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## Barriers to the Provision of High-Quality Early Childhood Education in the Mississippi Delta

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BARRIERS TO THE PROVISION OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD  
EDUCATION IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

by  
Mackenzie Poole

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
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### **Abstract**

High-quality early childhood education has been shown to enhance the development of social, emotional, cognitive, language, and literacy skills in young children (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant, & Clifford, 2000; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Barriers encountered when attempting to provide high-quality early childhood education in the Mississippi Delta were investigated by analyzing the opinions and perceptions of early childhood educators. Requests for participation in the study were mailed to 92 child care facilities, and individuals from three licensed child care centers in the region participated. Opinions were gathered using questionnaires ( $n = 20$ ) and interviews ( $n = 2$ ) created for this study. Participants included women ranging in age from 26 to 68 years, 70% identified as Black/African American. Fifty-six percent of participants indicated that they encounter barriers when trying to obtain training and 53.8% of participants indicated that they encounter barriers when trying to provide high-quality early childhood education. Eighty-six percent of participants agreed that overall educational quality would improve and that children would enter kindergarten prepared to succeed if barriers were removed. Additionally, the present study found that 75% of participants would still pursue a career in early childhood education if they were required to earn a college degree. The opinions collected in this study shed light on several issues in the Mississippi Delta's child care system that need improvement.

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## **Barriers to the Provision of High-Quality Early Childhood Education in the Mississippi Delta**

### **Introduction**

#### **Mississippi Delta**

The Mississippi Delta is a unique rural region that differs greatly from other landscapes and cultures within the state of Mississippi and within the surrounding United States (Green, Greever-Rice, & Glass Jr., 2015). The Delta has been loosely defined as “the relatively flat and highly fertile lands bordering the Mississippi River,” and has an economy that was built almost exclusively around agricultural production (Green et al., 2015). Today, agriculture continues to dominate Mississippi’s economy (Coblentz, 2016).

Exploitation based on race, beginning when African Americans were forced to provide slave labor under a plantation system, has had a lasting negative impact on the Delta’s development (Green et al., 2015). Local governments have failed to allocate substantial investments to social infrastructure (Green et al., 2015). The region of Mississippi known as the Core Delta, which consists of “Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tunica, and Washington” County, is increasingly associated with high poverty rates, low median household incomes, low levels of education, widespread racial inequality, and substandard health outcomes (Green et al., 2015). See Appendix A for a map of the area.

#### **What is high-quality early childhood education?**

In recent years, policymakers and educational advocacy organizations in the state of Mississippi have placed an increased emphasis on the importance of high-quality early childhood education to improve rates of school readiness (Bass & Canter, 2017; Early

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Learning Collaborative Act of 2013; National Strategic Planning & Analysis Center [NSPARC], 2016). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2005) has defined high-quality early childhood education using the following standards:

*1. Relationships ... The program promotes positive relationships among all children and adults to encourage each child's sense of individual worth and belonging as part of a community and to foster each child's ability to contribute as a responsible community member ... 2. Curriculum ... The program implements a curriculum that is consistent with its goals for children and promotes learning and development in each of the following areas: social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive ... 3. Teaching ... The program uses developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate and effective teaching approaches that enhance each child's learning and development in the context of the program's curriculum goals ... 4. Assessment of Child Progress ... The program is informed by ongoing systematic, formal, and informal assessment approaches to provide information on children's learning and development. These assessments occur within the context of reciprocal communications with families and with sensitivity to the cultural contexts in which children develop. Assessment results are used to benefit children by informing sound decisions about children, teaching, and program improvement ... 5. Health ... The program promotes the nutrition and health of children and protects children and staff from illness and injury ... 6. Teachers ... The program employs and supports a teaching staff that has the educational qualifications, knowledge, and*

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*professional commitment necessary to promote children's learning and development and to support families' diverse needs and interests ... 7. Families ... The program establishes and maintains collaborative relationships with each child's family to foster children's development in all settings. These relationships are sensitive to family composition, language, and culture ... 8. Community Relationships ... The program establishes relationships with and uses the resources of the children's communities to support the achievement of program goals ... 9. Physical Environment ... The program has a safe and healthful environment that provides appropriate and well-maintained indoor and outdoor physical environments. The environment includes facilities, equipment, and materials to facilitate child and staff learning and development ... 10. Leadership and Management ... The program effectively implements policies, procedures, and systems that support stable staff and strong personnel, fiscal, and program management so all children, families, and staff have high-quality experiences.*

*(NAEYC, 2005, pp. 1-3)*

### **Why does the quality of early childhood education matter?**

High-quality early childhood education has been increasingly linked to developmental advancements. For example, a connection has been discovered between higher-quality care and enhanced socioemotional, language, and cognitive development (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant, & Clifford, 2000; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). These positive developmental effects have been found to last throughout the early years of elementary school (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). A comparable longitudinal study found a correlation between high-quality care

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and enhanced vocabulary scores lasting up to the fifth grade (Belsky, Vandell, Burchinal, Clarke-Stewart, McCartney, & Owen, 2007).

