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## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, PERSPECTIVES IN LEADERSHIP AND PROGRAM MANAGEMENT OF PRESCHOOL DIRECTORS by CAROLINE L. DIAZ, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

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# PERSPECTIVES IN LEADERSHIP AND PROGRAM MANAGEMENT OF PRESCHOOL DIRECTORS

by

**CAROLINE L. DIAZ**

Under the Direction of Dr. Sheryl Cowart Moss

## **Abstract**

This study aimed to examine the leadership and program management perspectives of preschool directors in a large urban area in the Southeastern United States. Given that there are no defined national preparation standards and requisite competencies for preschool directors, this inquiry sheds light on how directors become leaders, how directors are supported, and how directors manage their programs. Also, this study describes how directors incorporated constructs of self-efficacy in their leadership and program management.

The researcher employed a qualitative multi-case study design bounded by place, definition, and context as the study's methodology. To access data for the case study, the researcher provided a demographic questionnaire and a Principal Self-Efficacy Scale (PSES) to the Abacus Early Childhood Education Leaders (AECEL) group members. Of these, six participants exhibiting varying levels of self-efficacy were invited back for two semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed and thematically coded. Each

interview was analyzed line-by-line for emerging patterns or themes. This thematic coding process allowed for deeper insight when analyzing the participants' interviews.

The results from the PSES, along with information collected from the questionnaire and interviews, were all compiled to complete a descriptive report. The findings illustrate that preschool directors defined their leadership style as collaborative, relationship-focused, and responsive regardless of self-efficacy levels. They overcame challenges and persevered through operational difficulties presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. They set high goals for themselves and applied the same high standard for their teachers. None of the directors interviewed had planned on becoming a preschool director. With no early childhood leadership program preparation available, these directors took it upon themselves to seek ways to build their leadership capacity and knowledge in managing a preschool.

**Keywords:** Preschool Director, Preschool, Self-Efficacy



PERSPECTIVES IN LEADERSHIP AND PROGRAM MANAGEMENT OF PRESCHOOL  
DIRECTORS

By

CAROLINE L. DIAZ

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

in

the College of Education  
Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA  
2022



## **DEDICATION**

Three years filled with tears, frustration, and incessant writing, have finally met its fitting end. I will never again take for granted the liberation a proper comma brings, nor a good night's rest. I finally return to my ordinary life with one perk, a hard-earned Dr. attached to my name.

This dissertation is dedicated to all the educational leaders who braved work during the COVID-19 pandemic. An already challenging job was made even more difficult by the number of shifts and pivots we all had to make to keep our team safe, our schools open, and ourselves sane.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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I am grateful to my SEAL commander and Jujitsu accountability partner, SWF. Homesick with COVID and all preserved... just a couple of the many grammatical errors you caught. I appreciate you more than you'll ever know. Thank you for being my shield and sword.

Thank you to my boys: Vince, Lucas, Eli, and Max. I know you all have been so starved for attention throughout this time. I appreciate you taking over all of Mommy's duties around the house. Thank you for giving me the much needed space to finish writing my dissertation.

To Rolandria and Teruko, my wonderful dissertation accountability partners. Thank you for pushing me to speak up and encouraging me to not shy away from greatness. Not only did I gain colleagues, but also lifelong friends in this doctoral journey.

Finally, to my Mom (1956-2011). You always said I owed my good genes to you. Thank you for breathing life and love into me. You will never know that I finally got my doctorate -- but would have been most proud nonetheless.

## Table of Contents

<i>LIST OF TABLES</i> .....	<i>v</i>
<i>LIST OF FIGURES</i> .....	<i>vi</i>
<i>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<i>1 THE PROBLEM</i> .....	<i>1</i>
Research Questions .....	3
<i>2 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE</i> .....	<i>8</i>
<i>3 METHODOLOGY</i> .....	<i>30</i>
Theoretical Framework .....	31
Instruments .....	36
<i>4 RESULTS</i> .....	<i>49</i>
<i>5 DISCUSSION</i> .....	<i>79</i>
<i>REFERENCES</i> .....	<i>95</i>

## LIST OF TABLES

• <b>Table 1:</b> <i>Center Type</i> .....	<b>50</b>
• <b>Table 2:</b> <i>Age Range</i> .....	<b>51</b>
• <b>Table 3:</b> <i>Length That Center has Been in Operation</i> .....	<b>52</b>
• <b>Table 4:</b> <i>Gender</i> .....	<b>52</b>
• <b>Table 5:</b> <i>Work Hours in a Week</i> .....	<b>53</b>
• <b>Table 6:</b> <i>Jobs Prior to Being a Preschool Director</i> .....	<b>54</b>
• <b>Table 7:</b> <i>Importance of Roles and Responsibilities for Respondents</i> .....	<b>55</b>
• <b>Table 8:</b> <i>Importance of Roles and Responsibilities for High Self-Efficacy Respondents</i>	<b>56</b>
• <b>Table 9:</b> <i>Importance of Roles and Responsibilities Average Self-Efficacy Respondents</i>	<b>56</b>
• <b>Table 10:</b> <i>Importance of Roles and Responsibilities Low Self-Efficacy Respondents</i> ....	<b>57</b>
• <b>Table 11:</b> <i>PSES Subscale Levels</i> .....	<b>58</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

- **Figure One:** *Self-Efficacy Categories*.....38
- **Figure Two:** *Interview Questions*.....41
- **Figure Three:** *Demographic Information for Five Interview Candidates*.....43
- **Figure Four:** *Thematic Coding Snapshot*.....45

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**AECL** - Abacus Early Childhood Leaders. An informal early childhood leaders' organization.

**BFTS** – Bright from the Start. Preschool licensing organization for Georgia.

**DECAL** – Department of Early Care and Learning. Regulatory organization for childcare centers in Georgia.

**ECE** – Early Childhood Education. Education for children before elementary school.

**QR** – Quality Rated. Accreditation organization for childcare centers in Georgia.



## **1 THE PROBLEM**

Every child enrolling in an early learning program deserves high-quality education and care. In Georgia, early childhood programs currently serve an estimated 337,024 children (ChildCare Aware, 2018). As the number of working parents increases, this number was expected to rise to 501,117 in 2018, driving the demand for early care and education.

There is burgeoning evidence on the positive impact of quality early childhood education (ECE) on child development and educational attainment (Deming, 2009; Heckman et al., 2011; Landry et al., 2014). Studies show that quality early education enhances a child's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive skills (Ruzek et al., 2011; Setodji et al., 2013). As an example, a longitudinal study conducted by the Perry Preschool Project in the 1960s highlighted the short and long-term benefits of a high-quality early childhood education. Years later, the study's participants reported fewer school suspensions, completion of higher levels of education and employment, and lower levels of participation in crime compared to the students who did not attend Perry Preschool (McCormick et al., 2017).

Similarly, Schweinhart (2005) asserts that enrollment in a high-quality ECE program leads to higher graduation rates, improved grades, and greater monthly earnings in adulthood. By contrast, poor-quality early childhood education incurs long-term adverse effects on young children, such as increased involvement with the criminal justice system, greater need for remedial education, and marked vocabulary gaps (Herbst & Tekin, 2012; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Marshall, 2012). In reality, despite the importance of high-quality ECE programs, most inadequately meet a child's educational, emotional, and social development needs (Barnett et al., 2002, 2011; Currie, 2016; Ruzek et al., 2011).

One way to ensure quality ECE programs is to enhance leadership effectiveness. Research in various fields shows that leadership is an essential driver for organizational performance, quality improvement, and innovation (Douglas, 2018). As such, Fleming and Love (2003) identified childcare directors as leaders of early childcare and education organizations. Their study posits that positive organizational changes occur because of a director's leadership. Along this same theme, Bloom (1992) identified childcare directors as the "gatekeepers to quality," a title supported by Tout et al. (2015). They too, pointed out that directors play an important role in a program's quality improvement. In fact, according to Bella and Bloom (2003), a director's level of education and experience positively correlate with the preschool's program quality. According to their study, preschool directors set the standards for program operations, staff performance, family engagement, and student achievement outcomes.

Despite a growing body of evidence visibly demonstrating preschool directors' positive effects on program quality, research remains scant in the ECE leadership field (Aubrey et al., 2013; Bloom, 1992, 1997, 2014; Fullan, 2000, 2001, 2004; Rodd, 1997, 2001, 2005; Wise & Wright, 2012). Currently, preschool directors rely on others to set priorities and policy agendas (Goffin, 2013; Kagan et al., 2008). Also, a majority of ECE leadership studies pull from business and elementary school-based leadership literature. However, these environments differ significantly from a preschool setting (Nicholson et al., 2020). Of concern are the ECE leaders themselves, who often do not have adequate training, preparation, and support to effectively run a program (Muijs et al., 2004). The paucity in early childhood leadership research is concerning, especially since leadership is positively correlated to a preschool's program quality, which in turn has repercussions on a child's development (Sims et al., 2015).

## **Research Questions**

This study aims to examine the leadership and program management perspectives of southern preschool directors in a large urban area in the Southeastern United States. Since there are no defined national preparation standards and requisite competencies for early childhood education leaders, this inquiry sheds light on how directors describe their leadership style and preparation for their leadership roles. The research questions for this study are:

1. How do preschool directors incorporate constructs of self-efficacy when describing their leadership style in Early Childhood Education (ECE)?
2. How do preschool directors build and support school culture, program operations, and faculty capacity?
3. How do preschool directors describe their preparation for their leadership roles?

The participants for the study are preschool directors from the Abacus Early Childhood Education Leaders (AECEL) group. They were invited to participate in the study by completing a demographic survey and the Principal Self Efficacy Scale (PSES) as a screening tool to group the participants into three self-efficacy levels: High, Average, and Low. Two participants from each self-efficacy level were invited back to participate in two semi-structured interviews.

## **Purpose**

Research reveals that preschools providing high-quality learning programs often promote a child's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Mashburn et al., 2008; Samuels, 2014). Although studies about the benefits of high-quality ECE programs are growing, there is limited data on a preschool directors' role in those identified benefits. The relative lack of research on the ECE leadership seems to be a significant oversight given the importance of high-quality ECE programs on a child's development. Prominently, the bulk of research on early childhood

education focuses on preschool teachers, curriculum, and environmental settings. Consequently, there exists a need for further studies on preschool leaders, those who have been identified as gatekeepers of quality, as opposed to teachers (New Venture Fund, 2018; Versland, 2016). After all, apart from quality instruction and a stimulating environment, leadership is a key element of a high-quality preschool program (Jorde-Bloom, 1988).

I have personally observed ECE leadership roles filled either by people who have acquired degrees not linked to ECE, or with no degrees at all (Bureau Of Labor, 2022). On the other hand, those who hold degrees in ECE have little business acumen or sometimes suffer from a lack of leadership skills. Either way, there is an insufficient understanding of the ECE field and the complex issues that require well-prepared leaders.

The theoretical framework that underpins this study is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's judgment of one's capability to perform tasks, how much effort to exert, and how long to persist in challenging situations (Bandura & Adams, 1977; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). In his writings, Bandura (1997) states that leaders exhibiting high self-efficacy will persist longer to achieve their goals even when challenges are out of their control. According to this view, self-efficacy determines what goals they choose to pursue, how they go about accomplishing those goals, and how they reflect upon their performance.

Bandura's theory on self-efficacy extends to the academic setting. A review of present-day literature on teacher and student self-efficacy reveals several empirical studies (Guskey, 1987; Pajares, 1996; Parker et al., 1998; Tschannen-Moran et al., 2007). Although the research into school administrators' self-efficacy beliefs and its effect on the school environment has not attracted much attention, the ones that are reviewed by this study support the argument that administrators' self-efficacy is essential for effective school management (Fisher, 2014).

Given the multiple roles preschool directors perform to be successful, they must possess the required skills and self-efficacy to accomplish desired goals (Wood & Bandura, 1989). For this reason, the influence of self-efficacy on preschool directors, whether they know it or not, affects their capacity as effective leaders.

### **Significance of the Study**

Early childhood leaders deserve more research attention (Aubrey et al., 2013). With the lack of literature focused on ECE leaders, this inquiry hopes to shed light on how directors view leadership, how directors manage their program, and how directors describe their preparation for their leadership roles under the self-efficacy framework. It is hoped the information gathered may facilitate discussions on the importance of ECE leadership, preparation, and support for the individuals occupying these roles (Bloom, 2014; Fleming & Love, 2003).

### **Overview of the Study**

#### ***Chapter 1: Introduction***

In this Chapter I have provided background information in relation to preschool directors as educational leaders. The chapter highlights the rationale and motivation behind the study. Also, a brief discussion of the study's theoretical framework is presented. Finally, an introduction to the research questions, purpose, and methodology is noted.

#### ***Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature***

This chapter critically reviews relevant literature on topics that pertain to preschool directors, preschool management, and self-efficacy. Published findings and ideas from literature reviews in similar studies are crucial in the shaping and validation of this study. The chapter presents preschool directors as effective educational leaders through the lens of self-efficacy.

### ***Chapter 3: Research Methodology***

Chapter 3 outlines the research strategies and methodologies employed. This chapter also covers the justification for using a case study method to answer the research questions. It introduces the participants, provides a description of the way data is collected, and the framework for data analysis. The validation of these methods is also discussed in this chapter as it informs the reader how conclusions in the study were derived.

### ***Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion***

This chapter discusses case study findings gathered from the demographic survey, PSES, and interviews with preschool directors. Empirical findings from related literature reviews articulated in Chapter 2 are also presented in this chapter for comparative purposes with the case study data and the discussion thereof.

### ***Chapter 5: Conclusion***

This chapter culminates by evaluating whether the objectives of the study were achieved using the gathered data. The results are discussed, analyzed, evaluated, and interpreted. In the conclusion, recommendations are generated to help answer the study's research questions.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Bright from the Start.** Preschools in the state of Georgia are regulated by the Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL). Its mission is to help preschools improve the educational experiences of young learners by allowing access to high quality care for all children in Georgia (Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2007). DECAL oversees the licensing of all childcare centers.

**Center-Based Preschool.** A licensed facility designed to provide care for one or more children in a non-residential building.

**Preschool.** A preschool is an educational institution offering early childhood education for children before attending elementary school.

**Preschool director.** Preschool directors are educational administrators who operate and manage schools that serve pre-elementary children, typically before age six (Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2007). Throughout this study, the term “preschool director” is used to refer to the person in this administrator role.

**Quality Rated.** Georgia’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), is a rating system designed to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and education programs. It is QRIS’ goal to support continuous program quality improvement for early childcare and learning centers (Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2007).

## 2 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Former President Barack Obama said in his commencement speech delivered to Northwestern University:

If we make high-quality preschool available to every child, not only will we give our kids a safe place to learn and grow while their parents go to work; we'll provide them with the start that they need to succeed in school and earn higher wages and form more stable families of their own. In fact, today, I'm setting a new goal: By the end of this decade, let's enroll 6 million children in high-quality preschool. That is an achievable goal that we know will make our workforce stronger. (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2014)

More recently, President Biden even considered that instead of cancelling student loans, he would rather use the funds to pay for early childhood education (Pramuk, 2021). After all, studies show that high-quality early childhood education results in better school preparedness, academic success, higher developmental outcomes, and significant economic gain (Bushouse, 2009; Fitzpatrick et al., 2014). These findings support that children's experiences during the first years of life are necessary for brain development, which in turn affects a child's long-term well-being and success (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012; Ursache et al., 2013).

The implications of a child's brain development and overall success are linked to the quality of experiences during their early years. There are currently 499,261 children under the age of 6 who potentially need some form of childcare in Georgia (ChildCare Aware, 2018). Regardless of whether the children were born to single parents or a two parent, working household, these children needed a high-quality learning environment just the same.



However, despite the need for a consistent high-quality learning environment, childcare centers in the U.S. vary in quality (Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2017). Unfortunately, most of these centers provide average to poor ECE experiences for the children enrolled (Currie, 2001; Sosinsky, 2012). Espinosa (2002) espouses that a number of vulnerable children are enrolled in low-quality preschool programs. He further adds that these children are at a higher risk for failure later on in elementary school, given the lack of exposure to a higher quality preschool. Knudsen et al., (2006) corroborates Espinosa's findings based on their study that shows how negative ECE experiences can be detrimental to children throughout their lifetime.

One factor that serves as an essential driver for organizational performance, quality improvement, and innovation is the quality of leadership among ECE directors (Douglas, 2017). To this point, there is substantial evidence on the importance of leadership in creating good schools (Donaldson, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001). Fleming and Love (2003) identified these leaders in the ECE setting as childcare directors. Research by Tout et al., (2015) submits that childcare directors with more formal training, prior related work experience, and longer tenures, operate higher quality preschool centers.

Studies on ECE leadership is also sparse as evidenced by Mujis et al. (2004). The researchers combed through various studies that were related to preschool leadership. They initially started with a set criterion for identifying the literature, but in the end had to broaden their scope since there were not enough studies on ECE leadership. They perused not only journals, but also books and professional reports. Their investigation clearly showed that there was a limit on high-quality research performed on preschool directors. As for the literature they found that did exist, the findings showed a demand for more training and professional development in early childhood leadership. Moreover, the researchers confirmed that there still is

a void in what effective leadership looks like at the preschool level. Similarly, Bloom (2014), Fullan (2004), and Rodd (2005) concur on the lack of importance given to ECE leadership and further supported the claim that research on ECE leadership is of relatively small numbers compared to studies on other educational leadership positions.

A study done by Goolamally and Ahmad (2014) identified five leadership characteristics that excellent school administrators must possess to maintain strong school leadership and impact student achievement: integrity, forward looking, inspirational, competency, and self-efficacy. This study focuses on the last leadership characteristic of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is defined as the belief in one's capabilities to execute tasks to achieve specific outcomes (Bandura, 1986). Based on this definition, educational leaders fulfill their leadership roles and persevere longer when faced with difficulties (Ng et al., 2008). Leaders with higher self-efficacy levels believe in their capabilities, exert greater effort in accomplishing tasks, and have a firm conviction that they control their self-development (Bandura, 1986; Gist & Mitchell, 1992).

