

Pre-K teachers' perspectives on factors that influence their experiences through universal Pre-K policy changes in New York City

Journal of Early Childhood Research

1–16

© The Author(s) 2019

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1476718X19885993

journals.sagepub.com/home/ecr**Sanae Akaba** 

Research Foundation of The City University of New York, USA

Lacey E Peters

Hunter College of The City University of New York, USA

Eva Liang

Research Foundation of The City University of New York, USA

Sherryl B Graves

Hunter College of The City University of New York, USA

Abstract

The focus of this study is preschool teachers' perspectives on their experiences during a Pre-K expansion in New York City. The expansion brought on neoliberal approaches to curriculum, child assessment, quality improvement, and instructional support in classrooms, and these changes in turn heightened expectations for accountability. This has required new sets of skills and resources for early childhood educators to implement the policy as enactors. Using an implementation research framework and a multiple case study approach, this study examined 14 Pre-K teachers' experiences during a policy enactment process and how the policy affected their practice and beliefs. In doing so, it became evident that teachers' daily experiences, loaded with the added requirements to execute the recommended practices set by the shifting landscape of early childhood education, lead to confusions and struggles between their beliefs about appropriate practices. Our findings also shed light on the high needs for compliance and the commonly seen disparities in professional learning opportunities and compensation, all of which may significantly affect teachers' daily lives and consequently, professional identity. Their insights show how they are seeking shared understandings between all stakeholders. This study examines the phenomena seen in classrooms during the Pre-K expansion in New York City and provides implications for policymakers for possible adjustments for the policy and implementation process.

Keywords

neoliberalism, New York City, policy change, qualitative research, teachers' experiences, universal pre-kindergarten

Corresponding author:

Sanae Akaba, Hunter College, Research Foundation of The City University of New York, 695 Park Ave, New York, NY 10065, USA.

Email: sakaba16@huntersoe.org

Introduction

Over the past decades, the push for education policy reform in the United States has gained much attention by policymakers and parents for more equitable early childhood experiences for children and their families (Zigler et al., 2006). Years of education research and recent neuroscience research has supported the assertion that early learning does matter for students' future outcomes such as high school graduation, university entrance, involvement in criminal activities, and physical and emotional health over all (Phillips and Shonkoff, 2000; Shonkoff et al., 2012). The success in promoting universalized early childhood experiences from some states that had started publicly funded early childhood education (ECE), such as Oklahoma and Georgia, attracted other states to implement public state-level or federal-level funded Pre-K programs over the past decade (Gormley et al., 2005, 2017). The success of these programs in addressing issues related to accessibility has resulted in rapid shifts toward publicly funded ECE, more specifically Pre-K education.

Efforts and energy in policy reform should not only stress academic outcomes of children but also focus on what teachers do to achieve them through teaching during a critical time period for human development. Therefore, in this practitioner-based, phenomenological study, we explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on their experiences during a major policy reform, the universal Pre-K expansion initiatives in New York City (NYC), and examine how teachers navigate the shifting landscape of early education.

Literature review

In the United States, publicly funded Pre-K programs are defined as being "funded and administered by the state with a primary goal of educating 4-year-olds who are typically developing and who are in classrooms at least 2 days per week" (Barnett et al., 2009), and there is increasing public interest in expanding preschool education available to more 4-year-olds (Wilinski, 2017). New York State became a part of the public Pre-K movement in the 1990s, and then NYC made public preschool programs available to all 4-year-olds in the city in 2014. After more than 3 years of universal Pre-K policy implementation, and as part of ongoing program evaluations, now is an appropriate time to review and have conversations about the city's approach to its broad expansion of preschool education to more than 70,000 children.

Overview of NYC's Pre-K expansion in 2014

NYC launched its Universal Pre-K expansion initiative, Pre-K for All (PKFA), overseen by the Department of Education 9 months after Mayor Bill de Blasio took office in 2014. The PKFA program grew from approximately 19,500 full-day (6 hours 20 minutes) seats to 52,000 full-day seats in the 2014–2015 school year, then to 72,000 in the beginning of 2015 (Kirp, 2016; New York City Independent Budget Office, 2015, 2017; Potter, 2015). In order to meet this capacity, there was a sharp increase in Pre-K demand on programs operated by community-based organizations (CBOs) under contract with the NYC Department of Education (DOE). Pre-K seats in CBOs grew by 8,000 seats in the 2014–2015 school year, which accounted for 59 percent in the same year and 61 percent in the 2015–2016 school year. The Pre-K student population at CBO sites also rapidly increased, going from 3,000 before the Pre-K expansion in 2014 to more than 31,000 in 2015 (New York City Independent Budget Office, 2015). These numbers show that the Pre-K expansion is eradicating issues of accessibility, and influencing the development of the early childhood workforce, in addition, the focus of policy and programming is moving toward quality improvement.

Quality and accountability in early childhood education in the United States

The discourse and evidence around “high quality” preschool education has been well documented to be effective preparation for kindergarten¹ and achievement for not only children from low-income families, but also those from middle-class families who are considered to hold lower risk of difficulties at school (Reynolds et al., 2017). Over the last few decades, the dominant discourse of neoliberal, market-based “quality and high return” regime has become (or has influenced) the political agendas of the educational reforms in the United States (Brown, 2007, 2015; Moss, 2014; Rose, 1996). As such, public agencies have welcomed “competition” and the “free market, unfettered by government regulation, [to] solve social, economic, and political problems” (Weiner, 2007: 275). Consequently, the Bush administration’s Good Start, Grow Smart (GSGS) initiative (Office of the White House, 2002) has consolidated the neoliberalism approach to ECE in the United States, arguing that public schools had significantly failed students because of a lack of regulations for higher standards and heightened accountability (Brown, 2007).