Research has shown that children participating in any kind of early education program are likely to exhibit enhanced reading and math skills, but higher levels of education quality provide better opportunities for academic advances (Coley, Votruba-Drzal, Collins, & Cook, 2015). Children attending center-based preschool programs, rather than home-based preschool programs, benefit much more in academic domains (Coley et al., 2015). Differences in academic advantages have been attributed to the lower levels of global quality offered by the home-based preschool programs (Coley et al., 2015). Specifically, the process quality of a preschool classroom, characterized by instructional climate and interactions between teacher and child, has been used to predict academic growth (Howes, Burchinal, Pianta, Bryant, Early, Clifford, & Barbarin, 2008). Higher process quality has been correlated with significant gains in language and literacy skills (Howes et al., 2008).

Along with improvements in academic skills, high-quality emotional interactions between teacher and child have also been linked to lower rates of problem behaviors and higher reports of social competence (Mashburn et al., 2008). The formation of strong, warm relationships between caregiver and child has been shown to have a lasting positive effect on a child's future emotional regulation and task attentiveness in elementary school (Gialamas et al., 2014). In contrast, low-quality child care could ultimately be detrimental to a child's development, as it leads to higher rates of problem behaviors (Burchinal et al., 2000).

### **Impact of teacher education/training on ECE quality**

The education and training of a teacher can have a great impact on education quality (Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000). Contrary to popular belief, the training and education of a caregiver seems to offer a more accurate predictor of child care quality than child:adult ratios in the classroom or the level of experience of the caregiver (Burchinal, Howes, & Kontos, 2002). Improvements in child care quality depend on training and educational content that pertains specifically to early childhood education (Arnett, 1989). For example, when compared with caregivers who received no training, caregivers that either attended Communication and Child Development classes over the course of a year or earned Bachelor's degrees in Early Childhood Education demonstrated less authoritarian attitudes and more positive interactions with students (Arnett, 1989).

The effectiveness of training also depends on a few other variables, including types of learning experiences and training locations. A study of collective participation in training sessions suggested that the knowledge gained from professional development activities is most likely to be applied in the classroom when caregivers and supervisors learn together (Douglass, Carter, & Smith, 2015). Another important aspect affecting the benefits of training sessions is the location in which they are offered, especially when they are offered within the child care center (Slot, Leseman, Verhagen, & Mulder, 2015). The provision of professional development opportunities within the center has been strongly associated with educational and emotional process quality, encompassing a child's daily classroom experiences (Slot et al., 2015).

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### **Impact of teacher wages on ECE quality**

Another factor that has been strongly associated with classroom quality is teacher wages (Phillips et al., 2000). When centers can pay higher wages to their teachers and caregivers, the hiring process is much more selective, which ensures that only well-educated and well-trained teachers are hired (Phillips et al., 2000). Centers that are unable to offer competitive wages are faced with difficulties in recruitment and retention of quality teachers (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). Low salaries are associated with a high rate of staff turnover, especially for well-qualified teachers that could earn much more compensation by teaching in the public school system (Boyd, 2013). High rates of staff turnover have been shown to yield negative effects on children's development, such as lower scores on measures of cognitive, language, and fine motor skills, and higher rates of aggressive and withdrawn behavior when compared to children who had a consistent caregiver (Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Tran & Winsler, 2011).

### **Impact of government funding on ECE quality**

Researchers have also uncovered a link between increases in government appropriations to early childhood education programs and improvements in educational quality at these sites (Hatfield, Lower, Cassidy, & Faldowski, 2014). Government funds can alleviate some of the great costs associated with achieving the highest quality of care. Some of these costs include rent payments, food expenses, and the provision of the wages necessary to retain high-quality staff members (Marshall, Creps, Burstein, Glantz, Robeson, & Barnett, 2001). Studies of preschool programs operating within public schools, and thus being supported by state funds, suggest that these programs achieve a higher quality rating and enhance school readiness of students because the funding allows

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them to hire teachers with higher levels of education (Marshall et al., 2001; Marshall et al, 2002; Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005).

