

ADVANCING EQUITY IN WISCONSIN'S EARLY EDUCATION WORKFORCE:

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

*An Executive Summary
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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary structure of the early childhood education workforce is rooted in America's history of systemic racism and genderism and has created barriers to equitable access, opportunities, and experiences for its professionals of color (*Whitebook et al., 2018*). On a national landscape, the early childhood education (ECE) workforce is primarily women, with approximately forty percent identifying as women of color (*Austin et al., 2019*). Collectively, regardless of their social identities, early education professionals are among the lowest paid workers in each state (*Whitebook et al., 2018*). When we analyze their experiences at the intersection of their race, class, and gender identities, we find that Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous women earn lower compensation and gain access to fewer work-related advancements and professional development opportunities in comparison to their White counterparts (*Whitebook et al., 2018*). Specifically, Black and Brown women are disproportionately represented as aides, assistants, and infant/toddler teachers where they suffer a wage penalty compared to White teachers who primarily assume lead teacher roles (*McLean & Whitebook, 2019*). Even when education is equalized, Black early educators make 77 cents less per hour than their White counterparts who assume the same position (*Austin et al., 2019; McLean & Whitebook, 2019*).

These 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). A series of quantitative studies (see *Awkward-Rich, Jenkins & Dresser, 2021, 2021b; Pilarz, Claessens, Awkward-Rich & Hoiting, 2021*) captured the strengths and challenges of Wisconsin's ECE system. Using a survey method, the researchers analyzed the workforce experiences of 1,685 teachers, 1136 directors and 381 family child care providers. Their analysis notes the positive attributes of ECE professionals in Wisconsin, illuminating their high levels of education and strong commitment to the field. Yet, in alignment with national findings, they also describe members of Wisconsin's ECE workforce as those who perform under stressful work conditions while earning low wages and receiving minimal benefits (*Austin et al., 2019; Awkward-Rich & Hoiting, 2021; McLean & Whitebook, 2019; Pilarz, A.R. et al., 2021; Whitebook et al., 2018*). These

“You have all these Black folks in these different zip codes they don't have an education so therefore you gonna either close them down, make them a one star or take away five percent of their income. If you're making \$1,000 a week and you go down to \$950, yeah that can affect you...you're counting all those pennies.”

– Center director

studies report that the median hourly wage for Wisconsin's early education teachers ranged from \$11.00/hour for assistant teachers to \$13.55 for lead teachers and only one in five teachers had health coverage through their employers. Directors earned an annual salary of \$41,000 and family providers earned \$7.46 per hour, only slightly above the state's minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. As a result of low wages, lack of benefits, and poor work conditions, many teachers held a second job, relied upon public health and SNAP (FoodShare) benefits and expressed concern over food insecurity. Additionally, thirty-eight percent of teachers anticipated leaving the field of ECE within two years.

The aforementioned studies demonstrate how early education workforce inequalities significantly impact the workforce as a whole (*Austin et al., 2019; Awkward-Rich, Jenkins & Dresser, 2021, 2021b; Pilarz, Claessens, Awkward-Rich & Hoiting, 2021; McLean & Whitebook, 2019; Whitebook et al., 2018*). Though quantitative research may provide a widespread investigation through means of statistical approaches (*Rigby et al., 2007*), it fails to provide an in-depth analysis. In other words, these study's findings are not disaggregated by race, class, or gender even though historical research (*see Banks, 2019; Bell, 1992*) highlights the persistent social and economic subjugation of Black and Brown populations in America in comparison to their White counterparts. Thus, less is known about how particular groups of professionals, for example Black and Brown professionals, experience the ECE workforce structure in Wisconsin. Because Black and Brown professionals and the environments in which they work can significantly impact children (*see Choy & Haukka, 2010*), it is essential for researchers to inquire about such experiences. Their inquiries can guide policymakers toward influencing a more equitable outcome for the ECE workforce and childcare quality (*Rigby et al., 2007*).

