A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE STORIED LIVES OF BIRTH THROUGH KINDERGARTEN LICENSED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

By

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ABSTRACT

AMANDA RAE VESTAL. A narrative inquiry into the storied lives of birth through
kindergarten licensed early childhood educators (Under the direction of
DR. ANN MICKELSON)

The quality of inclusion for young children with disabilities in early childhood learning
environments has long been attributed to the effectiveness of the teachers within such settings.
As the service delivery system has shifted toward more inclusive models, endeavors to improve
preparation for inclusion have been marked by efforts to combine the fields of early childhood
education and early childhood special education. While the initial development of such
programs, commonly referred to as blended, came from the belief that the approach would
promote inclusion, it remains unclear how well they actually prepare educators for inclusive
practice. Additionally, high variability persists in both inclusive practice and blended
preparation, impacting how teachers construct knowledge, a critical component of teacher
identity development. This narrative inquiry explored the storied lives of six educators through
the contextual theories of teacher identity development and blended preparation identity
development. Findings illuminated participants' professional identity has been constructed across
time as they: a) gained new theoretical knowledge that informed their belief systems, b) were
engaged in eye opening experiences that impacted personal and professional paradigm shifts, and
c) as their perception of agency was enhanced by bidirectional social influences. Implications for
research and professional practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS: early childhood education; early childhood special education, teacher identity
development, blended preparation

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DEDICATION

As this experience wraps up, it is hard to believe that more than five years have passed since my doctoral journey began. As a doctoral student, you quickly realize two things: 1) that life doesn't stand still for you to earn your PhD, and 2) to endure, you need a constant in your life. When courses, assignments, and exams begin, life continues. Loved one's pass, children still need their mother, they fall in love and experience their first heart break, they graduate, get married, your friend and family relationships evolve, a 40-hour work week remains, the house still needs to be cleaned, bills still must be paid, and a global pandemic still makes for an unrelenting opponent. Your PhD program persists through all these life experiences, becoming part of your understanding of the world, how you live within it, part of your family, part of who you are, and part of who you are becoming. It doesn't slow down because life happens, it becomes life.

As your new life ensues and you try to find balance as well as yourself within it all, something or someone must be there to ground you. To steady the roller coaster ride of exhaustion and tears, of joy and accomplishment, it must be met with consistency, reliability, and safety. Since I was 15 years old, one person has remained that constant presence in my life, my husband, Casey. For nearly 30 years he has represented home, strength, love, and commitment, everything that I need to make it through life, and especially through the last five years. This labor of love is first and foremost dedicated to him. His unwavering encouragement, support, and love throughout this process is what kept me going and enabled me to make it to the finish line.

My children Dillon, Jake, and Anna have always served as motivation to be the best version of myself. Growth doesn't come without sacrifice and my greatest sacrifice over the past five years was missing even a single second of time I could have spent with each of them. For

more than five years now, every hug, every text, every time we cooked together, watched a movie together, shared a holiday, sat on the sofa doing homework together, meant more to me than ever before. Every second I had with them filled my heart and replenished my sense of purpose. Thank you for every one of those moments and for giving me the space and time to grow. I also dedicate this work, along with a better version of me, to the three of you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

With the noble aim of making postsecondary and higher education accessible to more Americans, the Higher Education Act (HEA) was enacted in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson. While early proposals of the law were geared toward enhanced resources for institutions of higher education (IHEs) and provisions for financial assistance to students, later proposals included support and resources specifically for teacher training programs (McCants, 2003). As of the most recent reauthorization in 2013, the HEA governs student-aid programs, federal aid to colleges, as well as oversight of teacher preparation programs across the United States (The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers [AACRAO], 2023). During the 2018-19 academic year, roughly 560,000 students were enrolled in our nation's teacher preparation programs; upon completion, graduates reach an estimated four million students each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2022; Saenz-Armstrong, 2023). Among those who completed their teacher preparation program in 2019, roughly 85,000 (71%) were prepared to teach in elementary education, special education, or early childhood education (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022) most prospective teachers attend traditional teacher preparation programs as opposed to alternative options, both of which may differ greatly from program entry to exit. Although both types of teacher preparation programs have admission requirements (e.g., transcript and minimum grade point average [GPA]), traditional programs tend to lead to a bachelor's degree and provide students with more content related coursework, more hours of student-teaching experience, and hold them to a higher GPA for completion than alternative programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2022; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Alternative teacher preparation programs were designed

specifically to address shortages in the workforce by providing a route for teachers to enter the classroom prior to all certification requirements being completed (Whitford et al., 2018). The alternative pathway provides a more on-the-job training model, one that supports the practical side of learning to teach via an accelerated timeline but tends to lack pedagogy related coursework and rich field-based experiences (Whitford et al., 2018). Both routes will be further detailed in Chapter 2.

Due to variations across teacher preparation programs, it is inherently difficult to investigate their impact on teacher effectiveness, which is the most critical factor related to student outcomes (Opper, 2019; Whitford et al., 2018). As suggested by the National Research Council (2010) there are likely tradeoffs for any pathway that is chosen. Traditional pathways may produce more highly qualified teachers, however, take longer to complete so are at a disadvantage regarding the numbers of teachers ready to fill vacancies (National Research Council, 2010). The National Research Council suggested the need for teacher preparation programs "…to be evaluated on the basis of the demonstrated ability of their graduates to improve the educational outcomes of the students they teach" (p.5), but also noted the methodological difficulties in measuring this relationship. These difficulties along with shifting educational policies and views on how teachers should be prepared continue to impact the demands on teachers as well as expectations for their preparation (National Research Council, 2010). In addition to the increasing population diversity, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 has had significant impact over time on the way teachers are prepared (National Research Council, 2010). The IDEA, a prominent and longstanding federal education policy ensuring students with disabilities have access to high-quality educational services, also serves to hold teacher preparation programs accountable to producing educators

who are well prepared to support the diverse needs of their students (Harvey et al., 2010; Voulgarides & Barrio, 2021).

Subsequent amendments to the IDEA are among the most progressive regarding services provided to young children with disabilities. Changes to the federal law in 1986, extended the federal mandate for a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) down to the age of three years. Further, the reauthorization included services for children from birth to age three, in what is currently known as Part C of the IDEA (Voulgarides & Barrio, 2021). Part C required the development of programs that would provide early intervention services to young children (ages birth to three) with disabilities and provided federal funds to aid family resources and involvement, specifically through the development of an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) (Pugach et al., 2011; Ross, 2021; Stayton & McCollum, 2002; Voulgarides & Barrio, 2021). In 1990 reauthorization of IDEA clarified and strengthened the law's principles regarding the provision of FAPE in the least restrictive learning environment (LRE) for students with disabilities, ages three to twenty-one, as well as the natural environments requirement of Part C and the transition process from Part C to B (Ross, 2022). For young children with disabilities to learn in natural environments or the least restrictive environment meant, to the extent possible, they should be included in typical home and community settings and classrooms alongside their peers (Mickelson et al., 2022; Ross, 2021; Voulgarides & Barrio, 2021).

The increased inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities in typical early childhood settings, prompted by these new requirements of IDEA, placed new emphasis on how teachers needed to be prepared to support young children with *and* without disabilities in the classroom (Mickelson et al., 2022). The need for educators who were well prepared to serve in inclusive settings led some IHEs to purposefully integrate general and special education at the preservice

level (Pugach et al., 2011; Stayton, 2015). Although decades of meaningful outcomes for children and families support the inclusion of young children with disabilities in learning environments with their typically developing peers, positive outcomes continue to rest on the effectiveness of those who teach in inclusive settings (Odom et al., 2011). The shift toward inclusive practices has led to long-term efforts to blend the two fields (i.e., early childhood education and early childhood special education) that historically have varied distinctly in the required training and professional standards provided to educators (Spear et al., 2018). Over time, these programs have come to be referred to as blended preparation programs.

While the development of blended preparation programs came from the belief that the approach would promote inclusion, it remains unclear how well these programs actually prepare educators for inclusive practice (Mickelson et al., 2022). According to Chadwell et al. (2020) research indicates that coursework in early childhood educator preparation programs does not provide adequate attention to teaching young children with disabilities. Based on what we know about current inclusion rates, Mickelson et al. (2022) suggested that blended preparation efforts have not led to the intended effect of more inclusive educational opportunities for young children with disabilities.

Despite these challenges, teachers who are expected to teach children with disabilities in their classrooms need to be well prepared to do so (Berry, 2011). Unfortunately, a lack of clear definition and standardized models of inclusion remains, impacting how teachers are prepared and in turn influencing how they construct knowledge which is a critical component of teacher development (Berry, 2011; Rust & Sinelnikov, 2010). Teacher knowledge is linked to teacher beliefs and beliefs are suggested to inform educators' perceptions about practices, students, and content (Spear et al., 2018). Exploring teacher perception is a valuable way to glean insight into

how they construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences (Rust & Sinelnikov, 2010). Although numerous surveys have explored teacher perception and teacher attitude, giving teachers opportunities to share their stories in their own voice may support a richer understanding of the way teachers think (Berry, 2011). Teachers' beliefs and attitudes are paramount, as their acceptance of inclusion as a philosophy and their commitment to implementing it determines the success of inclusive practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Chadwell et al. (2020) explored the relations among early childhood educators' educational experiences and feelings of preparedness for working with children with disabilities. Several variables were noted as significantly correlated with feelings of preparedness (i.e., education-related major, educational attainment, and age group served). Findings also indicated a stark contrast between those who felt prepared to work with children with disabilities (19.6%) and those who felt well prepared to work with typically developing children (68.5%). These findings suggest that the preparation of early childhood educators to meet the needs of all young learners is not our current reality. Chadwell et al., encouraged a focus on the contributing factors that lead early childhood educators to feel less prepared to teach children with disabilities (e.g., need for behavioral supports, lack of pre-service training, lack of professional development, etc.), specifically through the use of qualitative research methods. A scarcity of empirical research exists that explores how early childhood educators feel about working with children with disabilities, as well as factors that relate to educators' feelings of preparedness (Chadwell et al., 2020).

When exploring the perceptions of educators, it is important to consider the interplay of the factors that create their professional identity (i.e., positionality, interactions with others, and interpretations of their experiences), each of which contribute to their unique perspective as a

teacher (Beijaard et al., 2004). Teacher perspective involves ongoing interactions between the personal and professional life of the teacher, which is constantly influenced by context, (Pillen et al., 2013). It is within this context that each teacher's lens is situated. As a teacher's professional identity is developed, context (e.g., preparation experience) is constantly influencing their perception and how they make meaning of their role (Pillen et al., 2013). Teacher effectiveness is an ongoing process of professional growth and development. It is not a linear or structured process, therefore, to best support teachers is to understand effectiveness based on the unique context that surrounds them (Schutz et al., 2018).

Birth through Kindergarten (BK) licensed early childhood educators in North Carolina (NC) are prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities. This license blends the content areas of early childhood education and early childhood special education and is obtained through preparation programs that do the same. Not only does NC represent one of only a few states that possess blended licensure and related preparation programs, it was also one of the very first states to create these programs in response to the 1986 IDEA amendments. Teachers holding a NC BK license are eligible to teach young children aged birth through five in public pre-k or kindergarten classrooms, as well as nonpublic (e.g., childcare) classrooms when the license is required. BK licensed early childhood educators who are employed in the nonpublic sector are embedded within a unique context that needs to be better understood. This small group of BK licensed teachers are also part of a unique framework that provides licensure, classroom-based mentoring, and performance evaluation supports to those employed in nonpublic classrooms, mirroring the support of a Local Education Agency (LEA) for BK licensed educators who are employed in a public school. This statewide system of support to licensed educators employed in nonpublic settings (e.g., childcare) is unique to NC and, in many cases, means teachers working

toward BK licensure have these services run parallel to the completion of their coursework. These nuances create additional unique, yet shared, context for this group of teachers, potentially influencing the development of their professional identity in ways different than other BK licensed teachers in the state.

The ongoing evolution of blended preparation in a field that has struggled to define its own identity further influences the contextual influences on the experiences of BK licensed early childhood educators in North Carolina. In order to enhance their experiences, we must better understand their experiences. Therefore, this study facilitated the voices of those who share in the experience of being prepared to hold a BK license and are teaching in nonpublic early childhood settings.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the storied lives of BK licensed early childhood educators who are employed in nonpublic early childhood settings and prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities in NC. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do BK licensed early childhood educators describe the construction of their professional identity within the context of their initial preparation, ongoing professional development, and other influences?

2. How do BK licensed early childhood educators describe their current professional identity and share experiences about their role as a teacher of young children with and without disabilities?

Epistemology and Methodology

Qualitative methodology is an approach to research that allows us to learn through the meaningful accounts of participants' lives; the goal of the researcher in this work is to describe, discover, explore, interpret, and verify (Durdella, 2019). For the current study, a narrative approach to the inquiry situated the researcher to explore the unique contextual experiences of BK licensed early childhood educators (Durdella, 2019; Frechette et al., 2020). According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990)

> ...humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories (p. 2).

Guided by a narrative approach to inquiry, as a qualitative researcher and principal instrument of analysis, I was intentionally attuned to my own presence, behavior, and relationship with the phenomenon and thoughtfully worked to mitigate its ongoing influence (Glesne, 2011).

Research Site, Participants, and Data Collection

This research was conducted with BK licensed early childhood educators who were employed in nonpublic early childhood settings, specifically North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) classrooms. Participants were recruited through the use of purposeful sampling, allowing the researcher to collect context-rich accounts of this specific group of educators (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Semi-structured interviews will be used to gather narratives about participants' experiences as a BK licensed early childhood educator employed in a nonpublic

setting. Follow up interviews will be utilized to gain additional insight and provide additional data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Conceptual Framework

Quality narrative research "…illustrates the uniqueness, dilemmas, and complexities of a person in such a way that it causes readers to reflect upon themselves and to bring their own situations and questions to the story" (Glesne, 2011, p. 20). Due to the interpretive and inductive nature of this narrative inquiry, no single theoretical concept framed the study. In consideration of the unique experiences of this study's participants, two contextual theories served to inform the interpretation of the data: the theories of teacher identity development and blended preparation identity development. According to Beijaard et al. (2004),

> professional identity refers not only to the influence of the conceptions and expectations of other people, including broadly accepted images in society about what a teacher should know and do, but also to what teachers themselves find important in their professional work and lives based on both their experiences in practice and their personal backgrounds (p. 108).

Furthermore, these concepts greatly influence the way teachers teach, their development as teachers, and how they receive and respond to changes within the educational landscape (Beijaard et al., 2004). The theory of teacher identity development informed the interpretation of narrative surrounding BK licensed early childhood educators' experiences. The evolution of blended preparation, including its lack of theoretical construct and definitive identity across the last few decades, also supported the meaning making of data. Blended preparation models were historically "centered on the belief that this approach will lead to graduates who are better prepared to provide quality inclusive education for diverse student populations" (Mickelson et

al., 2021, p. 2). Unfortunately, decades of inconsistent nomenclature and implementation has led to a lack of informed identity for blended preparation across the field that may further influence individual educator preparation and identity formation (Mickelson et al., 2021).

Significance of the Study

This study explored the storied lives of BK licensed educators who are prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities and are employed in nonpublic early childhood settings in NC. The current study sought to provide space for BK licensed early childhood educators to share their stories so that we may better understand their preparation and teaching experiences as they are situated within a context that is unique to them. By attaching meaning to their experiences, we give power to their voice and lift it up for others to hear. By collecting and sharing the perspectives of those who share in this unique context, this study informs current and ongoing efforts to better define blended preparation, to inform the design and implementation of blended preparation programs and may have implications for systems level change regarding inclusion. This study will also support the field of early childhood education by adding to the very limited literature base on the perspectives of early childhood educators, specifically those who are prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities in inclusive early childhood settings.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of the study, the following definitions were applied:

- *Alternative Teacher Preparation Programs*- "An Alternative Teacher Certification program is a non-traditional way of receiving training to become a certified teacher. If you have a bachelor's degree in a subject unrelated to education but want to teach, you may consider an alternative

teacher certification program. They are usually a faster route into the classroom with more flexibility than attending a traditional university or college." (Poliseno, 2022).

- *Blended Preparation-* "Collaborative models of preservice early childhood preparation, that attempt to blend preparation for both early childhood education and early intervention/early childhood special education" (Mickelson et al., 2021).

- *Developmentally Appropriate Practice-* "Methods that promote each child's optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning" (NAEYC, 2020).

- *Educator Preparation Program (EPP)-* "An institution or organization that prepares, trains, and recommends students for teacher licensure. Four-year universities or colleges are the most common EPPs, but some approved programs are not institutionally affiliated" (Wayne County Public Schools, 2023). Educator preparation and teacher preparation are used interchangeably throughout.

- *Inclusion-* "In early childhood programs refers to young children with disabilities participating in early childhood settings, together with same-aged peers, while being held to high expectations with the intentional promotion of participation in all activities, facilitated by individualized accommodations and use of evidence-based interventions" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

- *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)-* "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children" (US Department of Education, 2023).

- *Part B of IDEA-* "Infants and toddlers, birth through age 2, with disabilities and their families receive early intervention services under IDEA Part C" (US Department of Education, 2023).

- *Part C of IDEA-* "Children and youth ages 3 through 21 receive special education and related services under IDEA Part B" (US Department of Education, 2023).

- *Professional Identity-* "Something established and maintained through the interaction in social situations and negotiation of roles within the particular context" (Beijaard et al., 2000).

- *Traditional Teacher Preparation Programs-* "Traditional teacher preparation programs have typically served undergraduate students who have no prior teaching or work experience, and generally lead to at least a bachelor's degree, although some programs may lead to a teaching credential, without a degree" (Whitford et al., 2018).

Delimitations

To allow for an in-depth exploration into the storied lives of BK licensed early childhood educators, the choice was made to limit this study to NC and to NC Pre-K lead teachers. The population chosen was intentionally selected as a means to explore their unique shared context. As NC Pre-K lead teachers who are employed within nonpublic childcare settings, participants' experiences will include nuanced contextual factors that are only present in that particular setting (i.e., mentoring and evaluation support in a nonpublic setting, systemic constraints of nonpublic childcare settings, and meeting licensure requirements as part of a nonpublic evaluation system). Considering the high variability across early childhood preparation and licensure from state to state, it was important to limit to this context in order to achieve the research goal.

Summary and Organization of the Study

Mickelson et al. (2022) calls on those who are committed to the blended preparation approach to deeply examine the lingering issues and to foster the potential of the model so that it can elicit the social change of its initial design. By exploring the experience of those who live and engage within the model, we can help identify the barriers to social change. By understanding and lifting the voices of those who live and engage within the model, we can enhance the cycle of effectively supporting them to effectively support all young children in their classrooms. Therefore, this narrative inquiry explored the storied lives of BK licensed early childhood educators who were prepared for a blended license and are employed in nonpublic early childhood settings in NC.

Following this introductory chapter, this study is presented in four additional chapters. Chapter two provides an overview of the historical context and current landscape of blended preparation and a review of the literature related to teacher perception of their preparation and its potential connections to their identity development. Chapter three outlines the research design, positionality of the researcher, research site and participants, data collection and analysis procedures, and strategies for data quality. Chapter four presents the results of data analysis in the form of the final individual narratives and cross-narrative thematic analysis. The final chapter provides a general summary of the research and a discussion of its contribution to the literature, implications for practice, as well as recommendations for future research and practice. The bibliography of referenced literature and appendices follows.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the storied lives of BK licensed early childhood educators. To contextualize this study, this chapter first provides an overview of the past and current landscape of teacher preparation, including the variation in teacher preparation programs and its impact on outcomes. Teacher preparation will then be explored regarding the rise in need for teachers to be prepared to support children in inclusive settings. I briefly trace the history of the movement toward blended models of early childhood teacher preparation and the emergence of BK preparation programs in NC. This study examined the role that preparation plays in the development of BK licensed early childhood educators' professional identity. With that, the chapter concludes with the presentation of the conceptual framework, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which provided a lens through which to explore the nuanced process of identity development of BK licensed early childhood educators. Two theories, teacher identity development and blended preparation identity development, are used to further contextualize the construction of identity.

Teacher Preparation

As posited in Secretary Cardona's 2022 Report on *The Teacher Workforce*, "A supply of high-quality teachers is essential to the success of the nation's education system, and high-quality teacher preparation programs are essential to ensuring that supply of teachers" (p. xi). Although research on teacher preparation has been complex and largely influenced by competing ideas and political stances, decades of federal policymaking has emerged out of the notion that quality pre-service preparation is an effective route to quality teaching (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2014; Kuenzi, 2018). In fact, according to Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) the debate over how teachers should be educated and licensed has been a priority on

the educational agenda in the United States (US) for decades. The following sections will explore teacher preparation, first from a historical perspective, followed by an introduction to the current landscape of teacher preparation in the US, and the state of North Carolina, specifically.

Historical Context

According to the National Research Council (2010) much of the progress made in teacher preparation has not been well documented over the years, leaving gaps in what we are able to conclude about program characteristics that produce the most effective teachers. We do know that the first formal teacher training programs began as what were then called normal schools, which around the 1850's succumbed to universities who employed the first professors of pedagogy and began securing most of the available state funding (National Research Council, 2010). Although an organizational structure for formal teacher training existed during the late 1800's and early 1900's, it wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that the quality of teaching became a matter of public interest (National Research Council, 2010).

The level of public interest soared following President Lyndon B. Johnson's State of the Union Message in 1965 in which he declared that higher education was no longer a luxury, but a necessity. This address to Congress was quickly followed with the passing of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Through the authorization of numerous federal aid programs, need-based grants, and work-study opportunities, the HEA of 1965 meant a four-year college degree was accessible to many Americans who otherwise would not have had the resources to support their continued education (Flannery, 2015). In addition to increasing access to higher education, Title II of HEA was developed specifically to improve the quality of teacher preparation programs and included provisions for colleges and universities around financial support and accountability measures (Kuenzi, 2018). Programs receiving financial support from the federal government

were and continue to be held accountable to Part A of Title II, aimed at a) improving student achievement; b) improving the quality of prospective and new teachers by improving their preparation; c) holding teacher preparation programs accountable for preparing highly qualified teachers, and d) recruiting highly qualified individuals, including minorities and individuals from other occupations, into the workforce (US Department of Education, 2023).

In 1986, roughly 20 years after the passing of the HEA, the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession released a report that included recommendations for improving the quality of the teacher workforce through their preparation (National Research Council, 2010). The report was monumental regarding the progression of quality teacher preparation programs as it led to the development of master's degrees in teaching, the implementation of internships and residencies across programs, and the creation of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (Darling-Hammond, 2016; National Research Council, 2010). In addition to federal standards from the NBPTS that articulated what teachers should know and be able to do, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC), a group of state education agencies and IHE's, designed standards and assessments that would serve as a model for licensing beginning teachers, eventually being adopted and "integrated into licensing and accreditation standards for candidates and programs" across more than 40 states. (Darling-Hammond, 2016, p. 86). While the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards reflect the understanding of effective teaching for the education field at large, additional standards have been designed to more closely reflect the core body of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions needed across subsets of education (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2019). Standards designed to support the fields of early childhood education and

early intervention/early childhood special education, specifically, are explored more closely in the following section.

Professional Standards

According to Horn et al. (2022) standards is a broad term that represents the structural guidelines and requirements that form a state-wide system of early childhood education, ensuring that every child has equitable access to optimal learning opportunities. Although it may seem that state systems are inundated with various standards, three primary types have been identified: Program Standards (e.g., program attributes, inputs, and processes), Early Learning Standards (e.g., learning and development guidelines for young children), and Professional Standards (e.g., preparation guidelines). Most relevant to this study are professional standards, specifically those related to the preparation of professionals who teach young children with and without disabilities. As part of an early childhood system, professional standards regulate the qualifications of our educators and help us define the knowledge and skills they must demonstrate to effectively promote the development, learning, and well-being of the young children they teach (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Furthermore, they are used to inform credentialing and certification systems, to design, implement, and evaluate preservice preparation programs, and to guide ongoing professional development (i.e., in-service) (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Stayton, 2015). Importantly, professional standards help us articulate what effective teaching looks like based on what we know from the research about how young children learn and grow (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The inclusion of young children with disabilities in more early childhood settings led to a critical need for the standards guiding early childhood educator preparation to be well informed and well suited to supporting the needs of all

children in the classroom. Next, a brief history of the professional standards designed to meet this need.

History of Early Childhood Professional Standards. The first standards for the preparation of early childhood professionals were developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in 1985 and have seen several iterations since their creation (NAEYC, 2009). Prior to the release of the most recent version in 2020 (detailed below as part of the current landscape), the 2010 iteration of NAEYC's Professional Preparation Standards (shown here as an example) included six core standards each with supporting key elements, detailing what well-prepared students should know, understand and be able to do. For example, Standard 1: Promoting Child Development and Learning was supported by the following key elements:

1a: Knowing and understanding young children's characteristics and needs.

1b: Knowing and understanding the multiple influences on development and learning.

1c: Using developmental knowledge to create healthy, respectful, supportive, and challenging learning environments.

With the 2010 version of the Professional Preparation Standards, NAEYC's vision was to provide the profession a set of standards that would unify professionals across a range of roles and settings, further conceptualizing blended preparation for a previously separated field (NAEYC, 2009).

Although NAEYC's Professional Preparation Standards supported a range of roles within the field of early childhood education, they did not speak directly to those who support children with disabilities and their families. In 1922, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving the success of children and

youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents, proclaimed the development of professional standards for the field of special education as a priority of their organization (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2021). In 1983 CEC approved Standards for the Preparation of Special Education Personnel and charged their Professional Standard & Practice Standing Committee with implementation. (CEC, 2021). Like NAEYC's, these standards inform preparation programs, accreditation organizations, and credentialing agencies. Unlike NAEYC's Professional Preparation Standards, CEC's standards were not designed to specifically support young children, prompting those in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ESCE) to pull from the NAEYC and CEC professional preparation standards available to them and adapting practices accordingly. To solve for this issue, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), one of 17 divisions of the CEC, developed the DEC Initial and Advanced Specialty Sets (Mickelson et al., 2023). The specialty sets were designed to inform how the CEC standards applied to specific populations; in the context of early childhood education, they identified the specific knowledge and skills that early childhood special educators should possess (Berlinghoff & McLaughlin, 2022; Mickelson et al., 2023). Although a step forward, their development meant that blended programs now had to follow NAEYC and CEC professional preparation standards, as well as rely on DEC specialty sets. The next section will explore the current landscape of professional preparation standards, highlighting the newly released set of EI/ESCE and ECE professional standards.

Current Landscape. As stated in the previous section, prior to 2020, preparation programs that supported teachers who would serve young children with and without disabilities were informed by a combination of the NAEYC and the CEC professional preparation standards as informed by the DEC specialty sets. Although adequate, this approach complicated the

endeavor to prepare teachers across the two fields. Over the last five years, both ECE and

EI/ECSE have seen advancements in this regard. According to their Position Statement on

Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (2019), the Power to

the Profession Task Force charged NAEYC with creating nationally agreed upon professional

competencies for early childhood educators. This endeavor resulted in the recommendation that

the 2010 NAEYC Standards for Initial and Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation

Programs be updated to reflect the latest research and used "as the foundation for the standards

and competencies of the unified early childhood education profession" (NAEYC, 2019, p. 1;

Park et al., 2022). These comprehensive, long term, and cross-sector efforts resulted in the

development of the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators,

commonly referred to as the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Standards in 2020, which provide

the ECE field with a foundational body of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions for

effective ECE professionals (Park et al., 2022).

Simultaneously, very intentional work was underway to develop the first ever stand-alone

professional preparation standards for educators who work with young children with or at-risk

for developmental delays or disabilities (Park et al., 2022). Just as with the ECE Standards, these

would directly address the need for a specialized set of professional standards that would

articulate the unique knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions necessary for EI/ECSE

professionals (Park et al. 2022). Additionally, the development of a specialized set of EI/ECSE

professional standards eliminated the need to adapt the CEC standards for younger age ranged

making the DEC specialty sets obsolete (Mickelson et al., 2023).