Given the numerous roles a preschool director undertakes, including ensuring program quality, it is surprising that there are no defined national preparation standards and requisite competencies for early childhood education leaders. For one, the state of Georgia has limited initiatives and data that focus on preschool directors and their role in high-quality ECE programs (Abel et al., 2018). This ECE "leadership gap" is apparent as I compared the studies conducted between elementary versus early childhood administrators. This gap is attributed to the absence of policies and programs to help improve the preparation of preschool directors' leadership competencies (Abel et al., 2018). It is also because of this gap that I decided to focus my research on ECE leadership.

This study examines the leadership and management perspectives of preschool directors in Georgia under the self-efficacy framework. The research questions for this study are:

1. How do preschool directors incorporate constructs of self-efficacy when describing their leadership style in Early Childhood Education (ECE)?

Answering this question helps understand the views preschool directors have on leadership while taking into account how they exhibit self-efficacy constructs as they manage their schools.

1. How do preschool directors build and support school culture, program operations, and faculty capacity?

The response to this multi-part question reveals preschool directors' leadership and management perspectives, as it pertains to promoting school culture, running school operations, and supporting faculty.

2. How do preschool directors describe their preparation for their leadership roles?

The answer to this question illustrates the preschool directors' path to leadership and how they continue to build their leadership capacity.

This literature review is divided into three broad parts. The section on preschool covers the definition of a preschool and preschool licensing requirements in the state of Georgia. The second part introduces what effective leadership is in the early childhood setting. In the final section, the theoretical framework of self-efficacy that underpins this study is discussed.

## **Preschool**

### ***Definition***

A preschool is an educational institution that serves children before elementary school. There are various types of preschools: non-center based or center-based (McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2016). Non-center based programs provide care in or out of the family's home (Zhai et al., 2014). On the other hand, center-based preschools offer developmental and educational experiences for the child in a facility (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013). Under these categories, preschools can be further classified into the ages of the children, hours open for business, auspice and funding sources, and type of curricula used (Zai et al., 2014).

A considerable underpinning of a high-quality preschool's importance is the growing research on a child's overall development. The early childhood education period encompasses children from birth to eight years of age (Graue, 2009). This age group includes infant, toddler, preschool, and kindergarten. Studies show that high-quality preschools provide a rich environment that contributes to a child's school preparedness, academic achievement, positive developmental outcomes, and economic gains (Bushouse, 2009; Fitzpatrick et al., 2014; Zhai et al., 2014). Correspondingly, young children thrive in a safe, healthy, and stimulating learning environment (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). However, in the United States, a majority of ECE programs leave much to be desired (Currie 2016; Sosinsky, 2012). The lack of quality in ECE can be attributed to a few factors: high student-teacher ratios, lack of resources, teachers' lack of training in ECE, and a sub-par learning environment (Bless et al., 2011).

The plea for high-quality preschool programs has not gone unanswered (Campbell et al., 2014). Policymakers are convinced that something needs to be done to improve the quality of

ECE. For this reason, most states in the U.S. implemented quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS). The QRIS was the policymakers' answer to making early childhood education improvements. QRIS determines the quality of an ECE program by looking beyond the ratios or teacher qualifications; the assessment focuses on the quality of teacher-student interactions and learning (Norris & Horn, 2015). By doing so, programs are driven to go beyond minimum standards. Best practice in the ECE setting is now defined by going above and beyond the minimum childcare and education standards. Thus, QRIS's goal of children benefiting from attending high-quality preschools has the potential to come to fruition.

High-quality early childhood programs can have positive impacts that are sustained into adulthood. Research during the last few decades show that quality ECE leads to increased school readiness, decreased achievement gap for low-income children, and a rise in academic success once children enter elementary school (Gable, 2014, Pianta, et al., 2009).

The strongest evidence of positive, lasting impacts comes from older studies of small-scale programs, notably the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian projects. These two studies showed that students who received quality care in early childhood performed significantly better in school. The students were absent fewer days, had fewer failing grades, and higher high school grade point averages. They were also more likely to graduate from high school and generally reported more positive attitudes toward schooling (Heckman, 2016). These studies also showed that changes in personality skills that contributed to an improvement in adult outcomes such as being employed, less likely either to have been arrested, or received welfare and food stamps, persisted through the subjects' later years. Heckman, Pinto, and Savelyev (2013) found that the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian projects induced changes in personality skills, which in turn explain a large portion of the improvement in adult outcomes.

### ***Preschool Licensing Requirements***

Preschools in the state of Georgia are regulated by Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL). DECAL oversees the licensing of all childcare centers. Its mission is to improve the educational experiences of young learners by allowing access to high-quality care for all children in Georgia. Although all preschools need to be licensed by DECAL, Georgia preschools vary in levels of quality. This is because the annual state visits by DECAL only provide basic health and safety inspections (DECAL, 2007).

Recognizing the lack of consistency in ECE quality, Georgia launched the voluntary Quality Rated (QR) program. QR serves as Georgia's childcare rating system. After all, preschools need to have some sort of benchmark in order to compare themselves to other quality programs (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2018). Consequently, QR's launch exposed a cadre of ECE leaders who grappled with the new demands and expectations that came with the initiative.

### **Preschool Directors**

According to DECAL (2007), preschool directors are educational administrators who operate and manage schools that serve pre-elementary school children. Preschool directors are responsible for a school's day-to-day operations, including human resources, family engagement, administrative and marketing tasks, kitchen support, and facility maintenance (Nupponen, 2006).

There were 61,800 early childhood program directors in the United States as of 2018. (Abel et al., 2018). In Georgia, 3,166 early childhood program directors were running state-licensed childcare programs (ChildCare Aware of America, 2018). Georgia ranks 8th out of all U.S. metropolitan areas with the highest employment level for educational administrators, a ranking which includes preschool directors in their count (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Yet despite these numbers, researchers have emphasized the inequities of poor working conditions

and the lack of compensation working in the ECE setting (Whitebook et al., 2012). The childcare workforce is comprised of many women from lower socio-economic backgrounds who have informal training in ECE (Whitebook, et al., 2018; Ramey & Ramey, 2007). Statistics show that in Georgia, only 54% of lead teachers have some education beyond a high school diploma (BFTS, 2018). On top of this, low social status and historically rooted sexism plague this workforce (Wise & Wright, 2012).

It appears that society has not acknowledged the professional status of an ECE director (Larkin, 1999). A director's salary is reflective of this stance since salary is typically understood as a reflection of value that society places on an occupation (Hodge, 1996). One infers that the higher the salary, the more important the occupation. In 2017, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics reported that the average annual wage of educational administrators in "preschool and childcare" was \$39,670. This starkly contrasted to the \$94,674 afforded to school principals. For preschool teachers, it was even lower, where the average pay was \$19,660, only several hundred dollars more than the average annual wage of a parking lot attendant, at \$19,280 according to the same report.

### ***Training and Qualifications***

Given ECE's importance, a preschool director needs proper training to run schools effectively (Bloom & Bella, 2005). Studies indicate that high quality centers have effective directors, specifically when it comes to their training, prior experience, and tenure (Tout et al., 2015). Effective leadership is seen as one of the more salient reasons that propel an organization to succeed (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016).

The early childhood education leader performs numerous duties. They are often responsible for making decisions and implementing strategies for the program's overall

improvement. In addition, they also need to score well on QR's assessment. Finally, they also need to support and guide their teachers in understanding the expectations of the assessment tool to achieve high ratings for the program. Ironically, QR's tools target the teachers' performance, teaching methods, and the learning environment, but exclude the role of the childcare director.

In fact, QR does not even require preschool directors to have any administrator qualifications or education credentials other than completing a 40-hour training course (DECAL, 2007). Conversely, elementary school principals are required to have a master's degree with Pre-K coursework (Abel et al., 2018). The Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC) requires all school principals to have a master's degree, complete a leadership certification program, obtain a Tier II Georgia Education Leadership certificate, and pass the Performance Assessment for School Leaders (PASL) and the Ethics for Educational Leadership Assessment.

This limited focus on the requirements of a preschool director is perplexing since preschool educational leadership is an important component to enhancing a program's quality (Bloom, 1992; Fleming & Love, 2003; Tout et al., 2015). As of 2017, there were only 3% early childhood leadership related degree programs that are offered in only 37 states. Contrast this figure to the fact that elementary principal degrees are offered in all 50 states through 777 institutions (Ferguson, 2017). This discrepancy lends itself to the belief that greater importance is placed on a school principal's education compared to that of a preschool director. Because there are so few requirements for early childhood administrators, most states (including Georgia) do not feel it necessary to provide instruction focused on ECE administration. ECE content is not even required coursework of a school principal preparation program (Brown et al., 2014).

In addition to completing the course, DECAL outlines the professional development competencies for an ECE program administrator as follows (DECAL, 2007):



Program Administrator of Early Care and Education and School-Age Care Programs

Competency Goals (ADM)

ADM-1 To develop and maintain an effective organization.

ADM-2 To plan and implement administrative systems that provide effective education and support programs.

ADM-3 To market the program to parents and the community.

ADM-4 To administer effectively a program of personnel management and staff development.

ADM-5 To maintain and develop the facility and equipment.

ADM-6 To possess legal knowledge necessary for effective management.

ADM-7 To foster good community relations and to influence child-care policy that affects the program.

ADM-8 To practice responsible financial management.

ADM-9 To maintain a commitment to ongoing personal/professional growth and development. (DECAL, 2007)

These competencies are used as guidelines for DECAL-accredited trainers to plan their workshops in helping preschool leaders further augment their skill set. The trainer can choose from any of the nine competency goals identified above by DECAL to focus on, since early childhood leaders exhibit these professional development competencies in varying degrees. By performing well in these competencies according to DECAL, a capable preschool director should be able to uphold a school's quality (Bloom & Bella, 2005).

Given the minimal educational requirements for ECE leaders, a 2009 statewide study of randomly selected Georgia licensed child-care centers determined that only 26% of preschool

directors had a degree (Associate's, Bachelor's, or Master's) in early childhood education (Maxwell et al., 2009). This concern is not limited to the state of Georgia alone. A quantitative study from 640 preschool administrators all over the U.S. found that a majority of preschool directors did not have any management background before assuming their position (Talan, Bloom, & Kelton, 2014). Also, a more recent nationwide study found evidence that a third of ECE directors do not hold any post-secondary degree (McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2016). This 2016 status report on Early Childhood Leadership in the U.S. outlined the highest level of education attained by center directors in the US as follows: Less than an AA degree 33%, Associates degree 14%, Bachelor's degree 38%, Master's degree 14%, higher than a Master's 1%. On the other hand, elementary school principals reported 0% AA degree and Associate's degree holders, 8% for a Bachelor's degree, 60% for a Master's, and 32% for higher than a Master's degree.

As outlined earlier, most preschool directors do not share the same qualification requirements as school principals despite similarities in their job responsibilities. While in Georgia the current minimum requirements for principals are a master's degree along with a leadership certification, a preschool director's minimum requirements are completing a 40-hour director training program, attaining 21 years of age, and having a clean background check (Georgia Standards Professional Commission [GSPC], 2017; DECAL, 2007). Although ECE professional organizations recommend that preschool directors have a minimum of a bachelor's degree in ECE or a related field and a course work focused on leadership or program development (Abel et al., 2018; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2018), most ECE leaders align themselves with the absolute minimum licensing regulations when it comes to their educational level.

As iterated earlier, increased ECE director education has been associated with higher quality ECE centers (Mims et al., 2008; Mujis et al., 2004). Research from Ryan et al., (2011) and Whitebook et al., (2012) suggested that a positive correlation exists between a high-quality preschool director and a high-quality preschool. Mims et al., (2008) pointed out that these higher quality programs were found to have directors holding a bachelor's degree or higher.

Having higher-quality programs is not the only benefit of having a preschool director with advanced education. A preschool director's level of education also has an impact on his capacity to assist and inspire teachers (Bloom & Abel, 2015; Epley et al., 2010). Epley et al., (2010) discovered that directors who obtained specialized education used a variety of strategies in supporting their teachers' curriculum implementation. In addition, Howes et al., (2003) found that a leader's educational level was also a predictor of the presence of reflective supervision, which resulted in more open discussions with their team regarding child development and teaching strategies. Furthermore, directors who attended additional leadership trainings became more aware of how the different program components interact with each other in a school setting, which made them better leaders (Bloom & Bella, 2005). Finally, directors who participated in a leadership program became positive change agents for their preschools (Talan et al., 2014).

Preschool directors begin their leadership paths in different ways. Similar to their educational backgrounds, there is significant variance in how preschool directors become ECE leaders. A majority of ECE leaders moved into the position by chance and as such, they are consequently ill-prepared for the complexities that the position demands (Rodd, 1997; Mujis et al., 2004). These preschool directors were sometimes prior teachers with little-to-no school management experience and thrust into the role (Nupponen, 2006). As evidenced by a survey of

1,530 ECE program administrators, 42% held teaching positions prior to becoming a preschool director (McCormick, 2001). The same holds true for Australian and British preschools, which notably have the same ECE quality as that of the US (Tayler et al., 2013). Nupponen's (2006) qualitative research indicated that most Australian preschool directors too, did not set out as such. They were not familiar with the business side of operating a school, and because of this, they learned on the fly, which further reinforces the stance that preschool directors typically come inexperienced and learn the requisite skills while on-the-job.

Certainly, learning on-the-job has its own challenges. For example, in Dunning's (2009) qualitative study, he illustrates the various problems that United Kingdom preschool directors encounter, including financial administration and managing people. He gathered data from two sources: A previous European questionnaire that was taken in the mid-1990s, and analyzing reports from interviews with current preschool leaders. He used the evidence gathered to create a pluralist conceptual framework. Ultimately, he concluded that problem-solving and decision making are always part of any school, and that these principles apply similarly to preschool directors and principals (Dunning, 2009). This finding makes sense, since both deal with teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders covering the social aspects of an educational leader's responsibilities. One also must oversee the curriculum, school wide planning, and administration. These educational leaders need to believe they can fulfill their responsibilities to be effective (Tschannen-Morgan & Gareis, 2004).

Furthermore, with the many responsibilities preschool directors face, adequate support from stakeholders is needed (Nupponen, 2006). New Venture Fund (2018) examined previous bodies of research and literature that indicated the need to improve the methods by which early childhood leaders are supported in California. Their qualitative research helped funders

understand the benefits of investing in early childhood leadership programs. Ultimately, the study concluded that investing in preschool directors enhances the quality of schools (New Venture Fund, 2018). Even if New Venture Fund's research focused solely on California early childhood leaders, its data echoes other findings that encourage creating more effective early childhood leadership programs. It also established a positive causal relationship of preschool directors' investment vis-à-vis a school's quality.

Finally, it is generally agreed that the preschool director must be highly skilled in both pedagogical leadership and business management in order to provide high-quality education (Fairfax, 2015). Unfortunately, there is no defined path to becoming an ECE leader (Douglas, 2017) and as previously mentioned, the educational requirements are minimal. Since the preschool director is considered the educational leader that sets the school on its path to improvement, one would assume that holding them to higher qualifications and standards would greatly benefit all those involved, including the students, teachers, families, and the communities they serve. However, as the evidence reflects, this is not the case. There is still much room for growth in this area.

### **Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy theory serves as this study's theoretical framework. This portion of the literature review starts with the definition of self-efficacy, followed by self-efficacy sources, and concludes with a discussion of self-efficacy and its impact on the academe.

#### ***Definition***

When Bandura published his 1977 paper, "Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change," it became one of the most studied topics by psychologists and educators (Pajares, 1997). Self-efficacy is defined as the belief in one's ability to set a course of action to

accomplish a specific task or produce a desired outcome (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy determines what goals we choose to pursue, how we go about achieving these goals, and how we reflect upon our performance. Bandura (2001) adds that by exercising self-efficacy, one chooses to expose themselves to an environment that will facilitate personal growth and improvement.

Self-efficacy is people's belief about their talents to activate their motivation, cognitive resources, and actions they need to gain control over the events in their lives (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Self-efficacy also posits that people have control over their behavior, choices, and how they reflect and react towards any given situation (Bandura, 1993).

Self-efficacy differentiates people through their thinking process, beliefs, and, ultimately, their choices as they age (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Dibenedetto, 2016). Bandura (1997) explains that self-efficacy beliefs start from childhood and continue to evolve as individuals build upon self-efficacy beliefs from various life experiences. An individual's plan of action and motive to learn will differ depending on the self-efficacy level he manifests (Bandura, 1993, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). Dweck (2006), a researcher who worked with Bandura, expanded on this concept of self-efficacy by calling it a growth mindset, defined as one's belief in the development of the self and the capability to improve (Dweck, 2006). Conversely, a fixed mindset states that one's qualities are set in stones based on the skills that are inherent (Dweck, 2006).

When it comes to goal setting, individuals exhibiting high self-efficacy set loftier goals, are more resilient, and control their responses better in a given situation compared to their low-efficacy counterparts (Bandura, 1997; Versland, 2016). In addition, a person with a higher self-efficacy level exhibits elevated sustaining power when faced with failure, attributing failure to insufficient effort or lack of knowledge rather than the fault of his environment (Bandura, 1993).

Villanueva and Sanchez (2007) further noted that the higher the self-efficacy people possess, the more confident they will feel about completing a task. This is because a person's high self-efficacy results in more grit while pursuing goals over someone exhibiting low self-efficacy levels (Versland, 2016).

It is easy to confuse self-confidence for self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) clarifies that self-confidence is different from self-efficacy in that self-efficacy refers to one's perceived sense of his competence, given a specific ability. Self-efficacy levels can change. On the other hand, self-confidence is a personality trait that is unlikely to change. According to Schunk and Ertmer (2000), individuals can exercise agency and develop their self-efficacy, regardless of their past or current environment.