To fill this gap in the early education literature and shed a spotlight on Wisconsin's early education structures, the leadership team at **Wisconsin Early Childhood Association** (WECA) contracted with Dr. Toshiba Adams who designed a qualitative research study titled, "**Advancing Equity in Wisconsin's Early Education Workforce: A Narrative Inquiry that Center's the Lived Experiences of Black and Brown Professionals in the Field**". The purpose of this 2022 study was threefold: 1) to better understand the daily experiences of Wisconsin's workforce who identify as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color (BIPOC); 2) to adopt such narratives to influence the development of equitable ECE policies and practices in Wisconsin and 3) to support study participants in serving as change agents, those who are empowered to make decisions about policies that impact the workforce.

The next section of this executive summary discusses the methodological orientation and methods adopted for this study. The methodology section is followed by an abbreviated version of the research findings which accentuate the ways that systemic inequalities create social and economic barriers for Wisconsin's Black and Brown ECE workforce. Findings

further highlight the ways that workforce inequities weigh heavily on the mental and psychological well-being of its professionals and, in turn, interrupt their ability to properly serve the young children in their care. This executive summary concludes by presenting a series of policy recommendations that can potentially mitigate ECE workforce inequalities by embracing a more expansive and equitable approach to ECE workforce reform.

METHODOLOGY

As previously discussed, studies (see *Awkward-Rich, Jenkins & Dresser, 2021, 2021b; Pilarz, Claessens, Awkward-Rich & Hoiting, 2021*) have utilized a quantitative methodology to highlight the experiences of Wisconsin's ECE professionals. These studies are meaningful because they guide our understanding about the ECE field in general, illuminating the low wages, lack of benefits and turnover. Yet, the early education literature is scant in illuminating how Wisconsin's Black and Brown ECE professionals function within the structures of the ECE workforce - how they work within and respond to the system. Examining ECE workforce issues through a qualitative framework can provide the "how?" and "why?" behind the statistical data, in relation to the early education workforce issues of which Black and Brown professionals are subjected.

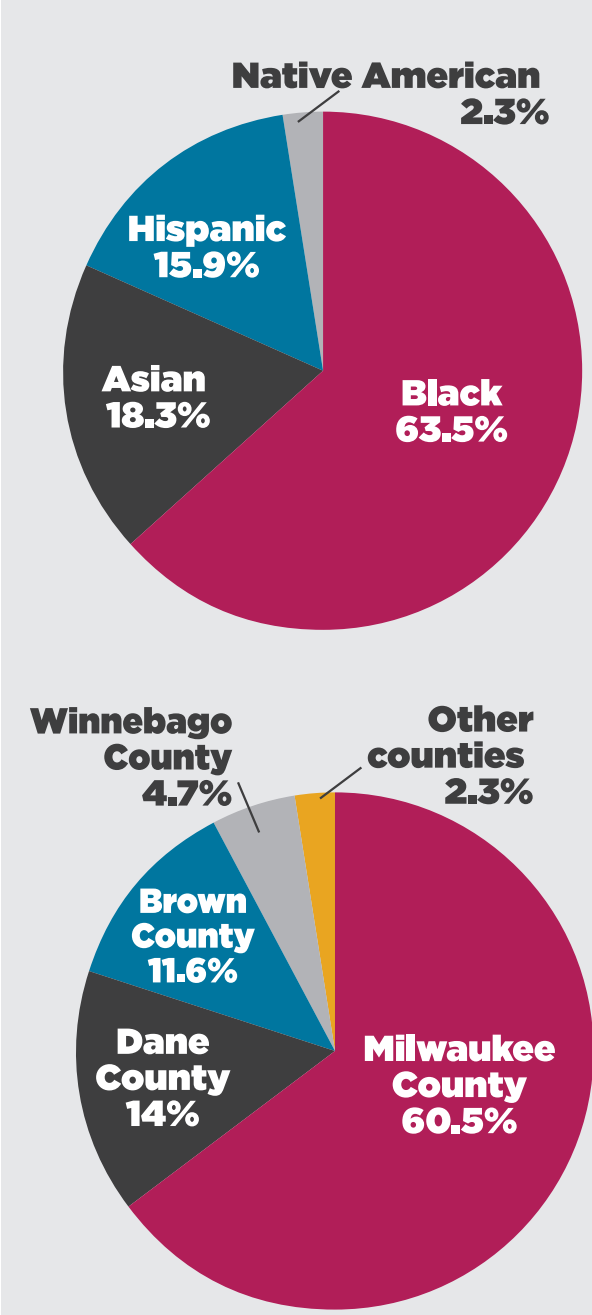
To occupy this gap in the literature, the present study adopted a qualitative approach, which incorporates instruments, such as observation, open-ended questions, in-depth interviews, and field notes in pursuit of gaining a richer understanding of an individuals' experience with a particular phenomenon (*Lincoln & Guba, 1985*). The present study furthermore relied upon a critical race and storytelling methodology which captures the stories and experiences of persons of color in an effort to interrupt the power and false narratives shared by the dominant group (*Love, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002*). Finally, for this study, a qualitative research approach has allowed the research participants to remain actively involved in the research process (see *Belanski et al., 2011; Lichtman, 2013*), including data analysis, policy recommendations, and policy development.