In trying to ensure government’s expectations for quality and accountability in Pre-K programs, Frede et al. (2011: 156) introduced the elements of multileveled Pre-K evaluations at child, classroom, program, and state levels to measure accountability. At the child level, ongoing individual child assessments that are embedded into the classroom curriculum can inform teaching practice and evaluate teaching effectiveness. At the classroom level, classroom observations can serve as data sources to inform teaching and evaluate program implementation. At the program level, annual program audits and aggregated child and classroom data can inform teachers’ needs for professional development and program effectiveness and efficiency. Finally, at the state level, aggregated data from child, classroom, and program levels can evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the state policy.

Despite the recommendations for evaluations of Pre-K programs for accountability, defining teacher and teaching effectiveness can be a complex task especially for ECE. The educational field still lacks a clear definition for it at the Pre-K level. In a neoliberal policy reform, teacher effectiveness is to be addressed through program and content standards, student outcomes, data tracking and reporting, program evaluation, and professional learning (Cooper and Costa, 2012). There is, however, a lack of consistency in Pre-K standards across the states and programs in the United States; educational researchers cannot systematically review the effectiveness of programming and teaching or standards.

Clear communication from both directions, is also critical in order to hold all stakeholders accountable in a policy, to build and maintain trust, which allow negotiation and co-construction of the policy (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2017). In an effort of creation and sustainment of an early education policy reform, much attention has been paid to standards on child outcomes and teacher quality (Brown, 2007, 2008), and little attention given to teachers’ experiences and shaping their daily experiences in the process of policy enactment.

Teachers’ experiences during policy change

Hall (2004) portrays teaching as a complex, caring, moral, cultural, intellectual, and emotional experience. Teaching requires teachers to hold not just content knowledge and pedagogical skills. Teachers need to be those who can empower children to be engaged and motivated for lifelong learning. In order for teachers to hold these skills and characteristics in their profession, they need to be motivated first to make differences in students’ lives, supported for their professional growth and trusted for their capability to do so (Day and Smethem, 2009), which shapes their professional identity.

For example, professional learning opportunities in and outside of school contexts are crucial components to support the key players of policy enactment and to understand how teachers are able to respond to policy changes and demands (Brown and Englehardt, 2016). Professional learning is

also essential for early childhood educators' growth in order for them to understand and process their teaching and children's learning (Brown and Weber, 2016). Wilinski (2017), however, describes the unequal access to opportunities for professional learning experiences by teachers at local child care centers due to inflexibility caused by their program scheduling and low adult coverage during the day. While teachers who are not provided professional learning opportunities fail to learn about policy reform and recommended practices that are directly related to quality and accountability, they are also excluded from communities of practice that might help them develop stronger relationships with their peers and colleagues. Therefore, Pre-K teachers and administrators at child care centers experience the need to consistently adapt their expectations to work in the Pre-K system so that they meet requirements of the Pre-K policy. This often occurs without clear guidance or communication, which results in competing discourses on quality or effective teaching (Graue et al., 2016).

In NYC, the DOE implemented a comprehensive approach to professional learning opportunities and emphasized instructional content focus to support all PKFA educators, including more than 2,000 new teachers since the expansion. There are four different instructional tracks: NYC Pre-K Inspire (various topics), Thrive (social-emotional and behavioral regulation skills), Create (creative arts), and Explore (critical thinking and problem solving).² These opportunities are offered for all PKFA teachers; however, we have noticed that it can be challenging for a significant number of teachers to attend as many Pre-K programs at CBO sites need to stay open as a result of mandates or expectations set by the other entities associated with their complex funding streams including Head Start.³ This creates an unevenness in teachers' engagement with professional learning and can result in variability of program implementation (Reid et al., 2018, 2019).

There is a dearth of literature on teachers' perspectives on policy enactment and its impact on their daily experiences, especially the variability in teachers' experiences and development of professional identity and since the Pre-K expansion in NYC. Our aim is to shed light on their perspectives to provide the ECE community a more in-depth perspective on the ways in which policies shape teachers' daily lived experiences. We pay particular attention to whether the Pre-K expansion has affected teachers' existing practice(s) for NYC Pre-K teachers through the process of policy enactment for the past 4 years.

Conceptualizing teachers' experiences through policy implementation

In order to understand teachers' daily experiences through the Pre-K expansion policy, we propose a framework that we adopted from implementation science by Proctor et al. (2009, 2011) for this study. The PKFA initiative has been implemented in roughly two school contexts, public schools and CBOs, and through multiple mechanisms in classrooms, such as the use of Authentic Assessment Systems (AAS), Units of Study (Units), a pre-crafted curriculum offered online by the DOE, external supports from social workers (SWs) and instructional coordinators (ICs), quality improvement through classroom environmental evaluations, family engagement, and professional learning for Pre-K teachers (see Figure 1 for the framework). According to Proctor et al. (2011), implementation outcomes are seen through teachers' daily experience and consisted of a policy's appropriateness (i.e. suitability), adoption (i.e. intention to try), acceptability (i.e. satisfaction with multiple aspect of the policy), feasibility (i.e. sustainability for daily use), and fidelity (i.e. adherence to policy requirements). Such implementation outcomes existing in teachers' daily experience lead to teacher outcomes, or service outcomes (Proctor et al., 2011: 66), such as impacts on teachers' beliefs and values for their professional identity development, effectiveness of teaching practice, and teachers' well-being.