To summarize, high-self efficacy has been shown to increase performance in a wide range of situations (Riggio et al., 2002). This conclusion echoes Gist and Mitchell's (1992) findings, which found that self-efficacy beliefs significantly affect goal setting, levels of aspirations, effort, adaptability, and persistence. Individuals with high self-efficacy levels see challenges as something they can overcome, rather than escape from (Bandura, 1993).

### ***Sources of Self-Efficacy***

Bandura (1997) enumerates four sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and emotional and physiological states.

Mastery of experience is the most influential source of developing self-efficacy. Personal mastery of experiences and attainment of meaningful goals profoundly affect a person's self-efficacy if he attributes success to his actions (Bandura, 1997). This authentic experience happens when the individual faces some setbacks that allow him to display his resiliency (Bandura 1997).

The second source of self-efficacy is vicarious experience: seeing similar people succeed allows the individual to believe that his actions too, will have equivalent results (Bandura, 1997). Witnessing others achieve success and persevere despite challenges can inspire an individual to believe in his own capabilities and maintain strong self-efficacy when faced with obstacles.

Social persuasion, the third source, shows how positive feedback can encourage better performance from an individual (Bandura, 1997). The encouragement from others can bolster an individual's beliefs about his capabilities. One needs to consider the social factors, such as the closeness of the relationship or trustworthiness, for social persuasion to be effective.

Reducing stress reactions and observing one's emotional state when performing a task is the fourth way of strengthening self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). If an individual is uncomfortable and feels stressed when completing a job, his self-efficacy is affected (Versland, 2016). The extent to which the individuals are emotionally or physiologically affected can affect the self-efficacy level and strength.

### **Self-Efficacy in the Academic Context**

#### ***Students***

Bandura's self-efficacy theory has had a significant impact on the study of motivation, teaching achievement, and leadership. Literature also suggests that self-efficacy can boost student achievement, foster emotional health and well-being, and serve as a predictor of learning (Artino, et al., 2012). In Artino's et al. study (2012), the value of self-efficacy is highlighted by showing how high levels of self-efficacy affected medical students. From a review of empirical research, the researchers encouraged medical professors to promote self-efficacy since technical skills were not enough for students to succeed. The study's result stressed the importance of professors practicing social persuasion to help bolster students' self-efficacy levels. Another



example is the research of Robbins et al., (2004) which compiled results from a meta-analysis of 100+ empirical studies over the last 20 years. Out of the nine commonly researched psychosocial constructs, academic self-efficacy was the strongest single predictor of college students' academic achievement and performance (Robbins et al., 2004). Bandura (1997) agreed that having good psychosocial skills was more critical than obtaining technical skills when it came to attaining academic achievement.

### ***Teachers***

A teacher's self-efficacy is crucial for an effective school and program (Bitto & Butler, 2010). Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are accepted as virtually indispensable in establishing effective schools (Pajares, 1996; Ross, 1994). To support this argument, Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig, and Morrison (2012) explored the effects of teacher qualifications, self-efficacy, and the teachers' classroom practices in a fifth-grade literacy class with a sample size of 1,043 students. A survey was used to measure teacher self-efficacy. The survey asked the teachers' belief on whether they felt they were making a difference in their students' achievement. The conclusion was that teachers with a higher sense of self-efficacy could promote a more positive learning environment (Guo et al., 2012). More importantly for this study, teachers with more experience in the field and a higher sense of self-efficacy produced students with stronger literacy skills (Guo et al., 2012). Nelson (2018) reiterates this sentiment by utilizing a case study that included principals and teachers of two high-achieving elementary schools. The data showed that a teacher's self-efficacy level seemed to affect their students' performance. Similarly, Artino's (2012) study utilized self-efficacy as his framework for medical professors with high self-efficacy levels. He demonstrated that medical students benefited from professors with high self-efficacy levels.

### *Educational Leaders*

Various studies support the contention that self-efficacy also plays a role in leadership. A leader's self-efficacy affects the type of goals he chooses, his motivation, and how well he can execute his action (McCormick, 2001). McCormick (2001) further defines leadership self-efficacy as an individual's perceived capability to perform the cognitive and behavioral functions necessary to regulate group processes with group achievement. Bandura (1997) expects leaders with greater self-efficacy to be more effective because they are inclined to put in more effort to fulfill their leadership roles. Significantly, Paglis and Green (2002) emphasized that a leader's strong self-efficacy enables him to accomplish leadership tasks such as direction setting, gaining follower commitment, and overcoming obstacles. Clearly, self-efficacy contributes to a leader's success (McCormick, 2001; Paglis & Green, 2002).

Since educational leaders are often called to be heuristic, especially in a dynamic environment, a leader's self-efficacy can affect his goals, motivation, leadership strategies, and goals (McCormick, 2001). The assumption here is that leaders who have higher self-efficacy can attain their goals more effectively than their counterparts who have lower self-efficacy levels. Since a school's environment is never static, the educational leaders' ability to respond accordingly, put in their best effort, and persist in difficult surroundings will have an advantage. As illustrated in Tschannen-Moran and Gareis' (2005) study, principals' self-efficacy beliefs influence the level of persistence in their daily work and their resilience in the face of setbacks. This is most likely because high levels of self-efficacy in a principal appear to mitigate the pressures of leading a school (Bernini-Schimpf, 2019).

In addition, Frederici and Skaalvok's (2012) study found that principals need a high level of self-efficacy to deal with their many responsibilities, and that furthermore, self-efficacy was

related to their job satisfaction. They designed a quantitative study to explore relationships amongst principals' self-efficacy, burnout, job satisfaction, and motivation to quit. They measured the self-efficacy of 1,818 Norwegian principals using the Norwegian Principal Self-Efficacy Scale. These results corroborate with others that showcase the importance of self-efficacy and its relationship to motivation and goal setting (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Wood & Bandura, 1989).

When it comes to improving one's self-efficacy, McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership stated that early childhood leaders' self-efficacy levels could be improved (McCormick Tribune for Early Childhood Leadership, 2007). In its case study, all the stakeholders of an exemplary preschool were interviewed and staff meetings observed. The theme of "room to grow" kept appearing throughout their data (McCormick Tribune for Early Childhood Leadership, 2007). This "room to grow" theme is a component of self-efficacy and was used by the preschool director to propel her program to a school of excellence (Talan, Bloom, & Kelton, 2014; Frederici & Skaalvok, 2012). Bloom and Bella (2005) also found evidence that proper training can further develop the self-efficacy levels of preschool directors. They drew empirical data from the participants who attended their institution's training. The researchers discovered that all preschool directors had a heightened self-efficacy level after attending the training event, further underscoring the premise that early childhood leaders' self-efficacy levels can be improved with appropriate training. Their finding was also supported by Bloom and Abel's (2015) study, which suggested that professional development makes a difference in leaders' self-efficacy level.

### *Schools*

Schools can also benefit from a leader's strong self-efficacy. Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundlach (2003) concluded that educational leaders who have high self-efficacy levels could identify a school's needs and take more effective action than their peers with lower-level self-efficacy. Also, principals with high levels of self-efficacy encourage their team's self-efficacy by fostering a collaborative environment (Nelson, 2018). This argument bolsters the importance of a leader's strong self-efficacy in improving a school's quality (Tschannen-Morgan & Gareis, 2007).

Moreover, effective educational leaders contribute to building a positive school climate and teacher efficacy (Spicer, 2016). Leadership is comprised of social interaction where the leader's ability to influence followers' behavior can heavily mold performance outcomes (Humphrey, 2002). For example, a principal's leadership style has significant impact not only on a teacher's self-efficacy but also on the collective teachers' self-efficacy (Çalik et al., 2012). In the Calik et al., (2012) study, teachers' self-efficacy grew because of the principal's supportive ways, and the teachers saw themselves as more effective in their jobs, thereby increasing their collective self-efficacy. Jung and Sosik (2002) also agree that empowering a team increases their perceived group effectiveness and, in turn, promotes collective efficacy. People in a group who share a high level of collective efficacy believe that they can perform their tasks well because of this empowerment (Jung & Sosik, 2002). Self-efficacy is a contributor to developing inspiration and knowledge to become more productive and proficient (Zimmerman, 2000). A leader's self-efficacy can play a role in building self-efficacy levels in their team members which then raises total group performance (Eden, 1988). Therefore, a leader's self-efficacy can affect his followers'

commitment to organizational tasks while contributing to the school's overall growth and climate (Spicer, 2016; Versland et. al., 2017).

In conclusion, the increasing evidence on the positive impacts of quality early childhood education (ECE) on child development and educational attainment promotes the discussion of how to improve quality learning in the preschool setting (Deming, 2009). As mentioned previously, leadership is a key element of a quality preschool (Stipek & Ogana, 2000). However, despite the demonstrated evidence linking the ECE leaders' importance to higher program quality, research in the ECE leadership field remains scant (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2012). The corpus of literature in ECE comprises mostly of studies on teachers and child development. The relative dearth of inquiries in the ECE leadership field is a significant lapse given the positive correlation of high-quality ECE programs on a child's development (Tout et al., 2015). Because ECE leadership is closely related to the quality of care provided, it is essential to learn how preschool directors view leadership, manage their programs, and prepare for and are supported in their positions. I hope the information gathered from this research allow both academia and practitioners to develop leadership strategies to foster effective educational leaders.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The methodology section discusses the research design used to answer the research questions, the rationale behind the chosen method, and how the data is obtained and analyzed. This section reiterates the research questions and their connection to the study's theoretical framework, articulates the research design used, and describes the participants and instruments used for the study. The chapter concludes with the detailed procedures for data collection and how the data was analyzed.

The research questions for this study are:

3. How do preschool directors incorporate constructs of self-efficacy when describing their leadership style in Early Childhood Education (ECE)?

Answering this question helps understand the ways preschool directors view their role and effectiveness as leaders through examination of any self-efficacy constructs exhibited.

4. How do preschool directors build and support school culture, program operations, and faculty capacity?

The response to this multi-part question reveals preschool directors' leadership and management perspectives, as it pertains to promoting school culture, running school operations, and supporting faculty.

5. How do preschool directors describe their preparation for their leadership roles?

The answer to this question illustrates the preschool directors' path to leadership and how they continue to build their leadership capacity.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory is the guiding framework for this study. Theoretical and empirical research was utilized in building self-efficacy as the dissertation's framework. Studies regarding the importance of self-efficacy in leadership and its intersection with the challenges, practices, and approaches to effective school leadership development were selected. Based on previous literature, although school leaders interact less with students, their self-efficacy level can positively influence collaborative relationships among teachers, which is essential for a school's success (Leithwood et al., 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Gaeris, 2004). The conclusion derived from the review of related literature was this: a school leader's high self-efficacy leads to quality schools (Versland, 2016).

## **Research Design**

In this research, I investigated current preschool leadership within its context and the lens to understand their leadership from the perspectives of the preschool directors. This research uses surveys, interviews, audio and video recordings, Principal Self-Efficacy Scale results, and the case study as its research design. These tools were used to gain insight into the preschool directors' perspectives while they were in their natural setting.

The purpose of my study supported the rationale behind the research method. Since I wanted to gain deeper insight into how self-efficacy beliefs contribute to preschool directors' leadership, the qualitative case study design was used. Yin (2009) describes a case study as a qualitative method to collect in-depth data through investigation and observation of a phenomenon within its real-life context. The value of utilizing a case study for this research is that it allows one to look for answers and investigate events occurring in a contemporary context.

A case study explains, describes, illustrates, and enlightens (Yin, 2009), which I aimed to do in this study.

There are six sources of evidence for a case study: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participants' observations, and physical artifacts (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Through these multiple data sources, a case study can dig deep and better understand a phenomenon. Combining qualitative and quantitative sources can be instrumental in this data-gathering process as well (Yin, 2009). In my research, the interviews served as the qualitative data source. At the same time, the PSES, which was used as a screening tool to gauge the participants' self-efficacy levels, acted as the quantitative evidentiary source. Also, utilizing the PSES as an additional data source led to a more robust research strategy wherein data is gathered from multiple sources of triangulated evidence that addressed the "how" questions about preschool leadership.

Since this study's objective was to capture the perspectives of leadership and program management among preschool directors, the multiple-case study design was considered an appropriate method to adopt. A multiple-case study design refers to several cases analyzed for differences and similarities. This design generates an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995). Furthermore, Yin (2009) stresses that by using a multiple-case study design, one can replicate any discerned patterns to increase the richness of the findings. Relying on this replication logic, I used each preschool director case to validate the others and drew data from multiple sources to capture the case in its complexity and entirety, followed by an exhibition of found themes from the interviews (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).



The boundaries in case studies are another defining factor for this methodology (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). My research uses a multiple-case study bounded by definition, place, and context: Preschool directors in a large urban area in the Southeastern United States exhibiting varying levels of self-efficacy. Being a bound study, I had to be very clear about my research's focus and extent. Understanding the scope of my study allowed me to develop the rest of the research in a focused manner. It helped me frame and manage the data I collected. I remained selective and specific by identifying the parameters of the case, which included my participant selection and the research questions, which detailed what I wanted to explore.

Interaction between myself and the participants was required to generate data for the study. I had to maintain an authentic and responsive demeanor to build a level of trust with my participants during the interview. Since the interviews were on Zoom, I also allowed for the preschool directors to be interviewed in a place where they felt most comfortable. Setting these conditions supported my goal of gaining an in-depth understanding of preschool directors' leadership. Because of this relationship and level of interaction, my perceptions lend an interpretative color throughout this multiple case study design. To manage subjectivity, after each interview I wrote down my thoughts in a journal. I also met with a small group of educational leaders from my doctoral cohort once a week to discuss perceptions about my research data. These two methods allowed me to remain reflective while conducting my case study.

## **Participants**

Currently, there are 949 licensed early childhood centers in the metro area that served as the site for this study (DECAL, 2022). Most of these centers serve children ranging from infants

to five years old. Because of the sizable number of childcare centers that could participate in the study, I culled the final selection of centers based only on the centers belonging to the Abacus Early Childhood Educational Leaders (AECEL) group. The AECEL can be categorized within Yin's (2009) concept of purposive sampling since AECEL members can provide relevant and rich data about the study.

The AECEL is a non-formal, voluntary, and open membership organization comprised of approximately 50 leaders in the ECE field in the metro area that served as the site for the study. These preschool directors represent a diverse demographic in the following areas: educational background, years of experience as a preschool director, variety of the geographic regions in a large urban area in the Southeastern United States, and are in leadership positions in different types of licensed centers (church-based, auxiliary service, private preschools, non-profit schools). This group of preschool directors actively connect and participate in once-a-week meetings to discuss the current temperature of the ECE landscape. Preschool Directors were chosen for the study through inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for the sample comprise preschool directors who run a licensed preschool, exhibit various self-efficacy levels as screened by the Principal Self Efficacy Scale, and are active in the ECE field. The researcher defines active in the ECE field as currently employed preschool directors who are members of the AECEL group and participate in AECEL meetings.

To determine the sample size for the study, purposive sampling was used to choose the participants. Purposive sampling is extensively used in qualitative research to identify participants knowledgeable about the researcher's study and the study's purpose. (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002). It does not require a set number of participants, leaving it to the researcher's discretion to discern participation based on the subjects' knowledge of the

phenomenon (Etikan, Abubakar, & Rukayya, 2019; Patton, 2002). In fact, Miles and Huberman (1994) postulate that a small sample size via qualitative research is more meaningful because purposive sampling provides more in-depth information than quantitative sampling, which attempts to gather data from many participants.

Purposive sampling allowed this study to investigate a specific group of people who have similar knowledge in ECE leadership. The sample size in this study, while small, is adequate to provide rich data of preschool directors' perception on how they manage their programs, support that they have received, and how their self-efficacy plays a role in their leadership. Patton (2002) emphasizes that there are no rules to determine the right size for the study in a sample size. Instead, the sample size is determined by what the researcher is inquiring about and the study's purpose. Also, the demographic background of the sample provides maximum variance in their years of experience, work background, center type, and differences in self-efficacy levels. This variance generates rich data needed for the study.

In this study, an email was sent to all AECEL members inviting them to participate in the study. Out of 50 members, 21 preschool directors answered the survey, completed the PSES, and agreed to participate in recorded interviews. A total of six participants with varying levels of self-efficacy were invited back to participate in the semi-structured interviews.

The six participants were grouped based on their self-efficacy levels. These levels were determined by examining the PSES scores. I looked at the 21 scores of the respondents and encoded them in a spreadsheet. Their scores were recorded for each PSES item in columns one through nine and the final self-efficacy score in column 10 (Appendix F). The scores were divided into three categories: Low, Average, and High. This was done determining an even split of seven preschool directors for each group. Preschool directors who scored between 5.61-7.22

in the PSES were assigned to the low group, the average group scored between 7.39 -7.72, and finally, the high group scored between 7.72 – 9.0. To allow for representation of each group, two preschool directors from each group were invited to participate in the semi-structured interview portion. I hoped to connect with the two lowest-scoring preschool directors from the low group, two preschool directors from the average group, and the two highest-scoring preschool directors for the high group to provide maximum variance when it came to self-efficacy levels. Maximum variance ensures a wider variety of participants.

Not all the participants responded, and because of this, I had to go down the list of participants and see if anyone else was available to be interviewed. To add to the complication, one of the average scoring participants declined to participate after saying yes to the interview. I could not get anyone to replace her despite numerous emails sent out to the rest of the group. Because of this attrition, I only had a total of five interviewees resulting in an uneven spread with this group: two preschool directors scored 8.17 and 8.11 and were placed in the high category, one preschool director scored 7.44 and was placed in the average category, and finally, two preschool directors with scores of 7.22 and 6.06 were grouped in the low category. These self-efficacy level scores resulted in a 2.11-point variance between the highest and lowest scoring participants on the PSES scale.

