Teaching Without a License: Uncertified Universal PreK Teachers' Policy Perspectives

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Abstract

Uncertified teachers are the foundation of early childhood systems across the nation. As states and districts move into professionalizing early childhood education, experienced but uncertified teachers are facing the need to enroll in teacher preparation programs to receive certification and retain their jobs. This article investigates the effects of teaching mandates and compensation policies in New York City (NYC) in the light of its universal prekindergarten (UPK) expansion. Over 50% of nonpublic school UPK teachers in NYC are uncertified teachers. While certification is a requirement to teach in NYC's UPK, due to the lack of certified teachers willing to teach in nonpublic settings, uncertified teachers often act as lead teachers while they complete their certification requirements. This article focused on understanding how uncertified teachers perceive their role in the larger school community, and how certification, compensation, and work condition policies support (or hinder) their licensing and course-of-study completion. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Schneider and Ingram's (1997) social construction and policy design theory, a qualitative case study approach was the primary form of analysis. Document discourse analysis, focus groups, and interviews (*n* = 20) were utilized. This study found that early childhood uncertified teachers are hungry for structural changes that acknowledge their role in the community by supporting the completion of their degrees. Findings support research literature signaling equity challenges of scaling up UPK implementations. Implications are discussed and policy recommendations are provided.

Key Words: UPK, universal prekindergarten, early childhood education compensation, early childhood policy, unlicensed teachers, uncertified teachers, early childhood professionalization, salary parity, certification

Background and Purpose

In 2014, New York City (NYC) deployed universal prekindergarten (UPK) or *PreK for All*, opening access to early education for all four-year-olds. To achieve the targeted scale in a short time, Mayor de Blasio's administration utilized a mixed delivery system, coordinating the use of private, public, and community-based/nonprofit early childhood centers already providing services. Sixty percent of NYC UPK's deployment has been implemented through what the NYC Department of Education (DOE) refers to as New York City Early Education Centers, "NYCEECs," including community-based organizations that, in some cases, comprise Head Start centers and independent childcare centers that host both UPK classrooms and private tuition classrooms. For over six years of data collection (2014–21), the UPK and 3K for All (for 3-year-olds) funding system offered different salaries and work conditions among nonpublic schoolteachers and their unionized public-school counterparts, with those working in nonpublic school settings earning up to $30,000 less than their similarly qualified public-school counterparts. This resulted in nonpublic school centers' inability to hire and retain certified teachers.

Consequently, over 50% of nonpublic school NYC UPK classrooms are staffed by uncertified teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs working to achieve certification (Hurley, 2019). These teachers, also called "study plan teachers," are mandated to complete their degrees and obtain certification in a specified time frame (3 to 7 years) in order to retain their jobs as lead teachers. Lead teachers, also known as head or group teachers, are responsible for planning, instructing, and assessing children in their classrooms. Initial certification is obtained by earning a Master's or Bachelor's degree in early childhood education from an accredited institution and completing certification exams and requirements. Programs providing tuition reimbursement and career ladder initiatives sponsored by advocacy organizations and unions exist to support this emergent workforce financially. However, these opportunities are limited, require a significant minimum course workload per semester, and often expect teachers to commit to their current workplace for several years after obtaining certification.

Substantial compensation improvements to attempt parity among all NYC UPK teachers have only included certified teachers (Alexander, 2019; City of New York, 2019; Elsen-Rooney, 2019; NYC Department of Education,

2019; Veiga, 2019), excluding uncertified teachers (Hurley, 2019). There are no guidelines for uncertified teachers' compensation, making them vulnerable to exploitative conditions. This has created a massive differential between uncertified and certified teachers' pay even when doing the same job, with some working up to 10 hours a day at minimum wage. Considering that a school community operates "on the basis of shared values, trust, expectations, and obligations rather than tasks, rules, and hierarchies" (Redding, 2001, p. 1), this disparity threatens to erode the sense of community among teachers and administrators working at these centers.

Given these significant differentials in compensation and work conditions, this article captured the perspectives and experiences of uncertified teachers in NYC's early childhood ecological system. In particular, this study focused on (1) how these teachers perceive how certification, compensation, and work condition policies support or disincentivize the successful completion of their course-of-study certification, and (2) how they perceive their role in the early childhood education community. This article unearths the truths hidden in many early childhood systems by bringing the voices of uncertified teachers to the forefront of the policymaking table. The goal of this study is to motivate those in charge of policymaking to include uncertified teachers in their future decisions when considering implementing policy on a larger scale.