Data Collection

The major research question that guided this narrative inquiry is: *What are the lived experiences of Wisconsin's early childhood education professionals who identify as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color (BIPOC)?* To determine answers to this inquiry, the research team - consisting of Dr. Adams and three additional field researchers - recruited study participants between March of 2022 and January of 2023. The research team gained access to study participants by sharing a marketing flier through their social media posts, personal and professional connections, professional (DCF and WECA) listservs, and by asking those who completed interviews to refer other professionals for the study (see *Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2007*). These methods allowed the researchers to gain access to fifty-five professionals who were interested in participating in the study; 45 individuals were interviewed for this study.

A demographic survey (as a Google Form) was disseminated to those expressing an interest in the study. The goal was to gather pre-interview data to ensure that selected participants met the appropriate criteria (prior to arranging interviews), to obtain relevant demographic data and to ensure participant diversity for the study (i.e., age, race, gender, career level, and program type). Based on these responses, first-round interviews were conducted with each respondent; second-round/follow-up interviews were conducted with 20 respondents; and 2 focus groups were held with 8 study participants. The majority of the interviews were conducted in a virtual format via Google Meet, except for two second-round interviews that were conducted by phone and two second-round interviews that were captured via a Google Form. The individual interviews stretched between 60-90 minutes and the focus groups each lasted approximately 120 minutes. For this study, consent forms were read out loud during the onset of the interviews and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants, affiliated employers, and early education programs (Creswell, 1998).

All of the study respondents identify as either Black (63.5%), Asian (18.3%), Hispanic, (15.9%) or Native American (2.3%), and they work in a variety of roles, including group center assistant teacher, group center lead teacher, group center director, group center trainer, family child care provider and Pre-K teacher in the public school system. Two respondents left the field of ECE prior to being interviewed. These research respondents range in age between 18 to 69 years with the majority of them (49%) ranging between 30-39 years. Collectively, they have worked in the field between 1 to 30 (plus) years. As it relates to their gender identity, 41 respondents identify as female and 4 respondents identify as male. These professionals work in a variety of early education settings, including licensed group programs, licensed home-based facilities, public schools, corporate and military-based programs and federally funded Head Start programs. The majority of them live and work in Milwaukee County (60.5%), followed by Dane County (14%), Brown County (11.6%) and Winnebago County (4.7%). Participant



representation from the remaining counties in Wisconsin is 2.3% and lower. Three respondents identified as being connected to the Oneida, Ho-Chunk, and Bad River tribes. Many of the research participants serve dual roles at their programs, accepting additional responsibilities such as cook, van driver, and maintenance personnel.