## **Instruments**

### ***Survey***

A researcher-designed eight-item demographic survey was used to illustrate the demographic profile of the preschool directors participating in the study (Appendix B). The questions were designed to extract the following information from the participants: preschool center type, length of time center has been in operation, gender, age-range, number of hours

worked in a week, work experience prior to being a preschool director, and ranking of various roles and responsibilities based on the importance placed by the directors. The survey was created using Google Forms, and the results were tabulated using the same program.

The survey aimed to inform me of the participants' background when planning for maximum variance later in the study. Also, the demographic data collected added another layer to the participants' profiles when the subjects were invited back for interviews. Lastly, given the dearth of data of preschool directors, my goal was to capture a snapshot of their background for possible research data in the future.

### ***Principal Self-Efficacy Scale (PSES)***

I administered The Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale (PSES) created by Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004). The scale was created to measure a school leader's self-efficacy level, and since preschool directors are considered school leaders, it became natural for me to adapt the PSES. The PSES was a perfect fit for my study's context: Exploring preschool directors' self-efficacy beliefs as it relates to their leadership position. Furthermore, the PSES offers high internal consistency and ease of use for the participants and the researcher. The PSES is also free and readily available for use by any educator. It is also cited in several leadership self-efficacy articles, making it one of the widely known leader's self-efficacy tests available (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). Given the milieu of the study and the test created specifically for school leaders, the PSES was chosen to measure the preschool directors' self-efficacy levels.

The origin story of the PSES started when researcher Megan Tschannen-Moran and Christopher Gareis (2004) wanted to study school principals as an agent of change. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) asserted that a principal's perceived ability to implement desired changes in the school environment is the definition of a school leader's sense of self-efficacy.

The PSES originally included 50 items that was later simplified to 18 items to measure a school principal's self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). PSES was also tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha, where it scored a .91, an excellent score for a test's internal consistency.

The PSES was intended to measure a school leader's self-efficacy level using a scale. The 18-item scale is divided into three categories: efficacy for management, instructional leadership, and moral leadership. It was further divided into six sub-items per category (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Principal Self Efficacy Categories*

**Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale**

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**Efficacy for Management**

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Handle the time demands of the job  
 Handle the paperwork required of the job  
 Maintain control of your own daily schedule  
 Prioritize among competing demands of the job  
 Cope with the stress of the job  
  
 Shape the operational policies and procedures that are necessary to manage your school

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**Efficacy for Instructional Leadership**

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Motivate teachers  
 Generate enthusiasm for a shared vision for the school  
 Manage change in your school  
 Create a positive learning environment in your school  
 Facilitate student learning in your school  
 Raise student achievement on standardized tests

---

**Efficacy for Moral Leadership**

---

Promote acceptable behavior among students  
 Promote school spirit among a large majority of the student population  
 Handle effectively the discipline of students in your school  
 Promote a positive image of your school with the media  
 Promote the prevailing values of the community in your school  
 Promote ethical behavior among school personnel

---

□

*Note.* Figure shows sub-categories for self-efficacy constructs (Tschannen-Moran, & Gareis, 2004).

I transferred the PSES questions to a Google Form that I sent out to AECEL members together with the survey and a consent form. When the responses came back, Google Form reported the answers in Google Sheets and assigned each participant's score to a column. To score for the full scale, I calculated the mean of all 18 items. Scores for each subscale were then computed by adding the total scores and finding the mean of the six items listed under each subscale heading.

Once all 21 participants' PSES scores were computed, I sorted the data from the lowest full-scale to the highest full-scale score. The scores were divided into three categories: Low, Average, and High. I assigned seven preschool directors for each group for even distribution. Preschool directors who scored between 5.61-7.22 in the PSES were assigned to the low group, the average group had scores between 7.39 -7.72, and finally, the high group had scores between 7.72 – 9.0. To allow for representation for each group, I decided to have two preschool directors from each group participate in the semi-structured interview portion of my study. I hoped to connect with the two lowest-scoring preschool directors in the low group, two preschool directors from the average group, and the two highest-scoring preschool directors in the high group to provide maximum variance when it came to self-efficacy levels.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

My intention during the interviews was for the participants to share their stories in a safe space, such that honest conversations could be held while encouraging connection. Patton (2002) states that interviews are conducted within a short period of time, so one needs to build a rapport with the interviewee relatively quickly to allow sharing of the person's life story. Careful attention was given to ensure that participants were comfortable during the interview. I made

sure that I worked with their availability and only scheduled the Zoom interviews during a time that worked for them. I interviewed my participants in a space where I knew no one else would hear them or interrupt our sessions to protect their privacy. Before the interview, I exchanged pleasantries in an attempt to ensure no discomfort before I started recording. I practiced active listening throughout the conversations. During the process, meticulous attention was given to both the guide questions and the answers in the interviews. I also followed up on any questions to fully understand the context of my participants' story. I further adjusted my questions and clarified unclear statements where necessary to generate a richer data base, which can be later analyzed for themes. In addition, I kept notes and jotted down words that I felt were important to the study. After each recorded session, the interview transcripts were emailed back to the participants for review and edits.

An interview guide was used to determine the questions and topics to discuss for a two-part interview. The interview guide also helped me frame the conversations. The interview questions went through a couple of iterations to ensure that the open-ended questions provided answers for the study and in-depth discussions that allowed for rich data mining. This open-ended interview enabled participants to provide insights regarding the various tasks and challenges they encounter while running a school. The questions were developed with the PSES categories as a guide: efficacy for management, instructional leadership, and moral leadership, as well as the study's research questions.

Again, the interview questions were designed to gather the maximum amount of information about the preschool leaders' self-efficacy in relation to their leadership and program management perspectives to answer the study's research questions (see Figure 2). Question One: How do preschool directors incorporate constructs of self-efficacy when describing their



leadership style in Early Childhood Education (ECE)? This is answered by the interview questions in Part One, questions one and two. Question Two: How do preschool directors build and support school culture, program operations, and faculty capacity? This query is answered by interview questions three, four, five in Part One, and Part Two, questions two and three. Finally, for Question Three: How do preschool directors describe their preparation for their leadership roles? The questions in Part Two, numbers four and five, answer this query.

## Figure 2

### *Interview Questions Category*

Interview Questions	Answers for Research Question #
<b>Part One</b>	
1. What is your leadership style? Please describe.	One
2. How would this description change if you were describing your leadership style to a a. Supervisor? b. Colleague? c. Teachers? d. Parents/Stakeholder?	One
3. How do you build and support your school culture?	Two
4. How do you build and support your program operations?	Two
5. How do you support your faculty?	Two
<b>Part Two</b>	
2. How do you describe your leadership values and goals?	Two
3. Walk me through the process on how you create and implement your program's values and goals?	Two
4. How did you prepare for your leadership role?	Three
5. What resources are available if any to support you in your leadership role?	Three

Two separate interviews lasting approximately one and a half to two hours were conducted with five preschool directors. The original design was to interview six preschool directors. However, it was challenging to recruit participants from AECEL as all the preschool directors were operating their schools during COVID-19.

## Procedures

Before any contact with the participants was made, an Internal Review Board (IRB) proposal (Appendix G) request application was submitted to Georgia State University's IRB, and

approval was granted on November 20, 2021. Since preschool directors in my study were not part of any school district, no school district approval was necessary.

After the IRB approval, AECEL members were invited to participate in the study by completing a demographic survey, a link for the PSES, and an informed consent form. The study's cover letter and invitation (Appendix A) were sent via email through AECEL's distribution list. Because of the initial low turn-out of participants (i.e., two), I did a follow-up prompt for participation by attending one of AECEL's Wednesday Meetings. During this meeting, I secured 19 more participants by dropping the invitation link in the group chat for any interested preschool directors to complete. At the same time, I reiterated that participation in the research was entirely voluntary, and they are free to withdraw at any time. This included withdrawing for the two one-hour semi-structured interview portions conducted via Zoom, I also stressed their responses would be confidential.

Out of 50 members, a total of 21 preschool directors answered the survey, completed the PSES, and agreed to participate in two recorded interviews. I encoded the demographic information of the 21 participants and computed their PSES scores. To allow for representation for each group, I decided to have two preschool directors from each group participate in the semi-structured interview portion of my study. I also calculated the average scores for the last question in the survey, which asked the participants to rank the importance of various roles they have as a childcare director for each of the group.

I reached out to the 21 participants via email, informing them that they had been selected for the next phase of the research. Even if my goal was to connect with the two lowest-scoring preschool directors in the low group, two preschool directors in the average group, and the two highest-scoring preschool directors from the high group to provide maximum variance when it

came to self-efficacy levels, I decided to reach out to all 21 participants in anticipation of some attrition.

I separated identifying information from the data and used code names to protect the participants' identities. The code sheet and the file containing the data were kept in a password-protected folder on my password-protected Google drive. Since not all of the 21 participants responded, I was only able to invite the second-lowest scoring and highest-scoring preschool director from the low category, only one preschool director from the average group since the other participant backed out, and finally, the two lowest-scoring preschool directors from the high group, back for an interview. This left my study with only five participants (see Figure 3). However, Creswell (2007) and Yin (2009) recommends anywhere between three to five interviewees minimum for a case study. This recommendation allowed for some grace when it came to my participant attrition.

**Figure 3**

*Demographic Information for Five Interview Candidates*

PARTICIPANT	GENDER	RACE	AGE	# WORK HOURS	TEACHER? IF YES, # OF YEARS	PREVIOUS JOBS HELD	SE SCORE
LOW SELF-EFFICACY							
Ms. White	Female	White	41 to 50 year	41 - 50 hours a week	yes- 12 years teaching elementary and then preschool	2nd grade teacher, 5th grade teacher, 2's teacher, private pre-k teacher	6.06
Ms. Scarlett	Female	Black	31 to 40 year	41 - 50 hours a week	Yes, 10 years	years Marketing Specialist 1 years	7.22
AVERAGE SELF-EFFICACY							
Ms. Green	Female	White	51 to 60 year	50 - 60 hours a week	20	Curriculum Specialist 5 years	7.44
HIGH SELF-EFFICACY							
Ms. Plum	Female	White	41 to 50 year	31 - 40 hours a week	No	Coach, director, mother	8.17
Mss. Peacock	Female	White	51 to 60 year	41 - 50 hours a week	Teacher for 10 years	Teacher - 10 years	8.11

I emailed the five participants asking them for their availability for the 1<sup>st</sup> interview. After I received confirmation of the date and time, I created a Google calendar invite with the Zoom meeting details included in the link and sent it to the participants. The interviews were

recorded, and the video file was saved in a password-protected Google drive. All but one transcript was uploaded to a transcription service website called GoTranscript, which uses human transcriptionists and guarantees 99% accuracy in their transcription. The one interview that was not uploaded, Ms. Green, was hand transcribed by me to help support the fidelity of the data. Regardless of the way it was transcribed, I listened to the video and followed along with the transcription on hand to check for any errors. Once the transcriptions were complete, I securely stored the file in a password protected Google Drive. I also shared the transcriptions to the respondents for member checking. I repeated the same process for the second interview.

Each interview lasted between forty minutes to an hour. A minimum of ten hours were spent completing all the needed interviews on Zoom. Zoom was the preferred venue for the interviews since most preschools are still on a strict no visitors policy because of COVID-19 and the surge of the Delta variant.

### **Data Collection**

Collating the returned surveys, PSES results, and the interview transcripts, I started reviewing the data. Using content analysis, the interviews were analyzed and coded based on an inductive approach. An inductive approach allowed for a straightforward method to condense the data into themes.

A spreadsheet was created with the demographic information of the participants, a ranking of the importance of various roles and responsibilities typically engaged by the childcare director, and their self-efficacy level scores. Also included in the spreadsheet were the interview answers of each participant (see Figure 4). For each question, the participants' answers were organized by row and this method of organizing the data continued until all their answers to the

interview questions were encoded. This data organization allowed me to create a general analytic strategy and offer an easier way to compare the responses later.

**Figure 4**

*Thematic Coding Snapshot*

A	B	C	D	E
LEADERSHIP STYLE				
Ms. Scarlett	Mrs. White	Mrs. Green	Mrs. Peacock	Mrs. Plum
My leadership style is, I like to say just leading with heart. I am someone who enforces the rules, understands our policies and protocols, and enforces those, but I also understand that we are all human and that we need a level of grace. As I move forward with protocols and as I want to tap into my staff and my administrative staff as well, it's extremely important for me to lead with my heart.	It depends on the day. My leadership style really varies depending on the day. It on really what's going on. I wouldn't say I'm super authoritative. I think I'm more of a collaborative leader. We try to solve problems together as a staff. I don't like to solve a problem for them that affects them more than it affects me. I like to get their input because if it has to do with the classroom, then they're the ones that are going to be enforcing it or following through with it, or whatever the decision is.	I would describe my leadership style as trusting and facilitative and firm when I need to be. That I trust the staff that we have hired to do their jobs, and I see myself as a support for them to get their jobs done. I do believe in leading if there's a professional development, or for a certain philosophy that you want to make sure that the school or the institution is embracing, leading that by example that way. That's how I would describe it. I've also had those hard conversations when I've had to. They went well eventually because the trust was established.	It's certainly not a top-down leadership. It's a very collaborative leadership style. I really try to develop leaders in all the faculty too. Anytime we make a decision, it's more of a collaborative decision. It's never my decision.	My leadership style is actually very much-- I'm figuring out what that is right now, outside of COVID, and now that I have this position. I would say I don't micromanage but I have high expectations. I surround myself by very, very smart people who know what they're doing. I give. I put the onus on the teachers, and I support them above all because they're the ones that are in the trenches with the kids. It was just day by day. It was just day by day.
It doesn't mean that I'm extremely vulnerable, or I get pushed over but it just means that as I'm communicating and connecting with people, I'm taking my time to get to know them where they are and making adjustments as needed.	I feel like we're super collaborative here. I try to be more of a mentor a lot of times and try to be available. I try to be more available to them. It's really hard for me because I don't have a designated office. It's always an open door policy because I don't have a door.	It's a relationship more like, not a friend but mentor or just trusting to have their back and support them and get them what they need to do their job. It's a relationship built on that or time and then when I've had to have those harder conversations, they're not easy. I think that eventually, they turned out in what's everyone's best interest in the long run because there is already that-- Plus an honesty and is a vulnerability.	With the entire team. We have an admin team. Then we also have a pedagogical steering committee that we meet once a month. Then it's just different tiers of leadership so that everybody feels like part of a decision being made.	My job is to hire good people and make sure that the facility is safe. I very much believe that the teachers drive the program. If I surround myself and I hire good, qualified-- not necessarily "educated" in the sense that, you have to be educated in-- you have to have education in education. As long as you have a drive and a respect and a love for kids, especially in preschool, right, then the children are going to benefit from it. I think my driving force is supporting my teachers.

Figure 4 provides a snapshot of the process used for thematic coding after the five participants were determined. The themes that surfaced reflected their style of leadership, struggles, and values. The recurring themes were collaboration/relationship building, COVID challenges, self-motivation, resiliency, and inspiration.

The general inductive approach was used to analyze the interview transcripts to identify themes that were related to my research topic. This was done by close reading of transcripts until I was familiar with the content. Once I understood each transcript, I combed through each interview on its own again. This time, highlighting emerging themes and did a line-by-line analysis of each sentence to assign a one, or two-word summary that described the meaning of the text.

Codes were charted to display the relationship with the corresponding research question. Once all the interviews have been coded and looked through individually, I went back to review each interview again to look for similar or redundant codes that can be combined. I moved from a vertical analysis to a horizontal analysis of the interview. Using an Excel spreadsheet, I looked at all the responses side by side to complete a horizontal analysis, after which the codes were checked to see if it matches the other codes in the other interviews. This iterative process, known also as thematic analysis, continued until there were only five to seven categories or themes left. The final themes were collaboration/relationship building, COVID challenges, self-motivation, resiliency, and inspiration. The final themes are exhaustive and reflective of the purpose of the research and provide answers to the study's research questions.

A theme is characterized by its significance to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using themes as a research tool allows one to organize various information gleaned from comparing perspectives and unexpected insights arising from the study's data. This strategy helps keep the focus on the research questions once data is analyzed to make assertions for the study (Yin, 2009).

Finally, the responses of the participants were examined to sift through any self-efficacy constructs mentioned directly or indirectly during the interviews. This data determined whether

self-efficacy constructs are different amongst the three self-efficacy groups. The findings are compared with data from the literature review in the Results section.

### **Limitations**

The qualitative nature of this study presented a limitation because the researcher had to accept the survey responses at face value and assumed to be true. Furthermore, the generalizability of the research findings is limited given the small sample size of this research. Because of this limited sample size, the findings could not be directly imputed to the larger population of preschool directors, nor other early childhood care and education sectors, such as state-operated schools (e.g., Head Start programs). For the purpose of this study, center-based preschools are defined as preschools that are located in commercial spaces and are the only ones included in this study. In contrast, non-center based schools are child-care programs that are operated in someone's home and not part of the sample. This definition is important because non-center-based programs have different educational resources and requirements compared to center-based preschools. Additionally, participants did not receive a stipend for participation in the study, which may have influenced their willingness or interest in participating. Also, with preschool directors operating schools during a pandemic, many participants could not participate. They were subbing in classrooms or were unavailable because their schedule no longer allowed for pockets of free time.

Since a case study is used, the data produced is not a panacea for answering all ECE leadership development questions. I also acknowledge that the PSES was not meant for the study's subjects. The PSES, originally designed for school principals, was adapted for this study since there are no available tests for preschool directors. The scale was the best I could find even if it was not designed for preschool directors in mind. The scale did not accurately capture the



preschool directors' self-efficacy levels especially when the notes of "survival leadership" became a factor in their directorship.