Theoretical Framing

Through Critical Policy Analysis, this study utilized Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Schneider and Ingram's (1997) social construction and policy design theory to understand how policies privilege some groups over others. This multitheoretical approach recognizes the complexities of how policy is designed (Young & Diem, 2017) and its impact on different aspects of uncertified teachers' experiences. (Please see Figure 1 for a graphic depiction of the connections between both frameworks.) This conceptual framework acknowledged the important relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) within the teacher's microsystem and the interactions among the teacher's macrosystems (mesosystem), while also using the social construction and policy design propositions to inform the ecological system of early education in NYC. In this conceptual model, which served as the basis for the study's analysis, policymaking is based on the social construction of target populations as "deserving" or "undeserving" (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Schneider and Ingram proposed that the way groups are treated by the government during implementation differs significantly depending upon that group's power and social construction. The conceptualization of uncertified teachers as "undeserving" may have

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
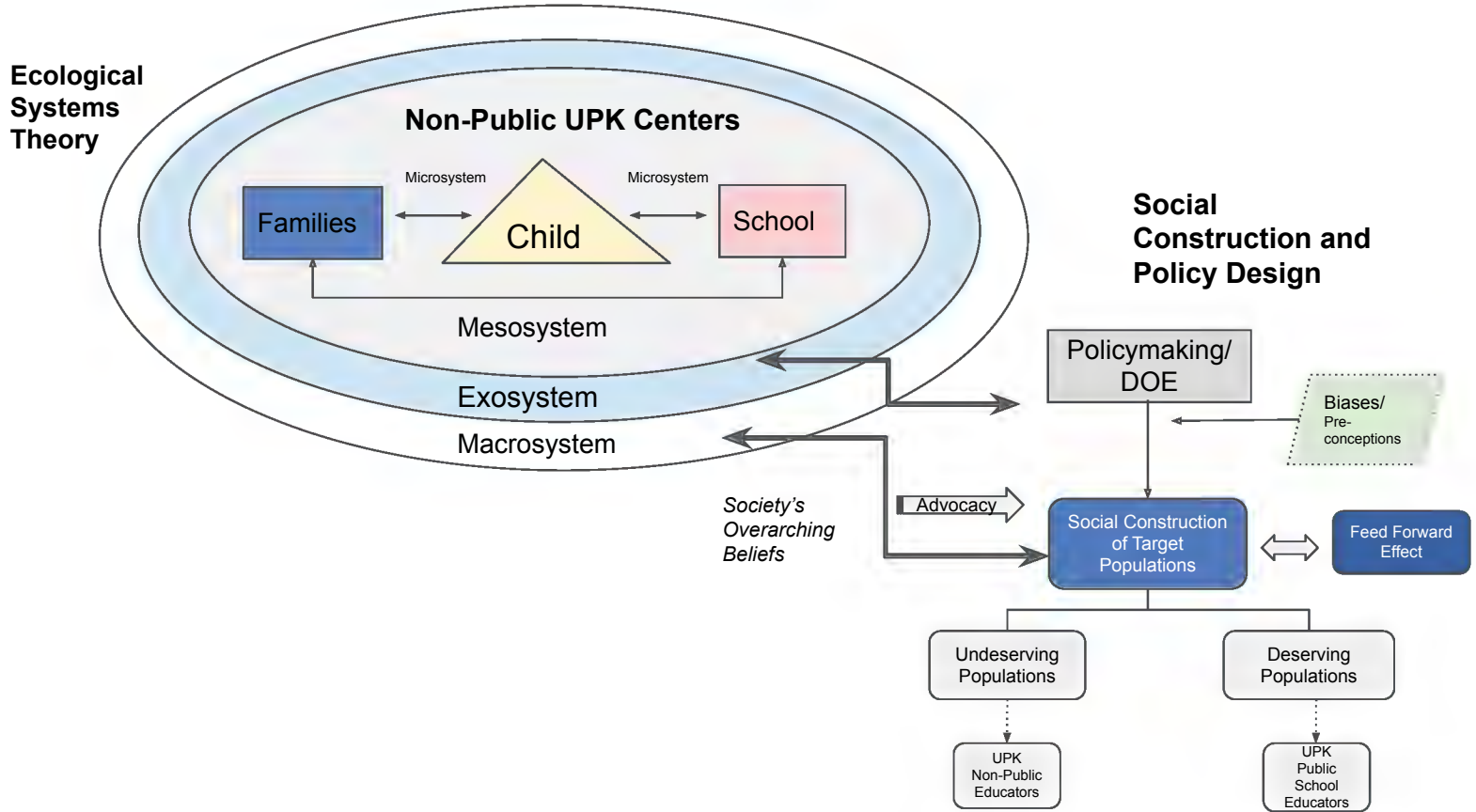
implications for what Schneider and Ingram labeled as the "feed-forward effect," meaning policies that reinforce negative or positive social constructions.

The salary disparities among different actors in the NYC UPK space are symptomatic of a larger issue: policymakers' perceptions of uncertified teachers as "undeserving" of appropriate compensation. This is also evident by the fact that, legally, uncertified teachers have no recourse to demand equal compensation for equal work. In turn, these policies have resulted in teacher turnover, teacher burnout, lack of community building, and safety violations, further reinforcing the negative social construction of these teachers as "less than" their licensed counterparts.

Furthermore, the interviews and focus groups enabled the author to investigate the effects of the policy from the perspectives of the teachers and explored whether the participants perceived that the policy created a conception of them as "undeserving." Changes in how certain populations are constructed could have ripple effects, resulting in policy changes. This particular aspect of the conceptual model helped us understand how the advocacy efforts by unions and other stakeholders have contributed to short-term or long-lasting changes in policy for certified teachers and, in turn, whether advocacy efforts must be taken to change how policymakers conceptualize uncertified teachers.