A lack of funding is detrimental not only because it hinders the center's ability to hire and retain competent teachers, but also because it affects the ability of teachers and caregivers to provide meaningful learning opportunities for young children (Boyd, 2013). For instance, multiple teachers who desire to supply children with an adequate educational environment have attested to the necessity of purchasing learning materials and resources, such as books and craft supplies, for their students with their own meager salaries because the child care center is financially unable to provide these materials (Boyd, 2013).

### **Mississippi: Current qualifications for ECE teachers and ECE appropriations**

Despite the wealth of knowledge provided by research regarding the importance of high-quality early childhood education, some states have been reluctant to adjust requisite teacher qualifications and government appropriations to this cause (National Center on Child Care Quality Improvement [NCCCQI] & National Association for Regulatory Administration [NARA], 2014). The state of Mississippi can be found among the states lagging behind; caregivers are not required to have a college degree, as they are not required to complete high school (Mississippi State Department of Health [MSDH] 2014). To be an early childhood caregiver in a licensed child care facility in the state of Mississippi, the current employment requirements include either a high school diploma or General Educational Development certification; a Child Development Associate credential, a Division of Early Childhood Care and Development credential, or a Director's Office for Children and Youth credential; or three years of documented

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childcare experience for unrelated children under the age of thirteen (MSDH, 2014).

Despite necessitating a relatively low level of education to gain employment at a child care facility, the Department of Health does follow the recommendations of NAEYC by requiring staff members to continue their education while they are acting as caregivers (MSDH, 2014). Fifteen hours of staff development trainings are required annually for each caregiver employed at a licensed child care facility (MSDH, 2014).

The federal government appropriates some funds to child care through the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which subsidizes child care costs for low-income working families (MDHS, 2016). Per Mississippi's Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013, child care centers are eligible to receive funding from the state government if they choose to form a collaborative with other entities interested in providing voluntary prekindergarten, but the collaboratives are responsible for matching funds awarded by the state (Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013). Licensed child care centers may also receive funding through participation in a voluntary quality improvement program such as Mississippi Building Blocks, which provides funds to centers to enhance learning environments, or Mississippi Quality Stars, which provides financial incentives to improve care and education quality ratings (De Marco, Yazejian, & Morgan, 2015; NSPARC, 2016). The Mississippi Quality Stars program, funded by the Division of Early Childhood Care and Development within the Mississippi Department of Human Services, is currently undergoing a revision process following an external evaluation completed in 2015 (De Marco et al., 2015). The evaluation showed that although child care providers most commonly chose to participate in Quality Stars due to the financial incentives,

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meeting the quality standards necessary to earn incentives often costs more than the center can spend (De Marco et al., 2015).

Child care licensure is funded by the Child Care and Development Fund, which is allocated by the Division of Early Childhood Care and Development (“Child Care Licensure,” 2016). A great majority of states, including Mississippi, do not allocate the revenue gained from child care facility licensing fees to support improvements in early childhood education (NCCCQI & NARA, 2014). Funds that could be contributing directly to the training of caregivers are instead yielded to the state's pool of general funds, or are used to support licensing agencies (NCCCQI & NARA, 2014). Federal funds that are earmarked for increasing access to child care and improving child care quality, like the Child Care and Development Fund, are being used to fund licensure as well, and funds gained from licensure that could be used to improve teacher education are being spent in ways that do not promote a higher quality of early childhood education (MDHS, 2016; NCCCQI & NARA, 2014).

### **Presentation of research questions**

Within the past few years, multiple studies have examined challenges, issues, and beliefs relating to early childhood education by interviewing early childhood educators (Alvestad et al., 2014; Boyd, 2013; Brownlee, Berthelsen, & Segaran, 2009). Alvestad et al. (2014) found that preschool teachers working in Nordic countries were compelled to focus more on children’s safety and routines than with curriculum and learning to effectively manage their classroom environment, while Brownlee et al. (2009) found that both directors of child care centers and child care workers in Australia agreed that professional training should provide more practical knowledge about how to interact with

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and care for infants. Boyd (2013) found that early childhood educators were frustrated by the expectation to attain a higher level of education and attend increasing amounts of training without an increase in wages.