The resulting Initial Practice-Based Professional Standards for Early Interventionists/Early Childhood Special Educators were approved by CEC in 2020 (Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2021), The development and approval of these standards represent incredible progress for the field as they are the first of their kind to "focus specifically on the preparation of professionals who work with young children ages birth through 8 who have or are at-risk for developmental delays and disabilities and their families, across home, classroom and community settings" (DEC, 2021). Furthermore, the EI/ESCE professional preparation standards are well situated to support relevant educator preparation curriculum and engage in advocacy for updates to licensure policies, as well as shift the previous reliance on the use of both NAEYC and CEC professional preparation standards and DEC specialty sets. Recent progress on ECE and EI/ESCE professional preparation standards leads us to an overview of the current landscape of teacher preparation.

Current Landscape of Teacher Preparation

Statistics from the 2022 *Title II Report on National Teacher Preparation Data* show that during the 2020-21 academic year there were a total of 25,852 teacher preparation programs in the US with 602,085 individuals enrolled. In the same academic year, the report indicates that elementary education was the most popular subject area among completers, with special education and early childhood education in second and third place, respectively. Additionally, over 200,000 individuals received an initial teaching credential in the US during the 2020-21 academic year; close to 80% of these individuals received their credential in the same state in which they had prepared to teach. The state specific data included in the report show that in North Carolina, during the same academic year, there were 917 teacher preparation programs with 17,497 students enrolled. Historically, most teacher preparation programs in the US have

been traditional programs (i.e., four-year undergraduate programs hosted at colleges/universities); however, trends in policy have resulted in an uptick of alternate pathways into teaching, replacing many of the traditional elements of the profession and creating a great amount of variation in how enrollees are prepared (Darling-Hammond, 2016).

Variation in Teacher Preparation

According to Darling-Hammond (2023), reviews of 30 years of research show that despite ongoing limitations of teacher education, teachers' who are prepared with knowledge of teaching and learning are more effective with their students. Notwithstanding the evidence, competing trends continue to pull advocates into opposite corners. Different viewpoints on what teachers should know in order to teach accompany various policies that influence the direction of teacher preparation programs (e.g., types of programs, design of programs, and entry and exit requirements) (U.S. Department of Education, 2022; Darling-Hammond, 2016).

Following nearly a generation of educational policies that enforced standard teaching behaviors, Darling-Hammond (2016) notes two critical advances in research on teacher education that effectively shifted the conversation from a very industrial approach to a more knowledge-based one. Predicated on a defined body of research and the National Research Council's publication on *How People Learn* (1999), the idea of learning for understanding replaced the past focus on rote and recall type of learning. These advances in the way learning was construed necessitated consideration of how teaching was conceptualized. Relatedly, the second critical advance detailed by Darling-Hammond was the direct link between the study of learning and the study of teaching, and how at their intersection was "the merger of knowledge about content and knowledge about pedagogy, which had been absent from much of teacher education" (p.84). These developments led to the redesign of many traditional preparation

programs, adding more content related to the theory and practice of learning, as well as an increased focus on and opportunities for practical application through student teaching/internship experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2016).

Those opposed to the traditional model of teacher preparation cite these changes as the issues with the model and propose that teaching is best learned through an on-the-job approach, void of the specialized knowledge and skill obtained in teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, 2016; Kuenzi, 2018). Further contributing to this perspective is an ongoing debate about whether connections exist between a teacher's preparation and their subsequent effectiveness in the classroom. Just as proponents of teachers' being fully prepared have made changes in policy and contributed to reform, those who see formal preparation as a burdensome requirement have influenced policy as well. This has contributed to contrasting policies and practices. Consistent recommendations to remove regulatory barriers to teaching, at times in direct response to workforce shortages, have led to the development of alternate pathways to enter the teaching field (Darling-Hammond, 2016). According to Darling-Hammond over 40 states have now implemented alternate routes into teaching.

In the US there are three categories of teacher preparation programs. Programs may be administered as traditional, alternative IHE, and alternative non-IHE (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Traditional programs are typically four-year undergraduate programs that are housed within IHEs; enrollees of traditional programs tend to be those who enter college with the intention of becoming a teacher (U.S. Department of Education, 2022; Kuenzi, 2018). In contrast, alternative programs commonly serve individuals who begin teaching while participating in the program; many may already have a bachelor's degree in another area and are returning only to obtain teacher licensure (U.S. Department of Education, 2022; Kuenzi, 2018).

Traditional programs tend to require more coursework and are more likely to include student teaching requirements than alternative programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2022; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Current teacher workforce shortages have led to a shift toward alternative approaches, introducing a new set of challenges around program quality and outcomes (Kuenzi, 2018). The fact that some programs are thoughtfully structured while others provide a means to enact emergency hiring options, further exacerbate the challenges around variation in quality and produced outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2023). The outcomes of both traditional and alternative pathways to teacher education are further explored in the next section.

Outcomes linked to Teacher Preparation

Despite varying beliefs in how teachers are best prepared, Darling-Hammond (2023) asserts "the past 30 years have concluded that even with the shortcomings of current teacher education and licensing, fully prepared and certified teachers are generally better rated and more successful with students than teachers without this preparation" (p. 73). This evidence suggests that those who gain greater knowledge of teaching and learning are also more effective with their students (Darling-Hammond, 2023). Further, teachers who are not fully prepared are not only less able to adapt their instruction and manage the classroom, but they also tend to be less satisfied with their training and their students learn less in key content areas (Darling-Hammond, 2023).

Although the traditional pathway to teacher preparation may yield more effective teachers, some argue that it is also more time and effort intensive, leading to barriers filling teaching vacancies and only further contributing to teacher shortages (National Research Council, 2010). Per Darling-Hammond (2023) the lesser time commitment required for alternate pathways (i.e., lack of traditional coursework and student teaching requirements) is generally

substituted with mentoring and supervision. However, studies have found that this classroom-based support is not a guarantee (Darling-Hammond, 2023). Less coursework and less student teaching also mean less opportunity to learn about child development and learning progressions for young children at a time when teachers are responsible for meeting the needs of a diverse population of children.

Indeed, the increasingly diverse group of students in the US has contributed to the need for various specializations within preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, 2023). According to the Congressional Research Service's 2018 report on Teacher Preparation Policies and Issues in the Higher Education Act, "there has been a proliferation of teacher preparation programs tailored to meet the growth of numerous teacher certification specializations" (p.3). Federal policies supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classrooms has not only increased the need for relevant specializations, but the need for teacher preparation programs to ensure all teachers are well equipped to meet the needs of all children in their classrooms (Harvey et al., 2010). A brief overview of relevant federal policies and their influences on teacher preparation is explored in the following section.

Impact of Inclusion on Teacher Preparation

As introduced in Chapter 1, in 1975 the US Congress mandated public special education services for students with special needs through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which was later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Lipkin, 2015; Ross, 2022). The inception of IDEA was predicated on the existence of public belief about the benefits of educating children with disabilities, children who previously went without any educational opportunities and were excluded from public school, or worse, institutionalized with little to no opportunity for learning (Ross, 2022). As concerns grew, so did legal challenges

spurred by disability advocates who filed lawsuits against the continued segregation of students with disabilities in the public education system (Lipkin, 2015; Ross, 2022). Following the outcomes of two federal court cases in 1972 (i.e., Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens versus Pennsylvania and Mills versus the Board of Education) schools were required to provide educational services that meet the needs of students with disabilities (Ross, 2022). In turn, states began to seek out federal funding to cover public education services for students with disabilities, which IDEA later authorized (Lipkin, 2015). Since its inception there have been several amendments to IDEA, a few of which served as a springboard for the development of special education services to young children, birth to six-year-olds. According to Lipkin (2015), IDEA's primary requirements are as follows: a) the free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all children with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 years; b) the identification and evaluation of all children with disabilities to determine eligibility and need for special education services; c) the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and Individualized Family Services Plans (IFSP) to support the goals of the child and family; d) the requirement to educate children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment(LRE); e) procedural safeguards for children and families; and f) the opportunity for parents and students to participate in shared decision-making. The requirements of IDEA are separated into four parts: A, B, C, and D. Most relevant to this study are Parts B and C (Ross, 2022). Part C, funded to encourage the building of statewide systems of early intervention services for children with developmental disabilities from birth to three years, placed a new emphasis on the child's system of support (i.e., family unit, childcare settings and caregivers, and community settings) (Lipkin et al., 2015). Part B of IDEA authorized the use of federal funds for special education services to preschool-aged children (3–5 years) under Section 619 and school-aged children (ages 6–21 years) with

disabilities (Lipkin, 2015). The federal requirements of Part B led to the most progressive changes regarding the inclusion of young children with disabilities. As noted in Chapter 1, Part B systemized the rights of preschool aged children with disabilities to FAPE and to be educated in the same classrooms with their typically developing peers (i.e., in the least restrictive environment) (Lipken et al., 2015; US Department of Education, 2023). Requirements outlined in IDEA, specifically the 1986 amendment and 1990 reauthorization, have led to the increased number of young children with disabilities being served in community childcare and school settings and paved the way for the revolution around the inclusion of young children with disabilities (Hebbeler et al., 2012).

According to UNICEF (2017) inclusion refers to "an education system that includes all students, and welcomes and supports them to learn, whoever they are and whatever their abilities or requirements" (p. 1). Inclusive practices ensure that everything from the teaching and the curriculum to the school buildings and classrooms meet the needs of children of all abilities (UNICEF, 2017). Since well before the start of the 21st century, research has supported the idea that children's development is an iterative and holistic process, one that does not occur in isolated domains of development (Myers et al., 1998). Research has also long supported and identified the benefits (e.g., socialization, higher skill acquisition, attitudes of acceptance) of the integration of preschool children with and without disabilities in classroom settings (Myers et al., 1998). Meeting the needs of young children of varying abilities in the classroom is not easy and requires teachers to be well prepared. Stayton and McCollum (2002) asserted that the movement toward including children with disabilities in general education classrooms made it critical for preservice teachers to be prepared for teaching in inclusive classrooms. To be well prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities, IHE's have a responsibility to ensure that

teachers can meet the challenges of inclusive educational settings (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Stayton & McCollum, 2002). Although inclusive practices have shown promising results for the developmental and social progressions of young children with disabilities, barriers to its success and opponents of inclusion itself have created ongoing challenges (Bruder, 2010; Hebbeler, 2012; Sopko, 2010; Stayton et al., 2009).

According to Hebbeler (2012) IDEA requirements have not ensured that those who provide services within inclusive settings and to young children with disabilities, specifically, are well prepared for the role. With that said, concentrated efforts have been made to promote the successful implementation of inclusive education, most importantly a mid-1980s call for the blending of general and special education within the personnel preparation system (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Some of the most successful models have been developed with the needs for integration among the fields of early childhood education and early intervention/early childhood special education in mind (Pugach et al, 2011) and are most commonly referred to as blended (Mickelson et al., 2022). Blended preparation models were a response to the need for the re-envisioning of programs for teachers being prepared to support children in inclusive settings (Mickelson et al., 2022). Blended preparation will be detailed in the following sections. Emphasis will first be placed on blended preparation through a broader, historical lens. An overview of the current landscape will follow, ending with a look at NC's longstanding model of blended preparation and licensure.

Blended Preparation

Historical Context

As detailed in Chapter 1 and previous sections, the passage of the IDEA and several subsequent reauthorizations greatly influenced service delivery for young children with

disabilities and their families (Stayton, 2015). In addition to IDEA, evolving consideration of inclusion as a socio-political issue prompted an increased focus on the key role education plays in ensuring social inclusion (Robo, 2014). The parallels between a socially inclusive society and an inclusive educational system were becoming clear as each construct placed emphasis on a) all people feeling valued, recognized, and accepted; b) differences being respected; and c) the basic needs of individuals being met so they can live in dignity and experience a sense of belongingness (Robo, 2014). The need for educators to be well prepared to understand inclusion as a philosophical notion and effectively teach in inclusive settings was a driving force for states to develop personnel preparation programs that blended early childhood education and early childhood special education content (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Stayton, 2015). Prior to the requirements of FAPE in the LRE being extended down to children ages 3-5, teaching young children with disabilities was viewed as the sole responsibility of the special education teacher and was not included within the scope of responsibility of the early childhood educator (Chang et al., 2005; Ross, 2022). With increased visibility and support of inclusive community settings as the context for special education service delivery (e.g., childcare centers, preschools), the movement to prepare future educators who could support the needs of all young children quickly became the focus of professional organizations and IHEs (Mickelson et al., 2022; Miller & Losardo, 2002).

As blended preparation programs were imagined, it was clear that the highest quality practices would be accomplished through preparation programs that reflected a "unified philosophy and synchronized practices" (Miller & Losardo, 2002, p. 308). As a result, programs designed to prepare early childhood educators for supporting young children with and without disabilities in early childhood settings expanded rapidly in the late 1990's; leading the charge

were Connecticut, Kentucky, New Mexico, and North Carolina (Miller & Losardo, 2002). In 1998, Miller and Stayton presented the first nationwide report on existing blended preparation programs (Mickelson et al., 2021; Miller & Losardo, 2002). The specific number of programs at that time varies in the literature, but somewhere between 38 and 41 blended early childhood education/early childhood special education teacher preparation programs were reported, across 10 states. By 2002, that number jumped to a minimum of 28 states reporting the development of blended preparation programs to support the increased nationwide efforts to provide quality services for all 3-to-5-year-old children (Piper, 2007). As more and more teachers were prepared through blended coursework and then entered the workforce, the distinctions between ECE and ECSE became less clear (Miller & Stayton, 1998).

Current Landscape

While the development of blended preparation programs has contributed to the profession at-large, empirical data on these programs remains scarce and narrowly focused on program characteristics (Mickelson et al., 2021; Miller & Losardo, 2002). According to Mickelson et al., (2021) a recent literature review was found to be 69% nonempirical and primarily focused on the earliest blended programs, supporting the case that the literature base remains descriptive in nature and antiquated as such. Although researchers are left with the sobering reality of the stagnant literature, recent initiatives, including DEC's work to situate the EI/ECSE professional standards as a staple in the field, may serve to reinvigorate the discussion around blended programs.

Interested faculty and researchers are now facing a very different early childhood landscape than earlier decades when the majority of literature on blended was published, as well as updated policies regarding teacher preparation and fluctuations in federal investment and

funding priorities (Mickelson et al., 2021). For example, while many of the original programs were developed with support of federal funding, changes in funding parameters have served to exclude most blended programs and eliminate this type of support for the development of new blended programs (Mickelson et al., 2022). Further, based upon the ambiguity in terminology and implementation of blended preparation, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of the number of contemporary programs. In 2014 the Early Childhood Personnel Center (ECPC) conducted a review of IHE website descriptions and reported an estimated 8% of the nation's universities offer a form of blended preparation programs but attest to the unreliability of the data.

Considering this reality, a call to action for a reconceptualization of blended preparation has been set in motion by Mickelson and colleagues. As discussed in the earlier section on professional standards, the development of the new set of practice-based professional standards for EI/ECSE offers the field a hopeful path forward (Mickelson et al., 2022). Conversations regarding next steps for new and existing programs began in late 2019 resulting in the following recommendations: (a) a joint DEC and NAEYC personnel standards position statement with recommendations specific to blended programs, (b) an alignment of the new ECE and EI/ECSE Standards, (c) a definition and quality indicators for blended programs, (d) case studies of different program models, and (e) sample program assessments and rubrics (DEC/ECPC Think Tank, 2020). As noted, many definitions and models of blended preparation exist. Given that the present study is centered in North Carolina, the following section provides a brief overview of the state's model of blended preparation and licensure.

North Carolina Birth-through-Kindergarten Teacher Education and Licensure Programs

In 1985, a group representing the state's two and four-year institutions convened to discuss preparation for inclusive early education (Myers et al., 1998). According to Myers et al.,

what resulted from the series of statewide meetings was a new license, one that required the inclusion of all three strands (child development, ECE, & ECSE), effectively making it a blended license, and required faculty to be prepared to teach based on a model of inclusion. By late 2002, the NC State Board of Education had approved the guidelines and competencies for an undergraduate Birth through Kindergarten license (Myers et al., 1998). The established licensure competencies were derived from the merging of professional preparation standards developed by CEC (supported by the DEC specialty sets) and NAEYC, effectively meeting recommended practice for inclusive teacher preparation in early education and intervention (Miller & Losardo, 2002). The new license would permit holders to teach young children with and without disabilities, birth through kindergarten (BK). Based upon the guidance of Blanton (1992), the NC Department of Public Instruction developed a series of workshops that emphasized a blended model for teacher preparation, one that would engage teachers in the practical application of new knowledge and in thought processes encouraging them to think beyond previous modes of teaching and learning. The workshops were geared toward providing the new content to teachers already holding a preschool or preschool handicapped license; ultimately, all individuals holding the older licensure types were required to apply for the new Birth through Kindergarten license (Myers et al., 1998).

The development of the blended BK license served as a catalyst for the development of blended preparation programs across the state that were focused on the integration of NAEYC and CEC professional preparation standards. According to Mickelson et al. (2022), Appalachian State University was among the first in the state to develop a blended Birth through Kindergarten undergraduate teacher education program. NC colleges and universities with teacher preparation programs continued to focus on the blending of all three strands with meaningful input from

those departments, as required by the NC Department of Public Instruction and the NC Governance of the University System (Myers et al., 1998). According to the NC Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) (2022), NC colleges and universities currently offer 19 BK teacher education preparation programs of which 16 offer a track towards obtaining the NC BK license.

Concurrent to the development of blended preparation programs in NC was the inception of the More at Four Pre-Kindergarten Program (More at Four), which also greatly contributed to the increase in BK teacher education and licensure programs across the state. In late 2001, the More at Four program was developed as a state-funded initiative designed to help prepare at-risk 4-year-old children for success in grade school (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2006). In 2011 the NC legislature moved the More at Four program from the NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) to the DCDEE and renamed it the NC Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K), by which it will be referred to henceforth. While a grace period was provided in the early stages of program development, the program guidelines stipulated that NC Pre-K classrooms would employ lead teachers with a NC BK or preschool add-on license (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2006). According to NIER (2021), the NC Pre-K Program served 23,718 four-year olds during the 2020-2021 school year. This equates to roughly 1300 classrooms and 1300 lead teachers who either held or were in the process of obtaining (i.e., completing coursework) a NC BK license.

In 2007, the NCDPI named the Teacher Licensure Unit, then part of the Office of Early Learning, as the statewide education agency for NC BK licensed early childhood educators employed in nonpublic NC Pre-K programs (Hegde et al., 2022). This decision proved to level the playing field between licensed educators employed as NC Pre-K teachers across the public and nonpublic sectors by providing an avenue for licensure maintenance and a much-needed

system of support through mentoring services (Hegde et al., 2022). According to Hegde et al., the Teacher Licensure Unit (now known as the Early Educator Support Office) provides teachers with "access to professional development, with opportunities for formal education that leads to BK licensure and a self-reflective, guided process that involves self-assessment, mentoring, and evaluation impacting both teachers' professional growth and teaching practices" (p.387). Utilizing an individualized, adaptable, and relationship-based coaching model, the program and its support services have served as a springboard for elevating the voices of NC BK licensed educators employed in childcare settings (i.e., nonpublic classroom). A qualitative study conducted by Taylor (2021), further detailed in the following section, was the first of its kind to provide this specific group of BK licensed early childhood educators the opportunity to share their perceptions about the support they received while working in an inclusive Pre-K classroom. The current study aimed to explore perceived experiences of BK licensed teachers. More specifically, to explore how their preparation programs influenced their readiness to serve young children with and without disabilities and helped to shape their professional identity as a teacher.

Teacher Perception

According to the Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession (2020) over 11,000 early childhood educators contributed their voices to NAEYC's Power to the Profession decision cycle process. Their collective voice has supported a nationwide movement towards professionalizing the field of Early Childhood Education. Unfortunately, the elevation of teachers' voices is not commonplace throughout the educational landscape. Increased discussion around the benefits of teacher qualifications as related to improved child outcomes and program quality has further supported the professionalization of the field, however, it is the voices of those educating our youngest children that continue to be missing from the conversation (Boyd,

2013). The perceptions of teachers guide not only their day-to-day practice but the beliefs they hold about teaching in general, constantly influencing their instructional decisions and impacting the overall growth and development of children (Job, 2017). When considering the preparation of those who teach in inclusive settings, early childhood educators' beliefs about inclusion are a contributing factor to the successful implementation of inclusion (Odom et al., 2002; Winton & McCollum, 1997). Plainly put, understanding teachers' perspectives can inform the improvement of positive outcomes for young children, with and without disabilities (Job, 2017).

Taylor et al. (2021) provided BK licensed early childhood educators with the opportunity to share their perceptions about the support they received from mentors and evaluators. Following a series of focus groups and follow up individual interviews, the following themes emerged: Responsiveness, Comfort Level as Early Childhood Educator, Support Needs, Modeling and Demonstrations, and Information Sharing. Findings suggested that coaching models shift toward a more explicit approach when supporting early childhood educators in inclusive settings.

In a study presented at the NC Council for Exceptional Children (NCCEC) 35th Annual Conference, Vestal et al. (2022) shared results of a survey of BK licensed early childhood educators that explored perceptions of their preparedness to support young children with and without disabilities, professional identity, task-related self-efficacy, and the support they receive. The following themes emerged and may have important implications for teacher support models and teacher preparation programs: Unprepared, Combination of Experiences, Professional/Educator/Influence, and Daycare Worker/Babysitter. Results suggested that reported feelings of unpreparedness to support children with special needs, as well as levels of comfort in their abilities, might be mitigated with classroom-based support (i.e., coaching,

mentoring, technical assistance, etc.) that is intentionally designed to build confidence and foster autonomy. Furthermore, teacher preparation programs that prioritize opportunities for practical application by offering a range of experiences (i.e., across disability areas, in a variety of settings, etc.) may enhance feelings of preparedness and translate to increased educator efficacy. Darling-Hammond (2020) suggests that when we include evidence about their preparation from candidates themselves through ways that reveal their experiences in preparation, we are finally supporting the connection between theory and practice in powerful ways.

According to Chadwell et al. (2020) roughly 20% of early childhood educators feel well prepared to teach children with disabilities while close to 70% feel prepared to teach children who are typically developing. With the number of young children with disabilities served in inclusive settings increasing each year, it is of great importance that their teachers feel well prepared to meet their needs. Chadwell et al. (2020) suggests that reported feelings of preparedness are tied specifically to inclusion specific coursework and experiences. Without having relevant and meaningful feedback from teachers, the move toward professional status may only add to the existing issues by increasing expectations without first addressing preparation issues (Boyd, 2013).

In 2002, during the early developmental stages of blended early childhood education and early childhood special education programs, Miller and Losardo studied graduate student perceptions of their preparation in blended programs. A survey study was conducted to gather information about the interdisciplinary preparation programs (*n*=7) in one state that led to a blended Birth-Through-Kindergarten teaching license. Like the findings of Chadwell et al., feedback from graduate students revealed the need for more experience planning and providing services for populations of children who have moderate to severe disabilities. Participants also

perceived their preparation for working with families of children with disabilities to be less than adequate and felt that their preparation in early childhood special education was generally in working with children who exhibit mild disabilities (e.g., speech problems). These perceptions are alarming, especially considering that the state BK licensure competencies indicate that teachers would be prepared to work with children who have a wide range of abilities from birth through kindergarten (Miller & Losardo, 2002).

More than twenty years following Miller and Losardo's study, the number of young children with disabilities entering community-based settings for their daily care and education has steadily increased and the role of early childhood educators prepared in blended programs have become more complex, however, our teachers continue to share they feel ill-equipped to effectively support the range of abilities and needs of their children (Mickelson et al., 2022). When considering the complexities of the role and simultaneous need for broader competencies, the critical nature of the role of educator preparation programs becomes clear. Teachers' perceived feelings of unpreparedness to support the children of their classroom indicate that educator preparation programs contribute to the professional identity of teachers (i.e., belief and value systems; Mickelson et al., 2022). The preparation experience supports the students' new identity as a teacher, a tacit construct that continues to evolve over the course of their own professional growth (Castaneda, 2011). The purpose of the current study is to explore the experiences of BK licensed early childhood educators who have been prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities. The applied contextual theories provide a basis to explore the development of a professional identity for BK licensed early childhood educators while also considering the influence of the complex nature of blended preparation itself.

Conceptual Framework

Due to the interpretive nature of the research, no single theory or concept was identified that could solely guide the present study. Instead, two theoretical lens informed data analysis and the development of implications of the findings: teacher identity development and blended preparation identity development. Participant responses were examined through these theoretical lenses to explore the relationship between experiences as a BK licensed early childhood educator and the impact of blended preparation programs on their professional identity as both the general educator and special educator of young children. Castaneda (2011) posits that teacher identity develops as a result of being engaged in the process of learning to teach, placing emphasis on the value of the teacher preparation process.

Teacher Identity Development Theory

BK Licensed
ECE Identity

Social Influences

Blended Identity Development Theory
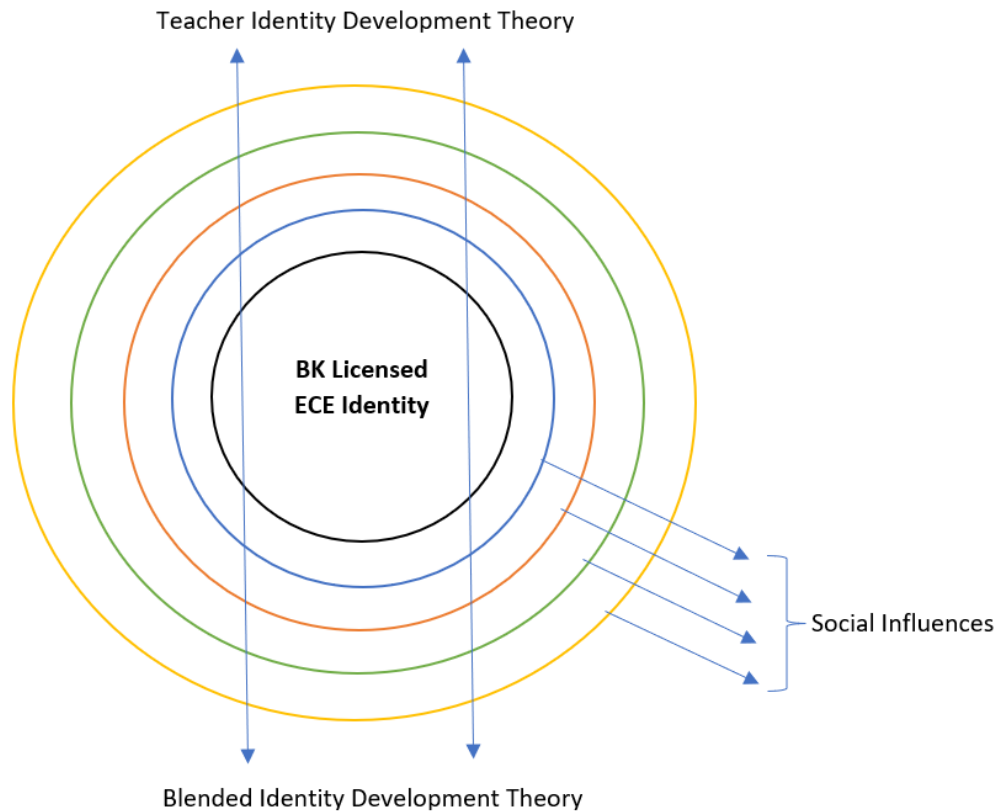
Figure 1

Conceptual Framework

Note. This figure represents the analytical process through the application of two contextual theories, Teacher Identity Development and Blended Identity Development, and the potential for social influences.

Similar to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory, this conceptual framework examines the intricate relationships between an individual and various external social context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The identity of the BK licensed educator is central to the framework as it represents the phenomenon of study. The concentric circles, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) representation of layers of ecological systems' influence on an individual's development, illuminate the ever-present, nonlinear, unique context surrounding BK licensed early childhood educators' identity development (Schultz et al., 2018). This framework also situates teacher

identity and blended preparation identity as interconnected and as and as an ongoing presence in the evolution of a BK licensed educators professional identity development.