Methods

This study is part of a larger study analyzing the effects of policies on all stakeholders in the NYC early childhood ecological system, including policymakers, directors, teachers, and parents. As the researcher examined the participant's lived experience and perspective, a qualitative approach was the primary form of analysis. To better understand the relationship between policy design, implementation, and the interrelated nature of stakeholders' lived experience in the UPK expansion, this study used an exploratory case study methodology (Yin, 2014). The case study methodology was chosen because it enables researchers to create "an extensive and in-depth description of some complex social phenomenon" (Yin, 2014, p. 5).

In addition, Critical Policy Analysis was used. Critical Policy Analysis is particularly well-suited for a case study methodology as it recognizes the complexities of how policy is designed (Weaver-Hightower, 2008; Young & Diem, 2017). It enables those affected by programs and procedures to have a voice, as defined by Rizvi and Lingard (2010). One of the exciting characteristics of the Critical Policy Analysis approach is that the methodology and theoretical perspectives are intertwined and work together (Diem et al., 2019). In this study's case, Critical Policy Analysis was utilized in conjunction with both the

social construction and policy design theory (Schneider & Ingram, 1997) and the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This multitheoretical approach "results in policy analysis that has more depth and breadth" (Diem et al., 2019, p. 4).

Data Collection and Analysis

Document discourse analysis, focus groups (n = 11), and interviews (n = 9) were selected as data collection tools. Documents (n = 36) were collected to reflect policymakers', advocates', and the public's perspectives on policy and its effect on uncertified teachers. Thirty-six documents and six years of Twitter (currently known as X) posts were collected. Documents included NYC Council hearings from 2014 to 2021, advocacy documents, and media releases dealing with compensation issues in early childhood. Social media posts (2014–21) were collected from accounts belonging to advocates, teachers, parents, the City of NYC, the Office of the Mayor, the NYC Department of Education, and its Chancellor. The collection timeframe spans from the implementation of the UPK expansion in 2014 to the end of the data collection period in 2021.

Twenty uncertified teachers were recruited across NYC to provide an ecological perspective on the effect of professionalization, work, and compensation policies on their personal and professional lives. Recruitment occurred through (a) emails to early childhood center directors (n = 8), and (b) a large urban public university's student research participation system (n = 12). Through this latter system, students in two foundational courses have the option to participate in a research study for credit. This study was one of several options offered to students. All participants have been approved by NYC's Department of Health as fit to lead a classroom while they complete their coursework towards certification. In addition, to be eligible, all uncertified teachers were required to be at least 18 years old and had to have worked at a nonpublic school center for at least the prior two school years. Uncertified teachers selected reflected New York City's demographic and setting diversity. Eighty percent of all participating teachers self-reported as belonging to a minoritized group. (Please see Table 1 for participants' demographic information.)

Participants who met the inclusion criteria had the option to select either a focus group (n = 11) from a set of proposed dates or to request an individual interview (n = 9). Focus groups were grouped by date, resulting in two groups of four participants and one of three participants. Interviews and focus group interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol. (Please see Appendix for the interview script; the script was not informed by the document analysis as it was created prior to the start of any analysis.) Interviews and focus

groups were conducted and recorded via Zoom by the principal investigator. Field notes were created after each interview to contextualize the information but were not used for data analysis. The average length of focus groups was 72 minutes, while the average length of individual interviews was 63 minutes. All focus groups and interviews were transcribed manually and verified by two other researchers.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Data (all names are pseudonyms)

Partici-pant	Ethnicity	Works at	Borough	Years of Experi-ence*	Years at Current Center	Modality
Ana	Black	Head Start	Manhattan	5	4	Interview**
Bethany	Latine	Independent Center	Brooklyn	12	10	Interview
Cece	White	Independent Center	Brooklyn	5	4	Focus group
Doris	Latine	CBO	Manhattan	15	15	Focus group
Ernie	Black	Head Start	Manhattan	25	15	Focus group
Frida	Latine	Head Start	Brooklyn	14	14	Interview
Gina	Black	CBO	Bronx	15	15	Focus group
Hillary	Latine	CBO	Queens	20	20	Interview
Iris	Black	Head Start	Brooklyn	5	2	Interview
Julia	Latine	CBO	Bronx	2	1	Focus group
Karyn	White	Independent Center	Queens	13	6	Interview
Kim	Latine	CBO	Queens	10	3	Focus group
Laura	White	Independent Center	Brooklyn	2	2	Focus group
Martin	Latine	CBO	Bronx	12	3	Focus group
Olga	Black	Head Start	Brooklyn	10	8	Interview
Rita	Latine	Independent Center	Bronx	3	2	Focus group
Sam	White	Independent Center	Manhattan	3	2	Focus group
Tina	Black	Independent Center	Manhattan	15	15	Focus group
Verna	Middle Eastern	Independent Center	Brooklyn	2	1	Interview
Zaira	Latine	Independent Center	Queens	3	2	Interview

*in Early Childhood Education; **"Interview" refers to individual interviews.

