

STUDY OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS

ADVANCING EQUITY IN WISCONSIN'S EARLY EDUCATION WORKFORCE

A Narrative Inquiry that Centers the Lived Experiences
of Black and Brown Professionals in the Field

AT A GLANCE

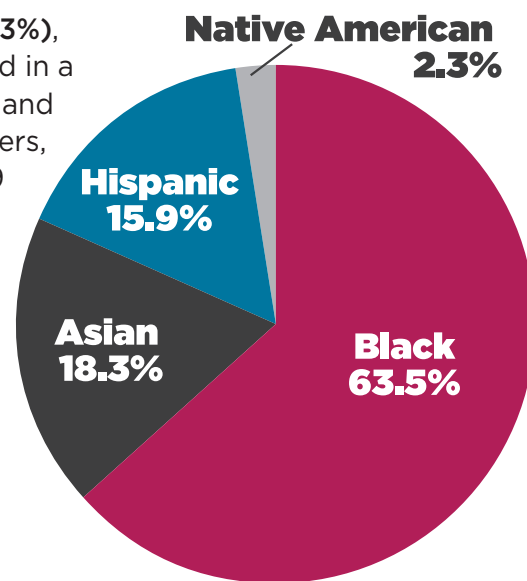
Wisconsin Early Childhood Association collaborated with Dr. Toshiba Adams, Ph.D., and a team of field researchers who collected and analyzed the lived experiences of early childhood professionals in Wisconsin who identify as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color (BIPOC) through an interview-based study. From March 2022 to January 2023, qualitative study participants were recruited for and engaged in one-on-one conversations that uncovered several key themes of inequities within Wisconsin's early childhood field and challenges that disproportionately affect the lives and livelihoods of educators who identify as BIPOC.

The 45 study participants identified as **Black (63.5%)**, **Asian (18.3%)**, **Hispanic (15.9%)**, or **Native American (2.3%)** and work or worked in a variety of roles and early education settings, including assistant and lead teachers, center directors and trainers, family child care owners, and pre-kindergarten teachers. A majority are between 30 to 39 years old and live and work primarily in Milwaukee, Dane, Brown, and Winnebago counties.

The purpose of the study was threefold: to understand the daily experiences of Wisconsin's workforce who identify as BIPOC, to use these narratives to influence the development of more equitable early education policies and practices in Wisconsin, and to support study participants in serving as change agents, or those who are empowered to collaborate in decision-making around policies that impact the workforce.

HISTORICAL AND DATA CONTEXT

National ECE work-related problems are mirrored within the context of Wisconsin. Almost all of Wisconsin's ECE workforce is female (97.6 percent) with 12.6 percent of center-based teachers and 28 percent of family providers identifying as Black or Brown (Pilarz, A. R. et al., 2021). In Milwaukee, the largest central city in Wisconsin, these numbers are heightened where 99 percent of its workforce is female and 61 percent identify as Black or Brown (Milwaukee Succeeds, 2023; Wisconsin Cities by Population, 2024). Early educators have high education levels and strong commitment to the field, while earning low wages and minimal benefits under stressful work conditions. Regardless of race, class, and gender identities, early educators are among the lowest paid workers in each state, but Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous women earn even lower compensation and have access to fewer work-related advancements compared to their White counterparts.



Past quantitative, or statistics-based, studies demonstrate how workforce inequities significantly impact the early childhood workforce as a whole. That is what makes this study's in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of educators who identify as BIPOC particularly valuable – and needed – to provide additional context to past studies and advance meaningful policy changes.

KEY FINDINGS

The study revealed several key findings that resonated across interviews. These include:

- **“LIVING PAYCHECK TO PAYCHECK”**: All study participants agreed the early childhood field is a low-paying profession that lacks benefits, which impacts their lives in several ways including their ability to financially provide for themselves and their families, emotional and psychological well-being, the ability to properly serve young children in their care due to emotional distress, and their decision to leave the early childhood field.
- **“HIGH-QUALITY WORK, HIGH-QUALITY PEOPLE, NOT HIGH-QUALITY PAY”**: Participants shared insights about working in a low-compensation field that demands high energy and significant time investment, including attaining credentials and college degrees. Earning low wages, combined with the aforementioned challenges, weighs heavily on mental well-being and complicates the ways they are able to serve the young children in their care.
- **“DCF IS A LOT”**: Participants described interactions with Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, the regulating institution for both center-based and family child care programs, particularly social encounters with licensing specialists. Black and Brown child care business owners and directors, in particular, shared how these interactions were oftentimes rooted in elements of racism and bias, particularly when compared to the experiences of their White counterparts.
- **“STUCK AT A THREE STAR”**: Nearly all study participants' programs participate in YoungStar, the state's quality rating and improvement system and appreciate it for its written commitment to ensure high-quality care for Wisconsin's young children. Yet, they also expressed concerns about the program's implementation and the ways they perceive its criteria to be extremely challenging for them to meet, noting they feel bias and racial exclusion are embedded in YoungStar standards.

“ [I can] barely afford groceries, barely afford rent, barely afford anything else outside of day-to-day stuff because I make barely over the 15 wage minimum. And that's not even the minimum everywhere.”

– Black, female, Head Start teacher

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the study make clear Wisconsin and the United States can no longer afford to ignore early childhood workforce disparities, particularly because a healthy workforce will positively impact child development. The study has shown Wisconsin's early childhood workforce is plagued with inequities that negatively affect the daily experiences of Black and Brown professionals and that partners, researchers, funders, and concerned members of the public need to broaden their understanding of the current crisis and how disparities affect not only the workforce but also young children in care.

With the findings in mind, Wisconsin needs to advance policy changes that include: significant public investment in early care and education, revising ratios, promoting shared governance in policymaking to include experiential knowledge and cultural capital of BIPOC professions, ensure diversity in leadership and managerial staff of regulatory agencies, commitment to more rigorous and regular data collection based on lived experience in the profession, and ensure mental health resources and services meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the early childhood workforce.

For the study in detail, scan the code with your smartphone to review the executive summary.