The present study differs from previous research of this kind by focusing on the unique educational environment that exists in the Delta region of Mississippi. Exploring the challenges faced by early childhood educators in the Mississippi Delta is crucial as the state is currently attempting to improve school readiness rates through high-quality early childhood education (NSPARC, 2016; Wiggins et al., 2013). This study sought to explore the following questions:

1. What are the barriers to the provision of high-quality early childhood education in the Mississippi Delta?
2. What do caregivers believe would change if these barriers were removed?
3. If caregivers were required to earn a college degree to have a career in early childhood education, would they still pursue this path?

## Methods

### Participants

Twenty early childhood educators participated in this study. These participants ranged in age from 26 to 68 years ( $M = 47.56$ ,  $SD = 12.15$ ). Of this sample, 10% of participants had completed middle school or some high school, 35% had completed high school or received a General Educational Development certification, 10% had earned an Associate's degree, 10% had earned a Bachelor's degree, and five percent had earned a Master's degree. Five participants reported having earned a Child Development Associate Credential, six reported having a Division of Early Childhood Care and Development Credential, two reported having a Mississippi or other state teaching certificate, and one reported having a Special Needs Credential. Seventy percent of participants identified as Black/African American (not of Hispanic origin), 25% identified as White, and five percent identified as having multiple ethnicities (Black/African American, Native American, and White). Sixty percent reported being employed on a full-time basis, while the other 40% reported being employed part-time.

Four participants indicated they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview and two participated in the follow-up interview. Both participants were 59 years of age. Of the sample interviewed, one participant had completed high school or

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received a General Educational Development certification, and the other participant had earned a Child Development Associate's degree. One of the participants also reported having earned a Division of Early Childhood Care and Development Credential. One participant identified as white, and the other participant identified as Black/African American (not of Hispanic origin). Both participants reported being employed at their center on a part-time basis.

All participants were recruited by mail in the counties of Quitman, Sunflower, Bolivar, Coahoma, Tallahatchie, Leflore, Humphreys, Holmes, Sharkey, and Tunica. A letter soliciting participation in the present study was mailed to the director of each licensed child care center in these counties, with the exception of Head Start centers, because Head Start centers receive more government funding than other licensed child care facilities. Follow-up calls were made to ensure that centers had received the recruitment letters, and visits were made to certain centers that were unreachable by mail. Three child care centers in Bolivar, Leflore, and Tallahatchie County in the northwest region of Mississippi are represented in this sample.

### **Measures**

**Early Childhood Education Opinion Questionnaire.** A questionnaire regarding barriers to the provision of high-quality early childhood education was created for this study. The questionnaire was designed to investigate the types of barriers, if any, that the participants encounter in early childhood education settings, and what the participants predict would change if these barriers were removed. Potential barriers to training provided on the questionnaire included training opportunities not being available locally, limited training topics, high costs, and inconvenient training schedules. Potential barriers

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to the provision of high-quality early childhood education provided on the questionnaire included a lack of training opportunities, a lack of government funding, and a lack of appropriate educational resources. Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed that a certain factor was a barrier using a 5-point Likert scale, with a score of one indicating strong agreement, and a score of five indicating strong disagreement. Potential changes that could occur if the barriers were removed provided on the questionnaire included overall educational quality improvement and the successful preparation of children for kindergarten. Again, participants indicated the degree to which they agreed that these changes would occur if barriers were removed using a 5-point Likert scale, with a score of one indicating strong agreement, and a score of five indicating strong disagreement. The questionnaire also inquired about the education level of the participants, and their willingness to pursue higher education. See Appendix A for the questionnaire.

**Interview.** An interview further exploring answers to questions asked on the questionnaire was also created for this study. Interview questions sought to gain more in-depth insight and perspective into the subjective experiences of participants as early childhood educators in the Mississippi Delta. For example, one question asked why participants indicated on the questionnaire that they would or would not pursue a career in early childhood education if they were required to earn a college degree. See Appendix B for the interview.

### **Procedures**

Letters explaining the study and asking potential participants to contact me via phone if they were interested in participating were sent to 92 directors of child care

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centers in the following counties: Quitman, Sunflower, Bolivar, Coahoma, Tallahatchie, Leflore, Humphreys, Holmes, Sharkey, and Tunica. Calls to each of these centers and visits to 12 centers in Coahoma, Quitman, Tallahatchie, Sunflower, and Bolivar County were also made to explain the study and request participation. Interested participants were given two options to participate: 1. Complete the questionnaire via phone, or 2. Complete the questionnaire in hard copy (I offered to mail them or deliver them in person). All participants chose to complete the questionnaire in hard copy.