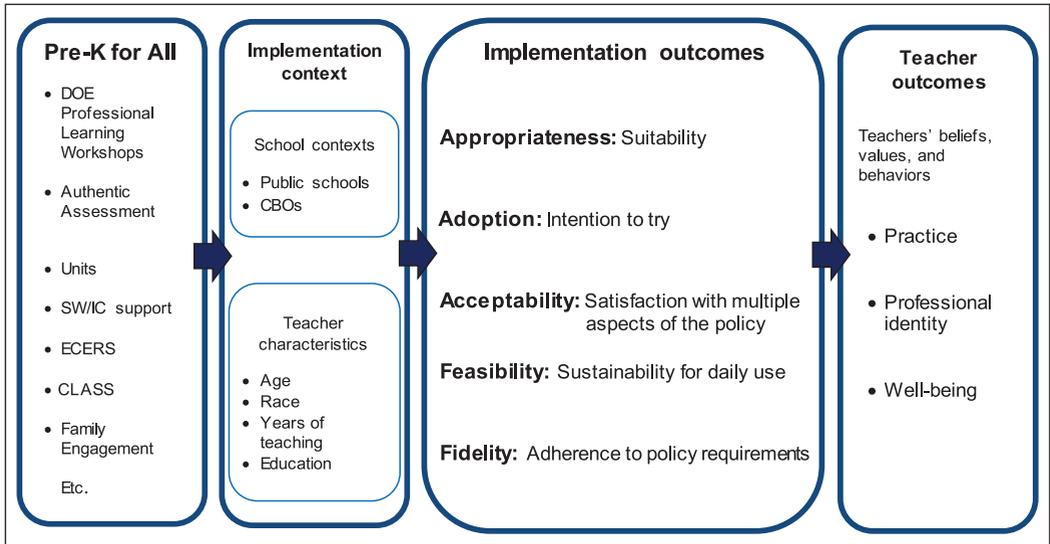


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of this study adopted from Proctor et al. (2011).

This study is part of a larger phenomenological project that utilizes a multiple case study design. We attempted to unpack what we had seen, heard, and learned from the Pre-K teachers in the classroom settings, as they implement the expansion policy through a multitude of PKFA specific tasks and responsibilities since the initiative started. Research questions we asked were: (1) What are teachers' daily experiences as a policy enactors through Pre-K expansion?; (2) What types of implementation outcomes are successful and/or need to be re-examined?

Methods

We recruited eight PKFA programs in three of the five boroughs of New York City during the 2016–2017 school year. Within the eight schools (one public school and seven CBOs) that had agreed to be a part of this study, 16 Pre-K lead teachers were initially recruited to participate in this study (see Table 1 for participant information). All of the teachers held master's degree or at least bachelor's degree who were on the DOE's study plan.⁴ Of the 16 teachers, 14 completed a demographic survey and participated in a series of five monthly interviews on their experiences in Pre-K programs. We conducted a total of five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each of the 14 teachers. Five teachers, however, needed to hold combined sessions due to time constraints. Each interview session was approximately 60 minutes, audio recorded and transcribed, and each participant was assigned a unique identification code and pseudonym. Interview questions were developed to understand teachers' perspectives on curriculum and AAS, family engagement, the types of support available for them, and kindergarten readiness. After completion of all interviews, each teacher received \$250 worth of classroom materials as a form of donation as per the NYC DOE's regulation on incentives for teachers.

Data were analyzed through a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to elicit main themes and patterns. In order to establish trustworthiness of the data, authors and research assistants collaborated in the process of exploring and refining the emergent patterns and themes. All of the recorded interviews were transcribed, and researchers read and reread the transcripts multiple times to familiarize themselves to the data. Initial codes were generated and coded the entire data

Table 1. Characteristics of participants.

Participant	Age	Race	Years of teaching experience	School type
Ms Frances	36–45	African American	20	CBO
Ms Candice	26–35	African American	6	CBO
Ms Felicia	46–55	African American	24	CBO
Ms Darlene	46–55	African American	21	CBO
Ms Kimberly	26–35	African American	5	CBO
Ms Jessica	26–35	White	2	CBO
Ms Sue	55+	White	30	PS
Ms Madison	36–45	Mixed Race	16	PS
Ms Stephanie	26–35	Hispanic	3	CBO
Ms Heather	18–25	White	3	CBO
Ms Samantha	26–35	Mixed Race	2	CBO
Ms Alicia	36–45	African American	3	CBO
Ms Mabel	55+	African American	20	CBO
Ms Gloria	46–55	African American	<1	CBO

PS: public school; CBO: community-based organization.

set in a systematic manner. The coded data were utilized to search for themes that were commonly found in relation to our research questions. After reviewing the themes, we defined and refined the specific meaning of each theme in relation to the data. Finally, we sorted out excerpts and selected examples that were compelling to answer the research questions.

Initially, data collection through our interviews was planned and conducted to learn about teachers' experiences with AAS, one of the added requirements for every PKFA lead teacher since the expansion. This topic caught our attention because of the growing prominence of AAS in Pre-K settings and heightened accountability around kindergarten and school readiness. As we developed our relationships with teachers through interviews and classroom visits, teachers started sharing more details about their daily experiences as PKFA teachers. As researchers in ECE fields, we felt that we need to report what we heard from teachers to a larger audience. Policy making needs to be effective, efficient, and equitable; therefore, we want there to be a space for negotiation among all stakeholders including teachers. This will lead to more informed decision making around curriculum, assessment, and other accountability measures. As Graue et al. (2016) argue, more nuanced understandings of universal Pre-K expansion and accountability are needed to illustrate how publicly funded early childhood programs are maturing in the United States.