Data Analysis

Interactive value and in-vivo coding were used employing coding software (Dedoose). Data analysis occurred in three stages: (a) content analysis of documents, (b) thematic analysis of interviews and focus group data, and (c) compilation of findings from these analyses to draw comprehensive conclusions. These different stages of analysis informed one another.

The researcher used themes collected in the document analysis phase to inform the focus group/interview analysis, as Creswell (2008) and Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) suggested. Bowen (2009) stated that document analysis is an "invaluable part of most schemes of triangulation, the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (p. 29), and therefore, it was the starting point of the study.

Document Analysis

Coding of documents occurred by document type (that is, all hearings were coded, then all advocacy documents, and then all social media posts). The purpose of organizing coding by the type of document was to enable comparing and contrasting among the discourse of policymakers (hearings and social media), advocates (advocacy documents/hearings/social media), and the educators on the ground (hearings/social media). Initial codes included the five concerns of Critical Policy Analysis, with concerns regarding:
- the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality;
- the policy, its roots, and its development (e.g., how it emerged, what problems it was intended to solve, how it changed and developed over time, and its role in reinforcing the dominant culture);
- distribution of power, resources, and knowledge, as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers";
- social stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege; and
- the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of nondominant groups (Diem et al., 2019).

In subsequent rounds of coding, in-vivo coding was carried out to allow for the "highlighting [of] the voices of participants and for its reliance on the participants themselves for giving meaning to the data" (Manning, 2017, p. 1).

Twenty-four in-vivo codes were initially found and later collapsed into themes, and patterns were determined following the pattern definitions outlined by Saldaña and Miles (2013): similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, or causation. This resulted in six in-vivo themes and four Critical Policy Analysis themes: *distribution of power and resources, dissonance between rhetoric and reality, resistance and advocacy, how policy emerged, crisis/urgency, equity, effect on children/families, sustainability, City's response,* and *lack of transparency.*

Interview and Focus Group Analysis

Interview and focus group analysis was conducted after the document analysis. Each participants' transcripts were analyzed separately. Transcripts were broken down into individual sentences to prepare for coding. As it occurred in

the document analysis, initial codes included the five concerns of Critical Policy Analysis, as described above. In subsequent rounds of coding, in-vivo coding was carried out using the codes found in the document analysis. These codes were modified for the interview/focus group analysis to reflect the discourse collected from the participants. Codes were collapsed due to co-occurrence/overlapping or conceptualizations that could be covered by one theme. Some modifications were made after the third coding round to reflect the specific nature of the interviews. A total of 18 in-vivo codes were found in the interview analysis. Finally, codes arising from the interviews were collapsed and patterns were found, resulting in two themes from the Critical Policy Analysis codes and seven themes from in-vivo codes. These resulted in nine themes: *distribution of power and resources, resistance and advocacy, crisis/urgency, equity, effects on classrooms, effect on personal life, effect on children/families, sustainability,* and *lack of transparency.*

Once the documents, interviews, and focus groups were analyzed separately, they were compared and contrasted to provide an in-depth look at this study's inquiry. Furthermore, given that the data was subcategorized by setting and geographical location, the analysis also looked at data patterns across these subcategories.

Given the sample of 20 uncertified teachers, data saturation was reached. In addition, the author added credibility by extensive triangulation, relevancy, and trustworthiness measures (Patton, 2015). Trustworthiness was considered using the following strategies, as suggested by Creswell (2008): (a) Triangulation of data using different methods of corroborating evidence and analysis (interview/focus groups versus document content analysis) and by using two different theoretical frameworks that flow into a model/conceptual framework; (b) having a second coder for all documents and interviews; (c) member checks; and (d) enhanced reliability measures, including dual transcription mechanisms, codebooks, and field notes.

Findings and Discussion

While previous studies (Mavrides Calderon, 2022; Reid et al., 2019) found that there are evident disparities in compensation and work conditions between nonpublic school UPK teachers and their public counterparts, the current study found that the impact of these inequities has a broad and significant effect on NYC's early childhood ecological system. Findings point to the negative impacts of uncertified teacher compensation policy on community building, work satisfaction, the ability of teachers to obtain certification while working, and the equity implications of disparities in the larger educational context. (Please note that all names used are pseudonyms.)

Community Building

This study found that there are hierarchies that further divided nonpublic schoolteachers as a group. Schneider and Ingram (1997) explained: "Target populations are often subdivided in policy design so as to direct benefits to the most powerful and positively constructed of the subgroups, further dividing the group" (p. 105). Uncertified teachers' experiences and responses to policies challenged their roles in the school communities to which they belong. Zaira articulated what many other participants reported: "I'm a teacher, but a second-class teacher. It goes one way. I have to be the lead teacher for the parents, but I'm not 'the teacher' when you pay me." While uncertified teachers' impact in their communities is undeniable, their roles are ill-defined, highlighting the need to recognize their value beyond certification. The deficit perception of these teachers permeates many aspects of school life; Martin, a teacher with over 15 years of experience and currently in his third year of a master's program, described how his school often gives certified teachers the first choice of materials and resources, signaling the value they place in one group of teachers over others.