An information sheet providing details about the study was either mailed or delivered to participants in person. Participants were asked to complete a demographics form, which demonstrated informed consent for participation in the study. Participants were given the Early Childhood Education Opinion Questionnaire. The last question in the questionnaire asked if they would like to participate in a follow-up interview. Interview times were arranged with interested participants. Participants interested in interviewing were given the option of holding the interview over the phone or in person at the child care facilities in which they work. All interviews were conducted via phone. Once all participants completed the questionnaire, three participants were chosen at random to receive a \$20 Walmart gift card.

### **Results**

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the opinions of early childhood educators regarding the barriers to the provision of high-quality early childhood education in the Mississippi Delta. A total of 63 questionnaires were distributed, and 20 of these questionnaires were completed. The majority of participants (84.2%) have worked at their current job between three and 18 years, while only 15.8% of caregivers have worked at their current job between two years and less than six months. Of the participants that indicated that they have worked in their current job for over a year, 89.4% stated that they complete 15 or more hours of training each year, while 10.6% stated that they complete less than the 15 required hours of yearly training. The most highly attended training opportunities included those offered on Health and Safety, Child Growth and Development, and Nutrition. See Table 1 for all possible topics that caregivers have been trained on in the past year.

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Table 1

*Trainings Attended by Participants in the Past Year*

Training Topics	Attendance
Health and Safety	95%
Child Growth and Development	75%
Nutrition	70%
Planning Learning Activities	60%
Guidance and Discipline Techniques	55%
Linkages with Community Services	15%
Communications and Relations with Families	35%
Detection of Child Abuse	30%
Advocacy for Early Childhood Programs	20%
Professional Issues	25%
Director's Training	10%
Playground Safety	10%
Menu Writing	5%

Fifty-six percent of participants stated that they encountered barriers to obtaining training in the county in which they work. With the exception of training cost, 50% or more participants indicated agreement that the given variables were barriers to obtaining training. Participants contended that the biggest barriers to training include unsuitable timing and training opportunities not being available locally. See Table 2 for the

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percentages of agreement among participants regarding possible barriers that educators could encounter when attempting to obtain training.

Table 2

*Percentages of Agreement with Barriers to Training*

Training Barriers	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Trainings are not available locally	31.3%	31.3%	31.3%	6.3%	0%
Possible training topics are limited	12.5%	37.5%	31.3%	12.5%	6.3%
Obtaining training is expensive	14.3%	28.6%	42.9%	14.3%	0%
Trainings are not available at convenient times	31.3%	31.3%	18.8%	18.8%	0%

Fifty-four percent of participants stated that there are barriers to providing high-quality early childhood education in the county in which they work. Over 67% of participants agreed that each of the given variables were barriers to the provision of high-quality early childhood education. In addition to the given variables, two participants proposed that the main barriers include a lack of family support, and difficulty in finding instructors who are willing to teach. See Table 3 for the percentage of agreement among participants regarding the possible barriers that educators could encounter when attempting to provide the highest quality of education. Eighty-six percent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that if barriers were removed, overall educational quality would improve and children would enter kindergarten prepared to succeed.

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Table 3

*Percentages of Agreement with Barriers to the Provision of High-Quality ECE*

High-Quality Education Provision Barriers	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree
Lack of			
Training opportunities	16.7%	50%	33.3%
Government funding	41.7%	33.3%	25%
Appropriate educational resources	41.7%	25%	33.3%

Participants reported that their hourly pay rate ranged from 7.25 to 10 dollars. Half of these participants earned less than 8 dollars per hour, while only one participant earned 10 dollars per hour. Over 70 percent of participants indicated that they were dissatisfied with the wages they currently earn. Participants suggested that a more appropriate wage would fall within the range of 9 to 15 dollars per hour. Most participants (60 percent) recommended a wage between 9 and 10 dollars per hour.

Seventy-five percent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they would still pursue a career in early childhood education if they were required to earn a college degree. Seventy percent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be motivated to pursue a higher level of education if they were paid in relation to their education level, like K-12 teachers. Seventy-five percent of educators agreed or strongly agreed that their classroom environment would improve with access to additional training opportunities. See Table 4 for more detailed information.