Findings

Extra support is helpful, but can lead to confusion

The Pre-K teachers in this study worked with children and families in an organized system of instruction, assessment, and program quality. At the beginning of the PKFA expansion, the DOE required all programs use one of the three types of AAS. There are three checkpoints for Pre-K assessment per school year: December, March, and June. Prior to these checkpoints, teachers are expected to consistently collect "authentic" data, including anecdotal notes, children's work samples, or photo documentation. In addition to data collection, teachers are required to input data into the online system which align to all NYS Pre-K standards throughout the year (New York City Department of Education, 2015) to inform their teaching practice.⁵

Teachers' responses toward AAS were somewhat mixed. Many indicated that the AAS had helped them to understand children's individual growth and inform their practice by individualizing lessons accordingly. For example, Ms Jessica shared her positive impression of the AAS and how she utilizes the assessment in her day-to-day practice:

Well, AAS helps me, I also do, during choice time and sometimes during centers I try to do a little bit of pull-outs for kids who need a little bit more assistance [based on the AAS] . . . , these are the kids that need some support with letters and numbers.

Ms Jessica also mentioned that assessment information helps to understand children's development better and inputting assessment data into the online system enables her compare children's outcomes to find out when there is something "wrong" and become a teacher who can inform her practice.

The DOE requires every Pre-K site to have their classrooms evaluated every other year.⁶ Classroom environment and program quality in every PKFA program are assessed on ECERS (Harms et al., 1980), and the assessment scores are posted online. Environment and program quality is also evaluated using the CLASS (Pianta et al., 2008). The teachers in our sample described their compliance with the requirements and their experiences. Ms Sue explained her effort to prepare her classroom for ECERS:

We were running around like chickens with their head cut off! You're getting ready for [ECERS] because you put so much effort, time, and love into the classroom. You want to put your best, and you want to say, 'We are not perfect but we want to show you the great things we're doing' . . . Time is always [a challenge].

The DOE places an IC to every site. IC visits are also need-based. High need sites receive weekly to biweekly IC visits and low need sites have monthly visits. ICs review classroom environments, instructional strategies, and materials based on the DOE Units and the state's Pre-K standards. At every visit, they hold a meeting with teachers and provide feedback. Many teachers in our sample indicated their confusion about different messages from ICs and SWs on classroom and program improvement evaluations using ECERS and CLASS and how to prepare for them. Ms Heather described her experience with many different DOE personnel providing her suggestions and recommendations to present her classroom, yet there is a lack of consensus in how the classroom should look:

Also, the [IC] needs to get on the same page as ECERS reviewers in the classroom. They are all completely different. ECERS wants you to do this way, CLASS wants you to do this way, DOE [SW and IC] wants you to put things away this way . . . So for each one I have to change my room around. For each individual thing. What is the point of that?

Teachers do prioritize quality improvement for their classrooms and practice, and they desire to score higher on those evaluations. However, many teachers firmly suggested the SWs and ICs find a consensus in order to avoid any confusions, especially on how to prepare for these evaluations because the teachers are the ones who are evaluated after all.

Almost all of our teachers appreciate the various supports from the DOE, such as their use of AAS and Units, IC and SW support for classroom and program quality evaluation, access to both DOE sponsored professional learning opportunities. That is to say, teachers responded to such supports with high degrees of *adoption*; or they utilized the supports or at least intended to utilize them. The majority of these supports were monitored and maintained by the DOE through their

implementation process for accountability, while teachers, especially CBO teachers, seem to have encountered difficulty adjusting their teaching practice and accepting SW/IC's visits as useful support. This indicates that the teachers' *acceptability* to the SW/IC's supports was low and that the *feasibility* of the implementation needs adjustment for the CBO teachers. As literature has pointed out, it is crucial that the DOE establishes clear expectations to help teachers in developing collaborative relationships and shared understandings of the role of each stakeholders in their classrooms, which allow negotiation and co-construction of the policy (OECD, 2017).

Expectations for kindergarten readiness has shifted with high accountability

For the majority of the CBO teachers in this study, the Pre-K expansion resulted in a brand new relationship with the DOE. PKFA teachers at CBOs had to learn a new way to be a teacher, adopt the Pre-K standards, and adjust their teaching practice and day-to-day work according to the requirements and expectations set by the local authorities and the dominant discourse around high-quality Pre-K programs and teachers. As a result, many of our teachers expressed that there had been significant shifts in the conceptualization of kindergarten readiness pre and post PKFA initiatives. Ms Samantha described her conceptualization of Pre-K education:

I feel Pre-K is to give children a vision of . . . a little bit of academics. So that when they go to kindergarten, they're prepared, not lost . . . Before PKFA was invented, [many] kids would come from daycare and go to kindergarten. They didn't know any alphabet, numbers, letter sounds . . .

Later she elaborated on how Pre-K now had become more close to kindergarten or first grade where children used to just start learning academic skills such as literacy and math. Ms Sue also described her perspectives on the shifting focus of Pre-K curriculum:

I've been doing PreK a long time. We always had standards but [since Pre-K for All] it's more focused on the Common Core standards. I think the expectations for the children are more academic now. It used to be a greater focus on the social emotional skills. It used to be having them getting used to school, having them socialize with their friends, learning how to sit on the rug. Yes, there was teaching going on always [before], but it wasn't so focused on literacy or mathematics at all . . .

Having taught as a teacher for more than 30 years, she was able to identify the shift since the accountability became part of discourse around ECE. She indicated that expectations for the Pre-K aged children are more academically focused, and less attention goes to social-emotional development now, such as sharing with peers, expressing desires and feelings.