Contextual Theories

Teacher Identity Development

Literature supports the notion that identity development is an ongoing process, a constantly evolving phenomenon that involves both a person and a context (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In the current study, the identity of BK licensed early childhood educators would seemingly evolve over the course of their shared context of blended preparation, in-service professional development, and professional experience teaching young children with and without disabilities within inclusive early childhood settings. Their personal and professional life experiences within these contexts would naturally influence shifts in their identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Although research has increasingly explored the concept of teacher identity, the complexities of the internal/external and personal/professional factors make it difficult to conceptualize using one theory, model, or framework (Ahmad et al., 2019). Identity requires a holistic understanding of the ebbs and flows of the development of a teacher, from the point in time they choose to be an educator throughout their educational preparation program, classroom-based experiences, as well as engagement within the broader community of educators and field (Castaneda, 2011; Pishghadam et al., 2022). To understand teacher identity development, we must understand the notion of self within these external contexts (i.e., preparation, in-service experiences, interactions with colleagues, families, and other professionals) and how they shape the individual voice of a teacher as well as the collective voice of the teaching community (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). While this study specifically seeks to explore the potential

influence of preparation on teacher identity, due to the interconnectedness of all aspects of our lives, it would not be possible to isolate preparation from other external contexts.

The idea of self in relation to our interactions with external factors was proposed by George H. Mead in his 1934 collection of essays titled, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist.* According to Mead, a teacher's identity is continually shaped and reshaped based on their idea of self in relation to others within external contexts. Essentially, self is developed through ongoing interactions with the environment, where a teacher is in constant communication and negotiation regarding their roles and the roles of others (Beijaard et al., 2004). As prospective teachers are immersed into learning their roles and the roles of others they begin to identify with common theories, attitudes, and beliefs about teaching and simultaneously engage in a relational phenomenon where they can see themselves as a teacher and see themselves recognized as a teacher within the societal context *(*Beijaard et al., 2004*)*.

Based upon similar thought, Erikson (1959) recognized the intricate relationship between self and society during an ongoing and evolving process of identity development (Pishghadam et al., 2022). In agreement with early researchers about the connection between self and societal context in identity development, Lauriala and Kukkonen (2005) suggested that the self is composed of three dimensions: 1) the actual self (the one that currently prevails), 2) the ought self (the one recognized by society or an external group as the goal), and 3) the ideal self (the one set by the individual as possible target for achievement). They recognize the dynamic nature of the three dimensions and encourage more research on the development of the dimensions of the self within situational contexts, such as teaching. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) express the connection between the external/internal aspects (i.e., context/emotions) of teacher identity development and teacher awareness and voice being the intersection between the demands of the

external aspects and their internal aspirations. When considering the variety of experiences that build context for teachers combined with individual feelings of motivation and agency, ambiguity around conceptual discussions become clearer (Davey, 2013).

According to Ahmad et al. (2019), a "researcher's choice of framework is not arbitrary but reflects important personal beliefs and understandings about the nature of knowledge, how it exists in relation to the observer, and the possible roles to be adopted, and tools to be employed consequently, by the researcher in his/her work" (p. 572). With the absence of a formal theory from the research (Ahmad et al., 2019), the researcher of the current study will situate the data analysis process within attributes of the socio-cultural perspective. The researcher's perspective in exploring the storied lives of BK licensed educators will value the influence of societal practices (e.g., preparation and collegial relationships) and cultural contexts (e.g., norms and discourses) on the shaping of their professional identity.

Blended Preparation Identity Development

Based on the research, a teacher's identity evolves as they transition from their educator preparation program into the teaching role, consistently adapting and responding to their unique school context and their interactions with the field at large (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). It is a daunting yet vital responsibility of educator preparation programs to also continue to adapt and respond to the needs of new and developing teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). As solidified in the previous section, the challenge with this charge is the ambiguity of the development of oneself as a teacher considering numerous contextual scenarios and the lack of common definition of blended preparation that exists in the literature. A similar challenge, not yet explored in the literature, is how the lack of a well-defined model of blended preparation may influence the experiences and identity development of teachers who hold BK licensure. In a

recent call to action regarding blended preparation, Mickelson et al. (2022) suggests an in-depth investigation of the long-term issues that prevent teachers from being adequately prepared as an educator of young children with a broad spectrum of support needs in the classroom. To elicit system change as well as the social change necessary to "live up to its original vision of increasing access to quality, inclusive educational opportunities for all young children and their families" (Mickelson et al., 2021, p.13), it is critical that we elevate the voices of all stakeholders in order to grapple with the past and re-envision the future of blended preparation (Mickelson et al., 2022). As a teacher's identity is developed it is consistently being influenced by the unique context in which it is surrounded. As the identity of blended preparation has evolved it, as a construct, would be considered a unique context, thus potentially influencing teacher identity as the evolving nature of blended preparation impacts preparation experiences.

As early as 1998, in North Carolina specifically, improvements needed in BK licensure programs were identified. Based on feedback from state universities and colleges implementing BK licensure programs and the first year of operation for the BK Teacher Education program at East Carolina University, Myers et al. (1998) noted three areas in need of improvement: a) ensuring that students have varied and monitored clinical experiences across the age span (i.e., birth through five years of age) with both typically and atypically developing children in high quality field placement sites; b) increasing the interdisciplinary nature of the program development and planning process through regular planning committee meetings; and c) the need for an advisory board that seeks out and values stakeholder input. The broader agenda was to emphasize continuity across programs for the three strands of early childhood education, child development, and early childhood special education (Myers et al., 1998). Fast forward more than three decades since the inception of blended models of preparation and nearly 25 years since the

first set of suggested improvements and our efforts toward adequate preparation for inclusive settings remains out of reach (Mickelson et al., 2021).

In their development of a conceptual framework for the historical perspective of blended preparation, Mickelson et al. (2022) consider blended program identity development through a socio-cultural context. The framework outlines the history across four decades, each with a distinct contribution to the identity of blended preparation: 1) First Decade-Exploration & Experimentation, 2) Second Decade- Proliferation & Dissemination, 3) Third Decade-Policy Expansion and Fragmentation of Practice, and 4) Fourth Decade-Opportunity & Possibility. Just as with teacher identity development, considering the socio-cultural influences on the blended preparation movement provides context for the shaping of its identity and its ongoing impact, specifically on preparation programs (Mickelson et al., 2021). As previously stated, identity requires a holistic understanding of the ebbs and flows of the development of a teacher (Pishghadam et al., 2022). This notion, in the context of blended preparation identity remains relevant. The conceptual framework developed by Mickelson et al. (2022) is useful in that it identifies the unique characteristics of each decade in the development of blended preparation programs. Due to the limited research across the same period and the existing variability in the interpretation and implementation of blended programs, researchers are not able to provide a clear definition or well-defined model of blended preparation. The continued lack of clarity and continuity continue to negatively impact preparation programs' ability to "produce graduates with professional identities that moved beyond the traditional dichotomy of ECE and EI/ECSE who could fill the multifaceted roles within the changing service context" (Mickelson et al., 2022, p.5).

Throughout the process of exploring the storied lives of this study's participants, the researcher will remain open to the potential influence of the lack of a well-defined model of blended preparation on the experiences and identity development of teachers who hold BK licensure. The conceptual framework for this study exists at the intersection of these two contextual theories, teacher identity development and blended preparation identity development, and the presence of external social influences. Throughout the research process, the interconnectedness of these two theories and additional social influences will support a very authentic and meaningful exploration of each participant's narrative, as well as the construction of a comprehensive interpretation and portrayal of their storied lives.

Summary

Blended preparation programs were the result of an identified need in the fields of early childhood education and early childhood special education. The increase of young children with disabilities being served in typical early childhood settings warranted the need for early childhood educators to be prepared to provide inclusive services to young children with and without disabilities. The literature reviewed in this chapter outlined the historical context as well as current landscape of blended preparation programs, first in general terms and then detailing the development of the BK license in North Carolina. The need for early childhood educators to be prepared for such a dynamic role, one that crossed over the three strands of early childhood education, child development, and early childhood special education, led to a movement that essentially became a new profession. The blended movement has served as a catalyst for higher quality professional standards in early childhood education and a focus on teacher effectiveness in the field of early childhood education.

After nearly four decades of evolution, we are at a crossroads regarding the future of blended preparation and its ability to produce a field of professionals that are adequately prepared to foster the optimal growth and development of our youngest generations. Attention to professional standards and teacher effectiveness have helped us focus the field on common goals, but a lack of non-conceptual research and forward thinking attached to action has left us with no clear definition nor model for effective blended preparation. Research from the current decade indicates that our teachers still do not feel prepared for the compound yet pivotal role they have chosen. Considering the role of teacher preparation on the development of new teachers, it is essential that we seek out and elevate the voices of those prepared for the complex role of teaching young children across a wide span of age and ability. Increasing understanding of the experiences of BK licensed early childhood educators may help stakeholders better understand what's working well and what's not, informing the much-needed re-envisioning of how we prepare such a valuable workforce. This study provides space for learning about the experiences of BK licensed educators within the context of socio-cultural influences on their identity development.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

In Chapter 1, I introduced the current study by establishing a foundation for its purpose and in Chapter 2 summarized the most relevant supporting literature and conceptual framework used to guide the study, particularly the data analysis process. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the applied epistemological perspective and methodological practices used to address the research questions of this study.

Research Questions

This study was a narrative inquiry into the experiences of early childhood educators who have been prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities. Specifically, this exploratory qualitative study aimed to understand how BK licensed early childhood educators view themselves, their profession, and their professional identity, as represented through their storied lives. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do BK licensed early childhood educators describe the construction of their professional identity within the context of their initial preparation, ongoing professional development, and other influences?

2. How do BK licensed early childhood educators describe their current professional identity and share experiences about their role as a teacher of young children with and without disabilities?

Methodology

As an approach to the study of human lives, narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and honoring experience (Clandinin, 2006). Throughout our lives, we construct stories to make sense of our experiences and to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be, as well as

who we are within the social contexts of family, community, class, culture, etc. (McAdams, 2008). Authentically and richly describing the ways in which people make sense of their experiences and who they are within these various contexts is the purpose of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006; Maruna, 2001). As Butina (2015) points out, there are several benefits to using the narrative approach in qualitative studies. By nature, humans are storytellers, making it easy to collect their stories, and our ability to gather in-depth data is accomplished through the thick description that narrative commonly provides (Butina, 2015). In this study specifically, narrative inquiry was engaged to explore and give voice to the storied lives of BK licensed educators in North Carolina which have been shaped by unique knowledge, experiences, values, and feelings (Moen, 2006).

Narrative Inquiry as Epistemology and Methodology

According to McAdams (1999), narrative methodology as an epistemological framework focuses us on the creation of knowledge and, as a methodology, opens the door to the exploration of identity, transformation, and meaning. To situate the current study of the storied lives of BK licensed educators, McAdams' (2008) six common principles for the narrative of studied lives were particularly relevant as an epistemological framework that informed my approach to this inquiry. In the coming sections, each of the six principles will be further detailed. First, underlying context for narrative inquiry will be provided through an overview of the three tenets of narrative inquiry and a supporting quote, each from two of the foremost narrative inquirers, Clandinin and Connelly. As posited by Clandinin and Connelly (2006) the study of experience as lived is central to narrative inquiry, as is a focus on three shared commitments: temporality, sociality, and place. Temporality refers to the notion of continuity in experience (i.e., experiences under study are described with a past, present, and future; Clandinin, 2007). Sociality supports

our consideration of both personal (e.g., feelings and morals) and social conditions (e.g., environment and people), introducing the notion of interaction into experiences and how they form context (Clandinin, 2007). Place refers to where our experiences and inquiry occur and the critical importance of the impact of places on lived and told experiences (Clandinin, 2007).

The following quote from Clandinin and Connelly (2000), further supports underlying context for narrative inquiry as we explore McAdams' principles:

> "Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives. Simply stated, … narrative inquiry is stories lived and told" (p. 20).

Principle 1: The self is storied.

Bruner (1986) posited the simple power of storytelling as a human universal, noting that human beings are all storytellers by nature. Although not referred to as storied lives during the nineteenth century, in 1892 William James introduced the idea that the self encompasses a subjective storytelling "I" whose stories about personal experience become an essential element of a storied "me" (McAdams, 2008, p. 244). Today, this aligns well with the concept of narrative identity, defined by McAdams (2008) as an "individual's internalized, evolving, and integrative story of self" (p.242), one that is constructed across the span of our life as we make meaning of our experiences.

Principle 2: Stories integrate lives.

The notion of integration is explained by McAdams (2008) as "putting things together into a narrative pattern that affirms life meaning and purpose" (p. 245). In our attempt to derive meaning from our experiences we engage in a process of reasoning in which storytelling helps us frame what's happening in our lives and how it contributes to how we came to be who we are (McAdams, 2008). Telling stories of our lives helps develop an understanding of who we are, who we've become over time, and how.

Principle 3: Stories are told in social relationships.

Moen (2006) suggested that as we engage in a continual production of narratives in order to make meaning of our experiences, we are also constantly peppered with narrative from our social world. Sociality, one of three tenets of narrative inquiry, leads us to the understanding that personal and social conditions are coexistent, as all surrounding factors and forces within our lives form the context for our individual experiences (Clandinin, 2006). Also, within the notion of sociality lies the essential relationship between participant and inquirer. As Clandinin (2006) asserts, "Narrative inquirers are always in an inquiry relationship with participants' lives. They cannot subtract themselves from relationships. Nor can they pretend to be free of contextual influences themselves" (p.69).

Principle 4: Stories change over time.

The fourth principle also aligns with one of three tenets in narrative inquiry, temporality. Temporality refers to the conceptual space where our stories are shaped by our present and past experiences, as well as how we envision our future (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). When we see stories as changing over time, we see beyond our own perspective and understand experiences as what is lived in the midst and as always unfolding over time (Caine et al., 2013). As we have new experiences of varying value to our lives, our motivations, priorities, and goals change, as

do the meanings we attach to our experiences (McAdams, 2008). Furthermore, as time passes our emotional connection to certain experiences may lessen, moving them from the forefront to the background of our memories and storytelling repertoire.

Principle 5: Stories are cultural texts.

Just as the inquirer and participant cannot subtract themselves from relationships, stories cannot be isolated from their cultural context; they should be seen as experienced and performed by individuals in cultural settings (Bruner, 1984; Moen, 2006). According to McAdams (2008) "Life stories mirror the culture wherein the story is created and told" (p.246). As we tell and retell stories, it is impossible to do so without the related context, as we are indisputably connected to our social and cultural settings (Wertsch, 1991). Narratives, therefore, capture both the individual and the context from which their stories are developed and shared.

Principle 6: Some stories are better than others.

According to McAdams (2008) stories are evaluated through our own moral perspective of good or bad, but also through the values and norms of the society in which they are told. Certain stories are aligned with what society would consider a reflection of "psychological maturity, mental health, and professional and marital satisfaction" (p.248), while other stories may present as the opposite, simply based upon how we tell our stories and how our storied lives are perceived by others. It is important to also consider the interaction between personality and culture and how each influences our identity formation (McAdams, 2008). For example, if we tend to be motivated by feelings of success, the stories we share will be narrated through that lens yet will also be influenced by the effects of our culture on our success. Included in the framework for personality, McAdams (2006) portrays the connection and interplay between culture (meaning system and practices), dispositional traits, and characteristic adaptations

(personality) on the social ecology of our everyday lives. These interactions are organically influencing our daily behavior as we maneuver situations, role demands, and challenges, in turn, creating the narrative of our storied lives (McAdams, 2006).

In summary, narrative researchers should attempt to understand and interpret experience through unique social contexts, as something we are constantly amid, and as co-composed in relation to others (Caine et al., 2013). As I shared in the storied lives of my participants, I did so with the understanding that stories are about what happens to and between people; a relational experience where the inquirer cannot disentangle from the participant or the process of inquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). The following excerpt from Huber et al. (2013) provided a meaningful underpinning for this narrative inquiry:

> "Our very identities as human beings are inextricably linked to the stories we tell of ourselves, both to ourselves and with one another. Living in the midst of these stories, and our interactions with them, they become part of who we are and who we are becoming" (p.214-215).

Research Design

Qualitative methodology offers a much-needed level of flexibility to inform the exploration of a phenomenon of interest, offering researchers the opportunity to commit to the inductive process with an open-mind, patience, and empathy (Durdella, 2019). Engaging in inductive reasoning is appropriate when considering professional identity-making as an experiential process that serves to construct meaning from a series of experiences told and lived as stories (Ampofo et al., 2022). As professional identity-making is part of a narrative understanding of experience, narrative inquiry was well suited for the present study as it hoped to capture both the individual and the context through the telling of their stories as BK licensed

early childhood educators (Moen, 2006). Narrative inquiry was not only well suited to preserve the unique richness of my participants' storied lives, but also provided the opportunity to retell their story, further supporting their process of meaning-making and fostering their continuously developing narrative (Maruna, 2001; Moen, 2006). To support my own process of meaning making throughout the data analysis process, teacher identity development and blended preparation identity development were applied as contextual theories that formed the foundation of the conceptual framework as outlined in chapter 2. Interpreting data through the lens of teacher identity development theory and blended preparation identity development theory within the socio-cultural context supported the discovery of social influences on professional identity revealed in BK licensed early childhood educators' narratives. As detailed in chapter 2, the conceptual framework, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory (1979), recognizes the influence of contextual factors in shaping development, framed the current study. Through this lens, social influences emerged and are represented as interconnected to the identity development of BK licensed early childhood educators.

Role of the Researcher

As I engaged within the research process, I hoped to develop in my roles as a researcher and as a learner (Glesne, 2011). As a researcher, I aimed to intentionally reflect on my behaviors and my biases to limit their unintended consequences on the reciprocal relationship between myself and my participants. As a learner, I wanted to provide space for myself and my participants to engage openly and authentically. I entered the research relationship as a reflective listener and someone who strives to honor the inductive and exploratory nature of my research.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) situate the researcher as the primary instrument of the research process, suggesting that the "subjectivity, identity, positionality, and meaning making of the

researcher shape the research process and methods" (p.218). With this in mind, I came into my dissertation research study as someone who values the relationship that I have with the context and participants and therefore was mindful of and responsive to my own subjectivities throughout this process.

Positionality Statement

I entered this study as a heterosexual, Caucasian, female in a leadership position within the field of early childhood education. Over the last 15 years, I have supported our state funded Pre-K program in various capacities at the classroom, county, local, and state government level. I hold NC BK licensure and was educated at a four-year institution that was strongly informed by constructivist pedagogy. My constructivist roots run as deep today as they did when I was first introduced to the idea that learning is socially constructed, that all children (i.e., those with and without disabilities) can learn, and that it is the teacher's responsibility to facilitate an environment of learning for all children.

My educational and professional experiences have led to a strong opinion about what high-quality care, interactions, instruction, and environments for young children should look and sound like. At times, it has been difficult to balance the reality of childcare's systemic issues with my own expectations of high-quality care and education. Stemming from what I perceive as the first-rate quality of my own teacher preparation experience, I assumed that all teacher preparation programs were of the same caliber and perspective early in my career. I assumed that all BK licensure candidates were afforded optimal student teaching experiences, rich content supported by meaningful and relevant field-experiences, an in-depth focus on diversity and inclusion, and professors who modeled the type of teaching they wanted to foster in their students. After years of providing in-service support to BK licensed early childhood educators it

is my perception that preparation experiences are quite varied for educators, leading to a lack of continuity and clarity in the definitions and implementation of effective teaching, developmentally appropriate practice, and the competencies of BK licensure candidates.

During the dissertation writing process, I have come to appreciate the opportunity to review a vast amount of related literature and it led to my acceptance of having much to learn beyond my own experiences. Throughout my writing experience, I've had to acknowledge that although my preparation was what I would consider a quality model of blended preparation, my subsequent career experiences have narrowed and shifted my focus more toward ECE and away from ECSE. This shift influenced my own path of professional development and service to the field. In thinking about my years as an NC Pre-K lead teacher in a nonpublic setting, I am reminded that a very low percentage of children enrolled in NC Pre-K classrooms have a diagnosed disability. Over the years, I supported a handful of children with IEPs related to speech and language and one child with cerebral palsy. Most of the children I taught were income eligible or eligible based upon learning English as a second language versus having a diagnosed disability, educational need, or developmental delay. Although I did learn and regularly implement strategies to support ongoing social/emotional skill development for children, my ability to support children with more moderate to severe disabilities in my classroom was very limited beyond my internship at the Centers for Exceptional Children, a merger of two schools (one nonprofit and one public) in Winston-Salem, each serving young children with moderate, severe, and profound disabilities. Throughout this process, I've grappled with the fact that I feel and say I was well prepared to be a teacher of young children with and without disabilities, however, I cannot say that my direct classroom experiences allowed me to confirm that notion. I am committed to continued reflection in this regard, especially as I

interview NC Pre-K teachers who may have a similar experience and as I analyze and interpret data, specifically considering a potential disconnect between what we are prepared for as BK licensed educators and our actual classroom experiences and the roles BK licensed teachers are expected to fill in the field.

I acknowledge that my pedagogical beliefs, expectations, and my own personal and professional identity may have introduced potential bias into the study process. My in-depth understanding of BK licensure and engagement with BK licensed early childhood educators had the potential to lead to both insight and bias to my research design and findings. To be certain I captured the true nature of my participants' perspectives, I engaged in reflexive journaling (Janesick, 1998) and the practice of engaging with a peer debriefer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to recognize any preconceptions I held throughout the process. Further, the individual narratives were co-constructed with each participant and several member checks also supported my appropriateness and the accuracy of my interpretations throughout the data analysis process.

Research Context and Participants

Research Context

NC Pre-K classrooms are administered through a diverse delivery system, meaning that classrooms can be in public and nonpublic schools across the state and may include any combination of children eligible for Head Start, NC Pre-K, Developmental Day, and private pay. Head Start, a federally funded program, provides free educational and health services to young children, ages birth to five, from low-income families through 1600 local agencies nationwide (Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center [ECLKC], 2023). In NC, Developmental Day programs are licensed public schools or childcare classrooms charged with providing special education and related services to eligible young children with disabilities (NC

Department of Health and Human Services [NCDHHS], 2015). According to the NC Pre-K

Program Guidelines (2023), child eligibility is primarily based on age and family income,

however, 20% of those above the 75% of state median income may be enrolled if the child has

limited English proficiency, an identified developmental disability, chronic health condition, or

educational need (e.g., IEP). Children who have a parent actively serving in the military are

automatically eligible, regardless of income or other factors (NC Pre-K Program Requirements,

2023). Per NC Childcare Rule (Section .3000), childcare centers serving NC Pre-K children must

maintain a four-or five-star rated license, issued by the NC Division of Child Development and

Early Education (DCDEE). North Carolina's Star Rated License program allows childcare

programs to be recognized for high quality care. Childcare facilities are evaluated on two

components a) staff education (e.g., administrator and teacher credentials); and b) program

standards (e.g., enhanced space, enhanced staff child ratios), and can earn higher quality ratings

for meeting enhanced standards. Each component is awarded a total number of points and the

total number of points coincides with a star rating. For example, a site earning 10-12 points will

be issued a four-star license and a site earning 13-15 points will be issued a five-star license.

Sites hosting NC Pre-K classrooms must also score a 5.0 or higher on the Early Childhood

Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). As indicated by Harms et al., (2005), the ECERS is an

environmental rating scale consisting of 35 items organized into 6 subscales (space and

furnishings, personal care routines, language and literacy, learning activities, interaction, and

program structure) each with quality indicators presented as a 7-point Likert Scale with four

quality levels. NC Pre-K sites must provide 36 weeks of instructional days per school calendar

year and offer a program day of a minimum of 6.5 hours.

According to DCDEE's online Data Dashboard, during the 2020-21 program year there was a total of 2,237 NC Pre-K classrooms administered out of 1212 sites, 580 of them located in nonpublic sites. In the same program year, 991 NC Pre-K sites held a five-star license and 121 held a four-star license. Considering annual program evaluations were halted due to the Covid pandemic, the most recent teacher and child data available for NC Pre-K classrooms comes from the 2017-18 program year. NC Pre-K lead teachers must hold a related four-year degree and hold or be working toward NC BK licensure. The 2017-18 program evaluation indicates 96.3% of public-school NC Pre-K lead teachers (n=1147) and 85.5% of NC Pre-K lead teachers employed in child centers hold a BK license (n=916) (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2019). The following table provides an overview of child demographics for children served (n= 30,035) by the NC Pre-K program, as according to Peisner-Feinberg et al.

Table 1

Overview of Demographics of Children Served by NC Pre-K in 2017-18

Gender	
Male	50.6%
Female	49.4%
Race	
White/European American	48%
Black/African American	36.2%
Native American/Alaskan Native	4.5%
Multiracial	7.0%
Asian	2.9%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1.4%

Table 1

Overview of Demographics of Children Served by NC Pre-K in 2017-18 (continued)

Ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic/Latino	76.1%
Hispanic/Latino	23.9%
Eligibility Factors	
Family Income	
130% of poverty and below	70.4%
131-185% of poverty	17.1%
186-200% of poverty	3.3%
201-250% of poverty	4.0%
251% of poverty or greater	5.3%
Limited English Proficiency	18.8%
Educational Need	22.0%
Identified Developmental Disability	5.3%
Chronic Health Condition(s)	4.0%
Military Family	5.1%

Participant Selection

Participants of this study were recruited from nonpublic childcare centers with a four or five star rated license located within the western region of the state. The six participants represented six different childcare centers, two of which were nonpublic classrooms

administered from a public-school location. Three centers housed blended classrooms (NC Pre-K/Head Start or NC Pre-K/Developmental Day) and three classrooms served only NC Pre-K eligible children.

To gather the most context-rich accounts of this specific population (i.e., BK licensed early childhood educators) I employed a combination of convenience and purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). My existing relationships with the Early Educator Support Office at UNC Charlotte supported the convenience sampling of BK licensed early childhood educators currently employed in nonpublic NC Pre-K classrooms in the western part of the state. The existing relationships with key personnel of this agency, as well as the BK licensed educators of this particular region, served my research well as it embedded a layer of familiarity and rapport into my research process. Recruiting from a small subset of the population of BK licensed teachers in our state introduced a purposeful way to sample but did limit the ability to introduce cross-comparisons related to regional differences (e.g., attendance at preparation programs in the eastern vs western part of the state, regional differences regarding access and equity, and support services from UNC Charlotte vs East Carolina Early Educator Support Offices). As BK licensed early childhood educators, participants of this study brought common prior knowledge to the research process as it relates completion of a BK licensure preparation program and ongoing maintenance of the requirements of BK licensure. Considering these unique qualifiers, purposeful sampling was best suited to address the research questions of the current study.

Research indicates that the size of the sample pool in narrative research should be small enough to elicit a rich and descriptively deep analytical process, allowing the researcher to truly examine the storied lives of the participants in detail (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990; Smith et al.,

2009). Six participants were selected for this study and met the following inclusion criteria a) completed an initial BK licensure program at the Baccalaureate level in the state of NC; b) holds Initial or Continuing NC BK licensure; c) enrolled with and served by the Early Educator Support Office at UNC Charlotte; and d) employed as a lead NC Pre-K teacher. Potential participants who completed a teacher preparation program in a state other than NC were excluded from participation in the study. The outlined inclusion criteria ensured each participant was uniquely qualified for this study based upon their experiences being prepared in NC to teach young children with and without disabilities and carrying out their role as a NC Pre-K lead teacher within a childcare setting versus a public-school setting.

Participant Recruitment

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were recruited via email announcement (see Appendix A). Email addresses of BK licensed early childhood educators meeting the inclusion criteria were retrieved from the assignment spreadsheet of the Early Educator Support Offices at UNC Charlotte. Access to this spreadsheet was gained by way of written approval via a letter of support from the Principal Investigator of the Educator Support Office at UNC Charlotte (see Appendix B for letter of support). It was preferable for the lead researcher to distribute recruitment emails, so participants did not misconstrue the request begin from the Early Educator Support Office itself. The assignment spreadsheet was provided as an excel spreadsheet and included teacher contact information (name and email address) for all teachers served by the program who hold NC BK licensure at the Initial or Continuing level. All teachers on the spreadsheet were NC Pre-K lead teachers and enrolled with and served by the Early Educator Support Office.

All teachers within this sampling frame received the recruitment email which provided: a) the purpose of the research; b) the study procedures; c) any foreseeable risks, benefits, and/or compensation; d) an explanation of voluntary participation and confidentiality; and e) relevant contact information. The consent form (see Appendix C) was attached to the recruitment email and requested that interested parties sign the electronic consent and complete a brief eligibility survey (see Appendix D) within seven days of the notification. As this study sought to collect data on varied initial preparation experiences, selection of participants was guided by the need to represent as many IHE's as possible. Therefore, the eligibility survey requested the name of the institution where the undergraduate degree and licensure were obtained. As submitted responses were reviewed, those who met the inclusion criteria and represented varying undergraduate preparation programs in NC were selected on a first come, first serve basis.