Lastly, research bias might affect the analysis of the case study given that I am an insider (McLeod, 2009). As a preschool director myself, responsible for leading and supporting faculty, I needed to withhold personal beliefs and biases until the research was complete. To help address this concern, I held weekly discussions with two accountability partners from my doctoral cohort and wrote in my journal after every interview to support a neutral environment for the data gathering and analysis process.

Chapter Three shared how both qualitative and quantitative data were organized. It displayed the demographic information, PSES results, and a description of how the data was analyzed. In the next chapter, the participants' perspectives are explored and presented through a series of interview vignettes. Thematic findings that emerged from the interviews are also articulated in a narrative format.



## 4 RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the leadership and program management perspectives of preschool directors. It is undergirded by Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which is a person's belief about his own ability to influence events affecting his life based on flexing a locus of control (Bandura, 1997). This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do preschool directors incorporate constructs of self-efficacy when describing their leadership style in Early Childhood Education (ECE)?
2. How do preschool directors build and support school culture, program operations, and faculty capacity?
3. How do preschool directors describe their preparation for their leadership roles?

In this chapter, data is presented in both descriptive and narrative formats. The results of the demographic survey data from the 21 AECEL members are represented using tables. The interviews are presented in a vignette style giving readers the opportunity to get to know the preschool directors. Thematic assertions that crystalized after the thorough analysis of the written transcripts are then displayed in a narrative format in this section.

### **The Demographic Survey and Principal Self-Efficacy Scale (PSES)**

The survey instrument along with a copy of the PSES (See Appendix B) was sent out via email through the AECEL email distribution list inviting the AECEL members to participate in the survey and PSES. The survey items were organized in the following manner: 1. Center Type, 2. Years in Operation, 3. Gender, 4. Age Range, 5. Number of Hours Worked in Director Role, 6. Director Background, 7. Ranking of Roles as a Childcare Director. 8. Principal's Self-Efficacy Scale. They are presented here in Tables One to Eleven.

## Semi-Structured Interviews

The participants' responses are presented in a vignette using a few verbatim quotes and background descriptions. Data transcripts were analyzed using an inductive coding process to make thematic assertions. The directors' direct quotes were used to illustrate their story. All participants in the interview were assigned a pseudonym and the interviews were conducted online (Appendix E).

## Demographic Survey Results of the 21 ECE Leaders

**Table 1**

*Center Type*

Center Type	Number	Percentage
Private for-Profit	10	48%
Non-Profit	3	14%
Faith-Based	5	24%
Others	3	14%

Table 1 shows the classifications of the preschools surveyed. A preschool is an educational institution that serves children before elementary school. Preschools can be classified into two categories: Non-Center based or center-based (McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2016). Non-center based programs provide care in or out of a family's home (Zai et al., 2014). In contrast, center-based preschools offer developmental and educational experiences for the child in a facility (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013). This study focused only on center-based preschools. The center-based preschools were classified into four categories: private for-profit, non-profit, faith-based, and others. Most of the respondents who answered the survey were from

private for-profit preschools, followed by faith-based schools, while non-profits and the “others” category tied for last place.

**Table 2**

*Age Range*

Age	Number	Percentage
26 - 30 years old	1	5%
31 - 40 years old	3	14%
41 - 50 years old	5	24%
51 - 60 years old	6	28.5%
61 - 70 years old	6	28.5%

Table 2 shows that 57%, n=21 of the participants were 51 years of age or older. No one indicated that they were between the ages of 18 – 25 years old. This is significant because there appears to be a dearth of incoming ECE directors. This is even more of a concern given that only four directors were 40 years old or less in this surveyed population.

**Table 3**

*Length That Center has Been in Operation*

Years in Operation	Number	Percentage
1 - 5 years	1	5%
6 - 10 years	3	14%
11 - 15 years	3	14%
15 - 20 years	2	10%
Over 20 years	12	57%

Table 3 shows that most centers have been operational for over 20 years. The number is tied for centers who have been open for 6-10 and 11-15 years. There is a growing need for quality childcare programs for young children; however, this study was only able to include one newer center in the sample population that has been in operation between 1-5 years.

**Table 4**

*Gender*

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	20	95%
Male	1	5%

In the U.S., the childcare workforce mainly consists of women (Whitebook et al., 2018; Ramey & Ramey, 2007). Table 4 shows this similar statistic in that most respondents surveyed were females working for private preschools. There was only one male director who completed this survey.

**Table 5**

*Work Hours in a Week*

Total Weekly Work Hours	Number	Percentage
Less than 15 hours	1	5%
16 – 30 hours	0	0%
31 – 40 hours	3	14%
41 – 50 hours	12	57%
50 – 60 hours	5	24%
Over 60 hours	0	0%

In Table 5, a majority reports between 41–50 hours of work a week on average. This means that a majority of ECE leaders are working more than 8 hours a day. Only one director reported working less than 15 hours a week. Assuming the typical work week of 40 hours, many directors are simply working longer hours. This statistic is consistent with findings from a prior study that indicated longer workdays for directors, who typically start the day before all other staff do (Krieger, 2001).

**Table 6**

*Jobs Held Prior to Being a Preschool Director*

Jobs	Number	Percentage
Teacher	8	38.10%
Counselor/Social Worker/Youth Ministry	2	9.52%
Resource/Curriculum Specialist	4	19.05%
Summer Camp Director	1	4.76%
Preschool Assistant Director	2	9.52%
Business Owner	1	4.76%
Coach	1	4.76%
None	2	9.52%

Table 6 shows that many of the participants were previous teachers. Aside from teaching, some of the previous positions that directors held were Counselor, Social Worker, Youth Minister, Resource Specialist, Curriculum Coordinator, Summer Camp Director, Preschool Assistant Director, Business Owner, and Coach.

**Table 7***Importance of Roles and Responsibilities per Respondents*

Roles and Responsibilities	Raw Score	Ranking	Importance
Manage the day-to-day operations	53	1	High
Supervise teachers/caregivers	61	4	Mid
Balance the budget	77	8	Low
Make program changes	75	6	Mid
Attend Workshops/Conferences/ Director Support Groups	71	5	Mid
Read books and journals for professional learning	83	9	Low
Take time to reflect and imagine better ways to serve children and families	76	7	Low
Guide staff in understanding the program's values, vision, and goals	57	2	High
Create a climate of trust	58	3	High

Table 7 shows that regardless of self-efficacy level, most of the directors considered managing day-to-day operations, guiding staff in understanding the program's values, vision, and goals, and creating a climate of trust, as their top priorities. Managing operations and supervising staff are important managerial tasks, while creating a climate of trust is an important attribute of a leader. Vander Ven (1988) states that for director proficiency to occur, there must be a blending of managerial roles and administrative roles. According to this sample of directors, they have indicated that both management and leadership skills are important for director leadership.

## PSES Results

Analyzing the data through the lens of self-efficacy levels allows for further interpretation of any relationship between self-efficacy and priorities of ECE leaders. The PSES scores were used to extrapolate the self-efficacy range. The range for PSES scores was 5.61 – 9.0. Using these values, the respondents’ scores were divided into three categories:

- a. Low self-efficacy: participants with a score from 5.61 – 7.22
- b. Average self-efficacy: participants with a score from 7.23 -7.67
- c. High self-efficacy: participants with a score from 7.68 – 9.0

**Table 8**

*Importance of Roles and Responsibilities for High Self-Efficacy Level Respondents*

Roles and Responsibilities	Raw Score	Importance
Manage day-to-day operations	11	High
Supervise teachers/caregivers	12	High
Balance the budget	16	Mid
Make program changes	18	Low
Attend Workshops/Conferences/ Director Support Groups	18	Low
Read books and journals for professional learning	18	Low
Take time to reflect and imagine better ways to serve children and families	21	Low
Guide staff in understanding the program’s values, vision, and goals	12	High
Create a climate of trust	9	High

Based on the data in Table 8, ECE leaders with high self-efficacy prioritize creating a climate of trust. They also place the least importance on taking time to reflect and imagining better ways to serve children and families or engaging in some sort of professional development. This conclusion contradicts prior self-efficacy research, which suggested that engaging in professional development positively impacted a leaders' self-efficacy level (Bloom and Abel, 2015). This lack of interest in professional development is also a departure from Bandura's (2001) assertion that leaders with higher self-efficacy choose to expose themselves to an environment that will facilitate personal growth and improvement. Prior research also indicated that there was a demand from preschool directors for more training and professional development in early childhood leadership (Mujis et al., 2004). The data from the survey does not comport with this research.

**Table 9**

*Importance of Roles and Responsibilities for Average Self-Efficacy Level Respondents*

Roles and Responsibilities	Raw Score	Importance
Manage day-to-day operations	9	High
Supervise teachers/caregivers	13	High
Balance the budget	29	Low
Make program changes	21	Low
Attend Workshops/Conferences/ Director Support Groups	15	Mid
Read books and journals for professional learning	21	Low
Take time to reflect and imagine better ways to serve children and families	20	Mid



Guide staff in understanding the program's values, vision, and goals	14	Mid
Create a climate of trust	9	High

In Table 9, which shows ECE leaders with an average self-efficacy level, top priorities were tied between managing day-to-day operations and creating a climate of trust. A couple of items are worth noting: Managing day-to-day operations is a role typically associated with that of a manager, while creating a climate of trust is one typically associated with a leader. Here, two individuals possessing only a “moderate” amount of self-efficacy have placed high importance on a role that one would expect only from those with high self-efficacy. Similarly, investing in professional development and guiding staff in understanding a school’s values, vision, and goals were also rated highly. These two categories were likely to have been considered more prominently from the higher self-efficacy group given that these roles are considered high-level, effective leadership priorities. Rather, it was the moderately endowed self-efficacy group that rated these responsibilities higher.

**Table 10**

*Importance of Roles and Responsibilities for Low Self-Efficacy Level Respondents*

Roles and Responsibilities	Raw Score	Importance
Manage day-to-day operations	17	High
Supervise teachers/caregivers	22	High
Balance the budget	24	Mid
Make program changes	25	Mid
Attend Workshops/Conferences/ Director Support Groups	30	Low
Read books and journals for	33	Low

professional learning

Take time to reflect and imagine better ways to serve children and families	28	Low
Guide staff in understanding the program's values, vision, and goals	18	High
Create a climate of trust	23	Mid

Finally, Preschool Directors with low self-efficacy levels ranked managing day-to-day operations high and gave the least importance to reading books and journals for professional growth. This result is more congruent with Bandura's (1993) research on self-efficacy that states that professional development, reflection, and self-knowledge improve self-efficacy levels.

**Table 11**

*PSES Subscale Results*

Subscale	Low SE	Average SE	High SE
Efficacy for Management	37	50	60
Efficacy for Instructional Leadership	50	53	57
Efficacy for Moral Leadership	50	56	59

For Table 11, subscales from the PSES were calculated to see if any relationship existed between the self-efficacy level of preschool directors and any of the PSES subscales. The low self-efficacy group scored the lowest in efficacy for management. On the other hand, the high self-efficacy group scored the highest for this same category.

For the high-efficacy group, this is evident seeing that they scored the highest on all the PSES subscales. This finding is consonant with previous research of Bandura's (1986) that found individuals with high self-efficacy set higher performance goals, and then develop and more

skillfully enact effective task strategies than those with low self-efficacy. McCormick (2001) concurs that self-efficacy beliefs affect the development of functional strategies and the skillful execution of those strategies. Leaders not only know what goals they need to accomplish, but also how to utilize people and processes to accomplish goals.

### **Interview Vignettes**

#### *Ms. White (Low Self-Efficacy Level)*

Ms. White works 41-50 hours a week. She was a teacher for 12 years at a different school prior to becoming a Preschool Director at her current location, an auxiliary service for faculty and staff of a high school in a large urban area in the Southeastern United States. She has been the preschool director for her center for almost 12 years. Ms. White met with me online for the first interview and we exchanged pleasantries. She was in a make-shift office beside one of her Pre-K classes. She joked that she has an open-door policy with her team because she literally has no door.

We start the interview, and I asked her about her leadership style. She laughed and said, “It depends on the day. My leadership style really varies depending on what’s going on”. I appreciated her candor. She continued to share with me that they are collaborative in their preschool. She values the input of her teachers especially with problems that affect them more than her. “I try to be more of a mentor a lot of times and try to be available”, she continued. Connections to her are important as she continues to create the time to meet with her teams.

She shared that two of her struggles in leadership is that she is the only ECE expert on campus and that furthermore, her team was not recognized sometimes by the rest of the campus as part of the school’s faculty and staff. During an all faculty and staff retreat once, she complained to the school leadership team, “Don’t call it faculty and staff because it’s not all

faculty and staff. Be careful on your wording because we are hired and employed by the same school and we are not included in a lot of things”.

Although supported by the Chief Financial Officer and the President’s Council, Ms. White is virtually in a silo running a preschool program on a high school campus. Her clientele’s age group is not only different, but also the program’s purpose, which is to benefit the school’s faculty and staff, bringing about its own unique set of challenges. “My leadership here has to be different than probably anywhere else because the parents of my program are people I sit on committees with”, she explains. The culture is different too. Their program is focused on ensuring that their students are loved and happy. Academics are not a priority. She shares that culture when she interviews potential teachers. “You could stand on your head all day in the classroom, all day long. As long as those kids are hugged at the beginning of the day, and at the end of the day when they leave, these parents will not care”, she states empathically. Ms. White considers the objectives of guiding staff in understanding the program’s mission, vision, and goals low on her priority list. For her, there was sparse need for this since the goal of the program was simple: take care of the faculty and staff’s children. This result comports with the study of Osterman & Sullivan (1996), which found that leaders possessing low levels of self-efficacy tend to set lower goals for their organizations, if indeed they set goals at all.

Ms. White admits that the expectation from the school has changed slightly, from the initial provision of a loving environment where the families were just grateful to have a childcare program, to the current baseline of solving all the faculty and staff’s childcare needs. From alumni days to staff retreats, her teachers are being asked to cover childcare for almost all the faculty and staff events at the school. Furthermore, there has been added pressure due to COVID. “COVID has made it even more difficult because everyone is on edge, everyone is defensive”,

she pointed out. Ms. White is clear about how this affects her as she lamented, "... there are days where I am like, I don't want to keep this going. I'm ready to throw in the towel". Her goal: "Could I say just to make it to June?"

One item of note during our conversation was what Ms. White shared about setbacks. Most of them were unexpected. Things can go along smoothly, "...and bam! It'll hit you". She imparted that this job has always had challenges, especially when it came to dealing with parents and staff. However, people do not see what goes on in the background and it is difficult for her when she gets "chewed out" not to take it personally. She continued that she wants to fix things immediately with any challenging moment. "I want to solve it immediately. I want to come back immediately. I want to respond immediately. I want to answer immediately", were her exact words. Ms. White then expressed her desire to allow herself to pause before responding in order to decrease her anger or to not take things personally. She felt the weight of taking care of all the children and not being "seen on the eleven o'clock news...because nothing good happens on the eleven o'clock news".

I asked Ms. White a few more questions about how she supports her faculty. Ms. White takes pride in the fact that she recruits and hires "right" from the onset. She believes that she hires the teachers who are good at their jobs. She also replied that she feeds them a lot, leaves them appreciation notes, and recognizes individuals for doing something amazing during staff meetings. She is intentional about the frequency of meetings, knowing that her team misses the interactive collaboration impacted by COVID. Taking care of her team's well-being however, rests heavily on her shoulders. She goes around every day asking teachers how she can help them or just to check-in. She strongly feels that if someone's mental health is not in a good place, it is her duty to fix it. Curriculum has very little to do with her priority as a director. It's her staff's

well-being that comes first. This is consonant with Hesbol's (2019) study that asserted principals with lower self-efficacy tend to identify themselves as the primary problem solver for most school-related issues, taking key time away from their instructional and change management leadership, thus making the job more challenging (Hesbol, 2019).

When asked about who she looks up to in her field, Ms. White shared that at the beginning of her career, she modeled her leadership style to that of her previous director. She quickly realized that her past director was very authoritarian in nature, which differed from her own leadership style. After this realization, she decided to look for an alternative mentor. She listened to leadership podcasts, and finally read *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers*.

After reading *The Good Neighbor*, Ms. White continued to seek professional development on her own. She prefers professional development that focuses on relationships. She strongly believes that healthy working relationships are key to building a school. Leading with love and kindness is at the forefront. From her own experience, she is willing to put in more into her job when she is invested in it, and when she has a relationship with whomever her direct report is. "I can bring in people for phonics and I can bring in people for loose parts, and I can do that myself if I want to...What they don't always have is a leader or a director who is invested in them. The more I invest in them, the more I can get out of them. They're willing to stay late or clean up the poop off the floor, whatever it is. They're just more willing to do more when they know I value them". These sentiments convey exactly her point on why relationship building is so important.

I asked her for any parting thoughts. She mentioned that being a preschool director is one of those jobs you need to have a passion for. "It will eat you up if you let it". She believes that

preschool directors like her keep all the “ugly stuff” from getting to the teachers. “You can’t compare it. We are at the bottom of the totem pole. People think teachers have taken a beating. They have done a lot of stuff for elementary and high school teachers, but it’s the early childhood people who have really taken a very hard beating and with very little recognition. Not that you do it for recognition, but you want to know you are doing a good job... I want my work to be valued.”

*Ms. Scarlett (Low Self-Efficacy Level)*

Ms. Scarlett was very put together when we met. She was never frazzled despite interruptions by her staff during our meeting. I find this admirable since she manages a unique preschool program that also runs school-based health clinics and a family medical center. Her program integrates education and health. She was a teacher for ten years and a summer camp coordinator for two years in prior centers before her current role. She proclaimed that her leadership style is one that leads with heart. She punctuated this by saying, “I am someone who enforces the rules, understands our policies and protocols, and enforces those but I also understand that we are all human and that we need a level of grace”.