In fact, this study found that uncertified teachers felt they were the most vulnerable, underpaid, and overworked among all educators in the early childhood community. It is evident that while these teachers comprise 50% of all teachers in the system, they are rarely part of this community, often being isolated from professional development opportunities and other privileges and benefits. Participants have reported that certification mandates for centers do not come with the needed compensation and supports to carry out the mandates effectively. This failure to provide supports was perceived by teachers as being indicative of policymakers' disregard for uncertified teachers, viewing the group as "undeserving" of better work conditions (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Moreover, uncertified teachers' experiences differed depending on each center's setting and location—which in a segregated city like NYC, could be considered a proxy for socioeconomic resource level. In particular, uncertified teachers working in centers located in low-income neighborhoods, who experienced longer hours, expressed an inability to complete their coursework on time and described more burnout characteristics than their counterparts working in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. One may propose that policies that affect specific populations disproportionately create the systemic and institutional problems described above. These policies reinforce policymakers' perceptions of these centers as "low-quality" or "less effective," giving rise to what Schneider and Ingram (1997) describe as the "feed-forward" effect: "when policies are enacted, they create a *feed-forward* effect, constructing

perceptions that, while they may not have been initially accurate, become a reality due to the enactment of policy" (Mavrides Calderon, 2022, p. 282).

Work Conditions and Experience

Half of the interviewees mentioned work days of between 9 and 11 hours. However, some participants worked 7 to 8 hours a day; these educators tended to work at community-based organizations or Head Starts that are part of large organizations, with a union to limit the hours they were asked to work. Ernie, an uncertified teacher working in Manhattan, provided context about the challenges of working long days:

I'm drained; I'm physically tired; I just want to go home, lay on the couch, and that is it. We are open from 8:00 to 6:00. It really, you just, you just can't do anything. You just want to sleep, but you have to go to school.

This significant variability of experiences reflects the inconsistent work conditions across early childhood centers in NYC (and across the nation) and points out the value of organized labor in regulating conditions for uncertified teachers. The study demonstrated that educators working at centers with a union had more regulated and manageable work hours. Yet, most unions also viewed uncertified teachers through a deficit lens, negotiating lower wages and radically fewer benefits than their certified counterparts, regardless of their experience at their centers. Martin's experience is representative of other uncertified teachers, as he stated how he viewed this differential:

I know so much more than the people [the centers] hire, but I'm still not part of anything good. And the union, they are like, "no, you don't get a raise because of certification." They lump us with the assistants and the janitors, but I'm a head [lead] teacher. They are like 'no, you get your 3% increase, and that is just what it is.' We don't count much for the union.

Furthermore, this study found that regardless of union affiliation, there was no widespread plan to support uncertified teachers to complete their degrees on time. While regulators require these teachers to complete their degrees in a specific time frame, there are no guidelines for what supports would be provided to make this a reality. This dissonance could be understood through the analysis of documents (hearings, media, advocacy documents) and social media posts, as they barely mentioned uncertified teachers, their needs, or presented any advocacy for their cause. This finding highlighted the invisibility that uncertified teachers faced, and continue to face, in the policymaking process.

Most participants agreed that their compensation was not enough for the amount of work they performed. Ninety percent of the participants felt uneasy

about the fact that as uncertified teachers, they were asked to perform the duties of a lead teacher without the payment of a lead teacher. Karyn confirmed this perspective: "Like, I know I don't have my degree yet, but I'm doing the same work. For teachers like me in the study plan, we are so dependent on the school's wishes to pay us."

In fact, the veteran teachers interviewed in the group believed they deserved more recognition for the years of experience they brought to the field. Olga, a teacher in Head Start, explained the value of her experience as compared with a new teacher with certification:

> I've seen it, you have teachers who have a degree but have no experience at all. I mean, with a master's degree and no experience when it comes to teaching, you put her in the classroom, and she's like freaking out…and sometimes it's like, you who have the experience may not be as qualified as the teacher. And they give that teacher who has the high-end degree more emphasis to do this, to do that. And they look down on you who have hands-on experience, that know what you can do, know what it is you're supposed to do.

The reality is that without certification, uncertified teachers in NYC earn, on average, 40% to 35% less than their certified counterparts working at non-public centers (Miksic, 2019). Several participants confirmed this experience as they described that they find themselves with no other option than to continue in their job despite the working conditions because of the lack of appropriate licenses. The perceived lack of support experienced by participants was consistent with the feeling of being "trapped"; not being able to leave a job with suboptimal conditions because of the long hours, financial costs, and lack of support to complete their degree. This viewpoint seems to be shared across all participants. Rita, an independent center teacher from the Bronx, further elaborated:

> They know you're qualified; but they just give you something because they might think that you desperately need a job. So they just throw something at you, and you say, 'okay, I'll take this' because I don't have any other option.