 Thirteen individuals submitted a signed electronic consent form and responses to the eligibility questions. Following review, nine participants were found to be eligible and received a follow up email to schedule a first individual interview. Within the email, each participant was asked to follow an embedded link and provide responses to a brief demographic survey (see Appendix E). Each participant was also asked to indicate their availability to participate in an individual interview by clicking on a Doodle Poll link and selecting all available dates and times from a calendar created by the Doodle Poll platform. The date and time slot convenient to the participant was selected and used to schedule the first interview. Each participant received a calendar invite for the selected date and time, along with a link to the Zoom meeting.

Participant Demographics

During the first round of individual interviews, it was concluded that three participants were in fact not eligible for the study. These individuals had completed undergraduate

preparation programs in other disciplines (e.g., fine arts, elementary education) and subsequently earned an add-on BK license. Additionally, one degree had been earned in another state. Therefore, a total of six participants who met the outlined eligibility criteria and consented to participate made up the final participants in the research study. All participants identified as female and of the six, five participants self-identified as White, while one participant self-identified as Black/African American. While all participants are working as the lead teacher of a NC Pre-K classroom, half reported being the lead teacher on record in NC Pre-K blended classrooms (e.g., NC Pre-K and Head Start eligible children or NC Pre-K and Developmental Day eligible children).

Faith identified as a White female in her early sixties. She earned her BK degree and license from a relatively small public university located in the western mountain region of NC. Samantha identified as a White female in her late thirties. She earned her BK degree and license from a moderately sized public university located in northwestern NC and recently earned a master's degree. Meagan identified as a White female in her late forties. She also earned her BK degree and license from a relatively small public university located in the western mountain region of NC. Teri identified as a White female in her fifties and completed her preparation and earned her license at a large public research university located in an urban residential area of eastern NC. Ava identified as a Black/African American female in her early forties. Like Faith and Meagan, she earned her BK degree and license from a relatively small public university located in the western mountain region of NC and has since earned two master's degrees. Bethany identified as a White female in her mid-forties. She earned her BK degree and license from a moderately sized public university located in northwestern NC. Participant demographics are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Overview of Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Group	Race	Classroom Type
Faith	F	50+	White	NC Pre-K/Head Start
Samantha	F	36-40	White	NC Pre-K/Developmental Day
Meagan	F	46-50	White	NC Pre-K
Teri	F	50+	White	NC Pre-K
Ava	F	41-45	Black/African American	NC Pre-K
Bethany	F	46-50	White	NC Pre-K/Head Start

Data Collection

To uphold the integrity of this narrative research study, I chose to follow the steps in data collection as suggested by Smith et al. (2009): 1) conduct semi-structured interviews with as many as 25 participants and as few as two participants; 2) hold interview sessions that are approximately 60 to 90 minutes in duration; 3) keep the interview invitation to one interview per participant, requesting follow up interviews only as needed for purposes of saturation; 4) ensure the researcher's preference for date, time, and place is always focused on the convenience and comfort of the participants; and 5) utilize various forms of technology to collect data, being certain to include the traditional practice of jotting observations throughout the process.

Semi structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews introduce a natural balance between interview questions and interview dynamics, providing opportunities to follow intuitive directions (Durdella, 2019). For this study, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions, tailored to their connections

to BK licensure. Based on the six kinds of interview questions proposed by Patton (2015), this study primarily focused on opinions and values; guided by questions designed to explore participants thoughts or beliefs about the phenomenon of interest. The goal of this study's interviews was "neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p.31) but an opportunity for BK licensed early childhood educators to openly share their storied lives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Prior to IRB approval, the semi-structured interview protocol was reviewed and vetted by an expert panel including two professors at universities other than the host institution. Both professors have extensive background knowledge, experiences, and expertise in the field of early childhood education and early childhood special education. Dr. Archana Hegde is a Professor in the Human Development and Family Science program at East Carolina University and serves as the Principal Investigator for the Early Educator Support Office at East Carolina University. She is also a member and Past-Chair of the North Carolina BK Higher Education Consortium, a voluntary network of educators involved in the preparation of professionals seeking BK teacher licensure. Dr. Vicki Stayton is a Distinguished University Professor Emerita of Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education (IECE) within the School of Teacher Education at Western Kentucky University (WKU). She served as Past-President of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and chaired the CEC/DEC Standards Development Workgroup which developed the 2020 EI/ECSE personnel preparation standards. Their review and feedback supported efforts toward the development of a rigorous and trustworthy data collection process (Glesne, 2011). Feedback from Drs. Stayton and Hegde resulted in minor changes to the wording of two questions on the interview protocol.

The final semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix F) included a series of broad, open-ended questions, totaling 15, which was supported with the use of follow-up and probing questions to extend the participant's responses (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Following a brief overview of the purpose of the study, two warm-up questions served to build rapport and set the tone for the conversation. Following warm-up, four questions focused on the participant's preparation for BK licensure, four questions on their role as a BK licensed educator, and five questions on their identity development as a BK licensed educator. The structure of the questions supported reflection and storytelling of their evolving identity as a BK licensed educator. Following the approximately hour-long interview (range 41-57 minutes), participants were thanked for their participation and provided with an overview of subsequent member checks and of the second interview. The approximately 30-minute (range 21-34 minutes) second interview session allowed for clarification, follow-up questions, additional insight, and the opportunity for co-construction of each participant's final narrative, further supporting my ability to collect a rich, thick-description of my participants' experiences (Butina, 2015). Considering the participants of this study were geographically spread out across the western part of the state, interviews were held virtually, via Zoom. This served as a convenience to the participants and researcher as well as supported the confidentiality of each participant. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom, a software program developed by Zoom Video Communications that provides its users with the option to record their virtual meetings locally or to the cloud, with searchable transcripts. Zoom's transcription services provided verbatim transcripts, allowing the study to maintain fidelity to the participants' words and genuine expression of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Audio and video recordings and transcripts were saved via pseudonym to a password protected device. Each participant received an emailed copy of their transcript for

first level member checking purposes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Member checks allowed participants the opportunity to review the data for corrections and to ensure it an accurate reflection of our conversation.

Data Analysis Procedures

Engaging in qualitative data analysis is an iterative process; one that immerses the researcher in a cyclical pattern of scrutinizing data. Narrative analysis, one form of qualitative data analysis, often used in narrative inquiry, was applied to this study (Butina, 2015). Specifically, narrative thematic analysis was used to guide the data analysis process. Considering the vast amount of raw data that can be produced by qualitative studies, Ravitch and Carl (2021) suggest a three-pronged data analysis process consisting of: (a) data organization and management, (b) immersive engagement, and (c) writing and representation. This process of engaging in a series of iterative phases of data analysis aligns well with narrative analysis and was used to provide structure to the process. A brief introduction to the applied research process is provided in Figure 2 and is further detailed in the following section along with details as to data organization and management, immersive engagement, coding, and writing and representation.

Immersive Engagement			Writing and Representation

Initial Interviews	**Co-Construction of Narratives**	**Cross-Narrative Analysis**	**Exploration of Themes and Implications**
Interview 1: Followed interview protocol during semi-structured virtual interviews with six participants. Transcripts saved to password protected device using participant pseudonyms. Audio/video files deleted. Transcripts provided to participants for member checking purposes. Initiated codebook, dialogue with critical friend and reflective journal to document and support the full process of analysis.	Engaged in three cycles of review of raw data. Developed draft of participant narratives, each reviewed by critical friend. Version 2 provided to participants for member checking purposes. Interview 2: co-construction of final narratives. Version 3 provided to participants for member checking purposes. Version 4 of narratives provided to participants for member checking purposes.	Engaged in three cycles of analysis using conceptual framework, followed by a second layer of cross-analysis. 1st read: General-uninterrupted by the desire to code. 2nd read: Holistic-captured sense of overall content and potential categories. 3rd read: documented emerging words, ideas, and patterns. Themes and sub-themes were provided to participants for member checking purposes. Solidified notable themes and sub-themes.	Themes were defined, summarized, and supported with relevant data. Aligned final themes to research questions and relevant literature, leading to implications for practice and suggestions for future research.

Figure 2

Phases of the Research Process

Data Organization and Management

Each interview transcription was transferred from Zoom to Dropbox, saved according to each participant's assigned pseudonym, and stored on a password protected device. To increase participant confidentiality, the video files saved from the recording were deleted following each interview, leaving only deidentified audio files and the transcription. As the transcript was reviewed for the first time, I simultaneously listened to the original recording of the interview. During this review, corrections were made to the transcripts and notations added for any

indecipherable content, dates/times, pseudonyms, and line and page numbers were also added to each transcript (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Once each transcript was reviewed for readability, the audio files were also deleted. Remaining data were stored in a password protected Dropbox account, only accessible to myself and my faculty advisor throughout the remainder of the research process.

Immersive Engagement

Multiple readings of each transcript informed the development of each participant's storied narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995). This process of transforming orally generated stories into written serves to turn data into a textualized form (Polkinghorne, 1995). The first analysis concluded in the construction of narratives, derived from two interviews per participant and multiple levels of member checking (see Figure 2). After each member check, participant responses were used to refine their personal narrative. During this process raw data went through the following three cycles of analysis: 1) orient myself to the data, 2) identify statements that emerged as relevant/prominent pieces of each participant's story, and 3) transform raw data into narrative form. During the second interview, the draft form of individual narratives was shared with each participant, serving as both a member check and the opportunity to co-construct their written narrative into its final form. As stated by Hunter (2010) "representing and interpreting another's voice is not a simple task and needs to be done with respect and humility" (p. 50). The process of co-constructing the final version of the narrative with each participant fostered a process of respect and humility and ensured their stories were constructed in a way that most accurately and meaningfully represented the stories they choose to tell (Hunter, 2010).

Coding. Following the development of each participant narrative, a secondary process of thematic analysis was conducted across the narratives and in search of notable themes. The first

read of the summary was unstructured and uninterrupted by the desire to codify the data;

however, it served to orient myself to the data and provide an appropriate pace for the ongoing

data analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). This stage of the process provided a general sense of the

data collected (Butina, 2015). Subsequent readings were more structured as I began to look for

patterns, similarities, and differences of experiences among participants, how the data began to

take shape, and what it all meant in the broader context of the research questions that guided the

study through the lens of the conceptual framework (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). During the second

reading, a process of holistic coding was applied to each summary, providing a broad sense of

the narrative (Saldana, 2016). Following this preliminary phase of data analysis, the coding

process was continued and consisted of re-reading the narrative and identifying recurring words,

ideas, or patterns generated from the data (Butina, 2015). As suggested by Saldana (2016) for

novice researchers or small-scale studies, I chose to complete the data analysis process manually.

At this stage of coding, I applied the use of underlining, circling, and highlighting recurring

words or messages that stood out as prominent ideas. Corresponding codes were developed and

placed in the margin next to the passages of interest. A codebook supported ongoing

documentation of the full data analysis process. Each emerging code was transferred to the

codebook along with a brief description and supporting data in the form of participant quotes

(Saldana, 2016). As I proceeded, existing codes were color coded based on continued fit (i.e.,

could be applied across narratives). As new codes were generated, they were added to the

codebook and as the cross-analysis continued, codes were collapsed into others as their

connections became clear. As patterns emerged and codes were solidified, I continually

examined the data for disconfirming evidence. This process continued until no new meaning

emerged. Initially, 47 codes were transferred to the codebook to represent emerging/potential

themes. Subsequent cycles of analysis collapsed the initial codes into 12 and then into 4 emerging/potential themes. The final stage of analysis, aided by the use of my critical friend, illuminated 2 notable final themes, each supported by 2 sub-themes, that provided insight into the professional identity of BK licensed early childhood educators. To enhance the credibility of the study's findings, the themes and supporting quotes were returned to participants as a fifth level member check for accuracy and alignment with their individual stories and personal perceptions (Haydon & van der Riet, 2017). Participant responses were unanimous in support of these final findings.

As noted previously, no single theoretical concept framed the study. Instead, a conceptual framework built from theories of teacher identity development (Beijaard et al., 2004, 2022; Beijaard & Meijer, 2017; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) and blended preparation identity development (Mickelson et al., 2021, 2022) within a social-cultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) informed the interpretation of this study's thematic findings. Prominent themes that emerged throughout the data analysis process were compared to the contextual theories as a way to explain how BK licensed early childhood educators experience their roles and address the research questions.

Writing and Representation

Written findings of qualitative studies are commonly organized and presented by category or theme (Butina, 2015). To represent the findings of the current study, each theme was described and defined as well as supported by narrative quotes that provided direct evidence of my findings. Inclusion of quotes from participant narratives allowed me to provide rich, thick descriptions of my data and supported the goal of conveying clarity and meaning (Butina, 2015). In addition to representing the data through themes and sub-themes using the participants own

language, individual final narratives representing their storied lives served as an authentic and meaningful written representation of the data.

Strategies for Data Quality

Qualitative researchers strive for their readers to have confidence in what is being reported to them (Stahl & King, 2020). Although there are no specific strategies to promote validity and reliability for the narrative approach, there are several strategies commonly used across qualitative research (Butina, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In consideration of the interplay between my own positionality and prior knowledge of the context and population from which participants were recruited, I applied three types of strategies to mitigate any influence on my analysis and to present research that can be trusted by the audience (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

First, efforts toward credibility were realized through several levels of member checks. To ensure their ideas were presented accurately, interview transcripts, each version of individual narratives, and a summary of the final themes were shared with participants for review and validation of the analysis and interpretation of the data (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Additionally, I engaged the support of an expert on my doctoral committee who served as a critical friend. My critical friend reviewed and assessed the quality and carefulness of my data analysis, asked provocative questions, and provided critical feedback on an ongoing basis (Mat Noor & Shafee, 2020; Patton, 1999).

Second, I continually explored and attempted to clarify the bias that I as the researcher brought to this study. Within my subjectivity statement, I openly shared the assumptions and experiences that may shape my interpretation of the research findings and how they may influence my approach to the study. I engaged in all aspects of the current study under the premise that I did not seek objectivity but did commit to practices that continuously,

intentionally, and explicitly mediate the presence of the subjectivity (Guba, 1981). Journaling was used to document my ongoing reflections and discussions with my critical friend that helped me to recognize and challenge my bias and assumptions throughout the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Finally, I aimed to provide research narratives' that were rich in contextual details, that provided a rich enough portrayal of the study's context and circumstance that others would be able to make authentic meaning of the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Stahl & King, 2020). In addition to detailed descriptions of my interview participants and their related experiences, providing narrative quotes as supporting evidence contextualized my participants' responses to enable readers to "understand the context in which quotes were presented and discussed," enhancing the credibility and transferability of my results (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 180).

Ethical Considerations, Risks, and Benefits

Ethical Considerations

In a broad context, the quality of special education research can be measured by the degree to which it "is successful at transforming special education in equitable and just ways that disrupt persistent inequities" (The QR Collective, 2023). To support the advancement of special education I committed to foundational quality indicators (Brantlinger et al., 2005), as well as to the expansion of quality through complexity, subjectivity, positionality, and intentionality throughout my research process (The QR Collective, 2023). The qualitative researcher's commitment to authentic engagement with their participants also introduces a host of considerations (e.g., expectations, transparency, respect, representation, and assumptions) related to healthy research relationships (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Throughout the current study, ongoing

attention was given to ethical codes, researcher roles, participants' right to privacy, and the fostering of trusting research relationships (Glesne, 2011).

Prior to implementation, the proposed research study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the host institution. IRB approval of the current study indicated that the basic principles of the code of research ethics (e.g., informed consent, voluntary involvement, notification of potential risks or benefits, and the qualifications of the researcher/team) were appropriately addressed (Glesne, 2011). Participant recruitment emails, follow-up emails, and informed consent forms provided participants with information about the purpose, goals, and procedures within the study, as well as the voluntary nature of participation. This information was reviewed again with each participant at the start of each interview.

Throughout this research study, I worked to remain cognizant of the movement in and out of various researcher roles and documented this awareness through ongoing journaling practices and discussion with my critical friend. In addition to the aforementioned roles as researcher and as learner, Glesne (2011) details four additional potential researcher roles: a) exploiter, b) intervener/reformer, c) advocate, and d) friend. A keen awareness and responsiveness to these roles throughout the research process were consistently engaged as I reflected on the need to treat participants with respect and dignity, sought advice and support from others   to maintain the goal of interpreting and representing reality versus improving the situation for participants, and remained attuned to relational ethics – including "the nature and influence of the relationship as well as the role of power within the relationship" (p. 171).

As stated by Glesne (2011) "participants have a right to expect that when they give you permission to observe and interview, you will protect their confidences and preserve their anonymity" (p. 172). Throughout the research study, sensitive data were stored on a password

protected device, only accessible by the lead researcher and faculty advisor. At the conclusion of the data analysis process all identifiable electronic and paper files were destroyed. During the write-up phase of the inquiry process the researcher used pseudonyms to protect the identity of the study participants. Additional precautions were in place when using Zoom as a recording and transcription tool. The interview recordings were saved to a password protected device in Dropbox and audio and video files of each individual interview were deleted immediately following the initial review of transcripts for accuracy.

Potential Risks and Benefits

Minimal risks were expected for participants in the study. One potential risk was participant concerns about confidentiality due to the small sample size. To alleviate any potential concerns, I was forthcoming and transparent regarding all steps taken to protect participant privacy. In addition to the steps detailed in the above section, participants were notified that while the video feature of Zoom will serve to make a stronger connection between myself and participants, the feature was offered as optional should they have desired a higher level of anonymity throughout the discussion.

The primary benefit of this study was the opportunity for participants to reflect upon their experiences as a BK licensed early childhood educator and the positive impact they have had on the lives of young children with and without disabilities. Reflecting on their experiences, available resources and support, and current instructional practices – all in support of young children with and without disabilities – may support their motivation toward continued growth and learning as well as advocacy efforts. The telling and retelling of their stories may also influence a new iteration of their own professional identity and their understanding of the factors that might influence their past, present, and future identity. Additionally, this study's results

illuminated implications for preparation, practice, and research around models of preparation, teacher identify development, interpretation and understanding of what   blended preparation and licensure are and the role of an individual blended educator within systems.

Summary

This chapter described the methodological aspects of the current research. Utilizing a narrative approach, this inquiry aimed to explore the storied lives of BK licensed early childhood educators who are employed in nonpublic early childhood settings and prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities in order to illuminate the impact of preparation on professional identity development. In turn, results were expected to garner understanding as to how blended preparation and licensure are conceptualized and interpreted in NC. Data were collected from participants' engagement in semi structured interviews. A narrative approach to this inquiry was used to co-construct personal narratives for each participant. After each narrative was complete, an iterative approach to data analysis across participant narratives was applied to identify common thematic categories that authentically illustrated key findings from the narratives of BK licensed educators. Considering the interpretive and inductive nature of this study, the researcher relied upon a conceptual framework built on contextual theories to inform the interpretation of the data and implications of the findings, which are be detailed in Chapters 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This study was a narrative inquiry into the experiences of BK licensed early childhood educators who have been prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities. This exploratory qualitative study aimed to understand how participants view themselves, their profession, and their professional identity, as represented through their storied lives. The following research questions steered this inquiry:

1. How do BK licensed early childhood educators describe the construction of their professional identity within the context of their initial preparation, ongoing professional development, and other influences?

2. How do BK licensed early childhood educators describe their current professional identity and share experiences about their role as a teacher of young children with and without disabilities?

Through an iterative process of data collection and analysis, participant narratives were co-constructed to represent the storied lives of BK licensed early childhood educators and their unique surrounding contextual factors. To offer the reader insight into the commonalities across narratives and their connection to identity development, each was structured to reflect: a) experiences that led to early childhood education, b) pre-and post-preparation perspectives, c) expectations of and effectiveness in the role of BK licensed educator, d) the intersection of self-identity and the perception of others, and e) motivation, influence, and impact. Chapter 4 concludes with the findings of a cross-analysis of all six narratives. This includes a discussion of the application of the conceptual framework which illuminated major themes and sub-themes that best represented the lived experiences and identity development of this study's BK licensed participants.

Faith's Story: Queen of the Island of Misfit Toys and Member of a Unique Teaching Force

Faith took her first college course in 1985 and graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2023. Over the decades she would complete coursework in four different states and have four children, now ranging in age from 30 to 42. Faith has worked in administrative roles (outside of early childhood education) but has mostly spent her years in the field working in preschool and childcare classrooms, while periodically completing courses towards a seat in nursing school.

Experiences That Led to Early Childhood Education

In 2015, she completed her associate degree and was awarded a long-awaited seat in a southeastern state nursing school. Faith explained, "I went to the first day of classes, looked around me and thought I haven't got the slightest desire to do this, not even a little bit, and I was in my fifties at the time." Faith stated,

> "I just really knew it [early childhood education] was for me, it was a little bit of a moral decision…I knew I would never spend a day actively working as a nurse if I could avoid it and there were single mothers who were trying desperately to get a seat in that program that had been waiting for four years…I thought, I'm giving this seat up so that one of them can get a year ahead on feeding their kids."

Faith explained that the school required her to go through counseling to acknowledge that she understood the impacts of her decision prior to relinquishing the seat. Although it was a difficult decision, she stuck with her decision not to pursue nursing. After much reflection, Faith was moved by the number of times during her years of coursework that she gravitated toward early childhood education and literacy content. Any time she needed an elective or extra credit hours, she would consistently lean toward early childhood content. She shared she is grateful for the many science courses she took as part of the nursing curriculum, however, as they have

supported her understanding of developmental processes and health issues in her early childhood career, particularly "teratogens that can affect the developing brain prenatally." She feels this knowledge now supports her ability to understand child development from a more medical standpoint.

Pre- And Post-Preparation Perspectives

Prior to enrolling in her educator preparation program to earn a BK degree and license, Faith had a limited understanding of the BK license, but did know it was required by the state to teach in an NC Pre-K classroom and that it qualified teachers to teach kindergarten. Faith saw alignment between previous and current requirements for childcare administration roles with the attainment of a BK license and noted, "I felt like that it would give me at least 3 different career paths." Her ultimate motivation to obtain a BK license came from the words of a peer whom she had run into periodically over a 10–15-year period. The peer once said to her, "Well, I heard you finished your associates… so, you're gonna go on now and get the BK?", to which Faith replied, "…I'm debating that, I mean, I'll be 62 when I graduate if I do." The peer looked at her and said, "You're gonna be 62 in 2 years whether you go to school or not…isn't it past time that your credentials match your experience?" Considering she would also make more money with her BK license, Faith "entered that program at 60 years old and graduated in May of 23 at 62 years old Magna Cum Laude, Dean's List, Chancellor's List, and President's List."

Many things stand out to Faith about aspects of her preparation program that were most beneficial or useful. She has friends who attended different schools and has therefore compared the benefits of the programs. For example, Faith said, "[University A] is known for their people graduating B through K being really good at licensing (i.e., meeting facility licensing requirements) … [University B], not real sure what their people are good at, but [University C]

people are very well prepared to teach Kindergarten." She added, "We're very well prepared in early literacy teaching in knowledge and we get more support than any other college I've heard of in this state when we're going through the edTPA process from our faculty…it's part of our degree program. You don't graduate that semester unless you pass with a score of 40 or more." Faith attributes the support she received to enabling her to mentor three teachers at her agency who were completing the edTPA assessment "that did not have that kind of support [from their IHEs]" She contributed her success to having "some of the best professors."

Faith was pleased with the number of special education credits offered during her program explaining, "I have 28 credit hours of special education…so, I am very well prepared to work with children with disabilities." Faith considers herself as "dual certified in both early childhood education and special education, preschool or early child…I don't really know what they call it." She was satisfied with her overall preparation experience, especially the trauma informed education courses which were a part of her preparation, and a more recent addition to the program that her friends at other universities "don't have the kind of preparation on that subject that I did."

Faith teaches in a nonpublic Head Start/NC Pre-K blended classroom that is housed within a public-school site. This set-up is common for the delivery of the local Head Start and NC Pre-K programs. She is not an employee of the school system, and her students are enrolled through the local Head Start agency, not through the elementary school. The school site only serves as a housing mechanism and her classroom is called a stand-alone site. She stated she feels very respected at her site, stating that, "I am definitely considered an integral part of their school community." Faith's classroom tends to serve as a feeder (i.e., many of her students

remain at the same school) for the kindergarten classes, at times supporting the opening of additional kindergarten classes.

Expectations of and Effectiveness in The Role of BK Licensed Educator

Faith's greatest expectation of being a BK licensed educator was that she "would be viewed as a real teacher." She shared that Head Start is very hard work, "but it requires you to have an associate degree and the pay is lower and you're not always seen as a real teacher." She shared she is touched by the respect she receives in her community as a Head Start teacher, but less so from the broader community, and stated, "I guess my expectation was with my actual license that I would then get respect from the professional community." At her current site, Faith serves on the kindergarten transition committee and the administration is "eager to embrace and partner with NC Pre-k and really quite supportive."

Faith stated she currently feels very effective in her role as a BK licensed early childhood educator, she added that she feels more effective in her current county of employment versus the previous as there is a greater number of support staff available within her current county and agency. She currently has the support of a behavioral management child development team which is equipped to aid in evaluations and referrals for children who need additional support. Although she shared she feels very supported in this regard, she also felt her sense of effectiveness is impeded by what she explained as the State's need "to decide what it wants NC Pre-k to be…it's too much of a patchwork…it's childcare in some counties, it's part of the public school system in other counties. She wondered if "they want it to be childcare or do they want it to be a real preparation for school? If they want it to be a preparation for school, I need more teaching time and to be less restricted by the requirements of a licensed childcare facility." Faith shared her ability to teach is impacted by the schedule requirements (e.g., 2hrs/15-minute free

choice time, 30-minute rest period, meals and snacks, and an hour outside) of her 6 ½ hour school day that she felt leaves her only about 45 minutes to teach. She added, "there are some things that if they truly want these children to be ready for kindergarten, I just have to be able to sit down and teach them." Faith stressed the need for NC Pre-k to "stop this hybrid…decide what they want it to be and if they want it to be a junior kindergarten, they need to move towards special [i.e., unique] childcare regulations for NC Pre-k."

Intersection of Self-Identity and The Perception of Others

When others ask Faith about her profession, she tells them that she is a "teacher." When asked what grade she teaches, she explained she teaches pre-k and shares the name of the elementary school, and explained, "they see that as one of a grade." At times, Faith said she will explain that she's a "combination pre-k teacher and early childhood special ed teacher…because I'm a dual classroom, I'm a dual Head Start pre-k classroom." Of this dual role, Faith explained,

"So I have had quite a number of children who are new to any kind of structured setting and I'm the one that's identifying their issues and getting them in front of people that can evaluate them. I've done a lot of special ed teaching with some children with some pretty, pretty significant issues."

Faith sees herself as part of her "whole cohort" and shared, "I see myself and my colleagues who are similarly credentialed as a unique teaching force equipped to deal with the children that are walking into classrooms today to try to help get schools ready for dealing with them when they hit kindergarten." Faith added that others tell her that she is a "saint", although she assures them "I'm not…maybe it's just because I'm pretty confident about what I do and what I know how to do but pretty much across the board others see me as very qualified and competent to help them address the needs of their children."

Faith feels that her educator preparation program played a "huge role" in who she is as a BK licensed early childhood educator, specifically because of the "trauma informed education, early literacy, the amount of special education credit hours that were included." Her program played a "huge role in preparing me and causing me to see myself as a special education teacher, largely, my particular level of expertise happens to be early childhood, but I see myself in the role of social worker/teacher, and they were enormously influential in guiding me towards seeing myself in that capacity." Faith stressed that she feels it is important that all Head Start/NC Pre-k teachers in North Carolina be prepared, "to deal not only with early childhood education and children with disabilities and developmental anomalies but also some training in social work or something along those lines to help you deal with those very real issues."

Motivation, Influence, and Impact

Faith's son has had the most influence on who she is as a BK licensed early childhood educator. Her son, who is now 30, was adopted at three months of age and would likely be "considered Asperger's, if we still had that as a diagnosis, except he does not have the high IQ." Faith and her husband struggled to find the appropriate type of support for him as a child and feel that "he fell between the cracks" because "there was no one who was prepared to really help him with his issues." At the time, they worked together to interview professionals and put together a team for him. Faith shared that, "…he is the greatest influence and what led to what I have ultimately done as my second career because I learned a lot in the 90's while I was putting [our] team together." She is also influenced by "a lot of people under four feet tall…that need somebody who isn't put off by children with issues." Jokingly, she said her husband teases her, "he says that I am the queen of the island of the misfit toys." She added that she feels drawn to children with "issues" and "they're drawn to me; we have a heart for each other." Additionally,

Faith was influenced by a particular professor and her former advisor and spoke highly about their level of support and patience. She also "gives props" to the friend who encouraged her to continue her education.