Data Analysis

An analysis and presentation of reported data was conducted by Dr. Adams. The data was analyzed through the process of coding (see *Cresswell, 2007*) and presented as emergent themes. Each individual and focus group interview were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Afterward, transcripts were reviewed multiple times (at least 3-4) and codes (key concepts) were determined based on recurring patterns that were identified within and across interviews (*Creswell, 1998*). Next, these codes were color-coded to better identify similar experiences across interview data. This process of coding resulted in 4 major themes being identified for this study, including: **“Living Paycheck to Paycheck”**, **“High Quality Work, High Quality People, Not High Quality Pay”**, **“DCF is A Lot”** and **“Stuck at a Three Star”**. Once the final report was developed, the lead researcher asked the participants to review the study’s findings and the researcher’s interpretation of the study’s data to ensure that their stories were captured accurately (see *Lincoln & Guba, 1985*). The study’s findings are discussed in the following section.

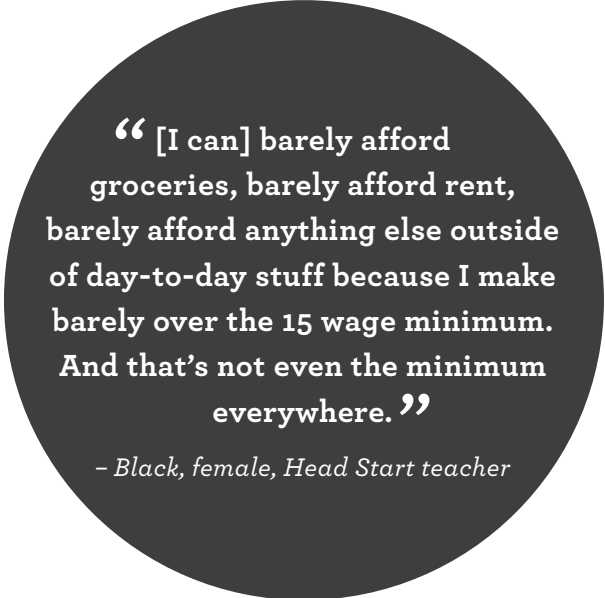
FINDINGS

“LIVING PAYCHECK TO PAYCHECK”

All of the professionals who were interviewed for this study agreed that the field of ECE is a low-paying profession that lacks benefits. They shared how serving as low-wage earners impacted their lives in various ways, including their ability to financially provide for themselves and their families, their emotional and psychological well-being, their inability to properly serve the young children in their care due to emotional distress, and their decision to leave the field of ECE.

Low Compensation and Financial Distress

All participants complained about working under the constraints of Wisconsin’s low compensation and benefit structure. The majority of the study participants earn wages that are well below the federal poverty line. Teachers who are employed by federally supported Head Start locations as well as those who work at military-based facilities, reported receiving higher wages at or slightly above \$15.00 per hour.



“ [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

Living in poverty hinders their ability to afford what most would consider basic necessities: gas, household bills, rent/mortgage, family outings, food, savings account and a high quality learning experience for their children. Their inability to afford the high cost of child care meant that many of their own children were often left in unregulated care environments, such as at home being cared for by older siblings or with other relatives, friends and neighbors. When asked how they remained financially afloat, many program directors shared how they became reliant upon COVID-19/American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) relief and grant funding, and others shared how they relied upon their spouse's income, accessed loans, and worked part-time jobs.

Low Compensation and Family Child Care Providers

The family child care providers included in this study recognized their marginalized standpoint and discussed how they struggled to make financial ends meet, how they felt isolated/distant from group-center professionals and the social connections and financial resources that they perceived were more readily accessible to them, and how they felt disrespected by the system. All of the family providers included in this study, except for one, identify as either a Black, Hispanic, or Asian woman. Several of the family child care professionals suggested that their low compensation status was indicative of the ways that they perceived the “government” to view them as subpar professionals. A financially strapped business model suppresses these women (family providers) financially and, in turn, complicates their ability to recruit and retain high quality teachers as well as their means to purchase developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive learning materials for the children in their care. Unlike group child care teachers who complained about working under high child:teacher ratios, many of the family providers would appreciate being able to increase their enrollment capacity because it would ensure that they accessed additional funding that would support them in better maintaining the finances of their businesses.