Studying While Teaching

Certification is one of the main goals for uncertified teachers—a goal that is often challenged by a multitude of obstacles. Participants reported that while working long hours and the summer, they were also required to be enrolled in a higher education program to earn their certification. Some participants found it extremely difficult to juggle both work and school. Frida, a PreK teacher from Brooklyn, shared:

I think one of the things that's really hard is managing your time and priorities. Like throughout the day, you'll be working, and then you'll have classes and stuff and assignments. I think that's a struggle because school is usually like half of the day, too. And then schools like [to have] classes at the end of the night. So you really don't have enough time for studying and stuff. I think that's a challenge.

From the interview data, observable metrics that promoted their ability to complete the participants' degree included leadership consistency, informal and formal time release supports, and tuition reimbursements or waivers. These will be discussed in the section below.

Leadership Supports and Challenges

The ability of participants to complete the degree was highly correlated with the supports they received at work, which reinforces the need to understand these teachers' conditions as part of a larger ecological system. The availability of leadership coaching was inconsistent across participants. These supports included mentorship, training, and professional development, informal time release supports (i.e., leaving early for class), as well as leadership willingness to secure formal tuition reimbursement benefits that allowed uncertified teachers to attend school. Participants working at Head Starts reported more support to complete their degrees than those working in independent centers. Many Head Start uncertified teachers mentioned the willingness of their supervisors to allow them to miss days to complete field experiences outside of their own classroom. This is in contrast with all independent center participants, who reported experiencing pushback by their directors when requesting time to complete degree requirements, like alternative field experiences, taking exams, or attending class. Large community-based organizations and Head Starts also provided or guided participants to some form of tuition assistance or reimbursement, albeit minimal. Independent centers did not provide guidance on how to apply for tuition reimbursement programs or lacked this benefit, except for corporate childcare chains, which offered tuition assistance in exchange for a teaching commitment that, for many, was too onerous. Sam explained:

Yes, they will pay like 10% of my school bill, but I need to sign a contract with them for three years after my degree. That is too much for me with such a low pay and working the hours we work. I'd rather get loans and get out of here as soon as I can.

One could explain this differential as the perceived leadership's assumption that uncertified teachers would stay at Head Start after completing their degrees (Mavrides Calderon, 2022). At the same time, in private independent

centers, there was an implied assumption that uncertified teachers will leave after obtaining certification, and therefore a minimum effort to provide time or financial assistance was reported.

While school leadership is crucial for uncertified teachers' ability to complete their degrees, director turnover threatens those supports. Over 50% of all participants mentioned that during the last year, their center had experienced the departure of at least one director or leader, and all participants reported the departure of at least one leader over the past five years. This is a rampant phenomenon in the early childhood field and in NYC, in particular, where many directors earn less money than the teachers they supervise (Mavrides Calderon, 2022). Lack of leadership availability and consistency affects teachers' ability to receive appropriate coaching and supervision, ultimately affecting teachers' practices and professional growth. Uncertified teachers, this study revealed, are particularly affected by leadership turnover.

Structural Issues

While participants felt a sense of urgency in completing their degrees to avoid a cycle of dissatisfaction, many uncertified teachers do not progress in their degree for many years, and some never complete their degrees. Doris, an uncertified teacher with over 15 years of experience, explained:

> It's taking me a while. There are semesters that I just can't take class, because I'm too tired or I don't have who takes care of my kid. I also can't pass the [certification exam]. Like I study, but I can't pass it. I haven't been in school in so long, I just don't do well in exams and studying. I'm too old. I don't know how I'm going to pass and finish.

The financial, emotional, psychological, and cognitive burden of completing certification exams and requirements is a significant obstacle for students like Doris, who may have been out of school for many years or who struggle to juggle family, work, and school life. This is particularly challenging for participants who, given the cultural norms in their families, are often in charge of extended family, children, and aging parents. Hillary explained:

> It's about priorities. Do I study for the exam, or spend the 70 dollars in registration? Or do I spend time with my kids and take care of my mom's diapers? I can't justify not doing it, you know. Es mi mama. It is my choice, but I have no choice. No one else is there for them, so I'm the one.

For uncertified teachers, there is a sense of urgency to achieve their degrees as a vehicle to improve their lives and seek out more lucrative jobs. All participants considered the study plan program "a ticking time bomb." As Sam

explained: "I have a few more years [to finish]. It's a lot of pressure." All participants indicated that they planned to leave their current positions to seek a job at a public school as soon as they graduated and obtained certification. Policies aiming at supporting retention will be explored in the implications section.

Equity Considerations

All participants were keenly aware of work condition differentials between public school teachers, certified teachers, and themselves. These differences included insufficient prep time, longer hours, summer instruction, and lack of appropriate coaching. Confirming what Schneider and Ingram (1997) proposed as the social construction of policy, most believed that there are historical reasons for this differential rooted in beliefs that privilege some groups over others. For example, Kim argued that the disparities in work conditions stem from preschool teachers' work being labeled as low-skilled rather than as a caregiver–educator job:

> Because they think we are just disposable, like babysitters, but I don't get it because, in meetings, they always say, "You are part of what makes *PreK for All* great," and they ask us to do the same things, but then they pay us so little. Like, I know I don't have my degree yet, but I'm doing the same work. If you think I shouldn't be doing this, then you shouldn't allow me to do this. But then pay me the same. Like for teachers like me, in the study plan, we are so dependent on the school's wishes to pay us. There is no DOE [to] tell us what to get, and there is so much abuse. I have seen it. So I think the DOE allows this to happen because they need people like me. Maybe they don't care because we are not part of the union, you know? In their eyes, we are not the real teachers? But they say we are—it's a lot of contradictions.