Faith has also experienced a couple of very difficult situations with children and families over the past few years. To uphold the confidentiality of those families, the stories will not be shared, but they were nothing less than tragic, terrifying, and incredibly difficult situations to maneuver as a teacher of young children. Faith shared she is still haunted by these experiences but said they "drove me to want to know how to do the best I could to support children that had been through things like that." Now that she holds a BK license, she shared she feels that people listen to what she has to say now that she holds a BK license as they know "she's dual certified and she has training in special ed and she's got a teaching license."

Faith is hopeful about her impact on the lives of young children with and without disabilities and said,

> "I hope that the impact that I have is that regardless of where they are coming from they are comforted by the fact that…I'm going to meet them where they are. I'm going to try and get them where they need to be and I'm always gonna work to get them where they can be even if it's not where they need to be, I'm gonna get them as far they can go…and I hope that I'm able to bring them some satisfaction in feeling capable."

She hopes to "help them learn and understand that the world has a place for them and they have a responsibility to fill that place, not that it's been given to them, but… they have a responsibility to do their best to fill that place and be a good, decent productive citizen." Faith shared the need for more teaching for children that helps them understand "that the world doesn't exist to serve them, they are part of a world, and we need to serve each other."

Samantha's Story: Full Circle

Samantha has worked in early childhood education since she turned 18 years old and gained employment at a local child development center as a floater and substitute. She started working at her current center in 2006 and has been there ever since, making this her 18th year at the same childcare center. She teaches in a blended non-public classroom that serves children who are eligible for the NC Pre-K or Developmental Day program.

Experiences That Led to Early Childhood Education

It was Samantha's 4th grade teacher who drew her to the field of early childhood education. She described her as one the best teachers she ever had and shared "she just really believed in me and just helped me want to be a teacher." As she got older, Samantha realized that she did not want to be involved with older grades due to standardized testing requirements, she knew she preferred working with younger children and "just loved little kids ever since I was old enough to babysit," which was around the age of 10. Samantha began her educational career at a local community college in 2003, transferred to a 4-year institution in 2006 and completed her BK program, earning her BK license, in 2009.

Pre-And Post-Preparation Perspectives

Prior to attending her educator preparation program, Samantha understood that a BK license would allow her to teach "anything from birth all the way up to kindergarten, and that they would just prepare me enough to teach those children, and …give me the credits to be able to teach like a public-school teacher." Samantha's mom served as her motivation to earn a BK license. Her mom planted the seeds by saying "you know you've always loved kids" or "you're really good with the littler ones." Her mom encouraged her to be a special education teacher, but

Samantha knew she wanted to be with younger kids which led to her belief that path was not for her.

Two of Samantha's professors stood out as the most beneficial part of her educator preparation program. Of one, she shared, "I absolutely loved her" and of the other, "she was very, very strict but she taught very well…her styles and teaching were really in-depth, so I felt like I learned a lot from her." The assessment courses were very helpful to Samantha, as was learning about the project approach. Although she would love to "use projects as a way of learning" and to dig deeper into the idea of provocations in the classroom, she feels that the variety of needs in her developmental day classroom simply do not allow her to do engage as much as she'd hoped to.

Samantha feels that she was "not prepared enough" to teach young children with disabilities and that "there needed to be more special education classes." When reflecting on her mom's initial push toward special education, she says "I actually love it now that I've got into it, but I do feel like there needs to be a lot more special education classes, even though they're like, you have a BK degree, you're licensed for special ed as well, I'm like, it's not enough". Samantha feels strongly additional courses should be "built into the birth through kindergarten program." While she does feel that she was prepared well enough to go into a classroom, she shared "they don't prepare you enough for all of the different types of assessments…the different kinds of paperwork…knowing how to write an IEP…how to implement those IEP goals…also how to work with related service providers." Samantha felt that gaining ongoing knowledge about assessments and child development has been a critical part of her growth, however shared, "but if you don't know how to teach children with and without disabilities, you're really going to struggle." Samantha praises the mentoring received through a statewide mentoring and

evaluation program, noting "no matter how much you've been in early childhood, you can always learn new things."

Samantha's choice to teach in a nonpublic early childhood setting has a lot to do with the types of leadership roles she has been afforded at her center. She earned her master's degree while at her current center and is able to mentor other teachers at the site. She has learned so much over the years about childcare rules and regulations, including the star rated licensing process, and feels that "seniority keeps me where I am and also knowing what I'm doing, I've learned so much."

Expectations of and Effectiveness in The Role of BK Licensed Educator

Samantha's current expectations of NC Pre-K teachers do not align with what her expectations had initially been about going into teaching, making her feel that her expectations may have "been a little lower than they should have been." She explained,

> "…I just felt like I would be able to have fun with the kids and teach them at the same time and not have a specific curriculum to follow per se. I knew about the Creative Curriculum, but I didn't know how in depth it would actually have to be…I feel like lesson planning for pre-k is a little more in-depth that what it really needs to be."

Due to the requirements that she feels keep her from teaching through play as much as she'd like to, Samantha has "been feeling less effective" and feels like "there's so many different things that they're requiring us to do now that I just feel like I can't do my job all the way because of the assessments,…the documentation,…paperwork, and I feel like I'm relying a lot on my assistants in the classroom to do a lot of the interacting with the kids." The service requirements for her children with IEPs overwhelm her school day and, it "leaves my assistants with everybody else, so the effectiveness is not as much what I would have hoped now as what it was

in the past [past sense of effectiveness]." Although the parents of her classroom and her directors tell her she's doing a great job, Samantha shared, "I still don't feel that way and I guess just because of all the requirements that are being required of me now."

The Intersection of Self-Identity and The Perception of Others

When someone asks Samantha what she does professionally, she says, "…I am a NC Pre-K/Developmental Day teacher." When clarification is needed, she'll explain, "I teach young children ages 3-5 in my classroom…we teach them how to count, say the ABC's, what their letters are, write their name…we teach them everything that they would learn in a public school setting only earlier." She also likes to share about her work within the infant/toddler classrooms. As a BK licensed early childhood educator who is prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities, Samantha sees herself as "being an influence on those [with disabilities] children and families" yet feels that others "see me as a babysitter and/or as a person who just plays all day." Expanding on that perception, Samantha added that people around her (friends, family) know what she does, but "people who don't know a lot about early childhood" may say things like "oh, you just work in childcare, you just watch children and you just play with them, that's all you do."

Although she does not feel well-prepared for teaching young children with disabilities, Samantha recognizes that her educator preparation program prepared her for entering the classroom as a general education teacher. She explains that "they gave me the resources that I would need, they taught me how to do assessments…how to make lesson plans. They showed me a little bit about children with special needs and how to teach them, and, you know, just tried to be the best mentors that they could be." Samantha feels that a mentorship program through the universities would be beneficial to all newly licensed teachers. Considering the benefits of her

own student teaching experience and the mentoring support from a statewide mentoring and evaluation program, Samantha sees similar support (e.g., observing and supporting strengths and needs) for the first six months of classroom teaching, but from program professors, as an improvement.

Motivation, Influence, and Impact

Samantha shared that she values having mentors, friends, and colleagues to "look up to." She relies on the support of a friend who used to teach, her director and a previous retired director, support staff from the local partnership for children, and her teaching peers as "a sounding board and as a way of getting new ideas" in order to remain effective. Of all the aspects of her preparation, Samantha feels a particular professor played a huge role in her development as a BK licensed early childhood educator and "to this day when I still see her…we still have a pretty good working relationship and…where I got my master's degree, I'm gonna try to apply to teach adjunct classes…she's trying to get me set up to be able to do that." Samantha has also been influenced by close relationships with many of her classroom families. She taught siblings, a couple of years apart, and is still close with their mom, she's "still kind of friends per se with this mom and this family and I still keep up and talk with them. The mom is a reading specialist at an elementary school, so Samantha is "able to talk with her about…how to prepare my kids going in kindergarten."

Samantha's perceived impact on the lives of young children with and without disabilities is strongly related to the progress of the children she teaches. She shares,

> "I feel like the impact I have is just teaching them to be better people, to be better, like to follow directions. I know that it's important to know your ABC's, to count, do all those things, but if you don't have the social emotional skills, you're not going to learn all of

that. So, being able to teach them…how to manage their emotions, how to become better friends, how to take turns…if I teach them that…then they'll be ready for kindergarten." Observing children's progress is also represented as what gives Samantha the most reward, she adds "seeing those kids …that do have disabilities that are in my classroom, to see where they started with me at to where they finished is huge for me and that's what makes me happiest because I go from having kids who don't talk at all…and to being able to talk in maybe three to four word sentences by the time they leave me...that's what's most rewarding to me."

Meagan's Story: They Chose Me

From the time Meagan was young, she knew she wanted to work with young children. When she had children of her own, getting her daughter into a preschool setting prior to kindergarten was important to her, so she "went to work at the daycare that I'm at now in 2002". This past August was her 22nd year working at the same center and she's "done everything but the director's job." Meagan has worked with infants, 2- and 3-year-olds, as well as with school-age children in the afterschool program. Regarding her longevity, Meagan shared that she taught a child in last year's class who's oldest sibling is now 18 and she "had him when he was little." She shared that she is proud of the fact that she has been in the same classroom long enough to have taught "the whole family of kids…we're starting to get to where I'm seeing the babies of the babies I had."

Experiences That Led to Early Childhood Education

Meagan grew up in a large family. She is one of four siblings and grew up around several cousins, so has "always been around little kids." She started babysitting around the age of 10 and shared that she has always had a strong connection to kids, "I just feel like I've always been able to really connect with the kids and I enjoy being around little kids." She recognizes something

special about each age group and "can't pick a favorite because she loves watching what each age group can do."

For the last six years Meagan has been the NC Pre-K lead teacher at her center. Meagan was working on her bachelor's degree when the center gained nine NC Pre-K slots and needed a qualified lead teacher. She transferred into the NC Pre-K classroom, finished her degree, and earned her BK license. Prior to her educator preparation program Meagan shared that she did not know much about BK licensure, only that she'd always wanted a bachelor's degree and was able to get a TEACH scholarship to help pay for it. Meagan explained that "in the beginning I signed up for the non-license part because we were told at that point, when I started, you didn't have to have a license to teach pre-k." Once the license became required, Meagan's plan of study was revised, and she was able to move forward with licensure attainment.

Pre-And Post-Preparation Perspectives

In looking back on her educator preparation experience and what stood out as the most useful and beneficial, Meagan shared "I think it helped me a lot, change how I thought about teaching." The curriculum used by her center for many years is a scripted curriculum, "it tells you what to do, there's a lot of paperwork for kids to do and I always felt like, that can't be right…a 4-year-old can't sit for an hour and do five or six worksheets a day." For years, Meagan felt limited by the way "it had always been done" at the center and explained that her classes in general "opened my eyes to how it can be done better and how the kids learn, too." Meagan aligned what she learned in her educator preparation program to being a mom, specifically to being a mom of a son with a learning disability. She frequently reflects on what she could have done differently had she known then what she knows now, she feels "it was always a struggle for him and had I known all that early it would have been helpful, could have helped him prevent

some of the struggles he had…it would have been nice to be able to go back and change some of that stuff."

Of her overall educator preparation experience and its impact on her as an early childhood educator, Meagan again reflected on what she has learned and how her experiences as a mother relate to her teaching. She explained,

"…just being able to compare my son to the kids I have now and knowing how much better I can make their learning or getting them to enjoy learning where he hated it…because he had problems, and that's been mostly a warning for me because I can see it and I can see these kids now as I'm learning, especially how to do assessments and track their learning and see how far they've come, but…I feel like they're gonna have a better chance of having a successful school career with all that early learning."

Meagan teaches in a nonpublic early childhood setting and shared that she feels that is "for a reason right now", and said "…to be totally honest, I feel like God has led me to be where I am." She has given thought to a move to the public schools, especially considering the benefits that she doesn't currently have but continues to feel compelled to stay exactly where she is. In her area, most pre-k programs are located in public schools, yet family choice is an integral part of the enrollment process. Considering families have the ability to choose the public or nonpublic pre-k classroom, Meagan shared that she is struck by their decisions to choose her nonpublic classroom, "when they come to me, they have a choice, so I feel like, you know, that they've chosen me to, you know, help their kids and that's the biggest thing, that's the biggest thing of why I'm still here."

Expectations of and Effectiveness in The Role of BK Licensed Educator

At first, Meagan allowed the expectations of being a BK licensed early childhood educator to "get to her." She explained that she was "terrified because I know being BK licensed a little bit more is expected of you and I've always felt like I wasn't capable of getting those kids ready for kindergarten because that's huge, that's very huge." Working to obtain the BK license helped her realize her potential, "I can do it and gave me the tools that I need to be successful at that."

Now that she has her license and has been teaching in an NC Pre-K classroom for 6 years, Meagan shared that her sense of effectiveness as a BK licensed early childhood educator "depends on the day" but she does feel that the support from her mentors and evaluators is beneficial. Of their support, Meagan shared, "…they have all helped me see where I could change, and you know to do things a little bit different." Her current evaluator has been with her for the past 6 years, since she became an NC Pre-K teacher, and has seen Meagan make a lot of progress. Meagan shared that she appreciates her willingness to answer questions, to share ideas and training opportunities, and wishes "that they could work with the other teachers at my center, because I can see where they can change, make their room better, their teaching, and it's all just from, you know, learning, observing, and asking questions." Meagan's sense of effectiveness is enhanced when she sees her children making progress, when she "can look back and see where they were and where they are now." In her classroom, there are "a lot of social emotional issues" being monitored and many seemingly due to the impacts of social isolation during the pandemic, "you can tell they're the only child and they've been home, they're COVID babies, they're used to getting what they want." Of a particular little girl who would scream and hit the other children in the classroom but is now starting to use her words to communicate, Meagan shared, "…you

can just see the progress, where she's come so far." Hearing from parents who are seeing the same progress at home also greatly enhances her sense of effectiveness.

The Intersection of Self-Identity and The Perception of Others

When others ask what she does professionally, Meagan said she identifies as "a NC Pre-K teacher at a local daycare center." She shared that she sees herself as a "teacher" and feels "the parents see me as someone they can go to and ask questions and that can help them with their child." Meagan tends to "develop a good relationship with my parents because I want to help them, I want to help their kids the best I can. The more I know about their family and what's going on, not personal but little things that affect kids, I can help them at school, especially with social-emotional type stuff."

Meagan's educator preparation program played a "big role" in who she is as BK licensed early childhood educator. Her advisor and professors were very respectful when she had questions, "they didn't blow it off…they helped me understand what it was I was questioning." She is not as confident about the role of her educator preparation program on who she is as a teacher of young children with disabilities. Meagan completed her degree during COVID, so her educator preparation was an online experience. She shared, "They didn't really, with it being online you don't have that. I think in-person you probably would have an opportunity to go maybe in a class, see a classroom that has kids with disabilities…being online you just pretty much had your book and what you were reading." Meagan completed her student teaching in her own classroom but did have the opportunity to visit one classroom at a public school "because they said there wasn't enough diversity in my class." Meagan explained, "that was nice going there because of course they had more children because they were the one that the class has the 3-year-olds in it too, and so they had several children with down syndrome…so I was able to see

kinda how they helped those kids being involved in the whole classroom." Although she gained useful knowledge from the assigned course readings, this one experience most influenced her understanding of the inclusion of young children with disabilities within the classroom setting, routines, and learning experiences.

Motivation, Influence, and Impact

Meagan's mentors and evaluators had great influence on who she is as a BK licensed early childhood educator, "they really helped me see and they didn't just tell me, they showed me things…those ladies are the ones that helped develop me more where I am right now." Meagan shared that she is grateful for their help in her understanding and implementation of learning through play versus the scripted curriculum she was trained to use, as well as how to use assessment data to show her children's progress.

Meagan was also greatly influenced by her personal experience babysitting a child who had cerebral palsy. At the age of 10 Meagan accompanied he and his family to appointments at Shriner's, she remembers these experiences as "what helped me decide that's what I wanted to do when I was working with him because it was amazing." Although he passed away when he was only 4-years-old, this experience has stuck with Meagan over the years, she shared "just watching him grow and develop and do things that other people said he would never be able to do, and I see that,…some of my kids that have a learning disability or come from a bad situation…you can see where they change and it's amazing to watch that and I just hope that they can carry that with them on through school."

Meagan has also been influenced by the children and families she's served in past years, especially those she "runs into" from time to time. When they "beg their mommas, please take me to see Ms. Meagan" or she "runs into them in town" and they remember who she is and hug

her, it makes her feel like she "had a positive impact on their life and hopefully that will help them later on." When thinking about the impact she's had on the lives of young children with and without disabilities, she recalled "being in town before Thanksgiving" and seeing a teenager whom she'd supported in the school-age program. He recognized her and,

> "Thanked me for the way I treated him at after-school because he'd come from a bad situation and this kids like 13. What 13-year-old comes up to an old preschool teacher or you know, school age teacher, and says thank you, and he told me about his life and he didn't have to do that, and so things like that impact me. I know what I'm doing is what I'm supposed to be doing, and those are the biggest things."

Teri's Story: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood" – Robert Frost

Teri began her career on a pathway polar opposite that of early childhood education, working first in administrative roles within the insurance industry. She then spent roughly 20 years exploring the broader field of education, caring for children in a church nursery and serving as a substitute teacher in local elementary schools. Teri has been employed in her current childcare setting for five years now and stated that, "while I didn't go down this road to work in private childcare…, I am happy where I am now."

Experiences That Led to Early Childhood Education

During her "eye-opening" substitute assignments with older children and in higher grades, specifically those with end of grade testing, Teri began to realize she preferred working with children in the early childhood stages of development. Knowing that her path was not elementary education, she began to explore other undergraduate programs. In addition to seeing the need in her community for early childhood educators, Teri shared that she felt strongly about

formal education and was motivated to obtain a BK license in order to best support young children's developmental needs, specifically young children with "neurodiverse needs."

Pre-And Post-Preparation Perspectives

Although Teri did not have prior knowledge of the birth through kindergarten license, she shared that it appealed to her because she knew of pre-k programs housed in public schools in her area that required a licensed teacher. She was drawn to the opportunity to learn about children, become a licensed educator, and to teach young children in a public-school setting. Teri described herself as someone who was eager to learn about and understand the developmental stages of all children during her educator preparation program. Overall, Teri was "happy with the experience" and shared that she did feel well prepared to enter the classroom as a teacher. The knowledge gained from coursework gave her the confidence needed in the classroom. Her practicum experiences, both in public and nonpublic settings, were noted as the most meaningful part of her preparation. Teri recalled there being limited information about children "on the autism spectrum" during that time and is hopeful that 11 years later a much wider range of material and support is available in contemporary preparation programs.

Teri shared that she feels strongly about the use of appropriate terminology, being very clear that she refuses to characterize children as needing special education and prefers to use the terms exceptional children, children with special needs, or neurodiverse children. Throughout her participation in the BK program, she wrote about Children and their Families only using capital letters. A fellow student and a professor made mention to her that this was an improper use of grammar in her assignments, but Teri refused to change her stance, noting that she saw the capitalization as a sign of respect for each group.

Expectations of and Effectiveness in The Role of Early Childhood Educator

Teri's initial desire to work with young children in a public pre-k classroom led to nine years of more than a dozen interviews across a few different counties, with no offers for employment. Teri wondered if this was a result of only being licensed to teach through kindergarten, meaning that she is not as mobile as someone with a K-6 degree who can be readily transitioned across grades, based on school need. This ongoing experience has informed her expectations of being a BK licensed early childhood educator. Of this experience, Teri shared,

> "I expected to have no problem being hired into public school. My personal goals in
> striving to work in a public-school Pre-K program was to have more time to spend with
> my family, as well as to travel to see extended family members in the summer. I didn't
> realize it was limiting having a BK degree in relation to seeking employment in the
> public school system."

Since obtaining her BK license, this is the first time she's had health insurance, a retirement plan, paid vacation and sick leave, so she considers it "sort of like public school because I have all those benefits". In addition to the benefits, Teri shared that she enjoys the level of flexibility she has in her current job and feels very trusted and never micromanaged.

As a BK licensed early childhood educator, Teri contributed her confidence and ability to form a strong sense of school family to her use of Conscious Discipline (™). Teri learned about Conscious Discipline™ during a practicum in a public NC PreK classroom and has been committed to implementation ever since. She shared her excitement about a recent opportunity to engage in an in-person workshop with the founder, Becky Bailey. This was the first time she had attended a formal training and in asking her director for approval to go, said, "You don't understand, this is like the highlight of my life." Teri explained that her sense of effectiveness is

hindered when "families do not take their child's pre-k experience seriously", particularly when a child is chronically absent as it interferes with relationship building "for the child, for me, for our class as a family."

The Intersection of Self-Identity and The Perception of Others

Teri identifies as a "PreK teacher" and said that she shares with others that she is a "PreK teacher at a community college," She added, "I would rather work all day, all week, all month, all year with children more so than adults." She knows for sure that she doesn't want to be anywhere other than in the classroom. She sees herself as "growing as a leader in early childhood education" and feels others see her as "committed, passionate, dedicated, and concerned about longevity within the field, shortages of employees, appropriate compensation for early childhood development teachers." She is aware of and alarmed about the lowering of educational requirements for early childhood educators. In reflecting on the role her preparation program played in the development of her professional identity, Teri shared, "It's part of who I am. It's part of what makes me feel as strongly as I do, you know, and gives me the motivation and passion that I have for the field of early childhood.

Motivation, Influence, and Impact

Teri shared that she feels strongly about the benefits from the support of her initial mentor and evaluator, noting "they never came empty handed- they inspired my love of using recycled materials in the classroom, as well as promoting the concept of recycling in general." Teri discussed being thankful for a resourceful supervisor and her connections within the business community who frequently share free resources and materials with Teri's classroom. Aside from environmental types of support and resources, the TEACH scholarship was a

financial resource that supported the attainment of her undergraduate and graduate degrees, she doesn't "recall ever having to pay out of pocket at all."

Teri was most influenced by the NC Pre-K teacher who taught her about Conscious Discipline™ during her public-school practicum, as well as her first mentor and evaluator. Teri explained,

> "They were all about 10-15 years older than me and they had all been in the field since their twenties. Seeing them in action really motivated and inspired me. I reflect back on them quite a lot…the thoughts and memories of stuff that I experienced with them still motivates me to this day."

A particular child also had great influence on who Teri is as a BK licensed early childhood educator. Teri described it as a "very emotional situation where a family came on radar on a Monday and fell off my radar on a Friday." The family did not speak English and there wasn't time to get an interpreter involved to ensure the child and family received the services they needed. The child ended up in foster care and Teri shared that the feelings of her falling through the cracks continue to haunt her to this day. Although a difficult situation, it did motivate Teri to focus her attention on making connections with families, sooner rather than later in the year.

Teri feels she has a positive impact on young children with and without disabilities, and that her impact grows as she continues her own professional growth as an educator. She is "hesitant at times" with children with special needs because she feels she doesn't have any "formal education" in this regard. In teaching young children with special needs, Teri feels "the only way to have an impact for me…is having the patience of understanding what messages they're giving me, because they might not be verbal…they might have emotional issues, and I feel like if I can have patience, I will have more impact on a child with special needs." She feels

that her impact is also based on her own behavior and attitude as a teacher, because "they [young children in general] need a positive model in their lives, and they might only have the opportunity to see that at school or this short of a window every day." Teri feels she needs "to have a hugely positive impact on these children…they need an adult in their lives who can be consistent, reliable, and patient.... academics, sure, but I tend to keep our classroom more focused on the growth and development of social emotional skills. I really do because they're struggling. These are the COVID children and they're struggling."

Ava's Story: "The hands are the instruments of intelligence" - Maria Montessori

As young as twelve years old, Ava's grandmother would tell her about the glow coming from her when she was around young children. Supporting her granddaughter's passion, her grandmother convinced their minister to let Ava become the church's youth director. For the next 18 years Ava would serve as the youth director and eventually as the youth choir director, working with a mixed age group of up to 33 kids. Ava's mother served as a girl scout leader and led vacation bible school, so Ava came into her work with young children honestly. It was something she didn't have to be drawn to, instead she "always felt like it's my God given talent to work with kids…I think I really just enjoy working with kids, something that I'm very passionate about, kids and families."

Experiences That Led to Early Childhood Education

Ava was introduced to the field of early childhood education when she first became a mom herself. Head Start teachers were wrapping up a home visit next door and "they saw my daughter out and they asked if she was in school, and they shared all this wonderful information." Ava later visited the school and met with the family advocate. After discussing her work in the church and her love of working with young children, the family advocate told Ava

about an early childhood program at a local community college where she could earn an associate degree.

Pre-And Post-Preparation Perspectives

Prior to her educator preparation program, Ava shared that she did not know much about the BK license. She had only heard from her mentor that the program was "created to make educators highly qualified through maintaining their education and enhancing professional growth." Ava was also motivated to obtain a BK license by the positive feedback she received from parents of the children she taught, they would say things like "just keep doing it, I wish you could be my child's kindergarten, I wish you could be my child's first grade teacher." Ava completed her degree while working in a Head Start classroom and later moved into a position at a Developmental Day center, where she was encouraged to "take on the NC Pre-K role" and is still there, 13 years later.

The parts of her educator preparation program that stood out as the most useful or beneficial to Ava were the "hands on experiences" of her internships. The coursework gave her a lot of "new knowledge", but the actual experiences stood out most, especially when considering teaching young children with disabilities. Ava shared, "…I can read course work from one page to the end, but once you get that hands on experience, sometimes it's different…you have to exercise different techniques and make different adaptations to meeting those individual needs, so that was very helpful." She shared that she felt fortunate that the classroom where she completed her internship was inclusive of children with disabilities, "So I got to see how the teachers were managing, dealing with that and putting my own practices into it and working collaboratively together with the service providers and everything." Supporting lesson planning and collaborating with service providers was helpful for Ava's growth as a teacher.

Ava was very clear about her reasons for choosing to work in a nonpublic early childhood setting instead of in a public-school setting. She explained that,

> "…sometimes I feel in a nonpublic setting I have the ability to implement more of my thoughts into it, instead of, sometime in like public schools they have set rules and a certain set of rules and guidelines that you have to follow, but being in a nonpublic I could implement anything that I've learned from past coursework and just my experience alone, where I could still use my smarts instead of just bouncing off a curriculum that tells me okay at this time you're supposed to be reading this book for 30 minutes. Do this and do that. I kind of like…I like to be creative."

Ava recognized the need to be creative in her classroom especially during certain years when "I have to make a lot of modifications and adaptations for the different children…the COVID children this year are so different than the kids in the past." She feels that as result of the children having to be at home during COVID, "they're a little bit more immature…it's a lot of social and emotional development that we have to strive and work on, …I'm doing more teaching on social emotional development than going into the academic level."

Expectations of and Effectiveness in The Role of BK Licensed Educator

Ava shared that she values formal education as it allows her to stay "current in my education…and just keep nonstop learning." The requirements of the BK license keep her "where she's supposed to be…for the position I hold, but also I want to always expand in my growth as an educator." Ava has now earned two master's degrees and continues to expand her knowledge base. Ava explained that she feels effective in her role as a BK licensed early childhood educator when she facilitates the type of learning that helps "kids get on the level cognitively where they supposed to be in their development for that milestone…or even grow

greater." The support from her evaluator, supervisor, peers, and the members of her professional

learning community (PLC) has provided her with an increased sense of effectiveness. These

individuals support her by offering resources, tips, strategies, training, and hands on

opportunities. Although Ava identified these supports as helpful to her professional

development, she recognized room for improvement and gave herself a "9 out 10 in order to

leave room for growth." Ava shared that she feels frustrated by the need to "wear different hats

every time I turn around" and working with children and families who are English language

learners can be challenging for her. She has noticed an increase in the different languages spoken

in her classroom as well as an increase in the number of children with autism. At times being

able to "meet the different needs of different children" can be difficult and may impede her sense

of effectiveness in her teaching role.