Ms. Scarlett is part of my low self-efficacy group. However, Ms. Scarlett stated in the demographic survey that managing day-to-day operations, taking time to reflect and imagine better ways to serve families, guiding staff in understanding the program’s values, vision, and goals, and creating a climate of trust were all her top priorities, much of which could be considered traits of leaders with high self-efficacy.

She believes in coaching and mentoring individuals, the same way she was mentored by her previous boss. “You may not come in with the life goal of this wanting to be your career, but my goal is to mentor you and coach you through where you see your potential and you realize

that you can really be great in this position, and I want to bring you up. I want to help lead you along the way, give you the tools that you may need, and support you as you make mistakes, as we just learn and grow the same”, she shared. One could deduce that mentoring is her preferred method of professional development since she placed the least importance in attending workshops, conferences, or director support groups in her survey ranking.

Her school culture is “one in training”. Being a new director who started in July 2021, her teachers were all doing their own thing. Her goals as a new director was to build her team, create a collaborative atmosphere, build a “culture of family”, and pouring into her teachers. She combines coaching with giving hard deadlines to her team.

Ms. Scarlett supports her team by providing treats, little gifts, and acknowledging them for their contributions. She proactively advocates for her teachers all the time, especially for those teachers who show up and work hard. Ms. Scarlett lets her supervisor know whom to highlight in their weekly newsletter, whom to pay for professional development conferences, and whom to acknowledge for exemplary practices during staff meetings. Her stated goals are about high quality and being family-centered. She pushes for innovation whenever possible and tries to create leaders from current team members.

Ms. Scarlett holds herself to a high set of expectations while holding her team accountable. When asked on how she prepared for this leadership position, she exclaimed, “oh, my goodness! I didn’t.” It was not her goal at the beginning; indeed it was supposed to follow a certain order: teacher, lead teacher, educational coordinator, assistant director, and then director. “I’m skipping a level!”, she laughed as she referred to jumping from educational coordinator to becoming a director. She felt like she couldn’t do it at first until her old supervisor encouraged her. Eventually, Ms. Scarlett got the job and said, “Why not? Let’s get it done. Let me learn. I’ve



always been a lifelong learner. If I don't know something, I am going to find out... I knew I wanted to move up the ladder and really maximize this career and do everything that came with it".

On challenges, she says that "iron sharpens iron". "Tough things may be tough sometimes, (but) it doesn't always remain that way. Even still in a tough situation...it teaches you something that when you're in this situation again, it is nothing. You're like – Ah! I got this. I know what to do. I did this the last time. That is where I draw my strength."

*Ms. Green (Average Self-Efficacy Level)*

It was a delight to interview Ms. Green. She was a person you could spend a quiet afternoon with, sipping tea somewhere fancy. Her face was kind and earnest during our interview. She has been in the field of education for 33 years and is currently a preschool director for a specialized school that supports students with language delays. She described her leadership style as trusting, facilitative, and firm when needed. In her survey, she placed great importance on managing day-to-day operations, guiding staff in understanding the program's values, vision, and goals, and creating a climate of trust. These values were all woven throughout her interview.

She places complete trust in her staff when it comes to doing their jobs and sees herself as support for them to get their jobs done. "I'm not driving every ship; I'm not making every recommendation. It's not me with 20 assistants, it's me getting behind the teachers and making sure they have what they need to do their jobs well", she expounded. Since it is impossible to know a hundred students well, she sees her team as case managers for 16 students and she herself as the overall case manager for the entire student population of 100 kids. This arrangement allows the teachers to really understand their students and efficiently report to her the students' needs, such as academic supports.

She is a mentor and ensures that her teachers are assured she has their back. Support for her team means building a relationship with them and providing them the resources to do their job. For her, this is her vocation: she has never been outside the ECE field. Her work has always been with the birth to six-year-old age range. At the same time, in her survey, Ms. Green indicated that she placed little importance in attending workshops, conferences, or director support groups. According to her, these were not her bucket fillers.

Ms. Green's school culture is one that is intentional and is structured in such a way that evolving is inherently part of the process. She too evolved so that her teachers could feel empowered and feel respected. From initially starting out as the only one making the key decisions to now involving the whole team, Ms. Green has flattened the organizational structure, allowing teachers to step-up and be the experts in their field as well.

Every move she makes or conversation she has with her team is intentional. Conversations are critical to relationship building for her team. Her conversations are honest, empathetic, and empowering. With regards to hard conversations, she says, "If you have to say something that's hard to say, then it does come full circle where what's supposed to happen happens – either someone grows or someone decides that they were actually not the best fit for me that time".

She talked highly about her team of teachers, and I asked her how she hired them. She shared that they were people who took the time to understand the school culture and made connections with others. Also, she looks for self-starters who were willing to grow in the profession. She lets her teachers take the lead and she serves in the background in a supporting role.

Her values and goals as a leader were simple, “Making sure that children get the services that they need...really for me, it’s always with the kids. That’s probably, what’s kept my anchor in this crazy house three years with COVID. It’s making sure the kids get what they need”. She acknowledged that attaining that goal has been quite challenging. “Really, two and a half years have been in COVID. I feel like it’s just always problem solving. It’s chronic reinventing and problem-solving”.

*Ms. Peacock (High Self-Efficacy Level)*

Ms. Peacock is somewhat of a legend in the local ECE scene. She has been at the same preschool for 30 years. She has spoken at countless seminars and attended workshops on the importance of early childhood education both locally and nationally. I would be lying if I said I weren’t just a bit intimidated. She has read books and journals about the field, and she knew her ECE research. Ms. Peacock ranked all the different categories of director roles in the survey as high priority except for one - making program changes. Program changes are not applicable because her school has strongly followed the Project Approach curriculum for over 30 years now. The Project Approach curriculum has a set method of teaching that followers do not deviate from. These projects have a three-phase structure to guide teachers and the student: Exploration, Active Investigation, and Concluding the Project.

Our interviews always occurred at the crack of dawn. This was the only time she had free to accommodate me. Once she set foot at her preschool, she was on. I asked her about her stress level at work, from zero reflecting no stress to five as really stressed. She smiled and responded, “Probably it’s a two. Mainly I’m concerned about leadership across the United States... to me we are losing so many good leaders right now. Who’s going to really inspire, advocate for early childhood in the right manner?” I asked her to recall a challenging time in her career and to walk

me through her thought process during that situation. She shared that it was the week before school and 21 of her 74 teachers quit because of COVID. She told me that these were teachers she had known for a long time and had mentored. She was disappointed but didn't dwell on it. She gathered her team of teachers and administration to collaborate and find a solution. They ended up hiring 14 teachers that week. "I really try to develop leaders in all faculty...so that everybody feels like a part of a decision being made", when asked about her collaborative leadership style.

Even their school culture is about collaboration. "It is a collaborative culture. You are always working with other educators... We really want people to ask questions. Why are you doing this? Why. A lot of why questions. It is the way we live. It is our life. It's not (just) encouraged". This collaboration bleeds into other school partnerships. She strongly believes that it is important for leaders in early childhood to support other schools too. "I wish we would be more of a team working rather than silent about our practices...", she laments. For Ms. Peacock, working with other schools is important to bolster ECE, a field that is still not very well regarded in society.

*Ms. Plum (High Self Efficacy)*

Ms. Plum was home, sick with COVID when we conducted her first interview. This is her first year as director. She was a coach in the same school before she was put in the position. She has a background in theater, not education. She describes her leadership style as "... because I have only been a director during COVID, very much seat-of-my-pants. I mean that in the best way. My goals and my true north are keeping my students safe, keeping my staff safe, and keeping my preschool open". She indicated every role in the director survey as very important to

her, except balancing the budget and investing in herself by attending a professional development course.

Ms. Plum highlighted the importance of her staff since she understands that she cannot have a preschool without a good staff. They drive the program. She sees her job as hiring good people and making sure that the facility is safe. “My teachers are my life blood. If my teachers are not happy, then I don’t have a program...my personal mission is to check-in every day, multiple times a day and sees who needs what and if everything is okay”, she confessed. I asked her what makes her successful at what she does, and she gleefully shares, “My boss is incredible, my team, my other team, the executive director in the other program...We are all very close. It’s been in the trenches for the last two years, so we have created a team and a culture of support”.

I asked her how she views challenges. She answered with pride in her voice, “If the last five years of my life, honestly, have taught me anything, it’s that there’s not much I can’t overcome with support but also if I make up my mind for it and I’ve run a couple of marathons. I got divorced, and I got myself back and did this, and then I have this job, and then have these kids, then COVID hits, there’s been a lot over the last five years. I am not a puddle of mush, which is surprising. I am surprised by my own resilience. It’s not all me. It takes a lot of support from understanding coworkers and family.” “I just have to continue to remind myself of what I have accomplished. I know I am not done. I have got a lot to learn.” She shared with me that her enrollment dropped to 47 students from 130. It became all uncharted territory for her since none of her predecessors have managed a program during a pandemic. “It’s preschool in the time of COVID. It’s like love in the time of cholera,” she laughs.

## **Emergent Themes**

The interviews revealed several themes. The themes that surfaced mostly had to do with leadership style, values and goals as directors, stressors, and job priorities. The five most common themes are discussed below:

### ***Collaboration/Relationship Building***

Stajkovic and Luthans (1998) stated that leader self-efficacy had a positive effect on an employee's engagement with their work as well as creating an environment that can more effectively overcome obstacles to change. Regardless of self-efficacy level, all five directors highlighted the importance of collaboration and building relationships with their team. In the words of Ms. Plum, "My staff is very important to me because I don't have a preschool without really good staff". This importance is punctuated by the realization that teachers are needed to run effective preschools. The value they place in their teachers drives the need for collaboration and being responsive to needs. Interestingly, the review of related literature pointed out that only individuals with high efficacy are more willing to modify intermediate goals and strategies to respond to the needs of the individuals whom they lead (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). This was not the case here.

All interviewees showed the same level of passion when it came to working with their team. They all saw collaboration as surrendering partial control of running the program in exchange for teacher empowerment, with powerful results. Ms. Scarlett's directive "...is to mentor you and coach you through where you see your potential and you realize that you can really be great in this position, and I want to bring you up". The relevancy here is how self-efficacy is connected to leadership. That is, how a person sets a direction for the team, builds relationships with others, and works alongside them to overcome challenges (Paglis & Green,

2002). “I try to dump a lot more of energy into my staff because if I can get the best of them, then they are giving their best to the kids”, stipulates Ms White.

Another facet of this relationship building is showing appreciation for the teachers in very concrete ways. Ms. Green celebrates her teachers with little treats or gifts at opportune times. “I’ll make sure we either have food to eat, or to start the school year I gave them all planners to help them stay organized,” Ms. Scarlett adds. Ms. White concurs, “I try to feed them a lot”! These overtures are supplemented with staff recognition where appropriate during meetings. Sometimes, other opportunities or sources for teacher appreciation or validation can occur. For example, Ms. Plum’s school holds fundraisers where parents raise money at the beginning of the year to split and divide amongst the teachers later.

### ***COVID Challenges***

COVID challenges were woven into every single interview. Every director mentioned the difficulty in running a school during the pandemic. “Two and a half years have been in COVID. I feel like it’s just always problem solving. It’s chronic reinventing and problem solving... There was constant redesigning of events with COVID protocols so that we could still have these experiences for families and keep it as authentic as possible for children. It’s been a lot of problem solving and trying to be creative and knowing what we could and could not manage”, per Ms. Green. “To me during COVID, because we didn’t have any extra things going on, it was really just focused on the child. It’s not wrong to have all the events, but it made us rethink some of our ways we work”, Ms. Peacock adds. For Ms. Plum, COVID was a defining point of her leadership since her tenure started with leading a school during the pandemic. She shared that COVID was everywhere in her building. Classrooms were shutdown, enrollment was low, and teachers were sick. However, despite it all Ms. Plum adds, “I’ve had lost a couple of teachers in

the last couple of months... I don't think that was a reflection on me. I think it's just happening across the board right now". She continues, "People are just moving on because there is a lot out there, a lot to offer out there for people, and teaching during this time period is not easy, so it's not for everyone".

Bandura (1993) postulates that individuals process diverse sources of information when encountering new tasks. They choose the task and the amount of effort to expend based on their feelings about their capacity to succeed. People with greater levels of self-efficacy tend to set higher goals for themselves and are more determined to accomplish them. Individuals with high efficacy are also more flexible in adjusting their intermediate goals and strategies to respond to the needs of the individuals whom they lead.

Here, we find that the directors had to navigate through various scenarios and exert some graceful pivoting. From Ms. Peacock's rethinking of her approach to Ms. Green's creativity in problem solving, they both had to explore and determine which tasks they would engage in and the amount of effort poured into it. Ms. Plum, for one, did a lot of self-reflecting. She saw the lack of progress as a realistic part of her job and not an indictment of her leadership ability (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004).

### ***Self-Motivation***

Although the directors were supported by their supervisors, administrative team, and school leadership, they were still internally driven to make themselves better leaders. None of the directors were handed a coursework to finish, or an organization to join. All sought their own professional development. Goolamally and Ahmad (2014) articulated that leadership self-efficacy is the self-assessment of one's ability to organize and carry out the work or actions required to achieve a performance target. In this case, the performance target was to be a better



ECE leader. “I think as a director, I prefer more leadership professional development...I did go and get my 40 hours of director’s training, stuff like that. I still to this day, I’m a professional development junkie. I love a good professional development”, Ms. White contends.

“My goals are always based on high quality...I have always been a lifelong learner”, Ms. Scarlett states. She adds, “One thing I always did is present myself as a leader. I’ve always been someone who believes in if this is what you want, this is how you show up for this position.” Ms. Scarlett sought out leadership and ECE organizations that share the same mission and vision as her school. Ms. Plum concurs, “I’ve searched for my professional development... There’s definitely a resource of preschool directors for our community.” Ms. Peacock on the other hand, takes it a step further. She stays on top by further reading in addition to being part of professional organizations and visiting other preschools that align with their practice. “...I am reading The Culture Code right now”, she states.

Leadership self-efficacy is defined as one’s estimate of his ability to fulfill the leadership role” (Murphy & Johnson, 2016). These preschool directors seem to have a clear idea of the importance of professional development to fulfill their leadership role. According to studies, self-efficacy beliefs are excellent predictors of individual behavior as well (Bandura, 1997; Humphrey, 2002; Schunk & Dibenedetto, 2016). School leaders with a strong sense of self-efficacy have been found to be persistent in pursuing their goals but are also more flexible and more willing to adapt strategies to meeting contextual conditions (Osterman & Sullivan, 1996). This was really not the case for all five directors. That is, regardless of self-efficacy level, all exhibited a desire to increase their leadership capacity. Rather than rest on their laurels, all directors engaged and continue to engage, in various venues to grow themselves as leaders.

## *Resiliency*

Self-efficacy regulates the goals people are willing to set for themselves, and it controls the number of times people are willing to persevere in the face of obstacles. It determines how well they will recover when they fail (Bandura, 1993). The preschool directors I interviewed talked about various situations where resiliency was displayed. “Opportunities. Challenges are always opportunities”, said Ms. Peacock. This thought process is reflective of Bandura’s mastery experiences and social persuasion whereby reflecting on successful experiences has the potential to increase self-efficacy (Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2006).

Ms. Scarlett recalled a situation where she was placed in a distressing situation. Being a mandated reporter, she had to confront one of her teachers who had been reported as having abused a student. “It has been a stressor for me...I think I ruined a relationship”. She struggled with that dilemma initially but reported back that she now sees the experience as a lesson learned. “I try to self-reflect, like how could I have done that differently? How could I have communicated what was happening more delicately? I try not to beat myself up...I’m very direct. I am very black and white. I’m doing a lot of self-reflection. I take it as a lesson”, she muses.

Efficacy can be described as a “product of reciprocal causation” between one’s belief and environment (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Individuals who exhibit greater efficacy are more likely to be successful. Experiencing success leads them to feel more capable. This encourages them to take on more challenging tasks that they are likely to do well, and their success yields even greater efficacy. Indeed, a robust sense of efficacy is necessary to sustain the productive attentional focus and perseverance of effort needed to succeed at organizational goals (Wood & Bandura, 1989).

“Whenever I get anxious about something new...that I haven’t done before...I’m a little anxious about it. I keep a mental list of everything I’ve done in the last two years...this is where you are now”, Ms. Plum says confidently. Thinking about past successes also has the potential to boost self-efficacy. School leaders who reflect upon successful experiences in the year before they were appointed to their job created a positive trajectory for their professional growth (Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2006).

Confronted with problems, high efficacy school leaders do not interpret their inability to solve problems immediately as failures (Osterman & Sullivan, 1996). As was the case with Ms. Plum, they regulate their personal expectations to correspond to the conditions, typically remaining confident, calm, and keeping their sense of humor, even in difficult situations. Individuals with stronger efficacy also demonstrate more effective analytical thinking (Bandura, 1993, 2001). When asked to describe a challenge, Ms. Green mentions, “...I just try to keep a goal in mind...It depends on what the challenge or the crisis is...It's easier to keep it in work because you know what the end games are, you know what your goals are”. Similarly, Ms. White’s perspective on challenges was: “Any challenging moment, I want to solve it immediately. I want to come back immediately. I want to respond immediately. I want to answer immediately.” She adds, “You can take this on...You want to react so fast because it hit you so fast. I think a lot of times just remembering to pause and not react so fast, then it works out better for everybody”.

### ***Inspiration***

All five directors discussed the genesis of their strength and the source of their inspiration. Though each director’s source of strength varied, the fact that there was something or someone that gave them purpose was worth noting. School leaders can bolster their self-efficacy

by reflecting on positive experiences and working with a mentor for encouragement and support (Kelleher, 2016).