Others like Gina, a teacher from the Bronx, believed that there is a gender component involved in this differential: "I also think because women are part of the workforce, they're always being paid less and treated poorly." Furthermore, most participants mentioned that there is a relationship between race and equity related to work and salary conditions in their centers. Cece, a teacher from Brooklyn, confirmed that access to certification is itself an obstacle for teachers who are affected by those systemic inequities:

> I think that this is directly linked to systemic racism for the simple fact that the percentage of people who go to get a higher education to be qualified and certified, to work in PreK and higher up, the percentage that are Black and Hispanic is still so low. So I think that would only make sense as to why White women are more dominant in PreK and

higher, because they're more likely to get that Master's and that higher education to become certified.

This perspective is confirmed by NAEYC and Ed Trust's (2020) research, which found that minoritized early childhood educators feel bullied and disrespected by policies "implemented in ways that disregarded them and the reality of their work" (p. 5). Fuller and Leibovitz (2021) and Latham et al. (2021) corroborated significant quality and work condition differences that existed between *PreK for All* classrooms based on location and race. The implications of these differences are profoundly troubling and need to be reexamined when implementing compensation policies, particularly in the context of the impact of white supremacy culture, which has permeated education for decades. This is highly problematic, as centers have been relying increasingly on uncertified teachers to keep their doors open; losing them would destabilize an already fragile system.

Implications and Recommendations

Findings support previous research signaling structural and equity challenges of scaling up UPK implementations. This is particularly important when implementations use mixed delivery systems (relying on nonpublic and public settings) with built-in, historically negative/biased conceptions of childcare that consider early childhood workers as low-skilled service workers. Nonetheless, mixed delivery systems have tremendous potential. Research has demonstrated that is the case in Georgia, Washington, DC, and other localities (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). The key is implementation that emerges from thoughtful, equitable, and inclusive policymaking, and takes into account the whole ecological system of the early childhood school community. Following that guidance, three main recommendations arose from this study:

Leadership Support

The study made evident the interconnectedness of different stakeholders in the early childhood system, particularly the impact of directors in the lives of uncertified teachers. Without a doubt, to support uncertified teachers, we must also support the leadership that mentors and acknowledges their value as members of the school community. Therefore, director retention must be addressed by providing parity in compensation with public school leaders, and at the very least, with the teachers they supervise. It is also recommended that leadership receives training to understand the complexities of the requirements for certification and the academic and logistical demands of being a teacher and a student simultaneously.

Total Compensation Policies

At the core of UPK expansions are school communities that require compensation policies that need to be crafted as total compensation policies, not only salary policies, but also with transparency, clear expectations, and equality in work conditions. Simply put, PreK teachers, regardless of their credentials or where they work, should be fully part of the educational community in each state. This means that while education requirements should be increased, there should also be support in completing their degrees for those on the ground teaching young children.

Career ladder models and scholarships for supporting teachers exploring higher education should also be considered at a national level. These models should acknowledge the variety of life circumstances that uncertified teachers face and, therefore, should consider flexible coursework requirements. Moreover, minoritized women, who comprise 80% of the current childcare workforce in cities like NYC, should not be left behind due to their inability to enroll and complete a higher education degree. We must recognize the experience and knowledge that these teachers bring to the system by paying them accordingly and grandfathering them into co-teaching positions. Most importantly, any implementation should be done at a sustainable pace and without political motivation in support of the systems already in place, avoiding preserving bias in policymaking. This is consistent with the Power to the Profession Task Force (2020) and NAEYC and Ed Trust's (2020) findings, urging policymakers to focus on the financial, workplace, higher education, and personal supports "to maintain and eventually increase the workforce's diversity" (p. 11). These efforts should be consolidated to provide broader access to all uncertified teachers in the system.

Redefining Social Constructions

Furthermore, it is suggested that as a policy is crafted, policymakers construct their conceptions of those who will implement their policy with the input of those on the ground. This would go a long way to prevent what Schneider and Ingram (1997) coined as "negative constructions of these stakeholders [held by those implementing the policy] that could perpetuate inequities in the future." As the document analysis found, uncertified teachers are overlooked both by policymakers and unions alike. It is imperative that these teachers get a seat at the table, get organized, and get heard. Advocacy, according to Schneider and Ingram, leads the way in disrupting the cycle of policymakers' negative conceptualizations. Uncertified teachers must reclaim their role in the early childhood community by demanding more agency in the policies affecting them.