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Table 4

*Opinions Regarding Teacher Education*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree
I would still pursue a career in early childhood education if I was required to earn a college degree	55%	20%	20%	5%
I would be motivated to pursue a higher level of education if caregivers were paid in relation to their education level	50%	20%	30%	0%
My classroom environment would improve with access to additional training opportunities	30%	45%	25%	0%

When given a list of standards provided by the National Association for the Education of Young Children defining high-quality early childhood education, there were no factors that every participant recognized as necessary. Most participants indicated that important factors of high-quality early childhood education include appropriate teaching techniques, safe learning environments, nutrition and safety, positive teacher-child relationships, assessment of children's progress, positive teacher-family relationships, positive community relationships, and well-educated teachers (See Table 5).

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Table 5

*Perceived Importance of Factors of High-Quality Early Childhood Education*

Standards	Agreement
Appropriate Teaching Techniques	90%
Safe Learning Environments	85%
Ensuring Nutrition and Safety	80%
Positive Teacher-Child Relationships	80%
Assessment of Children's Progress	75%
Positive Teacher-Family Relationships	75%
Positive Community Relationships	65%
Well-Educated Teachers	60%
Advanced Classroom Curriculum	50%
Competent Leadership and Management	45%
Special Education	5%

### **Discussion**

The goal of the present study was to gain a new perspective on the issues related to the provision of high-quality early childhood education by exploring the opinions of early childhood educators about the difficulties that they face each workday in the Mississippi Delta. Unfortunately, rates of response and participation were low. By way of mailed letters, phone calls, and center visits, I contacted 92 child care centers spanning 10 counties in the northwest region of the Mississippi Delta. I distributed 63 questionnaires among seven centers based on response to initial contacts, and 20 questionnaires were completed among individuals representing three centers. Thus the response rate to the initial letters and phone calls requesting participation was eight percent and the response rate for the questionnaires mailed to the centers who said they would participate was 32%.

Reasons for low response and participation rates could vary widely. Perhaps the most obvious explanation is that child care is a hectic and demanding line of work that requires the full attention of the caregiver. I experienced this frenetic environment myself when I made phone calls to the child care centers from which I requested participation. At nearly every center I called, children were crying or asking for assistance in the background. When considering that children are dependent upon the care of our participants and that the study offers no immediate benefit for participation, it is easy to understand a hesitancy to participate. Another reason could be a mistrust of employers, as early

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childhood educators might have feared backlash for providing answers that failed to reflect kindly on the center at which they work. Additionally, participants could have a mistrust of the university, which has a reputation for condescendingly telling community members what they are doing wrong without providing any real aid toward improvement efforts and transformational partnerships (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2012). Regulations for child care licensure are rather stringent for centers operating on a low budget, and directors might have opposed participation in a study if they thought their center was not exactly up to code. Lastly, some potential participants alluded to the fact that they had just recently completed a questionnaire provided by the Early Years Network which surely diminished their willingness to participate in the present study.

A modest majority of participants agreed that they encounter barriers when attempting to obtain training (56.3%) in the county in which they are employed. Apart from training cost, 50% or more participants agreed that the barriers include inopportune training schedules, inconvenient training locations, and limited training topics to attend. In an interview, one participant highlighted some of these barriers by explaining that trainings are often held in distant locations and that they are extremely expensive, especially because the child care centers must compensate their employees for their training attendance. She stated that it is also difficult to find training opportunities that teachers would be interested in attending. Another interviewee reiterated that trainings are often held in distant locales, and added that caregivers can only attend trainings late at night, as they are with children all day long. Perhaps caregivers would benefit more from hands-on training opportunities available within their center and at an hour more conducive to learning and concentration.

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A slight majority of participants also agreed that they encounter barriers when attempting to provide high-quality early childhood education (53.8%) in their county. Over 67% of participants agreed that barriers include a lack of training opportunities, a lack of government funding, and a lack of appropriate educational resources, while two participants added that barriers include a lack of family support, and difficulty in finding instructors who are willing to teach. Most participants (85.7%) agreed that overall educational quality would improve and that children would enter kindergarten prepared to succeed if barriers were removed. The confidence of these caregivers in the impact that removing barriers could have on the lives and education of their students emphasizes the importance of reducing them.