Working at a CBO site, Ms Jessica described how her practice needed to shift to "doing it the DOE way." As a teacher in a Pre-K program as a CBO, this shift was a significant change for her:

I just got a whole new way that we're doing lesson plans. I was just in an hour meeting and we were given, we're doing it the DOE way. So that's different for us and that's a lot more work. Constantly writing reports. Authentic Assessment . . . I feel like it is a big demand and it's time consuming, it's super time consuming. I'll probably do it this weekend. Other times, we're prepping for the next day. So if we're prepping for the next day, I can't write a report. So it's kind of all of it. It's all really time consuming.

Teachers in this study provided mixed responses that exhibited potential discrepancies between the expectations for kindergarten readiness and teachers' beliefs for ECE. The former was academic focused associated with demands and requirements from the DOE since the Pre-K expansion; the latter was more associated with their own beliefs on early childhood practice that was

linked to developmentally appropriate, play-based curriculum and practice. Previous to PKFA, most of our teachers had had their instructional focus on social-emotional learning; therefore, in their PKFA programs, they seemed to have struggled adjusting their practice to more academically oriented curriculum and content within the Units of Study. As literature indicates, teachers need clearer understandings on the conceptualization of kindergarten readiness, and there needs to be room for negotiation for potentially individualizing and localizing the concept of readiness for their own school community, prioritizing the *appropriateness* of implementation (Brown, 2007; OECD, 2017)

Additional requirements are completed for compliance and conformity

Since the expansion, there have been a multitude of additional requirements for teachers to complete. For instance, when asked to explain how she decided to use the Units, Ms Frances said:

All Pre-K programs have to comply with the DOE, and that's what I do (although I had curriculum that I used before). In the computer you can see the things you have to do weekly [in the Units]. So that's what I do. I go to the computer, I check it every week, I do what I am told to . . .

Ms Felicia also said:

I think we have to focus on that Units because when they [DOE personnel] come, that's what they're looking for. You want to get a check, check in the sense of good job, even if you don't agree with it. Give them what they want, right?

The comments from these teachers illustrate the teachers' experiences that we have seen in the past few years in classrooms. Teachers felt less autonomy with their own instruction and content development, and instead, sensed high demands for compliance with the DOE's expectations, standards, and accountability. AAS was meant for teachers to utilize to reflect their own practice and developmental growth and needs of each child. When asked why the DOE requires all teachers to complete AAS, Ms Samantha replied, "Probably just to collect data. And to have the information available. I'm not really sure who looks at it because we never get feedback on it."

Ms Jessica also illustrated how she would explain what the purpose of assessment is to parents as:

I don't really approach parents about [the assessment], and most of them don't know about it. They don't know anything about it. But if I do, I just explain that it's the DOE's way of tracking the kids to make sure that they're developmentally appropriate and they're meeting standards, and it's like the DOE's way of keeping track of the kids.

Some of our teachers found the assessment helpful to learn the development of each child and believed it had informed their practice by shifting their focus to more individualized lessons and curriculum. Others found it time and energy consuming. When asked how much time she spent during the day for data input, Ms Sue said:

I do it on the weekends in my house usually. Because there is really very little time at work . . . So most of the time I do it on the weekends at home.

Ms Sue's comment on AAS was shared by most of our teachers. They simply could not allocate adequate time to input data in the system during the daily hours of program operation; therefore,

they were spending their weekends in trying to meet the assessment deadlines. Moreover, many seem to be confused as to the purpose of all of the efforts for data collection and how to use the collected data on their own.

All of the teachers in our sample utilized an AAS and Units, and worked with SW and IC to align with standards and improve program quality. This indicates that the *fidelity* of implementation was met, whether or not teachers found it time and energy consuming. Although many of the teachers found AAS helpful to inform their practice, a few teachers did not. The majority of the teachers felt the need to comply with the requirements and deadlines, and it became evident that their autonomy and influence over pedagogical decision making was limited because of external demands. Individual-level assessment is meant to support teachers to deepen their understandings of the growth and learning of each child in their classrooms. If teachers utilize the data collection and assessment results intentionally, the assessment can be a useful tool that allows them more autonomy that enable them to individualize and localize lesson planning and curriculum building. The purpose of assessment, therefore, should be coherently communicated by the DOE for shared understandings in order for teachers to gain more autonomy and pedagogical decision-making power to increase *appropriateness* for their school community and *acceptability* of implementation.

Parity in opportunities and compensation

The fourth theme was related to the needs for access to more individualized or localized professional learning opportunities and equitable compensation. Ms Jessica reflected on her experience in attending professional learning workshops:

We're not just like sitting and being lectured at, but they're still like . . . there's not a good way of doing what they need to do. Because they need to reach ALL of us.

This statement exemplifies how the teachers in our sample recognize the enormity of the DOEs ambitions to provide professional learning for all of its Pre-K staff, but grapple with their approach to building support systems that meet the individualized or localized needs of educators. Some teachers said that they gained a lot from each of the workshops, whereas others found them to be basic or redundant.

Although professional learning opportunities were provided for teachers to attend, there were inequities in public schools and CBOs, also seen in Wilinski's (2017) study on Wisconsin's Pre-K. While all PKFA teachers are required to attend, as these workshops are scheduled on nonattendance days at public schools, many of our CBO teachers were unable to participate because of a shortage of staff coverage in classrooms. Ms Stephanie said:

I've never done a DOE PD ever. Because every time we [have an opportunity], there's always stuff going on here. So I've never been able to attend. [DOE] sends the email, and my boss says, "We need you here." I'm like, okay I can't go again. That's fine. I never go. Maybe one day . . .