In her role as a BK licensed early childhood educator, Ava shared that she feels supported

by her agency's NC PreK Coordinator. This individual coordinates monthly PLCs, provides

training and workshops, and sends behavior specialists to support teachers with challenging

behaviors in the classroom. With the support of these resources, Ava learned new instructional

strategies to support a child in her current class who has difficulty socializing with his peers.

The Intersection of Self-Identity and The Perception of Others

When others ask Ava what she does professionally, she said she identifies as an

"educator" and "sometimes…a NC PreK teacher." She mentioned that she also likes to share that

she is a "resourceful person" and that she "mentors beginning teachers." In her role as a BK

licensed early childhood educator, she sees herself "as a self-starter, a resourceful person that can

make adaptations and modifications to better benefit the success in children's learning." Others

see her as "a fun loving, adventurous teacher who knows her role." Ava shared that her educator

preparation program helped prepare her for a career of serving children and families. The coursework prepared her for what she would encounter in the field and "was very helpful…for working with kids with disabilities, working with kids, typical and atypical developing children, how to work with families and people in the community."

Motivation, Influence, and Impact

As a BK licensed early childhood educator, Ava has been most influenced by her grandmother. Of her grandmother's influence, Ava shared,

"she always said that…she could see, always knew that I was passionate when it comes to working with kids because she always seem that glow and she was the one that kind of opened that door for me getting the opportunity through a minister at the age 12."

Specific children over the years have also influenced who Ava is as a BK licensed early childhood educator. Ava shared, "Yeah, it's always my most challenging children that always influences me, It keeps me going because…I put myself up to a big challenge that I want to reach this child, even if it's just to get this particular child to sit down for 15 minutes through a circle time, it makes a big difference to me because it shows that that child has the ability to learn. It's just children that's most behavior, more outspoken, more challenging to me is the ones that keeps me going." Ava noted her fondness of an instructor at the community college, sharing "…she kept me encouraged, she was like a mentor, every time I got involved into one thing, she introduced to me something new, and I like, I kind of grew into liking it and loving it." This mentor, along with her supervisors at work, encouraged Ava to continue her education, motivating her to get her BK degree and license.

Ava sees her impact on the lives of young children with and without disabilities through the progress they make while in her care. She explained that when children who are now in older

grades come back to see her, they say things like "no other teacher gave me a hug or smiled like you smiled at me, that made me feel warm and welcome."

Bethany's Story: By happy chance

Bethany earned her associate degree from a local community college in 1998. Following an internship at the college's childcare center, she was offered an opportunity to be employed as part of the teaching team. She stayed for a couple of years, transitioned to other employment, and then learned of an opportunity at a 4-year institution where she could earn her bachelor's degree and BK license as part of a cohort program.

Experiences That Led to Early Childhood Education

Being in her thirties, a single mom of a young son, and a full-time employee, Bethany explained that the program was difficult but ideal as it was designed to meet the needs of "non-traditional students" and "the professors actually came to the local community college to teach the courses." A TEACH scholarship took care of her financial obligations, enabling Bethany to complete the program. During her educator preparation program, one of her internships was with a local family resource center. After a year at the childcare center, which was a TEACH scholarship requirement, she had an opportunity to work as an in-home educator for the same family resource center. While working at the center, she learned a lot about research and had an amazing opportunity to work alongside a leading early childhood researcher of effective coaching practices. After a year Bethany decided to return to the classroom and has been there for 11 years now.

Bethany shared that she was not necessarily drawn to the field of early childhood education but more so happened upon it. She does feel strongly that it "happened for a reason" because about halfway through completion of her associate degree, she got pregnant with her son

who is now 26 years old. She can now see how her school experiences, specifically learning about child development, helped her as a mother.

Pre-And Post-Preparation Perspectives

Although Bethany had limited knowledge of BK licensure before enrolling in her educator preparation program, she did know that it could "open the opportunity up for me to not just be in the classroom… other opportunities to work with other agencies like [the local family resource center] and other places to also work with families." She did understand that kindergarten would be the highest grade level she could teach.

One professor stood out as the most beneficial or useful part of Bethany's educator preparation program. Although each of them was incredibly knowledgeable, one professor had in-depth knowledge about child development and Bethany shared that she was motivated by the way the professor taught. The instructor shared her own in-depth experiences teaching young children and inspired her students through the inclusion of cultural responsiveness within her course content. Bethany shared, "she respected us, she made us think about varying perspectives and our own practices, and just shared ideas and thoughts that made us dig deep." Bethany learned a lot about children with disabilities, specifically about special education law, and about working with families, which she feels prepared her for working in a NC Pre-K/Head Start blended classroom. Bethany shared that her overall preparation experience taught her a lot about what is and is not developmentally appropriate for young children, specifically about what young children need to learn and know and how to meet their individual needs. She learned that it's not a "one size shoe fits everyone type of thing…you've got all these different little personalities in your classroom and learning to be more mindful of that." Based on her past experiences, Bethany

related her teaching practices to coaching practices, "…asking more open-ended questions, …encouraging critical thinking skills, …and taking time to learn from your students."

Bethany teaches in a nonpublic Head Start/NC Pre-K classroom that is housed within a public-school site. This is common for the area and for the local programs. She is not an employee of the school system, and her children are enrolled through the local head start agency, not through the elementary school. The school site serves only as a housing mechanism for her classroom. With that said, Bethany shared that she prefers the nonpublic sector due to the increased ability to connect with families. There is an open-door policy for her program, which she feels is not as likely within the public-school sector, and Bethany appreciates that she can further help "connect that family to school relationship" through home visits. Through home visits Bethany supports the families understanding of "where teachers are coming from, …what their children are doing in the classroom", and support relationship building that is critical when having "difficult conversations with families." Bethany shared that she enjoys preparing children for kindergarten but strongly feels that "what I do in my classroom is 90% social emotional." She adds, "I feel like if I can serve the children in any way, that's what I want to do…help them…learn to follow directions…share their materials with other children and get used to the routines and the schedule of being in a classroom." Bethany explained that she values the ability to develop relationships with colleagues, "Especially now, being housed in a public-school site, building connections with other teachers supports children's transitions to the next grade and helps others understand more about what we do." She added, "It's like, your own relationships with your peers support effective transitions for the kids that you have, right, for the kids you are teaching right now."

Expectations of and Effectiveness in The Role of BK Licensed Educator

As part of her educator preparation, Bethany shared that she hoped to gain more knowledge about child development, developmentally appropriate practice, and family school relationships. Each of which she feels are expectations that were met. She had an idea of how much work it would take to obtain and maintain her license but feels more knowledgeable about the process since she's been served by a program of mentors and evaluators who support BK licensed educators within the nonpublic early childhood settings.

Bethany shared that she feels effective in her role as a BK licensed early childhood educator, but also that "there's always more that I could do, I feel like there's always room for growth in any area." She also feels she's "been effective with children in the transition not just into kindergarten, but from home to school." Bethany is very supportive of her classroom families and noted that her efforts in building ongoing relationships with families has also contributed to her sense of effectiveness. Bethany's program serves many Latino and Hispanic families; she hopes to learn more Spanish to be more effective. Last year, Bethany developed a strong relationship with a family of Ukrainian refugees. She had such a strong desire to support the child's education and transition into the classroom, but also the family's transition into a new home and a new place. Bethany contributed her years of experience (26 years) along with her life experiences (e.g., being a single mom) to her level of effectiveness. Her level of self-confidence has increased over the years. She contributed not being as shy to her lived experiences as a mom and a teacher (i.e., navigating the system for her own son, communicating, and building relationships with families, and mentoring other teachers).

Bethany explained that she feels more effective when "working in a setting where your co-workers and your supervisors are also educated…being in an environment where people that

around me are educated in this field" as a supportive environment versus working in settings that "people would say are quote-unquote daycares." Another "huge impact" is "having supervisors that have been on the front lines…in the classroom…knowing what it really looks like and the expectations and what's practical." Bethany shared feeling supported by specialists, particularly those who support her with children with developmental or behavioral concerns.

The Intersection of Self-Identity and The Perception of Others

When others ask what she does professionally, Bethany said she tells them she is an "early childhood educator." She is intentional about using that term, because she wants others to understand that "it's not just playing with three- and four-year-olds…there's a lot more to it…especially with Head Start, there is a lot of paperwork involved." She explained that she has gained many skills by working for Head Start and learning the Head Start requirements. If speaking with another teacher, she will sometimes refer to herself as a Head Start teacher.

Bethany sees herself "as an essential, a very important part of the child's life, not just the child's life but the whole equation of a child's education." Others within her community also see her as "essential", if outside her community,

> "Some people could look at me as a babysitter more than an educator. Some people may think that I have a very easy job. Some people might think, oh my gosh, I don't know how you do that. Especially when they learn that we have 18 children with two teachers, and you know some of those children have disabilities…or behavioral issues."

Bethany's preparation program "played a vital part" on who she is as a BK licensed educator, she explained, "You know, not that I didn't learn anything when I was getting my associate degree, I did, but I feel like the preparation that I had from [University] as intense. It was really intense; we dug a lot deeper than the surface." Bethany valued her practicums,

internships, and student teaching experiences. They each allowed her to "see it on different levels" as her experiences were situated across an infant/toddler classroom, the local family resource center, and a kindergarten classroom. Having a variety of experiences allowed her to see teaching in action, and to learn about research, coaching, and working with families, and "opened my mind a lot more seeing the different layers of this profession."

Motivation, Influence, and Impact

Several people have influenced Bethany's identity as a BK licensed early childhood educator, but none more than her own son. As a mom, she wanted to "understand his development and his growth better" and wanted to "be able to put myself in a position where I could provide more for him." Bethany was also influenced by the teacher of her very first internship, "her energy and the way she set up her classroom and activities" was memorable. Her [community college] advisor along with two professors from [University] were also influential. In addition to support from her family and best friend, Bethany shared that the children and families she's served have influenced who she is as an educator. Specifically, those she sees now who have children of their own but still remember her. She shared, "they remember me even when they were like 4 years old, so I must have done something right or something important."

Bethany's shared that the consistent use of the Second Steps social emotional curriculum has contributed to her impact as a BK licensed early childhood educator. When children are able to do more for themselves, feel safe exploring their environment, and learn how to problem solve, Bethany feels most impactful, "I feel like if I've done anything for these children, I have provided an environment for them that they can feel safe and loved and free to explore and learn away from their home." Bethany has observed that this year's group of children need more support with self-help skills and are experiencing more separation anxiety than in past years, so

the curriculum is proving beneficial. Bethany has also stepped into a support role for parents this year as they too seem to be experiencing separation anxiety from their children, potentially related to having so much time at home during the pandemic. Although she has observed an increase in the need for self-help skills, she has also seen a decrease in more aggressive behavior than before, also potentially due to the level of isolation during the pandemic.

Bethany shared that she is hopeful for a better understanding of the work early childhood educators do and how important it is. Her wish was that early childhood educators "were recognized and maybe even respected more than what we have been in the past, and looked at, you know, for the hard work that we do put into it." Over the years she has observed a decline in the developmental level of her children and feels now that "we have a significant number of children in our classroom with disabilities or special needs, I would like to see a change in the ratio…to better support the children and the teachers." Bethany has been in the classroom now for 26 years and has seen a shift within recent years, "I've seen a lot of teachers, a lot of good teachers come and go in the last few years, and I feel like that has a lot to do with it." She would like to see more funding for our profession and hopes for teachers to be seen, and for the idea of "taking care of the caregiver" to be a reality by way of changes in the field that support teacher's needs.

Cross Narrative Analysis

In this section I introduce the themes and sub-themes derived from an iterative process of thematic analysis, across narratives. This secondary analysis provided the opportunity to revisit the data with a fresh mind and a welcomed layer of clarity and confidence. Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on the finalized personal narratives and three rounds of coding led to the development of two final themes, each supported by two sub-themes. As noted in chapter 3, a

conceptual framework guided the cross-analysis by recognizing the influence of two contextual

theories and social context. As depicted in Figure 3 the overall analysis through the lens of the

conceptual framework resulted in two major thematic findings: The Power of Influence and BK

by Happenstance, each deriving further meaning from supporting sub-themes. Each will be

described and discussed.

Figure 3

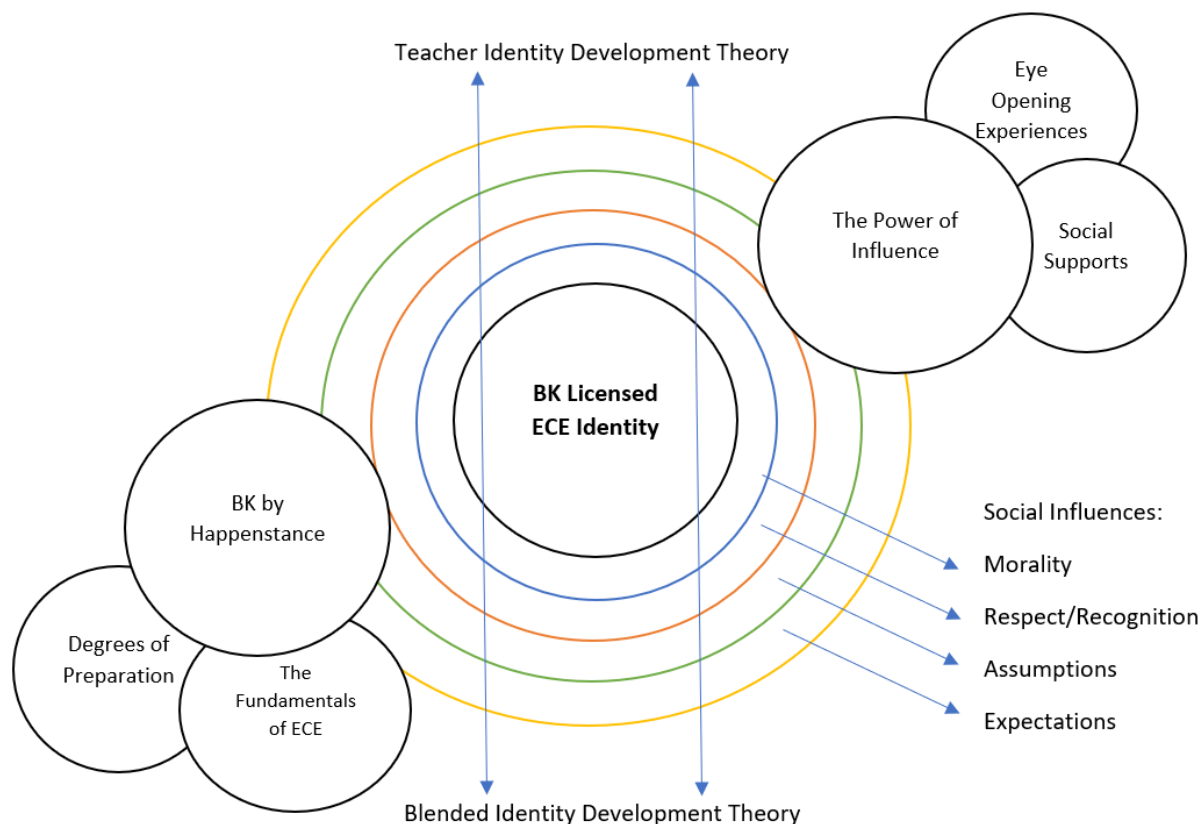*Final Themes Derived from Data Analysis Through the Lens of The Conceptual Framework*

Note. This figure represents: 1) the alignment of the resulting final themes and subthemes and the

theoretical framework of identity development, 2) the presence of identified social influences on

identity development, and 3) the ongoing influence of two contextual theories of identity

development.

The Power of Influence

Fascinating stories of influence emerged as participants reflected on their decisions to become a BK licensed early childhood educator, their effectiveness in the role, and their impact on the lives of young children with and without disabilities. The interconnectedness between each participant's personal and professional lives became clear as they shared who and what has had the greatest influence on their identity as a BK licensed early childhood educator. Teacher identity development, as depicted in the conceptual framework, is characterized by an ongoing process that is shaped by the context of personal and professional experiences and is continually shaped by the idea of self in relation to others (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2009; Castaneda, 2011; Pishghadam et al., 2022). Each notion has direct connections to the level of influence of unique contextual factors on the shaping of the professional identity of this study's participants. The power of ongoing influence across their personal and professional lives has enhanced their sense of belonging, their sense of agency, and the ongoing meaning making of their experiences as an early childhood educator. The power of particular social influences also has direct and indirect impact on the construction of their identity as a BK licensed early childhood educator. For instance, the implicit and explicit expectations of holding a BK license and of teaching in an NC Pre-K classroom serve as powerful influences on the identity development of BK licensed early childhood educators. The evolution of their professional identity has been influenced by constructive feedback and guidance, feelings of validation, their own ability to influence the lives of others, and by personal experiences and beliefs that give purpose and meaning to their lives as BK educators. These are captured in two subthemes: eye opening experiences and social supports.

Eye Opening Experiences

Participants' identities as BK licensed early childhood educators have been influenced by life experiences within the various layers of their unique external context (i.e., preparation, in-service, interactions with colleagues, families and other professionals, and opportunities) that they defined as eye-opening. These represented experiences that continue to resonate with them five, ten, even twenty years later. Participants attributed the longevity of the impact of these experiences with the fact that the experiences pushed them to think differently and therefore had significant influence on who they are as an early childhood educator. Eye opening experiences influenced shifts in teaching practices, belief systems, and morality. While many of the eye-opening experiences shared commonalities, they also represented contextual nuances.

All six participants spoke fondly of their internship experiences, most situating them as what stands out as the most beneficial part of their preparation program. For example, Teri was first introduced to Conscious Discipline during an observation of an NC Pre-K teacher in a public-school setting and it shifted her mindset about how to support the social-emotional well-being of young children with and without disabilities in her classroom. Teri now contributes her effectiveness as a BK licensed educator to the consistent implementation of Conscious Discipline and identifies the NC Pre-K lead teacher who introduced her to the approach as having the most influence on who she is as a BK licensed early childhood educator. Meagan had a very different preparation experience as it was during the onset of COVID. Due to related restrictions, she completed her internship in her own classroom and did not have many opportunities to observe and learn from other teachers. Fortunately, she was able to visit one classroom in-person, it was a diverse group and included young children with disabilities. Her ability to observe in this classroom and see firsthand how the teachers worked to intentionally include children with

Down syndrome was identified as the most valuable preparation experience and the one that most heavily influenced her own teaching practices.

Particular professors were regularly referred to as influential and creators of eye-opening experiences. Participants routinely spoke of particular professors who made a real difference in shaping who they are as BK licensed early childhood educators. These professors tended to respect them as students, provide a safe space for learning, serve as a source of motivation, and "opened their minds" in ways that they had not previously experienced. One participant spoke in detail about assignments that were intentionally designed to engage students with families from other cultures and classroom conversations that engrossed students in the topic of race within an early childhood underpinning. These professors were also described as "intense." They provided their students with the level of content knowledge and type of experiences that may have stretched them the most but were also identified as the ones that taught them the most and/or made them feel most supported. For example, Bethany referred to a particular professor's teaching style as motivating. Bethany shared, "she respected us, she made us think about varying perspectives and our own practices, and just shared ideas and thoughts that made us dig deep."

Additional eye-opening experiences were identified by participants as an "emotional experience" and as something that "still haunts me to this day." Although these experiences were described as some of their most challenging, they were also impactful enough to change practices, elicit new practices, or shape/re-shape their identity as an educator altogether. Teri details "a very emotional experience" where a non-English speaking family "came onto my radar on a Monday and fell off on Friday" She was horrified because the child and family desperately needed resources and support, but the program didn't even have time to secure an interpreter before the child was gone. Of this experience, Teri shared "The child…I think, went to foster

care and…that haunts me to this day." Teri feels that this child fell through the cracks, but she has used the attached emotions to enhance her family engagement practices. She explained, "I don't know that there was anything else that I could have done, but…that drives me to really make connections with families." In another example, Bethany detailed a particular year that remains her most difficult. It was a year that she worked with a little girl with cochlear implants, who she could not communicate with. The little girl was learning American Sign Language, but with a one-on-one aid during class time, which limited Bethany's ability to learn a new mode of communication and engage with this child. Bethany explained, "It was the biggest challenge of my career, I was so frustrated because we couldn't communicate…I almost quit, but it ended beautifully. I learned a lot…it was a challenging but beautiful experience." Although this was a difficult situation, it influenced her instructional efforts in modeling feelings of empathy and acts of compassion for the children of her classroom. She is also much more likely to advocate for her participation in IEP goal development and transition meetings and therefore had an impact on how she conceptualized her role as a BK educator in relation to disability.

All six participants detailed eye-opening preparation and teaching experiences that essentially increased their capacity through an intricate relationship of competence and confidence building and continually influenced identity development. As participants engaged in theoretical and practical pedagogy their competence levels increased, in turn increasing their confidence levels. As confidence increased, they were more willing to take risks in teaching and learning which served to increase their feelings of competence.

Regarding gains in confidence from preparation experiences, Meagan initially felt unsure of her abilities as a BK licensed educator but gained confidence through the process of earning her license. She shared, "I was terrified because I know being BK licensed a little bit more is

expected of you and I've always felt like I wasn't capable of getting those kids ready for kindergarten because that's huge…and so getting the license helped me to realize that, yeah, I can do it and giving me the tool that I need to be successful at that." Teri reiterated the role of Conscious Discipline in her classroom and explains "Conscious Discipline is a huge part of my teaching, and it gives me a lot of confidence in the classroom…the more I can create a sense of school family, the easier time we're gonna have of things. I am confident in my classroom management skills." Bethany shared that she used to be a very shy person, but that teaching has given her opportunities to purposefully communicate with families about their children and therefore increased her overall level of confidence. She explained,

"Throughout the years I have become more confident in myself in regards to talking with families. I'm not as shy as I used to be, so I feel like that has a lot to do with it...when my son was young, he did have behaviors and I had to go through some stuff with that...navigate the system a little bit...so I feel like with that knowledge it's made me more empathetic towards families...just really seeing the positive things within the children and being able to share that with the families and being able to communicate with them in so many ways , I see how special your child is, and so I feel like that's helped me a lot.

Significant personal experiences were also eye opening and expressed by all participants, as they contributed to beliefs and convictions that give purpose and meaning to their personal and professional lives. Across narratives, there was an expression of a greater power that led them to early childhood education. In Bethany's case, becoming pregnant with her son aligned her roles as mother and student/learner and gave her a stronger sense of purpose for both. She explained,

I think it happened for a reason because about halfway through my associate degree I got pregnant. Had my son…when back to finish it. So, I feel like that opportunity really helped me as a mother, learning a lot about childhood development and education.

Meagan also reflected on a higher power and stated,

Mainly, to be totally honest, I feel like God has led me to where I am. I've thought about going to public school, I don't have any of the benefits that they have there. It's hard sometimes, it's very hard because you know you look at what could be at the public school, but I just feel like I am where I am for a reason.

After working for decades to complete her associate degree and gain a seat in a nursing school, Faith reflected on why she made the decision not to accept it. She shared, "I went to the very first day of classes, looked around me and thought I haven't got the slightest desire to do this, not even a little bit, and I was in my fifties at the time…thought a little more and I thought I always go back to education. I always go back to literacy and early childhood education... And so I just really knew it was for me." She gave up her seat and went back to earn her BK degree when she was sixty years old, graduating in 2023 Magna Cum Laude, Dean's List, Chancellor's list, and President's list. In reflecting on her choice to teach young children, Ava spoke fondly of years of being around young children through her grandmother and mother's work in church and girl scouts. Her experiences instilled in her a strong sense of purpose, of which she shared, "Well, I've always felt like it's my God given talent to work with kids."

Social Support

According to Ko, Wang, and Xu (2013), social support serves to increase clarity in our lives and fosters our perception of agency throughout our lived experiences. The benefits of a

comprehensive system of social support have been and continue to be greatly influential on the professional identity development of this study's participants. Different from the mind shift type of influence of eye-opening experiences, participants gained a sense of motivation, inspiration, and feelings of belongingness from their social support systems. Social support systems generally include five types of support: informational, emotional, esteem, social network support, and tangible (Ko, Wang, & Xu, 2013). Each type of social support is interwoven throughout each participant's narrative, reflecting teacher identity development as it is characterized by an ongoing process that is: a) constantly evolving, b) shaped by the context of their personal and professional experiences, and c) continually shaped by the idea of self in relation to others (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2009; Castaneda, 2011; Pishghadam et al., 2022).

Informational support (i.e., knowledge, advice, feedback) has been provided through participants' relationships with their mentors. Responses reflect an appreciation for what they learned from these individuals and how they directly influenced their teaching practice through effective feedback and support. When describing the influence of her mentors and evaluators, Meagan shared "they really helped me see and they didn't just tell me, they showed me things…they have all helped me see where I could change, and you know to do things a little bit different." Teri was inspired by the feedback from her mentors and evaluators and often used it to enhance her practices. She was excited that "they never came empty handed- they inspired my love of using recycled materials in the classroom, as well as promoting the concept of recycling in general." She added, "just seeing them in action really motivated and inspired me…the thoughts and memories of stuff that I experienced with them still motivate me to this day."

The most common sources of emotional support (i.e., empathy, encouragement) came from those who participants identified as their greatest influence. In most cases, their own children were participants' greatest influence and their ability to empathize with the children and families they serve comes from lived experiences as a mother, in many cases a young mother and/or the mother of a child with disabilities. Bethany's response well represented this type of lived experience. When discussing who or what had the greatest influence on who she is as a BK licensed early childhood educator, Bethany shared, "I think one of the people would be my son. Wanting to understand his development and his growth better. Wanting to put myself in a position where I could provide more for him." Faith's greatest influence was also her son, whose support needs led to her own desire to ensure other children and families get the support they need. In describing her experience, Faith shared,

> I have a son who's 30 who would be considered Asperger's if we still had that as a diagnosis, except he doesn't have the high IQ…and he probably is the greatest influence and what led me to what I have ultimately done as my second career, because I learned a lot in the nineties, while I was putting a team together. We have the supports now, so I want to utilize them the way that I could not for him. Unfortunately, he fell between the cracks…there was no one who was prepared to really help him with his issues.

Meagan's experiences as a mother also greatly influenced her capacity for empathy as a teacher. She reflected on having her children young and what she could have done differently for them had she known then everything she learned in her BK program. She shared, "the things that I could do different for them that might would have helped…my son had some learning disability, and it was always a struggle for him and had I known all that early it would have been helpful, could have helped him prevent some of the struggles he had." Meagan was also greatly

influenced by an emotional connection to a child with cerebral palsy who she baby sat, as a child herself. Of that experience, Meagan shared,

> he couldn't walk, and his family let me go to a lot of his Shriners appointments…and I got to see him a lot and he is what helped me decide that's what I wanted to do when I was working with him because it was amazing. He actually died when he was four and they said he would never walk, and he walked about 2 weeks before he passed away."

Esteem support (i.e., promotion of intrinsic value, validation) resonates throughout participant responses as the ongoing validation and intrinsic motivation they receive from children and families. Four of the six participants were best able to describe their impact on the lives of young children with and without disabilities through the sharing of stories of children who remember them. Of her impact, Bethany shared,

> Even to this day, I run into children I had in my first class, now they have children of their own and they still remember me. That makes me feel really good inside, that you know, they remember me even when they were like 4 years old, so I must have done something right or something important."

Meagan shared,

> I'll be walking through the street with my grandson and all of a sudden I hear Ms. Meagan and then see them running and hug me and, you know, that makes me feel good because it makes me feel like I had a positive impact on their life and hopefully that will help them later on."

Meagan also detailed a recent experience where a former child from the school-age program recognized her and thanked her. She said,

We talked, and he thanked me for the way I treated him at after school because he'd come from a bad situation and this kids like 13. What 13-year-old comes up to an old preschool teacher ...and says thank you? He told me about his life, and he didn't have to do that and so things like that impact me. I know what I'm doing is what I'm supposed to be doing and those are the biggest things.

Ava also defined her impact in this way, "even when they leave pre-k going into kindergarten, first grade, second grade, they come back to me and they kind of like just share like, hey, I remember just doing this in your classroom. I remember …that you gave me that hug…no other teacher gave me a hug or smiled like you smiled at me, that made me feel warm and welcome."