“HIGH QUALITY WORK, HIGH QUALITY PEOPLE, NOT HIGH QUALITY PAY”

Professionals shared their insights about working in a low compensation field that requires high demands of their time and energy, including the attainment of credentials and college degrees. They explained how serving as low-wage earners in tandem with experiencing a high workload, teacher turnover and educational expectations weighs heavily on their mental well-being and furthermore complicates the ways that they are able to serve young children in their care.


Teachers and family child care providers described long work days that are filled with “chaos” and uncertainty and work demands that often require them to develop curriculum and purchase classroom supplies using their personal earnings during unpaid time, for example, evening and weekend hours.

Low Compensation and High Quality People

The field of early care and education requires “high-quality people” to serve the needs of children and families. Research participants shared a lofty list of workforce expectations, including developing age, developmentally and culturally relevant curriculum, hosting parent conferences, ensuring a safe and healthy classroom and playground environment, arranging home visits, conducting child observations, adhering to DCF rules and regulations, complying with YoungStar’s criteria, and acquiring postsecondary levels of education. Family child care providers shared how they are expected to adhere to all such responsibilities and regulations without additional support with running their home-based establishments. Professionals complained about serving as “high-quality people”, not because they viewed professionalism as unimportant or unessential to the field but because they felt unsupported and unappreciated as early educators.

Low Compensation, Stressful Work Conditions, Workforce Turnover and Child Development

ECE professionals possess a strong commitment to the field and openly declare their admiration for the profession as well as their “love” for the children and families who they serve. However, many of them shared how the compilation of low wages, lack of benefits and stressful work conditions either supported their decision to leave the field or their future plans to find employment in a different sector. In their reflections, they explained how their work environments are oftentimes “overwhelming” and how the workplace uncertainty (due to high teacher turnover) is mentally draining for them. Two male participants spoke freely about how they had to “jump ship” or leave the field because the salary didn’t allow them to properly care for their families. Other participants shared how they were making plans to leave the field in the near future and use their educational credentials to obtain employment in higher paying fields to escape the stressful ECE work environment. Workforce turnover, as noted by a few of the study respondents, forced program directors to shuffle children across classrooms to maintain ratios and rely upon unqualified teachers to serve as a “warm body”.



“I went from 200 pounds down to 170. The lowest I was at 168. I was so frustrated, so depressed that I could not get my message across. I could not get them [referring to the children] what they needed. And then I started looking at, well, how much are they paying me? And I didn’t feel that it was cool.”

– Black, male professional

Low Compensation, Stressful Work Conditions, the Emotional and Psychological Well-being of ECE Professionals and Child Development

Study participants shared stories about how serving as low wage earners, in conjunction with experiencing a high workload and daily responsibilities, weighs heavily on their mental well-being and furthermore complicates the ways that they are able to appropriately serve

the diverse needs of the young children in their care. Research participants, who hold positions at group early education programs, perceive the child:teacher ratio structure that is established through Wisconsin’s Department of Children and Families (DCF) to be unmanageable. In response to his workload and classroom child:teacher ratios, one male participant shared how he lost excessive weight and experienced episodes of depression. Others shared how they felt overwhelmed by their workload, experienced high levels of stress and how their attitudes were negatively altered toward the children in their care. A preschool teacher described how she had to take a “mental health break” in response to working in a classroom that enrolled a high number of children without adequate staff coverage.

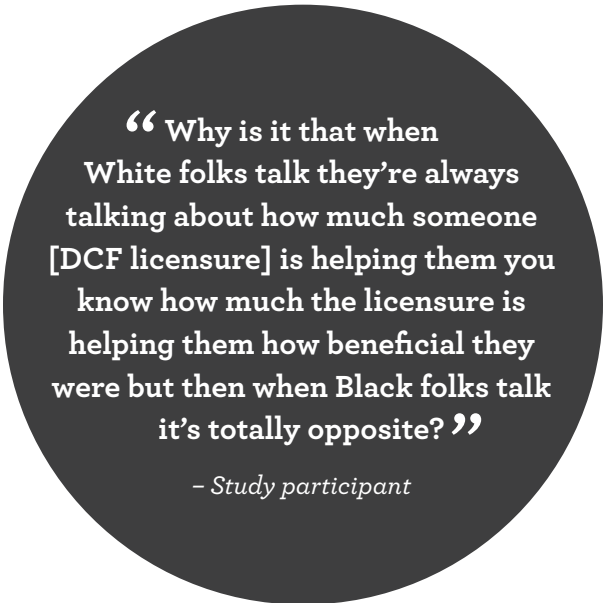
“DCF IS A LOT”