All of our teachers appreciated the opportunities for workshops. However, the existing structural inequality that promotes or inhibits access to those professional learning opportunities greatly impacts teachers' professional identity formation as Pre-K educators. In addition, public school teachers receive 1 hour of lesson preparation time per day and guaranteed lunch time, based on their union contracts, during their daily operation of 6 hours 20 minutes. On the other hand, most of our CBO teachers had to plan lessons during children's naptime. Ms Jessica strongly expressed

her feelings, “I wish, I wish that I had more time for my planning.” When trying to provide high-quality Pre-K education and keeping the practice and program accountable, promoting professional identity and well-being of teachers, who implement the policy on a front line every day, is critical.

Most of our teachers in this study were Pre-K teachers in CBOs. Before the Pre-K expansion started, their programs for 4-year-olds were funded through the Administrations for Children’s Services, an NYC agency for child and family welfare, not the DOE. Therefore, this expansion policy was the beginning of their brand new relationships with the DOE staff, standards, and regulations, which were designed for public school operations and more centered at quality and accountability. Ms Alicia, who had recently earned her master’s degree and became a certified Pre-K teacher, expressed her confusion about the salary disparity between public school and CBO teachers:

I think DOE needs to really, really check and see what it is they truly want and then let us know because they’re not clear. The DOE also needs to pay CBO teachers the same salary that they’re gonna pay the teachers in the public schools. That’s one of my big confusion with them, the requirements [to become a Pre-K teacher] are the same. You have to have the master’s, you have to be certified [by the state of New York]. Why should you make 10, 15 thousands less [at CBO] when you have to fulfill the same requirements? You still have the same loans that have to get payed back, so you should make the same money.

Salary parity has been one of a commonly shared topics among ECE teachers in the United States (Cassidy et al., 2011; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006) and NYC (Reid et al., 2018, 2019; Shapiro, 2015). Five years since the Pre-K expansion, the compensation gap between public school and CBO teachers has not been closed.⁷ We have observed a good number of qualified CBO teachers leaving their positions for public school Pre-K positions for union contracts, better compensation and working conditions.

Despite the access to such opportunities provided by the DOE, many of our CBO teachers felt left out as they had rarely been able to attend such workshops due to a constant lack of coverage at their sites, which aligns with literature (Wilinski, 2017). That is, the *feasibility* of offering professional learning opportunities for all teachers should be re-examined in order to avoid the influence of structural inequality between the two different school settings. This seemingly widespread inequity that is consistently observed in the ECE field disrupts growth and identity development of teachers. Our findings also suggest that the resources, such as time for lesson planning and lunch, professional learning opportunities, and compensation are unequally distributed among different program settings, namely public schools and CBOs. This unequal work condition between public school and CBO teachers causes frustration and resistance toward policy enactment from CBO teachers as they feel disempowered in their profession and become reluctant to utilize recommended practice.

Discussion

The findings of this study make apparent that Pre-K teachers are primarily complying with the expectations and mandates set through policy implementation and as a result of the programmatic shifts influenced by the PKFA expansion. That is to say, through the policy lens, the adoption and fidelity of implementation were met (Proctor et al., 2011). However, our findings also indicate that teachers are striving for more autonomy in teaching and pedagogical decision-making power. Moving forward, we hope to see a transformation from compliance to a place where teachers feel

comfortable and confident in doing what they feel is responsive to the needs of children and families in their school communities. While the teachers appreciated additional supports from the DOE, the majority of teachers in this study seemed to be confused and less autonomous with the DOE's expectations for utilization of these extra supports for PKFA programming (e.g. AAS, Units, SW/IC visits) and the conceptualization of kindergarten readiness. They wanted to have clear descriptions to help them better understand the PKFA policy.

The teachers also needed to understand the purpose of additional requirements for PKFA programming (e.g. ECERS or CLASS evaluations), and again they wanted the information clearly communicated to them so they could adopt them in their practice and gain more autonomy in their practice. The majority of the teachers completed assessments and utilized Units to comply with the requirements and conform to the societal norms about high-quality ECE. The utilization of such tools can be beneficial for any teachers to inform their practice and help them gain more autonomy (i.e. promoting the acceptability), if the purpose is communicated coherently and is less focused on compliance (i.e. prioritizing the appropriateness of implementation).

Finally, teachers suggested the feasibility of the policy be re-examined for equitable work conditions, access to resources, and compensations (Proctor et al., 2011), a lack of which creates structural barriers to well-being of the teachers, and consequently, high-quality early childhood teaching. Teachers' professional identity is largely affected by the contexts and relationships (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011); that is, the factors around them, whether it is the expectations from the DOE, the dominant discourse around ECE, or structural inequity in their profession, can intentionally or unintentionally influence their identity every day. It is, therefore, crucial for the policy-makers to create an equitable environment for all PKFA teachers where they can feel more comfortable and confident in doing what they believe in teaching is responsive and relevant to the children and families in their school communities. In order to do so, it is necessary to listen to teachers' voices first. Teachers need room that allows them to negotiate for what they need and co-construct the policy to gain more autonomy in their practice and positive professional identity.

The majority of our participants were teachers of color, immigrants, or immigrant descendants who taught children of color, predominantly African American and Latinx children. These cultural aspects might have influenced their practice and professional identity, but for further analysis we argue that understandings of the ecological systems of early childhood profession (Dalli et al., 2012) and critical race theory (Bell, 1987; Harris, 1993) are critical in order to better understand teachers' experiences as professionals in the white, Eurocentric education system. Because of the systemic racism that has impacted the lives of people of color at every level of the US society for centuries (Bell, 1992; Gillborn, 2016), including education, criminal justice, and health care, we also argue that systemic racism plays a role in teachers' chronic system of the ecological systems of early childhood profession. In other words, teachers of color must navigate every system in the United States *and* the dominant systems in education (e.g. the federal DOE, state and local DOE, accrediting bodies such as NAEYC), where decisions around universal Pre-K programming are made, that historically worked against them because of their skin color.