Participants' social network support (i.e., sense of belongingness) was enhanced by those in their closest personal and professional circles, specifically those who had knowledge of early childhood education and understood the value of their work. Ava's social network includes a professional circle of those who most influence her growth as an educator. She shared, "I think me being surrounded by my evaluator, my supervisor, other educators, and even being part of Professional Learning Community meetings and stuff has helped me has really, really helped me grow." In a few cases, colleagues became close friends and esteemed members of participants' social networks. For example, Bethany shared,

"I also had a colleague who was one of my best friends…we worked together in the field at the time, she decided to go through it too. So, she was also my motivator, we did help each other through the process…we've kind of went through this together...having her along my side, going through that time of being a single parent and going through the cohort."

Similarly, Samantha highlighted the importance of having mentors, friends, and colleagues to look up to and shared that she relies heavily on the support of a friend who used to teach and other teaching peers as a sounding board and as a way of getting new ideas. Bethany explained the significance of "working in a setting where your coworkers and your supervisors are also educated." She values being in an environment where people around her are "educated in this field...knowing what it really looks like and the expectations, and what's practical...that has a huge impact."

Although mention of tangible support is much less common throughout participant responses, more than half share that a TEACH scholarship made their education possible. When talking about resources and support that impact her effectiveness, Teri stated, "So, another great resource is the teach scholarship because that is how I got my undergrad, my birth to kindergarten license. I don't recall ever having to pay out of pocket at all, so it was a huge resource for me." The opportunity to make more money with the BK license was also a common thread regarding tangible support. Bethany explained, " I wanted to go that next level. Salary had a lot to do with it…I was a single parent…bringing home like $9 and some change an hour... had a mortgage to pay, had a child to raise." A friend encouraged Faith to go back to school to earn her BK license so that her credentials would finally match her experience and allow her to make more money. Faith noted "there was a big financial difference, so she was right."

BK By Happenstance

The second final theme, BK by happenstance, captures findings directly related to participants' professional identity in relation to blended preparation, identity, and practice. BK in the description of this theme, is synonymous with blended (i.e., preparation and license). Participants overwhelmingly had little to no knowledge of the BK license prior to enrolling in

their educator preparation program. In fact, in most cases, participants were not actively seeking out a BK program /license, instead they happened upon it. Participants' motivation to earn the degree and license was varied (i.e., opportunity to make more money in a NC Pre-k classroom, earn a degree for free, teach kindergarten). The BK license, for most, was synonymous with the NC Pre-K program. Largely, participants saw the license as a requirement for being the lead teacher of an NC Pre-K classroom and only knew that it would prepare them for that role or for teaching Kindergarten in a public-school setting.

Two participants had no prior knowledge of the BK license. Meagan shared, "I really didn't know a whole lot. …I've always wanted a bachelor's degree, so being where I was at and TEACH helped pay for that, that's why I started it… I really didn't have any understanding; I did not know what I was coming into." Ava's experience was similar as she detailed having no prior knowledge of the BK license. She happened upon the option after being encouraged to continue her education by an instructor who became a trusted mentor.

Other participants had limited knowledge of the BK license prior to enrolling in their educator preparation program but did know that it would allow them to teach Kindergarten and/or teach pre-k in a public-school setting. Teri shared, "I really didn't have a whole lot of knowledge about it. It interested me because I knew my path was not gonna be elementary education." Teri was aware of pre-k programs within the public school that required a licensed teacher, and that appealed to her. Faith shared, "I knew that it was required by the state of North Carolina to teach NC Pre-K and I also had an understanding that you were also qualified to teach kindergarten." Similarly, Samantha explained,

> Just basically that I could teach anything from birth all the way up to kindergarten and
> that they would just prepare me enough to be able to teach those children. It wouldn't tell

me how much like…what it would entail, so I didn't know a whole lot about it except for

the fact that it would give me the credits to be able to teach like a public-school teacher.

Bethany also did not know much about the BK license, but was hopeful that it would open doors,
she shared,

> I did know that…it would open the opportunity up for me not just to be in the classroom,
> that I could have, you know, like other opportunities to work with other agencies…and
> also to work with families. I think that's one of the reasons I decided to do it too, not that
> I was burned out at the time, I just wanted to see what other opportunities I could have
> outside the classroom. I did know that ...the highest level I could go would be a
> kindergarten classroom.

Degrees of Preparation

The first subtheme under BK by happenstance related to how prepared participants felt

for various roles and responsibilities. Perceptions of being prepared to teach young children with

and without disabilities seemed to also be by chance – dependent upon which preparation

program they attended, the practice-based opportunities afforded to them during that critical

period of learning, and the type of classroom they now teach in, blended or not. Perceptions of

preparedness to teach young children with and without disabilities did not reflect a unifying

experience, instead connected more to participant's current identities. As participants reflected

on their feelings of preparedness to serve young children with and without disabilities,

connections to issues around contemporary definitions and identity of blended preparation itself

emerged and are detailed in Chapter 5.

Those who currently teach in NC Pre-K classrooms had an increased perception of preparedness to teach young children with and without disabilities, while those who teach in blended Pre-K classrooms felt less confident about their preparation, specifically to support young children with disabilities. Although all participants described the burden of program requirements (e.g., paperwork, curriculum and assessment expectations) and the challenges of meeting the individual needs of children, participants who were teachers of blended classrooms seemed much more overwhelmed by the wide range of abilities and meeting dual program requirements.

Samantha was resolute in her feelings of preparedness to support young children with and without disabilities. She explained,

> I feel like I wasn't prepared enough, I felt like there needed to be more special education classes…even though they're like you have a BK degree, you're licensed for special ed as well, I'm like, it's not enough. I feel like there needs to be more special education classes built into the birth through kindergarten program itself.

Meagan also felt unprepared, especially considering she completed her program during the pandemic. Of her preparation program's role in preparing her to serve young children with and without disabilities, Meagan shared, "They didn't really, with it being online. I think in person, you probably would have an opportunity to go maybe in a class, see a classroom that has kids with disabilities or something, being online you just pretty much had your book and what you were reading." Along the same lines, Teri felt prepared to enter the classroom, but also felt that she lacked knowledge and know-how about children with specific disabilities, specifically children with autism. Teri said, " I did feel well prepared after the program, when I went into the classroom, but also noted, "I feel I'm hesitant sometimes with children with special needs

because I feel I don't have any formal education." While Bethany shared her preparation experience taught her a lot about what is and is not developmentally appropriate for young children and about special education law, she explained that so much of what she has learned to do to support young children with disabilities has been through her own trial and error and paying attention to each child's individual needs.

Faith and Ava's responses reflected differing perspectives. They each felt that engagement in coursework and hands-on experiences prepared them well to teach young children with and without disabilities. Regarding her preparation experiences, Faith shared, "I have 28 credit hours of special education between BKSE and the few regular special education classes that we had to take as part of a degree, so I am very well prepared to work with children with disabilities." She added,

> they played a huge role…because as I said, the preparation and trauma informed education, early literacy, the amount of special education credit hours that were included in my preparation, it played a huge role in preparing me and causing me to see myself as a special education teacher.

Similarly, Ava shared,

> I think it helped me prepare myself into that career field of being an educator to the children and families I serve. Being able to go through the coursework and learn the variety of different things that I'll be encountering as I go into like the educational field. So, I think...the class was very helpful and making preparations for that such as working with kids with disabilities, working with kids, typical, and atypical developing children, how to work with families and people in the community.

As previously mentioned, the unique demands and needs of individual children and their families appeared to be impactful on participants. Despite the deep sense of purpose they have gained from their roles, participants conveyed an acknowledgment of the challenges they face meeting the requirements of one or more funding agency, supporting the needs of young children with a wide range of abilities, and responding to the different needs of children and families post pandemic. The collective perception was that being a BK licensed early childhood educator in a nonpublic setting is hard work and when teaching in a blended classroom, specifically, feelings of unpreparedness to teach young children with disabilities are prominent.

When considering her role as a BK licensed early childhood educator, Bethany stated, "it's not just playing with 3- and 4-year-olds, oh, there's a lot more to it, a lot of paperwork involved…requirements." When considering the perceptions of others, she explained,

some people could look at me more as a babysitter than an educator. Some people may think I have a very easy job. Some people may think, oh my gosh, I don't know how you do that, especially when they learn that we have 18 children with 2 teachers, and you know some of those children do have disabilities.

Samantha teaches in a blended classroom, that serves children who are eligible for the NC Pre-K Program and for Developmental Day services, meaning she must meet program requirements of both. She expressed feeling less effective in her teaching role, due to requirements that take her away from the most valuable parts of teaching. Samantha shared,

I feel like there's so many different things that they're requiring us to do now that I just I feel like I can't do my job all the way because of the assessment...documentation...

paperwork, and I just feel like I'm relying a lot on my assistants in the classroom to do a

lot of the interacting with the kids.

In her blended classroom, Samantha can serve children ages 3-5 and as a Developmental Day

classroom, she tends to serve children with more moderate to severe disabilities. This means that

the range of abilities in her classroom in any given year can reflect children who are

developmentally functioning at a toddler level, all the way to a child who has just turned five

years old and is prepared to enter kindergarten. Samantha expressed the difficulty of this

situation,

I have 3-year-olds in my room and some of my 3-year-olds are more on like a toddler

level, they're not going to be able to respond to an open-ended question so you're trying

to get them to respond to a yes or no question verbally or non-verbally. So that's what

makes it really hard, to have those higher needs because they're on the spectrum a little

bit lower and then you've got those typically developing kiddos that may be already

adding and subtracting. I have a kid who I'm actually just working on using one of those

little ring stackers, so I mean that's like a young toddler. I wouldn't trade it for the world,

I love it, but it's very hard to try to meet the needs of everybody.

In addition to the varying range of abilities in NC Pre-k and NC Pre-K blended

classrooms, Ava shared her challenges working with children who are English language learners.

She explained,

I do have to sometimes speak a different language at times and just learning to meet their

particular needs and that now we have families that not only just Spanish speaking

families, sometimes I have some that's Vietnamese and from different other countries, so

that's more challenging to me.

Similar to Samantha's sentiments, Ava noted an increase in children coming into the classroom

with Autism and how it's more challenging to meet the needs of all of the children. Ava shared,

Far as behavior, I do notice that I've seen since the beginning more children with autism

come in the classroom…It's challenging because some might not have behaviors, others

might be more settled…that's what makes me put in more challenging level...to be able to

meet the different needs of different children,

In response to being asked about her experiences teaching young children with disabilities,

Meagan quickly and concisely stated, "It's not easy." She added "you're gonna get thrown a

curve ball sometimes and have to change what you do."

The COVID-19 global pandemic was also discussed as it has necessitated adapting to a

new way of teaching and to new and different types of child behaviors, post pandemic. All six

participants detailed noticeable differences in children's and family's needs following the return

to school after the pandemic. Teri was brief, yet clear in her description, sharing, "These are the

covid ones and they are struggling." Bethany provided more detail but expressed the same

sentiment,

What I'm seeing with this group of children this year is needing more support with

separation anxiety, self-help skills. So, I feel like my practices have helped impact them

to be able to do more for themselves, to be able to feel safe and explore their

environment, to be able to learn how to solve social skills, how to take turns...having to

help mom with separation anxiety too. A lot of children that come our way now are not

on like the developmental level that children, you know, 7, 10, years ago were.

Like Teri, Meagan concisely shared "You can tell they're the only child and they've been

home, they're covid babies. They're used to getting what they want. We've had a lot of

meltdowns and screaming and hollering." Ava also shared her concerns about children's needs in

recent years,

> With the set of kids I have this year it really pushes me to that level because I have to
>
> make a lot of modifications and adaptations for the different children. The covid children
>
> this year is so different than the kids in the past. I think because the parents had them so,
>
> you know, stuck and trying to keep them covered from all this covid...it seems like
>
> they're a little bit more immature.

Grounded By the Fundamentals of ECE

As a second subtheme under BK by happenstance, grounded by the fundamentals of ECE

captures participants' focus on how a strong theoretical foundation of general early childhood

education drove their professional identity. Although variation was reflected in participants'

understanding of the BK license and of their preparation, it was evident that each came away

with a strong conviction regarding what they feel is most important in their role as a BK licensed

early childhood educator - developmentally appropriate practice and supporting the social

emotional development of all young children. Specifically, applying the fundamentals of ECE

seemed to rise to the level of moral decisions (i.e., what is right and wrong when teaching young

children), further influencing their ongoing identity as an educator. Participants overwhelmingly

referred to the importance of knowing and understanding child development in order to support

the individual needs of children. Additionally, their support of the social emotional development of the children they teach was of the highest regard. These fundamental concepts of early childhood education seemed to ground participants and inform their beliefs about teaching and learning, in turn shaping their professional identity.

Learning about developmentally appropriate practice serves as a guide for how participants think about teaching. When reflecting on what parts of her preparation program stood out as the most beneficial or useful to her role as a BK licensed educator, Bethany shared,

> learning a lot more about developmentally appropriate practices and …you know, the developmental skills that children need to have and to learn to succeed but breaking that down on their level and meeting their needs. Not a one size one shoe fits everyone type of thing...you've got all these little personalities in your classroom and learning to be mindful of that.

Meagan was also positively impacted as she learned about child development and developmentally appropriate practice. She explained,

> I think it helped me a lot change how I thought about teaching. We use Abeka curriculum…very scripted, it tells you what to do. There's a lot of paperwork and things like that for kids to do and I always felt like that can't be right, you know, a 4-year-old can't sit for an hour and do 5 or 6 worksheets today, but that's always how we'd done it. So, really just all the classes in general opened my eyes to how it can be done better and how the kids learn too.

Ava frequently spoke about learning to make modifications to your learning environment and adapting instruction to meet the needs of all children. She shared, "So you have to kind of exercise different techniques and make different adaptations to meeting those individual needs."

Supporting young children's social emotional development was such a salient topic of discussion, that for participants, it appeared to be one and the same with developmentally appropriate practice. Participants expressed strong desires to prepare young children for kindergarten but stand by the idea that academics come second to the social-emotional development of the children they teach. In fact, it appears that building social-emotional skills has become primary and that teaching academic related content is secondary in importance.

Bethany expressed strong feelings about her role in supporting the social-emotional well-being of her children. She shared,

> I like being able to get the children prepared for elementary school, but I feel like what I do in my classroom is 90% social emotional. I feel like if I can serve the children in any way, that's what I want to do. I feel like if I have done anything for these children I have provided an environment for them that they can feel safe and loved and free to explore and learn away from their home.

Samantha's feelings were similar, she shared,

> I know that it's important to know your ABCs, to count, do all those things, but if you don't have the social emotional skills, you're not going to learn all of that. So being able to teach them, you know how to manage their emotions, how to become better friends, how to take turns, you know, all those basic social skills...if I teach them that, if they

leave my classroom knowing those things, then they'll be ready for kindergarten more so than learning to write your name.

Ava has recognized an increase in the need for social emotional skill development and shared, "it's more like I'm doing more teaching on social emotional development than going into the academic level."

When supporting children with special needs, participants also recognized the value of promoting social-emotional skill development. In speaking of a particular child with Autism, Faith explained,

> working with her means that…in her school week, I'm addressing social emotional skills… I'm helping her learn how to be less rigid…I'm helping her understand how to cope with the idea that she can't do or have what she wants at this moment for various reasons, of which one may be that's dangerous.

Conclusions

The lived experiences of BK licensed early childhood educators, specifically those working in nonpublic settings, were contextualized by their unique roles, settings, and space within the broader professional field of early childhood education. Within and across the individual participant narratives, results illustrate how BK licensed early childhood educators describe the construction of their professional identity within the context of their initial preparation, ongoing professional development, and other influences (RQ1) and how BK licensed early childhood educators describe their current professional identity and share experiences about their role as a teacher of young children with and without disabilities (RQ2).

In summary, participants of this study constructed their professional identity through a variety of external factors and through a deep interconnectedness of their personal, educational, and professional lives. Their professional identity has been constructed across time as they: a) gained new theoretical knowledge that informed their belief systems, b) were engaged in eye opening experiences that informed personal and professional paradigm shifts, and c) as their perception of agency was enhanced due to the influence of others as well as their own ability to influence the lives of others. Participants describe their current professional identity through their aspirations for the young children they serve, the challenges they face in being effective in their role, particularly for young children with disabilities, and through their ability to support the overall well-being of children through social-emotional skill development.

Chapter 4 provided a detailed look at the findings of this in-depth exploratory study of the storied lives of BK licensed early childhood educators. In addition to the presentation of co-constructed participant narratives, I have presented thorough and rich descriptions of two notable themes, each with two sub-themes, generated through a process of cross-analysis of participant narratives. In answering this study's research questions, the concept of respect and recognition for early childhood educators did not elevate to the level of a theme or sub-theme. It was, however, a notable occurrence throughout participant narratives as they described their desire to be respected and recognized among the broader professional community for the hard work they do. In Chapter 5, I will provide a rich discussion of the findings, an outline of limitations of the current study, and theoretical and practical implications for future research and practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The intent and purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of BK licensed early childhood educators in relation to professional identity development and the design and implementation of blended preparation. Through an iterative and inductive process of analysis, including the co-construction of participant narratives, this in-depth exploration served to contextualize how its participants describe the construction of their professional identity as well as their current professional identity and experiences about their role as a teacher of young children with and without disabilities.

As an approach to exploring the human experience, the application of narrative inquiry served to uphold the integrity of participants' shared experiences as well as their ongoing process of meaning making and storytelling (Clandinin, 2006). Applied as both methodology and epistemology, narrative inquiry helped understand how BK licensed early childhood educators view themselves, their profession, and their professional identity, as represented through their storied lives. As indicated in Chapter 3, narrative inquiry, when serving this dual purpose, attributed to this study's focus on the construction of knowledge and provided a channel through which to explore identity, transformation, and meaning (McAdams, 1999). The conceptual framework in Figures 1 and 3 illustrates the intricate relationship that may occur at the intersection of identity and the influence of unique social contexts.

To illuminate this relationship and its connections to this study's research questions, Chapter 5 first reorients the reader to the data with a general overview of the final themes and sub-themes and then offers a rich discussion of the key findings of this study. This chapter also

outlines the limitations of the current study and suggests implications for professional practice as well as recommendations for future research. The chapter ends with concluding remarks.

General Overview of Findings

The generation of major thematic findings emerged through an inductive process of thematic analysis of participants' storied lives as BK licensed early childhood educators who are employed as lead NC Pre-K teachers within nonpublic early childhood settings. Narrative development followed an iterative process of co-construction between myself and each participant, allowing for the creation of rich and authentic narratives of their lived experience. Participant narratives were situated alongside two contextual theories (teacher identity development and blended preparation identity) and introduced to a secondary level of cross analysis through the application of the conceptual framework to identify notable themes. This brief reiteration of the study's final themes and sub-themes aims to provide context for the discussion of key findings that follow.

As indicated in the first major thematic finding, the power of influence, unique contextual factors have a powerful impact on the professional identity development of BK licensed early childhood educators. Eye opening experiences (i.e., experiences that engage participants in mind shifts) and the presence of a comprehensive system of social support emerged as prominent sub-themes, each being further impacted by the presence of social influences that varied the degree to which experiences and support influenced participants' identity development. For example, as reflected in the conceptual framework, the presence of respect in regards to eye opening experiences facilitated by professors influenced the degree to which that experience supported the construction of identity as a BK licensed early childhood educator. The overlap of an eye-opening experience and respect had the power to shape teacher behavior.

A second major thematic finding connected the identity of BK licensed early childhood educators to the identity of blended preparation programs, as the engagement with blended preparation occurred for participants by happenstance. The degrees of preparation experienced by participants and the sense of being grounded and guided by the fundamentals of general ECE emerged as prominent sub-themes, each of which is also further impacted by the presence of social influences. For example, a strong sense of morality that is informed by developmentally appropriate practice as a fundamental of ECE influenced the degree to which participants felt effective as teachers of young children with and without disabilities. The overlap of morality and preparation had the power to shape teacher belief systems.

As illuminated in the findings and depicted in Figure 3, these themes and sub-themes were also subject to the impact of social influences. For example, based on the authority of the NC Pre-K program, the expectation is that a BK licensed early childhood educator is prepared to meet the demands of an NC Pre-K classroom. However, when classrooms serve dual roles and systems there can be overlap in the expectations and what is then assumed by center administrators (i.e., supervisors of BK licensed early childhood educators) as to the roles and responsibilities of educators. This may result in an imbalance of resources and demands for the teacher, negatively impacting their behavior, motivation, and effectiveness. When considering the entirety of this study's conceptual framework, broader constructs emerged and reflect key findings, each of which are explored in detail in the following section.

Discussion of Key Findings

As depicted in this study's conceptual framework, the identity of BK licensed early childhood educators is an evolving construct that is consistently influenced by external contextual factors, and the presence of identified social influences (e.g., morality,

respect/recognition, assumptions, and expectations. The conceptual framework was of great value throughout the analytical process as it illuminated the interconnectedness of the layers of identity and the social influences that arise to give meaning to the construction of identity, specifically of BK licensed early childhood educators. Three broader constructs emerged from this layer of mutuality, therefore representing the key implications of this narrative inquiry: a) the identity of BK licensed early childhood educators, b) the identity of blended preparation, and c) the identity of blended models of service delivery. Each will first be discussed as a separate, yet overlapping construct, then emphasized by their interconnectedness which brings attention to a broader collective blended identity, or lack thereof.

Identity of BK Licensed Early Childhood Educators

My findings suggest that BK Licensed early childhood educators tend not to identify as special education teachers, rather their identity, practice, and belief systems are largely informed by general education constructs. This finding is reflective of the broader system at large, one that even in the midst of the charge to professionalize and unify our field, continues to frame general early childhood education as foundational to other elements of the broader field such as early childhood special education (NAEYC, 2019). This ongoing perspective implicitly impacts BK licensed early childhood educators, as their identities are consistently influenced by preparation and practice that is guided by general education constructs that lack sufficient context to support the special education side of their teaching identity. Strong elements of the findings suggest the possibility that we have created a system where BK licensed educators have been socialized to not see themselves as special educators.

Of my six participants, all identified as a Pre-K teacher, yet through the use of a variety of identifiers (i.e., NC Pre-K teacher, pre-k teacher, early childhood educator, Head Start

teacher) with only one seeming comfortable identifying as a special educator. Even in this instance, the use of a variety of terminology (e.g., combination teacher, dual Head Start/pre-k teacher) used to describe her role seemed to indicate a lack of role clarity and definition as a special educator and a persistent separation between special educator and other roles. Additionally, participants were likely to identify differently based on their audience. For example, if they were with Head Start peers, they would identify as a Head Start teacher versus an early childhood educator. This suggests a plurality of identity lacking clear focus as opposed to an identity that blends more than one identity into something distinct.

In practice, participants tend to rely on general education constructs to support the needs of the children in their classroom. Theoretical and practice guidance derived from general early childhood sources, such as social emotional frameworks (i.e., Conscious Discipline and Second Steps) and developmentally appropriate practice guided the instructional practices for all participants. While these constructs provided participants with a set of fundamental principles that informed their belief system, the more limited early childhood special education constructs and guidance left participants feeling the need to seek out others for assistance regarding supporting children with more significant needs.

Additionally, participants' practices and language used when describing their work and identity seemed to 'other' a large group of children; specifically those diagnosed with moderate to severe disabilities, those who are new to structured environments, who present challenging behaviors, or are English language learners They were regularly referred to as "those children" or "those kids" and in the name of social emotional development, their needs were singled out and used to provide rationale for lessons on empathy and appreciating differences.

Taken together, this may have served to dilute aspects of professional identity aligned with special education and perpetuate an identity centered on general education. Indeed, findings suggest that participants did not feel adequately equipped to meet the needs of children with disabilities echoing historical (e.g., Miller & Losardo, 2002) and contemporary research (e.g., Chadwell et al., 2020) on blended preparation. However, historical research has also shown that ECE and ECSE practitioners are more similar than different in regards to the importance of specific practices (Kilgo et al, 1999) and beliefs (Sexton et al., 2002). These findings were often cited as support for the early movement toward blending the two fields and blended models of preparation (Bredekamp, 1993; Sexton et al., 2002). An implication of the present study's finding that participants' identity appears disproportionally grounded in ECE suggests that the blended component of their role and identity as educators prepared through blended preparation and for a blended license has been lost.

Identity of Blended Preparation

My findings also suggest how the participants' respective preparation programs were characterized and structured in relation to whether the program could be identified as a blended program plays a role in their identity formation. It is notable that a perception of feeling inadequately prepared to teach both children with and without disability was prominent in the participant narratives which suggests that a consistent observation evident in the historical literature on blended preparation, persists. Similar to research presented by Chadwell et al. (2020), most of this study's participants felt prepared to enter the classroom and teach young children without disabilities, while only one (approximately 30%) felt well prepared to teach young children with disabilities. Miller and Losardo's 2002 survey study revealed similar perceptions, but also shed light on how unnerving these perceptions were considering that BK

licensure competencies indicated that teachers would be prepared to work with children who have a wide range of abilities from birth through kindergarten ages. Mickelson et al. (2022) reported that educators continue to feel ill-equipped to support the wide range of abilities of the children in their classroom, an assertion that is supported by the findings of the current study. All participants of this study had little to no understanding of the BK license prior to enrolling in their blended educator preparation program. Most of the participants happened upon the opportunity and jumped on it with the hopes of making more money or being able to work in a public school. Participants did not report seeking out the license for the opportunity to engage in blended content knowledge. Most participants also directly related the BK license to teaching in an NC Pre-K classroom as opposed to the population they would be licensed to teach. Without knowledge of the local NC Pre-K context, they may not have otherwise known about the BK degree or license. The variability and range in offerings of special education content and field-based experiences across the various preparation programs represented was evident. One participant spoke of completing 28 credit hours of special education coursework and feeling well prepared to teach young children with disabilities, while another participant mentioned having only one special education course. A few participants mentioned a variety of field-based opportunities that provided firsthand experiences teaching young children with disabilities, yet one participant mentioned only having one field-based experience and content that did not include much at all about teaching young children with disabilities. One participant spoke of learning how to effectively support young children with disabilities in her classroom through her own trial and error each year. That level of variability does not ensure our preparation programs produce teachers who are ready for such a dynamic role. In relation to teaching children with and without disabilities, this suggests that their preparation programs failed to present a clear

identity of themselves as programs and conveyed to their graduates what exactly they were being prepared for.

This is not surprising given the persistent evidence that a high level of variability persists in the construct of blended preparation (Mickelson et al., 2021; 2022). The field lacks a clear definition, consistent terminology, or guidance for faculty (Mickelson, et al., 2022). Therefore, faculty continue to face challenges when developing and implementing blended preparation programs when attempting to address the full scope of content, knowledge, and skills for inclusive teaching. Further, faculty have long extolled challenges such as licensing structures (Piper, 2007; Stayton & McCollum, 2002); enacting interdisciplinary practice (Mellin & Winton, 2003); and administrative support (Miller & Stayton, 1998; Stayton & Miller, 2006), that have created barriers to blended preparation approaches.

Identity of Blended Models of Service Delivery

Finally, my findings suggest that the service delivery system BK (blended) licensed early childhood educators enter as beginning teachers is not aligned with the original intent of blended preparation and the aspirations that it could foster more and higher quality inclusive practices. Findings of this study suggest that the ongoing lack of clarity and variability in practice surrounding inclusion persists (Odom et al., 2011). Participants shared that they feel less effective in their role because of challenges presented by the system itself including the need to address a wide range of abilities, and meet the requirements of a variety of systems level elements such as childcare regulations, public education, special education, and Head Start. Participants who teach in blended classrooms (i.e., NC Pre-K/Head Start or NC Pre-K/Developmental Day) felt much less effective than their colleagues who are in NC Pre-K only classrooms and refer to their lack of ability to meet the needs of their children as related to

feeling stretched so thin. The different types of behaviors presented by young children, post Covid, have only added to the demands on these teachers.

In NC, holding a BK license makes you eligible as the lead teacher of an NC Pre-K classroom. Based on its own blended service delivery model, NC Pre-K teachers are now increasingly likely to teach in a blended (inclusive) classroom, either NC Pre-K/Head Start or NC Pre-K/Developmental Day. As this study's conceptual framework illuminates, variations in preparation and additional social influences impact a BK licensed educator's ability to feel effective in their role as a teacher of young children with and without disabilities when they enter the classroom. Strong elements of the findings indicate that participants do not feel well prepared to teach young children with disabilities. As the teacher of a blended classroom, teachers are more likely than those in other early childhood educator roles to serve children with moderate to severe disabilities. To illustrate, a blended classroom of 18 children in this system, would likely require a BK licensed teacher to meet the needs of: 1) 3-year-olds who may function on the developmental level of a toddler, 2) 4-and 5-year-olds who are mastering content and are ready to transition to kindergarten, as well as 3) any number of children ages 3- to 5-year-olds who are diagnosed with a learning, developmental, physical, behavioral or emotional disability. Participants overwhelmingly noted the challenge in meeting the needs of a group of children with such wide-ranging abilities.