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) is the child care regulating institution for both center-based and family child care programs. One aim of this agency is to ensure the health and safety of children who attend regulated early education programs in Wisconsin. One of the agency’s goals is to perform site visits and inspections to ensure that programs are safe, stable, and secure for young children. Study participants shared stories regarding their perceptions about DCF, particularly their social encounters with its licensing specialists.

Black And Brown Women Perceive Their Interactions With DCF’s Regulatory Agents As Racialized & Biased

Black and Brown women, particularly business owners and directors, discussed how their interactions with DCF licensing specialists were oftentimes rooted within elements of racism and bias. These women of color discussed how they perceived their licensing agents’ demeanor to be “cold” and “intimidating” and how, in turn, they felt disrespected, highly scrutinized, anxious, emotional distress, and intimidated by these interactions. As a result of encountering racial microaggressions forged by DCF licensing agents, two women (Hispanic and Native American) shared how they felt physically ill during and after their licensing visits.

Some of the study participants juxtaposed the ways that DCF licensors interacted with White versus Black and Brown professionals in the field. When visiting predominantly White child care programs, they shared how DCF licensors were friendly, “hands off”, lenient and, at times, ignored issuing citations even when they were warranted.



In contrast, when visiting predominantly Black or more racially diverse child care programs, study participants described DCF licensors as “nit picky”, unsupportive, over scrutinizing, lacking cultural awareness, and those who constantly issued citations.

“STUCK AT A THREE STAR”

YoungStar is Wisconsin’s child care **Quality Rating and Improvement System** (QRIS). For this study, all (except for one) of the programs participated in the YoungStar program because they served families who receive financial subsidies through the state. Overall, study participants appreciated YoungStar for its written commitment to ensure high-quality care for Wisconsin’s children. Yet, they also held reservations regarding the program’s implementation and the ways that they perceived its criteria to be crippling for many of them (to meet). Some professionals felt as though bias and racial exclusion were embedded within YoungStar’s standards and others shared how it was financially unfeasible for them to meet such standards since their programs struggle financially. Study participants particularly expressed difficulty with complying with the Lead Staff Education and Learning Environment and Curriculum standards, leading to them being “stuck at a 3 star” rating.

Lead Staff Education and Systemic Racism

Professionals criticized the mismatch noted between the years of postsecondary education that they are expected to acquire through YoungStar and their low compensation. While the study participants collectively acquired a high level of education - ranging from Registry credentials to a doctorate degree - many of them perceived their credentials and college degrees to “lose value” in the field of early care and education. This realization discouraged them from increasing their level of education in the field. Additionally, living in poverty makes it difficult for them to cover expenses related to college/university tuition as well as textbooks and other classroom materials.

Furthermore, study participants perceived that racism and bias were veiled within the development of YoungStar’s education criteria. They discussed how they discerned YoungStar’s education requirements to be inequitable towards Black and Brown providers who are geographically located in neighborhoods that are hypersegregated by race and socioeconomic status, those who are disproportionately led by Black and Brown professionals, and those who predominantly serve Black and Brown families who are socioeconomically marginalized. One center director argued that since ECE professionals are required to be on the Wisconsin Registry, which serves as a continuing education tracking system, the YoungStar developers knew that Black providers who live and work in urban areas of Milwaukee had acquired fewer levels of education than their White counterparts who live and work in suburban or other predominantly White areas. According to this director, this insight about the differentiated levels of educational attainment by race directed policy

makers to establish a YoungStar educational criteria that would disproportionately scrutinize and penalize Black and Brown professionals. The majority of the professionals who participated in this study earned ratings at a three star or below in the area of Lead Staff Education.