The decisions about programming and practice are premised in the socially constructed dominant, neoliberal narrative of kindergarten readiness (Graue, 1993, 2006); which is based on the political and economic values of "quality and high returns" (Moss, 2014, 2015); thus, it is without doubt that teachers of color are marginalized in the multilayered dominant systems within the US society. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, therefore, must become highly conscious of the impacts of systemic racism in education and the ways dominant culture and neoliberal narratives tend to ignore and, consequently, perpetuate the deeply entrenched white supremacy, social injustices, and inequities within the systems of education in the United States.

Despite the gains made during and after the Civil Rights movement to desegregate schools in the 1960s and to equalize systems of education, criminal justice, and health care, problems continue to persist today. Systemic racism significantly affects students and families of color in school, as well as teachers of color who breathe and live daily in their profession within the dominant, neoliberal systems. Educational researchers should prioritize race and systemic racism in their research models.

Conclusion

The current study examined how ECE policy in NYC, PKFA, has influenced teachers' daily lives through their enactment process. Our findings suggest that teachers seek more autonomy and pedagogical decision-making power in their profession, and coherent communication about the policy from the DOE. As Day and Smethem (2009) argue, teachers, especially teachers of color who daily navigate structural injustice, need to develop their sense of professional identity in an environment where they are "encouraged, supported, trained, trusted, respected, and valued" in addition to the expectations of teaching profession from policymakers, which are more focused on their efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. PKFA initiative is in its fifth year, and it is now more critical than ever to recognize how teachers' experiences shape their responses to the policy enactment process and child outcomes. In order to make these organizational efforts successful and sustainable, experiences of teachers should be represented in the decision-making process and focus less on the neoliberal approach of "quality, free market, and accountability," especially as the city has expanded their universal Pre-K to 3-year-old (3 K for All) in high need districts in 2017. In our sample of teachers, many have expressed their needs of individualized, localized support, as well as clear, coherent communication from the DOE on expectations for Pre-K teachers because a lack of such support and communication can significantly affect their daily experiences. To improve current teacher quality, as well as sustain and retain high quality teachers, we suggest policymakers start paying much closer attention to teachers' experiences and environments which promote early childhood educators to feel valued, respected, and supported in their profession.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the New York City Early Childhood Research Network for their collaboration and insightful feedback. They also thank the teachers who graciously collaborated with us and our research assistants who did the foundational work for this study.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was generously supported through a research fellowship by the Foundation for Child Development (grant number 7F223-0001) awarded to Dr Lacey E. Peters and Dr Sherryl B. Graves.

ORCID iD

Sanae Akaba  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0435-0625>

Notes

1. In the United States, kindergarten is the first year of formal education in school. Eligibility for kindergarten entry varies state by state. In New York State, all children who turn 5 by December 31 of the school year are eligible to enter kindergarten in September of the same school year.
2. In 2019, Professional Development tracks changed slightly. Inspire has been replaced with Teaching Team Learning Communities, where teachers and leaders learn various strategies on assessments, classroom management, critical thinking, language development, and etc.
3. Head Start programs are funded by the Federal Office of Head Start, at Administration for Children and Families, and promotes school readiness to children under 5 from low-income families through their comprehensive early childhood programs.
4. Teachers are eligible to apply for Study Plan offered by the DOE. Study Plan allows anyone with a bachelor's degree or master's degree in ECE to complete their education and credentialing process (PKFA requires at master's degree and New York State teaching certification in ECE) within 3 years.
5. Pre-K programs utilized New York State Pre-Kindergarten Foundations for Common Core (PKFCC). In 2019, PKFCC has been updated to New York State Pre-K Learning Standards.
6. In personal conversations, some teachers mentioned that they had either ECERS or CLASS evaluation in two consecutive years.
7. In July 2019, labor union and Mayor de Blasio announced a new plan to close pay gaps for Pre-K teachers at CBOs. Under this plan, there will be approximately \$20,000 increase for certified Pre-K teachers with Master's degree and \$17,000 increase for certified Pre-K teachers with Bachelor's degree by October 2021. In October 2019, the Mayor also announced a similar plan for Head Start teachers with an approximately \$15,000 increase by October 2021.

References

- Akkerman SF and Meijer PC (2011) A dialogical approach to conceptualizing teacher identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27(2): 308–319.
- Barnett WS, Friedman AH, Hustedt JT, et al. (2009) An overview of prekindergarten policy in the United States: program governance, eligibility, standards, and finance. In: Pianta RC and Howes C (eds) *The Promise of Pre-K*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes, pp. 3–30.
- Bell DA (1987) *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bell DA (1992) *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Brown C and Englehardt J (2016) Conceptions of and early childhood educators' experiences in early childhood professional development programs: a qualitative metasynthesis. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* 37(3): 216–244.
- Brown C and Weber N (2016) Struggling to overcome the state's prescription for practice: a study of a sample of early educators' professional development and action research projects in a high-stakes teaching context. *Journal of Teacher Education* 67(3): 183–202.
- Brown CP (2007) Unpacking standards in early childhood education. *Teachers College Record* 109(3): 635–668.
- Brown CP (2008) Keep it cheap, keep it local, and keep it coming: standards-based accountability reform in Wisconsin. *Educational Policy* 22(2): 250–294.
- Brown CP (2015) Conforming to reform: teaching pre-kindergarten in a neoliberal early education system. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 13(3): 236–251.
- Cassidy D, Lower J, Kinter-Duffy V, et al. (2011) The day-to-day reality of teacher turnover in preschool classrooms: an analysis of classroom context and teacher, director, and parent perspectives. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 25(1): 1–23.
- Cooper D and Costa J (2012) Increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of existing public investments in early childhood education: recommendations to boost program outcomes and efficiency. Center for American Progress. Available at: <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/06/pdf/earlychildhood.pdf>