All participants reported earning between 7.25 and 10 dollars per hour, and over 70% of participants reported being dissatisfied with the wages they earn. High rates of wage dissatisfaction are problematic as low wages have been linked to high rates of staff turnover, which can have negative developmental effects on young children (Boyd, 2013; Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Tran & Winsler, 2011). One interviewee reported that she was satisfied with her wages because she does not have a college degree. She expressed that she works part-time with no benefits, and that this is a standard working arrangement in her hometown. This insight lends itself to the possibility that more participants would have indicated wage dissatisfaction if there were reasonable jobs with fair pay and benefits available to them. Perceived wage satisfaction could be evidence of a greater workforce problem in this region.

Upwards of 70% of participants agreed that they would still pursue a career in early childhood education if they were required to earn a college degree; that they would be

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motivated to pursue a higher level of education if they were paid in relation to their education level, like K-12 teachers; and that their classroom environment would improve with access to additional training opportunities. Most caregivers recognized that their own education influences the educational environment they can offer the children in their classroom, and would be amenable to obtaining further training and education. In an interview, one participant explained that she would be willing to attain a higher level of education if necessary because she has a passion for teaching and wants to be able to educate each individual child in the most impactful way. However, participants would be more motivated to pursue a higher level of education if it correlated with their hourly wage. One interviewee expressed that she wouldn't encourage young potential caregivers to earn a college degree because it wouldn't benefit them; they will receive the same wages no matter their level of education.

Participants did not agree on the importance of each standard defining high-quality early childhood education provided by NAEYC. In fact, there were no standards that all participants recognized as essential to providing the highest quality of education. Disagreement between participants could be evidence of the differences in education and training that each caregiver has received. Teacher education and trainings should be standardized in such a way that all caregivers are made aware of important factors of their classrooms that will have a positive impact on the children entrusted to their care. After all, caregivers will be unable to provide the highest quality of care and education unless they are aware of how to provide it.

The present study achieved its goal of gaining unique insight into the experiences of early childhood educators in the Delta region of Mississippi. By using an innovative

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measure created specifically for this study to gather data from three different child care centers, we have acquired the distinctive perspectives about the state of early childhood education from people who experience it every day. Also, in terms of this study's sample and the population of the three counties who participated, the population percentages are reflective of each other. Seventy percent of participants identified as African American, and 64% of citizens in these three counties identify as African American (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Despite collecting data from centers in three counties, it would be ill-advised to definitively generalize these results to every county in the Delta. The Delta region of Mississippi comprises many more counties than are represented in this sample, and each county contains a myriad of child care centers. Each of these child care centers faces their own particular set of challenges separate from centers in surrounding areas, and they should not be treated as one homogeneous group.

The opinions of the caregivers surveyed and interviewed in this study suggest that they do sometimes encounter barriers when attempting to provide high-quality early childhood education. Various barriers mentioned in this study, such as a lack of government funding, a lack of appropriate educational resources, and a lack of training opportunities, can be addressed and adjusted to improve the quality of early childhood education across the state. These barriers could possibly be overcome by increasing government funding, increasing access to educational resources, and increasing access to training opportunities that are held nearby at a convenient time for the childcare workers.

This research has highlighted some issues in Mississippi's child care system that have room for improvement. As Mississippi continues working toward providing access

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to child care and prekindergarten to young citizens, more research focusing on the experiences of teachers will be beneficial to examine both the impact of their efforts and the areas that can be enhanced. Future research efforts of this kind, however, should attempt to reach out to child care centers across the entire state, rather than just in the Delta, to systematically gather input from child care providers about how to improve early childhood education.

Due to a relatively low participation rate, it would be irresponsible to draw any comprehensive conclusions about the barriers to providing early childhood education in the Mississippi Delta from the data collected in this study. Nevertheless, the opinions gathered in this study have pointed out some issues in Mississippi's child care system that need improvement. Future research should include teachers from all over the state rather than only the northwest region. Given the expansive body of research suggesting the benefits of high-quality early childhood education, efforts to facilitate high-quality care should be prioritized.