Learning Environment and Curriculum

Professionals discussed how they were unable to meet high standards on the Learning Environment and Curriculum standards because of limited funding being received through Wisconsin Shares. One group center director described the Learning Environment and Curriculum standard as “unfair” because they 1) couldn’t afford to renovate the outdoor playground space and 2) their lease agreement restricted them from making major renovations to the property.

Other center directors and family child care providers shared how they were rated lower in this area because, without additional funding support, they were unable to rearrange their homes and purchase an abundance of toys and materials (for rotation) to maintain compliance. These professionals discussed how it was easier for Head Start and other non-profit programs to fare better on their ratings because they received additional federal dollars in their programs. Their reflections once again illuminate disparities in the ECE workforce structure.

CONCLUSION

We, as a society, can no longer afford to ignore ECE workforce disparities, particularly because a healthy workforce will have a more positive impact on child development (*Rigby et al., 2007*). Based on participants’ responses, Wisconsin’s ECE workforce structure is plagued with inequities that negatively impact the daily experiences of its Black and Brown workforce. Although they are recipients of low compensation and benefits, Black and Brown ECE professionals are expected to work under stressful work conditions, obtain postsecondary education without appropriate social and financial supports, encounter racialized experiences with regulatory agencies, and abide by YoungStar criteria that they perceive as unobtainable – all of which impacts their mental and psychological disposition and the forms of care that they provide to young children.

The goal of this Executive Summary was to cast a light on the lived experiences of Wisconsin’s ECE workforce who identify as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color (BIPOC) and to use such narratives to inform a more equitable set of public policies. Partners, researchers, funders, and concerned citizens are encouraged to broaden their understanding about the current crisis facing ECE and its Black and Brown professionals and to commit to expanding the discussion, resources, and policies necessary to address these concerns. Policy recommendations are included in the following section of this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the challenges facing Wisconsin's BIPOC ECE professionals calls for the development of policies and programmatic interventions. The research findings suggest the following actions:

- **Increase public funding to the field of early care and education** to ensure Wisconsin's ECE professionals are recipients of a living wage income and benefits.
- **Commit to creating a more sustainable financial infrastructure** for Wisconsin's ECE system by increasing Wisconsin Shares to cover the true cost of child care.
- **Revise DCF teacher:child ratios for group child care programs** to lower the number of children who can be enrolled in a classroom setting. Child:staff ratios are a key quality indicator in early childhood programs. Lower ratios may potentially increase child outcomes by increasing opportunities for one-on-one interactions between children and their teachers.
- **Promote shared governance in policymaking** by relying upon the experiential knowledge and cultural capital possessed by Wisconsin's Black and Brown ECE professionals. Grant these professionals with opportunities to collaborate with DCF, YoungStar/Shine Early Learning, WECA, and Wisconsin Registry officials to serve on their advisory committees and guide the development of ECE workforce policies.
- **Ensure racial, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity** in the managerial and leadership staff of the regulatory agencies (DCF) and other organizations that influence the ECE infrastructure in Wisconsin. And, require ongoing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging training for professionals who assume such positions to ensure more equitable experiences for Black and Brown ECE professionals.
- **Change the YoungStar rating system** to ensure that programs are rated in an equitable fashion and to ensure that funds and resources are made equitably available to all programs, regardless of program type and geographic location. Specific attention should be given to the Lead Staff Education and Learning Environment and Curriculum standards.
- **Commit to rigorous data collection** to ensure that workforce policies are being created and implemented based on the lived experiences of the profession. Data must be collected and analyzed to not only assess racial disparities but also the gender and class disparities that exist between and across racial groups.
- **Establish differentiated policies** that specifically address the needs of family child care providers.
- **Increase awareness of current mental health services** and resources that are available to ECE professionals.
- **Ensure that culturally and linguistically relevant mental health services and supports** are available to ECE professionals.

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