The reality of these classrooms does not reflect a model of quality inclusive service delivery as the population of children is not reflective of the proportions of various groups seen in the general population. Keeping in mind that the blended construct began as a model to promote and foster inclusive classrooms and practices, this suggests a mismatch between the conception, arguably the identity, of blended service delivery and the original intent of blended

preparation. Further, the system demonstrates confusion with the interpretation of the roles and responsibilities of educators with blended licensure. Administrators may not see the BK license or those who hold it as dually prepared and equipped to serve as special and general early childhood educators. Therefore, the system and the identity of blended service delivery within it further contributes to identity confusion and lack of clarity.

Interconnectedness across the three layers of identity

The persistent lack of definition and clarity among these three layers of blended identity reflects misalignment and lack of cohesion. A lack of clear definition of blended preparation leads to a lack of identity for BK licensed early childhood educators which is compounded by a mismatched and variable identity of blended service delivery. In essence, the confusion within and across these three identity constructs suggests the identity crisis experienced by ECSE in the 1990s and often cited as an impetus for the development of blended preparation (Buysse & Wesley, 1993) has not been fully resolved. In discussing policy and programmatic coherence, Augustine et al. (2009) suggested that programs often send messages that are contradictory. Building coherence suggests a systemic approach to working in harmony to address collective challenges. Coherent policies work to avoid contradictions and strive to build on one another in some way to form a better collective picture. Cohesion across individual blended educator identity, preparation program identity, and blended service delivery is critical/essential for blended preparation to fully fulfill its original goals of increasing inclusion and elevating inclusive practice.

<div align="center">Limitations of the Study</div>

This study presents a number of limitations that are worth noting. First, the participants of this study represent a homogeneous sample regarding both race and age. Five of the six

participants identified as White, and five of the six participants identified as being in an age group of 40 years old or above. From a lens of diversity, perspective is limited across the participants. It is interesting that only an older, more experienced, subset of NC Pre-K teachers were represented in this study. Although this commonality may have contributed to the many connections across participant narratives, it does limit having the potential varying perspective of those with less teaching and life experience. Second, by way of the inclusion criteria for this study, findings were limited to those who earned their BK degree and license through a traditional pathway and did not include the perspective of those who chose an alternative pathway. While the pathways are defined and outcomes of each noted as part of this study's literature review, the study is unable to provide a comparison of pathways from the perspective of study participants. Third, when defining the inclusion criteria for the study, I did not consider that many Head Start classrooms are located within public schools. While they are administered by lead early childhood agencies and are in-fact still considered nonpublic classrooms, being housed within a public school may contribute to a very different professional experience than being employed in a nonpublic childcare center.

Fourth, while I did approach this process as one that was co-constructed between myself and my participants, I do acknowledge that my previous position as the Coordinator of the Early Educator Support Office entered our research space as a contextual factor. Although I feel they were very open, honest, and comfortable with me, there is a chance that some participants may have refrained from sharing negative components of the mentoring and evaluation support with me, due to recognizing my previous role with the program and staff. The thoughtful and intentional use of strategies (e.g., warm up questions embedded into the interview protocol, the ongoing sharing of the research process through member checks, and the co-construction of

narratives) to build rapport with my participants helped to ease this issue. Fifth, as with any novice researcher, capacity in regards to designing and implementing the research process presents as a limitation. Constructive feedback and ongoing support from my committee, as well as the employment of my critical friend served to mitigate the results of my naivety in the role of the researcher. Additionally, limitations inherent to narrative inquiry were introduced through my own positionality and forms of researcher bias. My own expectations of those teaching young children with and without disabilities began to surface throughout periods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. To alleviate their influence, I consistently documented those thoughts in a reflexive journal and openly shared and reflected on them with my critical friend. Instituting numerous levels of member checking and the process of co-constructing the narratives ensured that the results of this study authentically and accurately represent the storied lives of its participants. Finally, storytelling relies on the memory of each participant and is subject to McAdams' 4th principle, stories change over time, as previously outlined in Chapter 3. As our motivations change over time, so do the meanings we attach to those experiences, and as time fades what we are emotionally connected to may move to the background of importance, impacting what we remember of the experience (McAdams, 2008). To offset this reality, triangulation of the data was supported through the use of probing questions during the first interviews, the use of a second interview to gain clarity and offer participants the opportunity to revisit any part of their story, and through a cross-analysis of narratives that lifted only the most relevant and notable themes that emerged across participant experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

As suggested by Mickelson et al. (2021), empirical research on blended preparation models remains scant and mostly descriptive in nature. Additional empirical research would

support a state's ability to evaluate their own program quality standards as well as pull from other models to support enhancements to current models. An in-depth exploration of state funded pre-k program delivery models and connections to blended preparation models may support a better understanding of the link between the two models and their parallel successes and challenges. Implications of the current study may also represent an opportunity for further exploration around the imbalance between resources and demands experienced by our BK licensed early childhood educators who teach in blended classrooms. To ensure adequate support is provided to educators with the BK licensed early childhood educators who teach in our state's blended classrooms, research should be conducted to learn more about the imbalance between the resources and demands they experience. Implications of the current study may also represent an opportunity for exploration around the range of credit hours in special education and the type and number of special education related field-based experiences offered by blended programs, which may inform more consistent models.

The limitations of this study also present opportunities for further empirical exploration. To provide a comparative analysis, future studies might include BK licensed early childhood educators who completed their preparation and licensure programs through a traditional pathway as well as alternative pathways across our state. Additional comparisons could be introduced by exploring the storied lives of BK licensed early childhood educators who are employed in NC Pre-K classrooms in both public and nonpublic early childhood settings. A broader sample might also be introduced by including teachers employed in NC Pre-K classrooms in the eastern part of the state who are served by the Early Educator Support Office at East Carolina University – further enhancing opportunities for rich comparison data.

While this study's data and results are contextualized to NC, there are certainly findings that may relate to other, broader contexts. As presented in Chapter 2, the development of the new ECE and EI/ECSE Standards and the potential for a joint DEC and NAEYC personnel standards position statement with recommendations specific to blended programs, may serve to reinvigorate a national conversation about the direction of blended preparation. A new repertoire of empirical research on existing blended models might serve to address the persistent variability that for 30 years has limited our collective ability to define and bring clarity to the blended approach. A mixed methods approach may support a universal re-envisioning of blended models of preparation (i.e., how we define it, what it looks like, how it is supported in practice, and how it lends itself to the anticipated outcomes of inclusion).

Implications for Professional Practice

The outcomes of this research indicate theoretical and practical implications of importance which may be considered by NC's blended preparation programs as well as administrators at the state and local levels. Based upon the findings of this study, three primary implications for practice have been identified. Findings indicate the need for the following: 1) a more consistent and immersive pre-service experience that is more heavily aligned with special education content, 2) local and statewide mechanisms that help navigate social influences and provide ongoing social support to BK licensed early childhood educators, and 3) a broad awareness and responsiveness to the challenges for BK licensed early childhood educators that seem to be precipitated by the essence of our current blended models (i.e., preparation and classrooms).

Specifically related to preparation experiences, the current study indicates the need for BK licensed early childhood educators to be more heavily immersed in special education

content, through both coursework and field-based experiences. Participants indicated that the most meaningful part of their preparation was the experiences they defined as eye opening. These were elicited through professors and practicum, student teaching, and internship experiences powerful enough to shape their professional identity and teacher belief systems. As suggested in chapter 2, early childhood educators' beliefs about inclusion are a contributing factor to the successful implementation of inclusive practices (Odom et al., 2002; Winton & McCollum, 1997). To ensure preparation programs are effectively contributing to teacher belief systems around supporting young children with disabilities, preparation experiences will need to focus just as heavily on theoretical and practical knowledge specifically related to young children with disabilities as they do their typically developing peers. Special education content does not need to be limited to special education courses. Rather, should be naturally embedded within the course content and assignments of numerous early childhood courses. Field-based experiences that provide direct observation and interaction in classrooms serving children with special needs should be the norm, not the exception.

Professors might be more intentional in their joint efforts to ensure consistency across the program and offerings that are plentiful and authentic regarding learning more about supporting, teaching, and interacting with young children with disabilities – mild, moderate, and severe. Findings indicated that the professor matters. Those who are well equipped in specific content knowledge, hold high expectations of their students, are intentional about the use of teaching strategies that elicit emotional connections for students, and engage them in content and experiences that make them think differently and more deeply are more likely to influence the shaping of their students' teaching identity and belief systems. Unfortunately, the evaluation system is currently set up to provide feedback about instruction and student needs only after

course completion. Implementing the use of more consistent evaluations, at check points throughout the semester, may serve to support individualization to the greatest extent possible, as well as the professors' responsiveness to those needs. For example, an early evaluation may serve as a needs assessment that gains feedback on the type of classroom experiences students have had and feel they need more of (e.g., observation in classrooms with children with disabilities). Professors should also be evaluated on their intentionality in and ability to provide various high-quality field-based experiences to their students, understanding that the classroom they observe in and the teacher they observe also matters a great deal, as they inform the development of teacher identity and belief systems.

The findings of this study also demonstrated the influence of ongoing social support for early childhood educators. This study shows the importance of creating support systems that not only connect early childhood educators to each other and to needed resources, but to support that helps them navigate the broader social influences that directly and in-directly impact their identity development. Site administrators might consider the benefits of regularly scheduled joint planning time and professional learning communities. Putting such systems in place provide opportunities for early childhood educators within the nonpublic sector to connect as professionals, learn from and with each other, and serve as an ongoing system of instructional, informational, and emotional support. To help BK licensed early childhood educators effectively negotiate and balance the impact of social influences on their identity development, site administrators might also consider opportunities to recognize the ongoing professional contributions of their BK licensed staff. Opportunities to engage in leadership roles through center or community-based committees, mentoring beginning teachers at their site, and being part of the center's decision-making processes are all notable strategies. To further enhance

feelings of value within their community, NC Pre-K contracting agencies may consider the same strategies. Bringing teachers together for professional meetings, joint professional development, and engaging the counties' teachers in the program's decision-making would reinforce their value and provide clarity to the expectations of their unique role. To help offset the perceived demands of the role and the needs for esteem support, Local NC Pre-K contracting agencies, as well as the NC Pre-K Program at the state level, could consider the creation of a mechanism for recognizing and rewarding teachers for innovation and high-quality support to young children with and without disabilities and their families.

On a broader scale, the findings of this study indicate the need for attention to be given to our state's blended models. The lead agencies of the NC Pre-K, Head Start, and Developmental Day programs may consider engaging in thought leadership around the state of our blended classrooms within public and nonpublic settings. Attention should be given to the challenges faced by BK licensed early childhood educators who must: a) meet the ongoing program requirements of each individual funding source, and b) meet the needs of children with not only an array of abilities, ages, and linguistics, but of children who may experience extreme poverty, homelessness, food insecurities, and trauma. Additionally, there seems to be an untapped direct link between our state's blended model of service delivery and our blended model of preparation. In support of the educators who are experiencing both, our state systems should consider collaborative efforts that enhance the clarity, continuity, and consistency of our blended models. They might seek to resolve, or give attention to the following questions:

1. How might program requirements be more aligned, in turn reducing the demands on BK licensed early childhood educators who serve in blended classrooms?

2. How might blended preparation programs enhance their ability to prepare teachers who are well equipped to meet this vast range of needs?

3. Are the outcomes of our BK degree and licensure programs what we intended for young children with disabilities in our state? If not, how might both be re-envisioned to best support those being prepared to teach with a BK license, those teaching in blended classrooms with a BK license, and the young children with disabilities they teach.

Conclusion

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the storied lives of BK licensed early childhood educators who are employed in nonpublic early childhood settings and prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities. Theoretical frameworks of teacher identity development and blended preparation identity development provided lenses through which notable thematic findings of the study are interpreted and theorized. The findings of this in-depth exploratory study provided implications for professional practice for the consideration of NC IHE's with blended preparation programs, as well as administrators at the state and local levels. Directly related to the support of BK students, educator preparation programs can consider course design decisions that provide increased content and field-based experiences specifically related to teaching young children with disabilities. From a broader perspective, focus should be shifted to the challenges faced by BK licensed early childhood educators teaching in our state's blended Pre-K classrooms. The development of local and statewide social support mechanisms for BK licensed educators may serve to increase confidence and competence levels, potentially increasing retention rates.

The field would benefit from an uptick in research that provides more than descriptive information on blended preparation models. Several areas of further study are possible to gain a

more robust understanding of what models exist and what aspects are working well, which may inform effectiveness and consistency across models. Studies involving BK licensed early childhood educators who teach in our state's blended classrooms could investigate a potential imbalance of resources and demands and lead to a re-envisioning of service delivery and/or connections to enhanced preparation to serve young children with a wide range of abilities.

Based on this study's findings, a system built upon layers of blended identity that lack definition and cohesive messaging can have profound impacts on teacher belief systems, instructional practices, and their overall professional identity. The ambiguousness within and between the identities of each layer (BK licensed educators, blended preparation programs, and blended service delivery models), has led to decades of co-existing contradictions, leaving each layer unsure as to where and how they belong. The additional socio-cultural interactions of social influences (i.e., morality, respect and recognition, assumptions, and expectations) further affect teacher perception and how they make meaning of and negotiate their role, including their sense of belonging and sense of agency (Beijaard et al., 2000; Pillen et al., 2013). Despite this, findings suggest that early childhood educators see their role as valuable and find a way to tolerate ambiguity.

"You are only free when you realize you belong no place- you belong every place- no place at all." - Maya Angelou (1973)

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Subject Line: Seeking Participants for a Research Study on the Lived Experiences of Birth through Kindergarten Licensed Educators

Greetings,

My name is Amanda Vestal, I am a current doctoral student in the Special Education and Child Development program at UNC Charlotte. In my role as a doctoral student, I am the Primary Investigator on a study researching the lived experiences of NC Birth through Kindergarten (BK) licensed early childhood educators who serve young children with and without disabilities within nonpublic early childhood settings. While potential participants' names and contact information were provided in support by the Early Educator Support Office, the current research is not connected to the role or function of the Early Educator Support Office at UNC Charlotte. Dr. Ann Mickelson, Assistant Professor of Special Education and Child Development in the College of Education is serving as the Faculty Advisor.

As a NC BK licensed early childhood educator employed in a nonpublic early childhood setting, I am writing to invite you to participate in the current research study.

Why is this study being conducted?
The purpose of this exploratory qualitative research is to explore the storied lives of Birth through Kindergarten (BK) licensed early childhood educators who are employed in nonpublic early childhood settings and prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities. Specifically, this research intends to shed light on the value of teacher perception and to emphasize the role of educator preparation in the development of BK licensed early childhood educators' professional identity.

What are the criteria to participate?
You may participate in this project if you completed an initial BK licensure program at the Baccalaureate level in the state of NC, hold Initial or Continuing NC BK licensure, are employed as an NC Pre-K lead teacher, and served by the Early Educator Support Office at UNC Charlotte.

What happens if I choose to participate?
If you volunteer for the study, you will be asked to complete a brief eligibility survey that will allow us to select a participant pool that represents diversity in undergraduate educator preparation programs. If selected, you will be asked to participate in individual interviews. You will meet with me within the next few weeks for an initial interview, which will be held virtually. The initial interview will last approximately 60 minutes and a follow up individual interview will last approximately 30 minutes. An email-initiated member check (final review) will take approximately 15 minutes of your time. All virtual interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. You will have the opportunity to review your transcribed responses to double-check for accuracy and provide any clarification needed to your responses. All identifiable information from your interview transcripts will be removed, so any information about

participation, including identity, is completely confidential. Prior to the first interview you will be asked to complete a brief electronic demographic survey.

How do I participate?
If you are interested in volunteering as a research participant, please review and follow the next steps provided in the attached consent form, **within seven days of this notification**. Upon receipt of your consent, I will follow up with an email and electronic scheduling poll to coordinate a date and time for the initial individual interview with me.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Amanda Vestal, Primary Investigator
avestal6@charlotte.edu

Dr. Ann Mickelson, Faculty Advisor
amickels@charlotte.edu

APPENDIX B: EARLY EDUCATOR SUPPORT OFFICE LETTER OF SUPPORT

October 15, 2023

Amanda Vestal
Doctoral Candidate
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
9201 University City Blvd.
Charlotte, NC 28223

Dear Amanda Vestal,

The Early Educator Support Office at UNC Charlotte is pleased to support your research. The proposed study "A Narrative Inquiry into the Storied Lives of Birth through Kindergarten (BK) Early Childhood Educators" will provide valuable insight into the preparation of NC Pre-K lead teachers and its potential influences on the development of their professional identity.

In support of your research, we are happy to provide contact information (limited to names and email addresses) for the NC Pre-K lead teachers that hold an Initial or Continuing BK license that are served by our Office. It is understood that research data will be gathered without disclosing the personal information of the BK licensed educators who end up participating in your study. We trust that your research process will be carried out with integrity and with the utmost respect for those we serve. We know that you will abide by all applicable data security measures, protecting the confidentiality of participants throughout each step of the process.

Please let us know if we can further support your research. We wish you the best as you engage in your dissertation research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Richard Lambert
Principal Investigator, Early Educator Support Office at UNC Charlotte

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the Project: A Narrative Inquiry into the Storied Lives of Birth through Kindergarten Licensed Early Childhood Educators

Principal Investigator: Amanda Vestal, MAT, UNC Charlotte

Co-investigator: Ann Mickelson, Ph.D., UNC Charlotte

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are we doing this study?
The purpose of this exploratory qualitative research is to explore the storied lives of Birth through Kindergarten (BK) licensed early childhood educators who are employed in nonpublic early childhood settings and prepared to teach young children with and without disabilities. Specifically, the research intends to shed light on the value of teacher perception and to emphasize the role of educator preparation in the development of BK licensed early childhood educators' professional identity.

Research Summary
- The purpose of this research study is to explore the storied lives of BK licensed early childhood educators.
- Your participation in the research is voluntary, and any information about participation, including individual identity, is completely confidential.
- Some interview questions may foster reflection on your effectiveness as an educator of young children with and without disabilities. For some, this may bring about uncomfortable feelings.
- While there are no foreseen direct benefits of participation, you may take advantage of the opportunity to reflect upon personal experiences and how these experiences may impact the ways in which you understand and interact with the children and families you serve.
- If selected, you will be asked to participate in two individual interviews with the Principal Investigator. Interview responses will be transcribed and provided to participants in order to check for accuracy prior to the data analysis process. In addition, data analysis will be conducted of demographic surveys.

Research Team
This study is being conducted by Amanda Vestal, a doctoral student in the Department of Special Education and Child Development, as part of dissertation research. The current research is not connected to the role or function of the Early Educator Support Office at UNC Charlotte. Dr.

Ann Mickelson, Assistant Professor of Special Education and Child Development in the College of Education, is serving as the Faculty Advisor.

Eligibility

You may participate in this project if you completed an initial BK licensure program at the Baccalaureate level in the state of NC, hold Initial or Continuing NC BK licensure, are employed as an NC Pre-K lead teacher, and served by the Early Educator Support Office at UNC Charlotte.

You will only be contacted by the research team if you are selected to participate in the study.

Overall Description of Participation

If you volunteer for the study, you will be asked to complete a brief eligibility survey that will allow us to select a participant pool that represents diversity in undergraduate educator preparation programs. If selected, you will first complete a brief electronic demographic survey. A link to the survey will be provided to you by email and should only take 5 minutes or less to complete. You will then be asked to participate in two semi-structured interviews. The initial interview will be held virtually and based on a loosely structured interview protocol lasting approximately 60 minutes. A follow-up individual interview will be scheduled and will last approximately 30 minutes. Virtual interviews will be video recorded and transcribed, but only text transcription will be kept. You will be provided with a copy of your transcripts in order to check the accuracy of the transcription and provide any corrections or feedback about the accuracy of the transcription to the researcher(s) as needed. This will take approximately 15 minutes of your time. Your second interview, as noted above, will serve as an additional opportunity to provide feedback as we co-construct a narrative of your experiences. You will have the opportunity to complete a final review via email of the overarching themes that emerged from your interviews. This will take approximately 15 minutes. The Primary Investigator, Amanda Vestal, will schedule and conduct the interviews at a time that is most convenient to you.

Length of Participation

Each participant will spend roughly 2 hours and 5 minutes engaged in study related processes. The brief demographic survey will take 5 minutes or less to complete. The initial interview will last approximately 60 minutes and the individual follow-up interview which also serves as a member check (opportunity for you to review and provide feedback) will last approximately 30 minutes. Each additional member check (2) will take approximately 15 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of Participation

There may be some uncomfortable feelings on the part of the interview participants as some questions may elicit reflection about your effectiveness as an educator of young children with and without disabilities, past and present tense. The interviewers will try to make the questions as open and tactful as possible to reduce or eliminate these feelings. You may choose to skip questions you do not want to answer. There are no foreseen direct benefits of participation, but you may take advantage of the opportunity to reflect upon personal experiences, and how these experiences may impact the ways in which you understand and interact with the children and families you serve.

Volunteer Statement

You are a volunteer. The decision to participate in this study is completely up to you. If you decide to be in the study, you may stop at any time. You will not be treated any differently if you decide not to participate in the study, or if you stop once you have started.

Confidentiality Statement

Any information about your participation, including your identity, is confidential. The following steps will be taken to ensure this confidentiality. All interview data will be managed by the Research Team. All identifiable information from each interview transcript will be removed during the transcription process and replaced with pseudonyms. After this study is complete, study data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies without asking for your consent again. The data we share will NOT include information that could identify you.

All participant identifiers will be deleted at the conclusion of data collection. Data provided by anyone who gives consent but is not selected to participate will immediately be deleted.

You are one of six to eight BK licensed early childhood educators expected to participate in this study.

Statement of Fair Treatment and Respect

The university wants to make sure that you are treated in a fair and respectful manner. Contact the university's Office of Research Protections and Integrity (704) 687-1871 if you have questions about how you are treated as a study participant. If you have any questions about the actual project or study, please contact Principal Investigator, Amanda Vestal (avestal6@charlotte.edu) or Faculty Advisor, Dr. Ann Mickelson (amickels@charlotte.edu).

Process for Providing Consent

If you are interested in participating in this study, please thoroughly review the above information and then click on the link below to provide your consent. After providing your electronic consent, you will be asked to answer questions that will aid in determining your eligibility to participate.

Click here to access the Google Forms link.

APPENDIX D: ELECTRONIC CONSENT AND ELIGIBILITY SURVEY

Once participants click on the Google Forms link that is embedded within the consent form, they will be asked to provide electronic consent and then respond to a few brief questions that will confirm their eligibility and aid in the recruitment of participants from a diverse representation of undergraduate preparation programs within NC.

Google Form contents:

Introduction

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study: A Narrative Inquiry into The Storied Lives of Birth Through Kindergarten Licensed Early Childhood Educators. Please be sure you have taken time to read through the consent form and have contacted myself or Dr. Mickelson with any questions you may have about the research process and/or your participation.

To continue in this process, please first provide your name and email address and then read the following statement of consent and select the appropriate response.

Name: Text box response   Email address: text box response

Participant Consent

I have read the information in the consent form. I have had the chance to ask questions about this study, and those questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am at least 18 years of age and I understand that, upon request, I may receive a copy of this form after it has been signed by me and the principal investigator of this research study.

Multiple choice response
- Yes, I agree to participate in this research project.
- No, I do not agree to participate in this study.

If you selected yes, please respond to the next set of questions that will: 1) confirm your eligibility, and 2) help us recruit participants from various undergraduate preparation programs across the state.

Multiple choice response

- Please select the type of NC Birth through Kindergarten (BK) licensure you currently hold
  - o Initial (SPI) NC BK license
  - o Continuing (SPII) NC BK license
  - o I do not hold an Initial or Continuing NC BK license

- I earned my NC BK license through a traditional pathway, meaning that I received my initial teacher preparation at the bachelor's level and earned my NC BK license upon completion of my four-year degree.
    - o Yes
    - o No

Text box response

- If you selected yes to the previous question, please provide the full name of the four-year NC college/university you attended. _____

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1. Preferred Name (first and last): open text box

2. To which gender identity do you most identify? Select one (drop down)
   - a. Male
   - b. Female
   - c. Transgender female
   - d. Transgender male
   - e. non-binary
   - f. Prefer not to answer
   - g. Not listed. Please specify (text box)

3. Select your age group (drop down)
   - a. 20-25
   - b. 26-30
   - c. 31-35
   - d. 36-40
   - e. 41-45
   - f. 46-50
   - g. 50+

4. Are you of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin?
   - a. Yes
   - b. No

5. How would you describe your race?
   - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
   - b. Asian
   - c. Black or African American
   - d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   - e. White
   - f. Other: open text box
   - g. Prefer not to answer

6. Please describe your current classroom type:
   - a. NC Pre-K Classroom
   - b. NC Pre-K/Head Start Classroom
   - c. NC Pre-K/Developmental Day Classroom
   - d. Other: open text box

7. What is your current licensure level?
   - a. Initial (SPI)
   - b. Continuing (SPII)

8. What year did you graduate from an educator preparation program with your BK licensure? From which college/university?

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Welcome and Purpose
Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study. I appreciate you sharing your time with me today. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to examine your experiences as a Birth through Kindergarten (BK) licensed early childhood educators who are employed in nonpublic early childhood settings. As a BK licensed educator, you have been prepared to teach and support young children with and without disabilities.

Your individual experiences as a BK Licensed early childhood educator are important and valued in this space. You are encouraged to share your experiences at your own pace and comfort level today. As a participant of this study, what you share during this conversation will be held in regard, respected, and kept confidential.

Warm Up
Before I ask about your storied life as BK licensed early childhood educator, I am very interested in getting to know a little bit about you:

What is your professional background?
    Tell me about any other positions you have had prior to your current role.

What drew you to the field of early childhood education?
    Would you describe it as a personal or professional decision? Or both?

Preparation for BK licensure
I am interested in hearing about your preparation as a BK licensed educator:

What was your understanding of the Birth through Kindergarten license prior to being enrolled in an educator preparation program?

What motivated you to obtain a BK license?

Tell me about what part(s) of your BK licensure preparation stand out as the most useful or beneficial to your role as a BK licensed early childhood educator?
    Specific to working with children without disabilities?
    Specific to working with children with disabilities?

Describe your overall experience being prepared as a BK licensed educator.
    What would say about your preparation experience has had the most impact on your role as a BK licensed educator?

Role as BK licensed educator
I'd like to learn about your experience in the classroom as a BK licensed early childhood educator:

Tell me about your decision to teach in a nonpublic early childhood setting (center) as a BK licensed educator.

What were your expectations of being a BK licensed early childhood educator?
    How have those expectations been met?
    How have those expectations not been met?

Describe how effective you feel in your role as a BK licensed early childhood educator. Why or what influences your sense of effectiveness?

Describe the resources and/or support you have received as a BK licensed educator and how they have impacted your ability to effectively teach young children with disabilities?

Identity development as BK licensed educator
I am interested in hearing about how you perceive the professional role of BK licensed early childhood educators:

Complete this sentence: As a BK licensed early childhood educator, who is prepared to serve young children with and without disabilities, I see myself as…

Complete this sentence: As a BK licensed early childhood educator, who is prepared to serve young children with and without disabilities, others see me as…

How would you describe the role of your preparation program on who you are as a BK licensed educator today?
    Anything to add about the preparation you received, and its influences on your
    professional identity, specifically as a teacher of young children with disabilities?

Tell me about what or who has had the most influence on who you are as a BK licensed early childhood educator.

Tell me about the impact you have on the lives of young children, with and without disabilities.

Is there anything you would like to add?

Wrap Up
Thank you for your participation today. To make sure your responses have been accurately captured you will be provided with an opportunity to review the transcript of our interview before data analysis occurs. Following that review, I will draft your personal narrative based on your responses today. I will share that narrative with you to give you the opportunity to change, expand, etc. to ensure I have captured your story accurately. Throughout the data analysis process, I will also request your validation of the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Feel free to contact me or my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Mickelson, at any point.