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Appendix A



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**Appendix B**

Early Childhood Education Opinion Questionnaire

**Instructions: Please answer the following questions regarding your current job as a caregiver and early childhood educator.**

**What county do you work in?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you work full-time or part-time?** \_\_\_\_\_

**When you were hired for your current job, when did you complete an orientation session?**

Never    The first day I started    Within the first week    Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**How long have you worked at your current job? (If over a year, please answer the following questions)**

Less than 6 months    6 months-1 year    1-2 years    3-4 years

4-5 years    5+ years

**On average, how many training hours do you complete each year?**

1 – 2    3 – 4    5 – 6    7 – 8    9 – 10

11 – 12    13 – 14    15 – 16    17 – 18    19 – 20

20+    None

**Of the following topics, which have you been trained on in the past year?**

Health and Safety

Child Growth and Development

Nutrition

Planning Learning Activities

Guidance and Discipline Techniques

Linkages with Community Services

Communications and Relations with Families

Detection of Child Abuse

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Advocacy for Early Childhood Programs

Professional Issues

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Are you satisfied with the wages you currently earn for the work you do?**

Yes       No

**What do you think the most appropriate/fair hourly wage is for the work you do?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Please indicate important factors of high-quality early childhood education (Check all that apply)**

Positive teacher-child relationships

Advanced classroom curriculum

Appropriate teaching techniques

Assessment of children's progress

Ensuring nutrition and safety

Well-educated teachers

Positive teacher-family relationships

Positive community relationships

Safe learning environments

Competent leadership and management

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.**

If I were required to earn a college degree to have a career in early childhood education, I would still pursue this path.

1  
Strongly  
agree

2  
Agree

3  
Neither agree  
nor disagree

4  
Disagree

5  
Strongly  
disagree

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If caregivers/teachers were paid in relation to their education level, I would be motivated to pursue a higher level of education (e.g., a Bachelor’s degree or Master’s degree).

1 Strongly agree                      2 Agree                      3 Neither agree nor disagree                      4 Disagree                      5 Strongly disagree

I think that my classroom environment would improve with access to additional training opportunities.

1 Strongly agree                      2 Agree                      3 Neither agree nor disagree                      4 Disagree                      5 Strongly disagree

Are there barriers to obtaining training in this county?

No                       Yes (If yes, please answer the following questions)

**Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree that the following are barriers to obtaining training in this county.**

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither Agree nor Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
Trainings are not available locally					
Possible training topics are limited					
Obtaining training is expensive					
Trainings are not available at convenient times					

If there are any additional barriers to obtaining training in this county, please list them here.

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What do you think is the biggest barrier to obtaining training in this county?

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Are there barriers to providing high-quality early childhood education in this county?

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No             Yes (If yes, please answer the following questions)

**Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree that the following are barriers to providing high-quality early childhood education in this county.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Lack of training opportunities					
Lack of government funding					
Lack of appropriate educational resources					

If there are any additional barriers to providing high-quality early childhood education in this county, please list them here.

---

What do you think is the biggest barrier to providing high-quality early childhood education in this county?

---

**Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree that the following changes will occur if the barriers to providing high-quality early childhood education are removed.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Overall educational quality will improve					
Children will enter kindergarten prepared to succeed					

**Please share any additional relevant comments about providing early childhood education in the Mississippi Delta, including other barriers you've encountered in your experiences as a caregiver.**

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**Would you be willing to talk about your answers to these questions at a time that works best for you?**

Yes, via phone or in person (If yes, please complete the attached form)

No, thank you

**Thank you for your participation!**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I would prefer to be interviewed:**

over the phone. The best number to reach me at is: \_\_\_\_\_

in person at my place of work. My place of work is: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please provide some times you are available on a weekly basis and I will contact you to schedule a time.**

<b>Monday</b>	
<b>Tuesday</b>	
<b>Wednesday</b>	
<b>Thursday</b>	
<b>Friday</b>	
<b>Saturday</b>	
<b>Sunday</b>	

**Thank you! I look forward to talking to you!**

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## Appendix C

### Interview

1. On the Early Childhood Education Opinion Survey, you indicated that if you needed to earn a college degree to have a career in early childhood education, you would/would not pursue this path. Why/why not?
2. You indicated that if teachers were paid in relation to their education level, you would/would not be more motivated to pursue a higher level of education. Why/why not?
3. You said that you do/do not think that your classroom environment would improve with access to additional training opportunities. Why/why not? If yes, what benefits do you think you and your classroom will experience if you had access to better training opportunities?
4. You said that the wages you earn are/are not appropriate for the work you do. Why/why not?
5. You said the biggest barrier to training in this county is \_\_\_\_\_. Why is that? Could you give me an example of a time that this barrier affected you?
6. You said the biggest barrier to providing high-quality early childhood education in this county is \_\_\_\_\_. Why is that? Could you give me an example of a time that this barrier affected you?
7. If the barriers to the provision of high-quality early childhood education were removed, what do you think would change?
8. Do you have any additional relevant comments that you would like to share about providing early childhood education in the Delta?