- Dalli C, Miller L and Urban M (2012) Early Childhood Grows Up: Towards a Critical Ecology of the Profession. In: Miller L, Dalli C and Urban M (eds) *Early Childhood Grows Up: Towards a Critical Ecology of the Profession*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 3–19.
- Day C and Smethem L (2009) The effects of reform: have teachers really lost their sense of professionalism? *Journal of Educational Change* 10(2–3): 141–157.
- Frede EC, Gilliam WS and Schweinhart LJ (2011) Assessing accountability and enduring continuous program improvement: why, how and who. In: Zigler E, Gilliam WS and Barnett S (eds) *The Pre-K Debates: Current Controversies and Issues*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Gillborn D (2016) Critical race theory beyond North America: towards a trans-Atlantic dialogue on racism and antiracism in educational theory and praxis. In: Dixon AD, Anderson CKR and Donnor JK (eds) *Critical Race Theory in Education: All God's Children Got A Song*. New York: Routledge, pp. 87–122.
- Gormley W, Gayer T, Phillips D, et al. (2005) The effects of universal Pre-K on cognitive development. *Developmental Psychology* 41(6): 872–884.
- Gormley W, Phillips D and Anderson S (2017) The effects of Tulsa's Pre-K program on middle school student performance. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 37(1): 63–87.
- Graue ME (1993) *Ready for What? Constructing Meanings of Readiness for Kindergarten*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Graue ME (2006) The answer is readiness-now what is the question? *Early Education and Development* 17(1): 43–56.
- Graue ME, Wilinski B and Nocera A (2016) Local control in the era of accountability: a case study of Wisconsin Pre-K. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 24: 60.
- Hale-Jinks C, Knopf H and Knopf H (2006) Tackling teacher turnover in child care: understanding causes and consequences, identifying solutions. *Childhood Education* 82(4): 219–226.
- Hall C (2004) Theorising changes in teachers' work. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 32: 1–14.
- Harms T, Clifford R and Cryer D (1980) *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale—Revised Edition*. New York: Teachers College Press
- Harris C (1993) Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review* 106: 1707–1791.
- Kirp D (2016) How New York made Pre-K a success. *The New York Times*, 13 February. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/sunday/how-new-york-made-pre-k-a-success.html>
- Moss P (2014) *Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education: A Story of Democracy, Experimentation and Potentiality*. London: Routledge.
- Moss P (2015) There are alternatives! Contestation and hope in early childhood education. *Global Studies of Childhood* 5(3): 226–238.
- New York City Department of Education (2015) *Pre-K for all supports and resources overview 2015–2016*. New York: New York City Department of Education.
- New York City Independent Budget Office (2015) Universal pre-kindergarten: enrollment and funding. Fiscal Brief: Focus on The Preliminary Budget, March. Available at: <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/universal-prek-enrollment-funding-march2015.pdf>
- New York City Independent Budget Office (2017) A system in flux: new programs, administrative changes create challenges for New York City's traditional subsidized child care programs. Fiscal Brief: Focus on The Preliminary Budget, June. Available at: <https://ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/a-system-in-flux-new-programs-administrative-changes-create-challenges-for-new-york-citys-traditional-subsidized-child-care-programs.pdf>
- Office of the White House (2002) Good start, grow smart: the Bush administration's early childhood initiative. Available at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/earlychildhood/earlychildhood.html>
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017) *Education policy implementation: a literature review and proposed framework*. OECD Education Working Paper no. 162, 8 December. Paris: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Phillips D and Shonkoff J (eds) (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

- Pianta R, La Paro K and Hamre B (2008) *Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- Potter H (2015) *Lessons from New York City's Universal Pre-K Expansion*. New York: The Century Foundation.
- Proctor E, Silmere H, Raghavan R, et al. (2011) Outcomes for implementation research: conceptual distinctions, measurement challenges, and research agenda. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 38(2): 65–76.
- Proctor EK, Landsverk J, Aarons G, et al. (2009) Implementation research in mental health services: an emerging science with conceptual, methodological, and training challenges. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 36(1): 24–34.
- Reid JL, Kagan SL, Melvin SA, et al. (2018) Building a unified system for universal Pre-K in New York City: the implementation of Pre-K for all by setting and auspice. Available at: <http://policyforchildren.org/new-york-city-universal-pre-k-upk-study/>
- Reid JL, Melvin SA, Kagan SL, et al. (2019) Building a unified system for universal Pre-K: the case of New York City. *Children and Youth Services Review* 100: 191–205.
- Reynolds A, Hayakawa M, Ou S, et al. (2017) Scaling and sustaining effective early childhood programs through school–family–university collaboration. *Child Development* 88(5): 1453–1465.
- Rose N (1996) Governing “advanced” liberal democracies. In: Barry A, Osborne T and Rose N (eds) *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism, and Rationalities of Government*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 37–64.
- Shapiro E (2015) Pre-K providers pressure de Blasio over salary disparities. *Politico*, 14 January. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/city-hall/story/2015/01/pre-k-providers-pressure-de-blasio-over-salary-disparities-018812>
- Shonkoff J, Garner A, Siegel B, et al. (2012) The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics* 129(1): 232–246.
- Weiner L (2007) A lethal threat to US teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education* 58: 274–286.
- Wilinski B (2017) *When Pre-K Comes to School: Policy, Partnerships, and the Early Childhood Education Workforce*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Zigler E, Gilliam W and Jones S (2006) *A Vision for Universal Preschool Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.