For Ms. White it was being able to look back and see that she was able to support families. “I love being that support for families. I think that’s why I stick around the most is because I feel like nothing is more important than being the backbone to a bunch of educators so that they can go and do their job to their best of ability. Because I have kids and I would hope their teachers are having support the way we support these teachers. I think that is the most satisfaction I get. At the end the year, when I look back on the whole year is that we were able to support an entire community. Like this little program, this little group of people, the 11 of us, the 12 of us were able to support an entire community so that it could operate the way it was supposed to operate.

Separately, Ms. Peacock’s inspiration is to continue advocating for early childhood education. “I don’t think early childhood is very well regarded in our society still. I feel like if we were more of an advocate for it, it might be better. I think we’re losing a lot of our good leaders. I just think back like Lillian Katz, and just people in the past that we’ve really looked up to and we don’t have those leaders anymore. I don’t know who the leaders are any more in national early childhood...all these greats really inspire me every day”, she remarks.

Succinctly, Ms. Green explains, “Oh, my mom. She was the head of school at several of the independent schools in the '70s and '80s. My professors at school and graduate school, all of those women. Then now really my colleagues, I've learned a lot from them about pacing yourself, and leadership styles, and managing things and collaboration, and communicating”.

As for Ms. Scarlett, it was one specific person that inspired her. “Oh, my first director. Her name is Ms. Mustard, and she was badass. She came to school every day in heels. She was

honest, she was fun, and she was transparent. She inspires me because I was rough around the edges, but she saw my potential and she forced me into leadership opportunities. I wouldn't volunteer to just lead summer camp or do marketing. She'd be like, "Okay. No, Ms. Plum's going to do X, Y, and Z." or, "Ms. Plum is going to travel to another state to help with developing their childcare program." She did those things. That always inspires me now to reciprocate the same thing. Being open, being transparent, having fun, being clear, communicating clearly, but then also taking people along the ride with me”.

Additionally, Ms. Plum states, “I've had the opportunity to know a lot of really great strong women that have worked here past and present when I was just a parent here, and also when I started working here, that have taught me a lot, that are fun and serious and have mentored me along the way with good advice and tough advice sometimes too”.

### **Summary**

This study refers to self-efficacy as one's ability to organize and carry out the work or actions required to achieve a goal. Research indicates that highly efficacious school leaders lead to better functioning and more effective schools (Bandura & Wood, 1989; Eberhard, 2013). In addition, efficacious schools and leaders increase student achievement, reduce the impact of economic disadvantage, enhance relationships with families, and reinforce teacher commitment to the school (Brinson & Steiner, 2007). Ultimately, this research revealed that regardless of a subject's perceived level of self-efficacy as determined by the PSES, five main themes percolated from the interviews: collaboration and relationship building, COVID challenges, self-motivation, resiliency, and inspiration. Furthermore, the subjects' responses to these five issues indicate that overall, the preschool director's beliefs and actions (i.e., self-efficacy) directly correlates to the success of a preschool program.

To sum up this chapter, the results were correlated with previous studies, participants' perspectives were presented, and thematic findings were discussed. The next chapter, Chapter 5, further explores the interpretation and significance of the results. It answers the research questions using the data gathered; it asserts the study's finding, compares the findings with extant literature, and extrapolates any recommendations for policy and practice based on the study's results.

## **5 DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

This case study investigated how early childhood leaders viewed leadership, managed their preschool program, and explored the preparation for their leadership role. This chapter provides an overview of the study, themes uncovered and its relation to the self-efficacy constructs, a discussion presented for each of the research questions, the study's limitations, and implications for practitioners and policymakers. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

### **Research Overview**

Framed by Bandura's self-efficacy theory, this study aimed to provide some important information about leadership in the early childhood education setting, given that this field is under-researched. Self-efficacy theory is defined as a person's belief about his talents to activate his motivation, cognitive resources, and actions he needs to gain control over the events in his life (Wood & Bandura, 1989). A sense of efficacy includes a belief about one's own ability (i.e., self-efficacy) or the ability of one's colleagues collectively (i.e., collective efficacy) to perform a task or achieve a goal. It represents a belief about ability, not actual ability (Bandura, 1997). In the educational setting, self-efficacy theory posits that a leader's self-efficacy is essential for a school's success (Versland, 2016).

This research also provides data on factors that impact the development of efficacy. These self-efficacy constructs articulated by preschool directors were classified into four factors that influence efficacy beliefs: mastery of experiences (success experiences), vicarious experiences (social modeling), social persuasion (verbal suggestion or affirmation), and

physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 1997, 2010). Each uncovered theme from the interviews were aptly connected to each construct as follows:

1. Mastery of Experience: Resiliency, Self-Motivation, and COVID-19
2. Vicarious Experience: Relationship/Collaboration and Inspiration
3. Verbal Persuasion: Relationship/Collaboration and Inspiration
4. Physiological and Emotional States: Resiliency and Self-Motivation

Self-efficacy is measured by determining what is necessary to succeed in a specific area (Bandura, 2006). I used the Principal's Self Efficacy Scale (PSES) to measure the participants' self-efficacy level given the ease in administering the test. Using the self-efficacy results, I then grouped my participants into three classifications: low, average, and high self-efficacy levels. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to find emerging themes, find answers to research questions and its implications, and recommendations for additional research.

Efficacy beliefs, as asserted by Bandura (1993), develop in response to both cognitive and affective processes. Among the strongest cognitive influences on self-efficacy are beliefs about ability as either an inherent capacity or an acquired skill (Villanueva & Sanchez, 2007; Versland, 2016). The inherent capacity perspective focuses on protecting the positive evaluation of one's competence. Those in leadership roles with this perspective experience a decline in self-efficacy as difficulties arise. Their problem-solving skills take a downturn, and their drive to overcome challenges declines as well. This lowered drive then leads to weakened performance. Conversely, with the acquirable skills perspectives, one's self-efficacy is not affected by challenging situations. These leaders continue to set challenging goals for themselves and exercise effective problem-solving skills to overcome demanding situations. It appears that all five directors displayed this acquirable skills perspective. In their interviews, they exhibited



efficient ways to navigate and pivot around the minefield that COVID presented. “My true north is keeping my students safe, keeping my staff safe, and keeping my preschool open”, expressed Ms. Plum.

Although each participant's self-efficacy level had a variance of 2.11 points at the most, they all exhibited self-efficacious beliefs and behaviors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, every preschool director shared the specific challenge of keeping their school open. Despite staffing issues and constantly changing health and safety protocols, the preschool directors continued to be efficient and effective problem solvers, thereby displaying the acquirable skills belief system as posited by Villanueva & Sanchez (2007) and Versland (2016). With regards to the causal correlative relationship between a higher self-efficacy level and a school's quality (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2007), this research is inconclusive because no measures were taken to assess school quality.

## **Answers to Research Questions**

### ***Research Question 1***

How do preschool directors incorporate constructs of self-efficacy when describing their leadership style in Early Childhood Education (ECE)?

Self-efficacy theory submits that the perception of efficacy is influenced by four factors: mastery of experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physical and emotional state (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2002). The preschool directors in this study manifested these four self-efficacy constructs unknowingly. That is, as they answered the interview questions, they were unaware of the self-efficacy constructs, but these constructs were displayed throughout their stories of leadership.

**Mastery of Experience.** Mastery of experiences occurs when one does something and is successful. This is the most effective way to promote self-efficacy because people tend to believe they can do something unfamiliar if it is similar to something they have already done well (Bandura, 1997). Therefore, if new tasks are easy and similar to ones already mastered, and though difficult and unfamiliar situations may be avoided, then one's self-efficacy level will simply not increase by engaging in these familiar activities. Rather, to improve self-efficacy, one needs to undertake difficult situations and work through them (Bandura, 1997). In this research, this construct was manifested in themes of resiliency, self-motivation, and COVID-19.

For these preschool directors, their leadership is defined by their responsiveness to challenges both expected and unexpected. They all viewed these difficult situations as opportunities for growth. This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic in the level of resiliency that emerged and was reflected in their leadership style regardless of their level of self-efficacy. These directors tasked themselves with keeping classrooms open, and their students and teachers safe. There was no guideline or handbook. They all had to adjust and pivot when it came to decision-making. There was a lot of taking it day-to-day moments, if not hour-by-hour, or even minute-by-minute. "There was no time to pause and reflect," as one director puts it. "It's been a lot of problem-solving and trying to be creative," another director adds. One preschool director said it was her goal to "make it until the end of the school year." Ultimately though, they all persevered and succeeded to share their experiences.

Prior research has consistently asserted that people with a strong sense of self-efficacy believe that they can complete difficult tasks (Villanueva & Sanchez, 2007). They see these as challenges to be mastered, rather than threats to be avoided (Bandura, 1997). For this study, a preschool director's success when meeting a challenge should have been an indicator of her

belief in her leadership ability. However, this was not reflected in the study. Ms. White's and Ms. Scarlett's self-efficacy level were low, despite exhibiting the same behaviors and beliefs when it came to challenges as Ms. Plum's and Ms. Peacock's, who had the highest self-efficacy scores. In other words, while Bandura (1997) surmised that completing a challenge successfully leads to a higher self-efficacy level, the subjects of this study showed that meeting such challenges appears to have not resulted in any changes to their self-efficacy level, especially for the low-scoring PSES directors. What was certain though, was that the low-scoring PSES directors manifested the characteristics of highly efficacious leaders when it came to completing challenging tasks. They did not shirk from the obstacles presented by the COVID-19 landscape.

**Vicarious Experience.** The second source, vicarious experience, occurs when an individual observes the activities of a mentor, experienced professional, or a role model (Bandura, 1997). Although not overt, the directors indirectly raised the vicarious experience construct when they recalled stories of people who made an impact on them or their leadership styles. It was displayed through the themes of relationship, collaboration, and inspiration. Vicarious experience influences the perception of self-efficacy through the observation of the success and failures of one's role models (Bandura, 1997). The extent to which your vicarious experience affects self-efficacy is related to how much you see yourself in your role model.

Ms. White best exemplified this construct. She watched the previous director and was determined to be like her when it came to running the school. Initially however, she failed miserably. She realized her past director was very authoritarian in nature, which differed from her own leadership style. After this realization, she decided to look for an alternative mentor she could model her leadership after. She listened to leadership podcasts and read *The Good*

*Neighbor: The Life and Work Fred Rogers*. It became her bible and served well as her inanimate mentor.

For Ms. Green, her vicarious experience surfaced when she spoke about her mother, professors, and colleagues. “She was the head of school at several of the independent schools in the '70s and '80s. My professors at school and graduate school, all of those women. Then now really my colleagues, I've learned a lot from them about pacing yourself, and leadership styles, and managing things and collaboration, and communicating”. They were all successful at what they did, and Ms. Green saw a lot of her in them.

Vicarious experiences for Ms. Plum were the strong women that worked in her school when she was a parent at that time. When she became the preschool director, these women mentored her and took her under their wing. They served as her role models when she assumed the preschool director role.

In a similar vein, Ms. Peacock’s were vicarious experiences she followed throughout her ECE career. Individuals like Lillian Katz, Ben Mardell, and Margie Cooper were all big advocates for initiatives to elevate early childhood education. All three individuals are known in the field as huge proponents of research-based learning in early childhood education. “All the greats just really inspire me every day”, she shares. This is not surprising, because Ms. Peacock shares the same views as these “greats”. They all believe in data-driven instruction for the youngest learners. If self-efficacy research predicts that self-efficacy is stronger when one shares similar traits as one’s mentor, Ms. Peacock has fulfilled that prophecy by scoring the highest self-efficacy level in the group.

Ms. Scarlett’s vicarious experience, on the other hand, is unique in that she not only benefits from the self-efficacy construct, but she also shows and teaches the same construct to

her team. For example, from her first director, Ms. Scarlet learned how to run a school through the values of “being open, transparent, having fun, communicating clearly, but then also taking people along the ride”. In turn, she practices the same philosophy of “being open” and “communicating clearly” through an open-door policy and frequent feedback. In addition, she maintains a pleasant environment by celebrating important occasions with her team. Finally, she takes her charge along for the ride by empowering them through periodic professional development whereby experts engaged in best practices are brought in to support the teachers.

In sum, all five subjects had strong vicarious experiences as evidenced by their stories. However, the findings are once again inconsistent with Bandura’s postulation that vicarious experience influences the perception of self-efficacy through the observation of the success and failures of others who are similar to oneself (Bandura, 1997). Although the directors were exposed to people who they thought of as positive role models, their levels of self-efficacy were not impacted after the exposure. Two directors still had a low self-efficacy score despite having positive vicarious experiences.

**Social Persuasion.** The third construct of self-efficacy is social or verbal persuasion, which asserts that when individuals are persuaded verbally to master a task, the more likely they are to perform that task. Receiving verbal encouragement does much to support a person’s belief in himself. Social persuasion happened earlier in the beginning stages of the directors’ careers. These stories were manifested through the themes of relationship, collaboration, and inspiration. For instance, none of the directors interviewed planned to be directors. All of them had been asked or felt that they had no other choice but to accept the position since they were the only viable candidates. Either way, all the directors were either verbally persuaded or continuously encouraged that they would make excellent preschool directors by their mentors or the heads of

the school that was hiring them. These “charismatic” individuals were clear in their belief that the directors were ready and capable in taking on the responsibility of leading and running a preschool. As the directors reflected upon these experiences, social persuasion apparently worked because they applied for and accepted the position almost immediately regardless of how they felt about their readiness.

**Physical and Emotional States.** The physical and emotional states that occur when one contemplates acting on something provides clues as to the probability of the task being successful. Stress, anxiety, worry, and fear are emotions that negatively affect self-efficacy and may lead to one’s inability to perform the required task (Pajares, 2002). To counteract this negative effect, preschool directors shared much about how they incorporate wellness into their leadership. The themes of resiliency and motivation were woven through their stories on how they dealt with their physical and emotional states.

The directors are well aware of the importance of peak performance. Indeed, this point was further magnified during COVID, when many staff and team members were perennially sick. Consequently, the directors made it a point of taking care of their health and well-being. A majority of them engaged in physical activities such as yoga, running, and working out. One director took up knitting. Another director performed morning affirmations and tells herself that “today will be a good day”, while playing meditation music to set the day’s tone. Finally, one just “leaves it at the day”. She is a single mom with two kids and tells herself that at the end, the most important thing is to be a mom to her girls.

Regardless of their self-efficacy levels, the preschool directors learned how to minimize stress levels in facing difficult tasks. They proactively sought ways to take care of their health and mental well-being. This finding counters the research of Bandura, which states that people

who have a high sense of self-efficacy can reduce their reactions of stress and observe their emotional state when performing a task (Bandura, 1997). In this study, even the preschool directors with lower self-efficacy levels were acutely aware of how their physical and emotional states affect their ability to lead.

Lastly, during the interviews, the emergence of the concept of “survival leadership” manifested itself. The way the preschool directors navigated leadership during a pandemic showed determination, grit, and fortitude to get through the challenges “day by day”, as Ms. White articulates. This approach to leadership was woven through the themes of resiliency, COVID-19, and self-motivation.

### ***Research Question 2***

How do preschool directors build and support school culture, program operations, and faculty capacity?

**School Culture.** As gleaned from the interviews, school culture is derived from the preschool director's values and beliefs. One factor shared by all five interviewees as the essential foundation of their school culture was relationships. A collaborative culture exists in their schools. The preschool directors expressed that they were supportive and responsive to their team's various needs. None of these ECE leaders were authoritarian type leaders. They involved others in the decision-making process and had a strong desire to ensure their teachers knew how much they were appreciated. They welcomed opinions, questions, and ideas. One director even expected her team to continually challenge her thoughts and ask the question “why?” For these directors, leadership is about continuous growth, and one of the ways they encourage this is by providing a deliberate, collaborative environment where questions are embraced.

This study found two types of school cultures: One school culture supported a more "family-like" school atmosphere, while the other school culture focused on academic rigor and developing leaders. The family-like school culture was not focused on academic curricula but on caring for their students. These leaders did everything to ensure their teachers felt supported, and not pressured into delivering an ECE curriculum. They wanted their teachers to show up for work, play, and take care of students, and know that they were appreciated for all their hard work. In contrast, the school culture focused on academic rigor and developing leaders held high expectations of their teachers' performance, whether in delivering classroom instruction or sharpening their own leadership skills. These directors wanted their teachers to reflect the same high standards that the directors held themselves to.

The director's level of self-efficacy was not an indicator of a school's culture. In fact, one director who scored the lowest in the self-efficacy scale advocated for a more academically rigorous school culture. On the other hand, one of the high scoring directors preferred a more relaxed school culture.

**Program Operations.** The answers for how these preschool directors handled their operations circled back to operating in a time of COVID. The answers primarily focused on keeping everyone in the school safe. They mostly discussed the support system: they all had a team to delegate many of their responsibilities, such as finance and facility maintenance. They also interfaced with the parents (especially irate ones) and acted as buffers between them and their teachers.

**Faculty Capacity.** While preschool directors cannot guarantee the quality of their students' education, they do their best to keep qualified staff. They provided professional development, food, acknowledgment, and leadership opportunities to motivate their team. The



directors also defined preschool leadership as one of mentorship. They wanted their teachers to strive and excel. Two directors felt so strongly about their teachers having leadership opportunities that they provided them with training and other professional development, while also delivering continual feedback. The preschool directors acknowledge that they serve as models for their staff; therefore, they show up on the floor daily, ready to do whatever it takes to ensure that needs are met.

All the preschool directors further reported that they had no issues stepping into the classroom, covering for their teachers, and taking proactive measures as required. They considered themselves as leaders who do not lead from behind. They lead from the front and by example.

Finally, the participants mentioned the importance of onboarding new teachers when shaping faculty capacity. Although one of the directors felt this was not her strongest suit, she agreed that it was important to onboard new faculty effectively. Proper teacher onboarding allowed new teachers to better understand the school's culture, build stronger relationships, and feel more empowered.