Future Research

Future research should explore avenues for sustainable and effective supports for uncertified teachers across the country. The role of higher education programs is vital in professionalizing the early childhood field and thus should be investigated as UPK expands across the country. Time release and tuition reimbursement mechanisms that recognize the importance and value of uncertified teachers in the early childhood educational community are also subject of controversy and should be evaluated as possible solutions. The richness of the data captured in this study points to the need for policymakers and leaders to understand better the diversity of the early childhood workforce and the effects of disparities in all aspects of school communities across early childhood settings. Furthermore, a deeper and national examination of how compensation policies disrupt or repair those school communities is long overdue.

Conclusion

"Common experiences define the meaning, the distinct character, and the central purpose of the school communities" (Redding, 2001, p. 23). This study revealed how unequal policies can disrupt those common experiences, creating dual realities for some groups over others and threatening healthy school communities. While the case of NYC is particular to its context, disparities in compensation and policy implementation abound across the country, particularly in early childhood settings that are often unregulated. Therefore, as systems expand and UPK is introduced in more states, it is imperative that policymakers consider crafting policies with special care to avoid bias, including the voices of those most affected by these policies: the early education workforce, children, and their families.

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Appendix. Interview/Focus Group Questions

Demographic Information
1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been teaching in your current school?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. Are you on a study plan? How many years do you have in your study plan?
6. What kind of center do you teach at (private, child care, community-based organization, Head Start, Early learn)?
7. What age group do you teach?
8. What borough is your center located at? What district?

Understanding your program and recent history.
9. Briefly, can you tell me what is the mission behind your center?
10. What were your expectations about your teaching experience before you joined this center?
    Probes:
    ☐ Job description
    ☐ Resources

- ☐ Classroom dynamics
- ☐ Organizational support
- ☐ Mentorship opportunities
- ☐ Socialization
- ☐ Community -building
- ☐ Access to other areas of our organization

11. (If applicable) Tell me about your experience before the lockdown. How would you describe that experience?

    You could talk about:
    - ☐ Curriculum
    - ☐ Resources
    - ☐ Classroom dynamics
    - ☐ Organizational support
    - ☐ Administration
    - ☐ Other teachers
    - ☐ Socialization
    - ☐ Community building
    - ☐ Access to other areas of our organization

12. (If applicable) Tell me about your experience in the last year-and-a-half. How would you describe that experience?

13. Have teachers left your center to take a different job since you started working here? Do you know why they left?

14. To your knowledge, has your center experienced difficulty recruiting new teachers?

15. If yes to "14", Why do you think your school had difficulty hiring new teachers?

16. If "yes" to 14, has the lack of teacher coverage impacted any of the following, and if so, how?

    Probes:
    - ☐ Your classroom practice
    - ☐ The children you teach
    - ☐ Quality of life
    - ☐ Administration
    - ☐ Teacher morale
    - ☐ Resources
    - ☐ Families in your centers
    - ☐ The mission behind your center

17. Are there structural issues in your center that have an effect on your practice? (For example: leadership focus, teacher turnover, resources, children's recruitment, lack of parental involvement, lack of resources, emergency resources)

18. Why do you think these structural issues exist in the first place?

19. What should we do about it?

20. Whom do you think should be addressing it?

Policy and Salary Parity

21. How much do you know about *Pre-K for All*?

22. How much do you know about the birth to 5-year-old DOE consolidation?

23. How has the *Pre-K for All* expansion affected your center?

☐ Please think about the effect of this on children's recruitment

☐ Programmatic changes (have you seen a change in hours, curriculum, etc.)

☐ Teacher retention and turnover

24. Tell me about similarities and differences between your center and a DOE school *Pre-K for All*? Think about environment, salaries, work hours, leadership.

25. Are you aware of any compensation disparities that occur or occurred in different early childhood settings?

26. If "yes" to 25, What would you consider to be the reasons for any disparity?

27. Are you aware of the announcement that pay parity has been mandated across settings (all *Pre-K for All* classrooms)?

28. Did you participate in the advocacy efforts to gain parity?

29. Do you know if your salary changed as a result of the parity?

30. If "yes" to 29: How do you think this will impact your practice? What about your personal life?

31. What have you heard from your administration about the impact of the salary parity on the day-to-day operations of your center?

32. What has changed in your center, if anything, since NYC announced parity?

33. Have certified teachers discussed with you if the salary parity has changed anything for them?

34. What has changed in your school, if anything, since NYC announced that will take over the administration of all early childhood public programs?

35. Tell me more about how your role is different from certified teachers.

a. What are your challenges?

b. Have you received any support in completing your degree?

36. Tell me your experience in your university.

a. What have been some challenges of studying while working? Could you provide me with some examples?

b. What could be done to support you to complete your degree?

37. Are you planning to stay in your center after you receive your certification? Why or why not?

Pandemic

38. Tell me how your center dealt with the pandemic closures?

39. Did you get any support from the DOE in terms of PD as your center had to move to online learning?

40. Did your families receive electronic devices to continue remote learning?

41. How would you describe what has been happening to your center during the pandemic?

42. What is your opinion about the DOE response and supports during the pandemic?