### ***Research Question 3***

How do preschool directors describe their preparation for their leadership roles?

A variety of studies indicate a causal relationship between school leadership and a program's quality (Bloom, 1997; Kagan, 2008; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2012). Despite this correlation, preschool directors are not required to have anything more than a 40-hour director's certification. Though these participants were already in the field of education, they were not in the specific capacity of director. Indeed, they all expressed the impromptu nature of their journey in becoming a preschool director. Furthermore, they landed the job without much preparation.

For some, the opportunity was presented with no other choice but to accept, or they were encouraged by a mentor to apply for it. Fortunately, the directors concurred that due to the significant number of years in the field and long work hours (up to 50-hour work weeks), they felt they had sufficient knowledge and expertise to lead and run a school.

Finally, all five directors acknowledge the importance of professional development and organizations that share the same advocacy for early childhood education. They actively seek ways to sharpen their leadership skills, increase their knowledge on ECE matters, and build positive relationships. They also share a strong collaborative stance with other leaders in the field. However, as one of the directors quipped, not all preschool leaders feel the same way about collaborating. According to her, the field is very competitive and good ECE leaders who are admired and respected are both difficult to find and to replace.

### **Implications**

As stated previously, all the directors in this sample had not planned on becoming a director and indeed, most were classroom teachers before the promotion. This provides an opportunity for preschools, professional development organizations, or higher educational institutions, to offer early childhood leadership programs for those who are just imminent in their careers.

Preschool directors need to be adept in their knowledge to become effective leaders and advocates in the ECE field. Directors who are comfortable in their preschools may be proficient as an administrator, but the chances of them making an impact at the policy level as leaders are less likely. Complacency within the preschool may be enough for some, but not enough to improve the overall quality of ECE. ECE needs more leaders, role models, and advocates.

The results of this study form the basis of recommendations to better prepare and assist the transition of the preschool director role into a more dynamic ECE leader. Novice preschool directors need assistance in leadership practices that will impact their work in schools and build their leadership capacity. Professional development programs for aspiring and existing school administrators should be planned in accordance with the four sources of efficacy information: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasions, and emotional and physiological states (Bandura, 1993; Pajares, 2002). Incorporating the self-efficacy constructs into early childhood education leadership programs will increase not only the leadership readiness of our future leaders, but also the quality of ECE leaders in the field.

Meanwhile, higher educational institutions must prepare individuals interested in preschool education to become leaders in the ECE field rather than just teachers in a classroom. Though it is important to have the skills and knowledge to work with young children, it is also necessary to build one's leadership capacity. I am not suggesting that good ECE leaders are non-existent, but rather that ECE leaders are attempting to fill the learning gaps themselves. As this study showed, a majority of the preschool directors were teachers prior to assuming a leadership position. By providing aspiring teachers with ECE leadership training, many of these teachers who may become directors will be better equipped to contribute to the ECE field as leaders, role models, and advocates.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The early childhood education research base is lacking and uneven. Much more is known about teachers as caregivers in the classroom than about preschool directors as leaders. Most of the available research has been limited to small studies. While my data set is limited as well, future research could consider expanding the participants and targeting a national, formal ECE

organization for recruitment, for example. Supplementary research too, could enhance and refine any correlative relationships amongst ECE leadership, educational background, self-efficacy, and gender, since this study only had five female participants and may not be representative of the population. Additionally, there is currently no scale to measure preschool directors' self-efficacy. Because of this, the PSES was modified to measure their self-efficacy levels. However, the use of PSES was not enough to capture the data that I was looking for.

Although this research did not intend to study the concept of “survival leadership”, this theme emerged as the participants shared their stories about operating a school during a pandemic. Being thrust into a leadership position during a challenging time prompted the preschool directors to perform at their highest level. Given that preschool leaders are already an understudied population, exploring how preschool directors communicate, lead, and strategize during unprecedented times could be another suggested topic for future exploration.

The purpose of this study was to explore preschool leadership under the context of self-efficacy. The results add to a limited body of work regarding early childhood education and the importance of having an effective preschool director. The results provide insight into more effective early childhood education leadership and the benefits of adopting more ECE leadership programs to cultivate a preschool director's leadership capacity.

## **Summary**

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in one's capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1993, 1997, 2001). Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment (Bandura, 1997). These cognitive self-evaluations influence all manner of human experience, including the goals for which people strive, the amount of energy

expended toward goal achievement, and the likelihood of attaining levels of behavioral performance (Bandura, 1997).

Various researchers have theorized the causative role that self-efficacy plays in certain effects. These include their thinking process, beliefs, and choices (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Dibenedetto, 2016). However, in this study just concluded, self-efficacy played essentially no role in the performance, motivation, problem solving capacity, or perseverance of these five directors. It was simply their self-motivation and responsive nature that supported their drive for continuous learning.

One particular example stood out and that was the correlation between accomplishment of something difficult, and the resultant, higher self-efficacy espoused by Bandura (1997). If this theorem holds true, then a preschool director successfully enduring the challenge of COVID-19 would have resulted in a higher self-efficacy level. However, this was simply not the case. Two of the study's subjects demonstrated low self-efficacy, and indeed one scored significantly low on the scale and yet, their accomplished navigation of COVID-related obstacles should have led to high self-efficacy levels. In sum, the respondents' self-efficacy level, as captured by the PSES scale, was essentially irrelevant especially with regards to motivation or resiliency.

Ultimately however, PSES scores do not fully encapsulate the self-efficacy beliefs and behaviors of preschool directors. The quantitative aspect of the PSES only partially informs the self-efficacy symptoms exhibited by ECE leadership. Therefore, the interviews were promulgated to provide deeper insight into the directors' leadership style and management of their schools. Given the dearth of preschool director literature, the separate analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data in this study allowed for any disparate results to shed more light into the ECE leadership field. Furthermore, the study showed that relying on one method does

not enhance the robustness of any findings, but rather, it was in using two different methodologies to collect data that really exposed the directors' stories of their lived experiences, which better reflected how they lead, manage, and supported their programs.

A preschool directorship takes skill and commitment. Preschool directors lean heavily on relationships as they lead. Like the youngest learners under a preschool teacher's charge, a preschool director invests in understanding and nurturing their team as individuals rather than just animated objects running around doing one's bidding. Regardless of self-efficacy level, a preschool director positively impacts the teachers around them by elevating their own thoughts and ideals. The call to action is this: Knowing there is currently no model for early childhood education leaders, we need to be proactive when it comes to research, content, and approaches in that new developments in ECE should be shared with our teachers and applied in our daily interactions. We need to be intentional in our leadership practices and continuously ask ourselves, "how are we making the greatest impact for our team"? Through it all, this study made several conclusions: making connections, not shirking from difficult situations, building resiliency, taking the initiative, and empowering others to do the same, were the integral cornerstones that significantly impacted their preschool leadership skills. "You can't do this job just for a job. You have to love it...You have to have a passion for it. It will eat you up if you let it" (White, 2022).

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## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX A**

Informed Consent Form  
Georgia State University  
Department of Educational Leadership

Title: Perspective in Leadership and Program Management of Preschool Directors

Principal Investigator: Dr. Sheryl Moss

Student Principal Investigator: Caroline L. Diaz

I. Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to explore the perspectives in leadership and program management of preschool directors. You are invited to participate because you are a preschool director in a licensed childcare facility in a large urban area in the Southeastern United States. A total of 8 participants will be recruited for this study.

Participation will take up to 3 hours of your time.

II. Procedures: If you decide to participate, you will complete a demographic survey along with a Principal Self-Efficacy Scale (PSES) designed to measure a principal's self-efficacy. You will also be individually interviewed in two sessions for an hour each on Zoom. In the interview, you will be asked questions about your leadership experiences in managing an early childhood education program. You be asked about your management style, views on leadership and your values as an early childhood education leader. All Zoom interview videos will be recorded and later transcribed.

III. Risks: In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

IV. Benefits: This study is not designed to benefit the research participant. This study will hopefully provide stakeholders, policymakers, and administrators a look at the experiences that

grow preschool directors' self-efficacy. This study may give policymakers insight into developing programs to promote leadership and self-efficacy skills for preschool directors.

VI. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Participation in research is voluntary. Signing this document means you are giving the researcher permission to record the interview and use information gathered from it for the proposed study. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may refuse to answer questions or stop the interview(s) at any time.

VII. Confidentiality: Your records will be kept private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:

- Dr. Sheryl Moss and Caroline L. Diaz
- GSU Institutional Review Board

We will be the only people who have access to the information you provide. I will use a pseudonym rather than your name on study records. The information you provide, including the recordings, will be stored on a personal hard drive that will be password protected. Your consent forms will be stored separately in another folder in my hard drive that will also be password protected. Your recording(s), from the interview will be kept for five years after it is collected and will be destroyed thereafter. Your name and other facts that may identify you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally. Please be aware that I do not have complete control of the confidentiality of the data.

VIII. IRB and Investigator(s) Contact Information: The IRB at Georgia State University reviews all research that involves human participants. You can contact the IRB if you would like to speak to someone who is not involved directly with the study. You can contact the IRB for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your rights as a research participant. You can also contact the IRB for questions about the study or your part in the study, and for questions, concerns, or complaints about the study. Contact the IRB at 404-413-3500 or [irb@gsu.edu](mailto:irb@gsu.edu). Additionally, you can contact the Student Investigator, Caroline L. Diaz at (770)

597-2350 or [cdiaz15@student.gsu.edu](mailto:cdiaz15@student.gsu.edu) or the Principal Investigator, Dr. Sheryl Moss [smoss13@gsu.edu](mailto:smoss13@gsu.edu) for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your rights as a research participant. You can also contact the Student Investigator or the Principal Investigator for questions about the study or your part in the study, and for questions, concerns, or complaints about the study.

IX. Copy of Consent Form to Participant: You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be recorded on video, please sign below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Demographic Survey**

#### **1. Identify your center type:**

- For-profit (Owner)
- For-profit (Corporation or Chain)
- Private Non-profit
- Faith-based
- University or college affiliated
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

#### **2. How long has your center been in operation?**

- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- Over 20 years (please indicate number of years) \_\_\_\_\_

#### **3. With what gender do you identify?**

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

#### **4. What is your age range?**

- 18 to 25 years
- 26 to 30 years
- 31 to 40 years
- 41 to 50 years
- 51 to 60 years
- 61 to 70 years
- over 71 years

#### **5. Do you work in your director role:**

- Less than 15 hours a week
- 16 – 30 hours a week

- 31 – 40 hours a week
- 41 – 50 hours a week
- 50– 60 hours a week
- Over 60 hours a week

**6. Were you a teacher/caregiver before becoming the director?**

- Yes

If yes, for how many years\_\_\_\_\_

- No

**7. What other positions working with children have you held before you became a director?**

**Name of Position, Years in Position**

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**8. Rank the following items in order of importance to your role as childcare director. 1 being most important and 9 being not important at all.**

- Manage the day-to-day operations
- Supervise teachers/caregivers
- Balance the budget
- Make program changes
- Attend Workshops/Conferences/Director Support Groups
- Read books and journals for professional learning
- Take time to reflect and imagine better ways to serve children and families
- Guide staff in understanding the program's values, vision, and goals
- Create a climate of trust

## APPENDIX C

### Principal Self-Efficacy Scale

### Principal Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to help us gain a better understanding of the kinds of things that create challenges for principals in their school activities.

**Directions:** Please indicate your opinion about each of the questions below by marking one of the nine responses in the columns on the right side. The scale of responses ranges from "None at all" (1) to "A Great Deal" (9), with "Some Degree" (5) representing the mid-point between these low and high extremes. You may choose any of the nine possible responses, since each represents a degree on the continuum. Your answers are confidential.

**Please respond to each of the questions by considering the combination of your *current* ability, resources, and opportunity to do each of the following in your present position.**

"In your current role as principal, to what extent can you..."	None at All	Very Little	Some Degree	Quite a Bit	A Great Deal				
1. facilitate student learning in your school?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
2. generate enthusiasm for a shared vision for the school?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
3. handle the time demands of the job?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
4. manage change in your school?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
5. promote school spirit among a large majority of the student population?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
6. create a positive learning environment in your school?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
7. raise student achievement on standardized tests?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
8. promote a positive image of your school with the media?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
9. motivate teachers?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
10. promote the prevailing values of the community in your school?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
11. maintain control of your own daily schedule?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
12. shape the operational policies and procedures that are necessary to manage your school?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
13. handle effectively the discipline of students in your school?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
14. promote acceptable behavior among students?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
15. handle the paperwork required of the job?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
16. promote ethical behavior among school personnel?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
17. cope with the stress of the job?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
18. prioritize among competing demands of the job?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)

## APPENDIX D

## Principal Self-Efficacy Scale Scoring Guide

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### Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale

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#### Efficacy for Management

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Handle the time demands of the job  
 Handle the paperwork required of the job  
 Maintain control of your own daily schedule  
 Prioritize among competing demands of the job  
 Cope with the stress of the job  
 Shape the operational policies and procedures that are necessary to manage your school

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#### Efficacy for Instructional Leadership

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Motivate teachers  
 Generate enthusiasm for a shared vision for the school  
 Manage change in your school  
 Create a positive learning environment in your school  
 Facilitate student learning in your school  
 Raise student achievement on standardized tests

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#### Efficacy for Moral Leadership

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Promote acceptable behavior among students  
 Promote school spirit among a large majority of the student population  
 Handle effectively the discipline of students in your school  
 Promote a positive image of your school with the media  
 Promote the prevailing values of the community in your school  
 Promote ethical behavior among school personnel

---

To score the full scale, calculate a mean of all 18 items. To calculate each of the subscales, calculate the mean of the six items listed under each heading.

## APPENDIX E

### Interview Questions

All questions focus on participants' beliefs of self-efficacy, how they feel about their self-efficacy, external factors that have contributed to their self-efficacy, and how they have been supported as directors in their growth of their self-efficacy. Questions for the interview are aligned with the three research questions for this study:

1. How do preschool directors describe their leadership styles in Early Childhood Education (ECE)? (Answered by interview questions 1 and 2)
2. How do preschool directors build and support school culture, program operations, and faculty capacity? (Answered by interview questions 3, 4, 5 and Part Two question 1)
3. How are preschool directors prepared for and supported in their leadership roles? (Answered by question in Part Two numbers 2 and 3)

#### Part One:

1. What is your leadership style? Please describe.
2. How would this description change if you were describing your leadership style to a
  - a. Supervisor? b. Colleague? c. Teachers? d. Parents/Stakeholder?
3. How do you build and support your school culture?
4. How do you build and support your program operations?
5. How do you support your faculty?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

#### Part Two:

1. Do you have any thoughts about leadership since we last spoke?
2. How do you describe your leadership values and goals?
3. Walk me through the process on how you create and implement your program's values and goals?



4. How did you prepare for your leadership role?
5. What resources are available if any to support you in your leadership role?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

## APPENDIX F

### Self-Efficacy Scores and Level of Job Priority Excerpt

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V
LOW	3	11	12	15	17	18		1	2	4	6	7	9		10	5	8	13	14	16	
6.17	8	8	9	5	8	8		7	9	8	9	5	9		6	5	9	9	9	8	
6.06	6	5	5	6	3	3	4.7	5	7	6	9	1	8	6	9	7	9	7	8	5	7.5
7.22	8	7	8	6	5	6		7	9	8	9	2	9		8	8	8	6	8	8	
6.78	5	5	9	6	5	5		7	8	7	8	4	7		8	8	8	7	8	7	
5.61	5	4	5	5	5	5		7	5	5	9	7	6		4	4	7	6	6	6	
7.22	7	7	7	8	8	8		9	9	7	7	7	6		6	7	7	7	5	8	
7.22	8	7	4	8	6	6	6.5	7	7	9	8	8	8	7.8	7	7	8	7	7	8	7.3
	47	43	47	44	40	41	221	49	54	50	59	34	53	299	48	46	56	49	51	50	300
							37							50							50

## APPENDIX G

### IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL



#### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Mail:	P.O. Box 3999	In Person:	3rd Floor
	Atlanta, Georgia 30302-3999		58 Edgewood
Phone:	404/413-3500	FWA:	00000129

November 18, 2021

Principal Investigator: Sheryl C Moss

Key Personnel: Diaz, Caroline; Moss, Sheryl C; Norris, Jennifer

Study Department: Georgia State University, Educational Policy Studies

Study Title: Perspectives in Leadership and Program Management of Preschool Directors

Submission Type: Exempt Protocol Category 2

IRB Number: H22206

Reference Number: 365053

Determination Date: 11/18/2021

Status Check Due By: 11/17/2024

The above-referenced study has been determined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to be exempt from federal regulations as defined in 45 CFR 46 and has evaluated for the following:

1. Determination that it falls within one or more of the eight exempt categories allowed by the institution; and
2. Determination that the research meets the organization's ethical standards

If there is a change to your study, you should notify the IRB through an Amendment Application before the change is implemented. The IRB will determine whether your research continues to qualify for exemption or if a new submission of an expedited or full board application is required.

A Status Check must be submitted three years from the determination date indicated above. When the study is complete, a Study Closure Form must be submitted to the IRB.

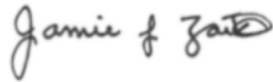
This determination applies only to research activities engaged in by the personnel listed on this document.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to ensure that the IRB's requirements as detailed

in the Institutional Review Board Policies and Procedures For Faculty, Staff, and Student Researchers (available at [gsu.edu/irb](http://gsu.edu/irb)) are observed, and to ensure that relevant laws and regulations of any jurisdiction where the research takes place are observed in its conduct.

Any unanticipated problems resulting from this study must be reported immediately to the University Institutional Review Board. For more information, please visit our website at [www.gsu.edu/irb](http://www.gsu.edu/irb).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jamie f Zaikov". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly informal style.

Jamie Zaikov, IRB Member

