



# Policy Effects on NYC Early Education Centers

ECOLOGICAL CASE STUDIES

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# Purpose

This study\* analyzed the impact of PreK for All (PKFA) expansion on the general early childhood education landscape in New York City by comparing and contrasting policymakers' discourse and the experiences of directors, teachers, and parents. In this qualitative study, the researcher identified the reported consequences of the salary and work condition disparities before what the City deemed as “salary parity” (sub-parity)\*\* was announced. In addition, the study scrutinized how the announced salary sub-parity has affected the experience of those working at or attending Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Head Starts, and independent child care centers. The focus of this study was on those stakeholders not affiliated with public schools: New York City Early Education Centers' ("NYCEECs") leaders, teachers, and parents. This study aimed at amplifying the voices of these stakeholders to inform policy recommendations.

\*This brief summarizes some of the findings based on Mavrides (2021). Policy Effects on New York Early Childhood Education Centers: Ecological Case Studies. Dissertation. ProQuest.

\*\*Whitebook and Mclean (2017) distinguish sub-parity compensation as compensation that is similar but not equivalent, where salaries are the same but not prorated for hours or days; where benefits are the same but not equivalent; and where supports may exist but may not be accessible. Using this conceptualization, the salary parity announced in July 2019, will be referred to as sub-parity.

# Context

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Pre-K for All (PKFA) opened access to early education for all four-year-olds in NYC, and has been lauded as a national exemplar. Mayor De Blasio's administration deployed PKFA using a mixed delivery system, coordinating the use of private, public, and community-based/nonprofit early childhood centers already providing services. The complexity of the early childhood system in place prior to PKFA was, and continues to be, a significant challenge. Sixty percent of PKFA's deployment has been implemented through what the NYC Department of Education (DOE) refers to as New York City Early Education Centers, "NYCEECs," that is Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) that in some cases included Head Start centers and independent child care centers that hosted PKFA classrooms, as well as private tuition classrooms.

For over six years, the PKFA and 3K for All funding system resulted in an imbalance in salaries and work conditions between NYCEECs' lead teachers and their unionized public-school counterparts. Starting in July of 2019, after an arduous advocacy campaign by several stakeholders, the City approved salary increases for all NYCEECs' PKFA teachers that promised to bring "parity" by October of 2021 (Alexander, 2019a, 2019b; City of New York, 2019; Elsen-Rooney, 2019b; New York City Department of Education, 2019; Veiga, 2019a).

While this is considered significant progress, the staged increases failed to recognize the prior experience of teachers working at NYCEECs. Currently, the salaries of these teachers are based on the years of experience in PKFA, not prior years of ECE experience, resulting in lower salaries than their public school counterparts with the same years of service. In addition, the new salary agreement does not apply to uncertified teachers working under study plans and teachers working with children under three. The staged increases also neglect to acknowledge the challenging work conditions and long hours these teachers experience. The discourse on the announced salary sub-parity and system consolidation does not reflect what has been reported both in research and in the media as the reality of those affiliated with NYCEECs (Mavrides, 2018; Reid et al., 2019; Veiga, 2021). This is the discrepancy that this study explored. In fact, this study analyzed the impact of PKFA expansion on the general education early childhood landscape in New York City by contrasting and comparing policymakers' discourse and the experiences of directors, teachers, and parents.

# Methods

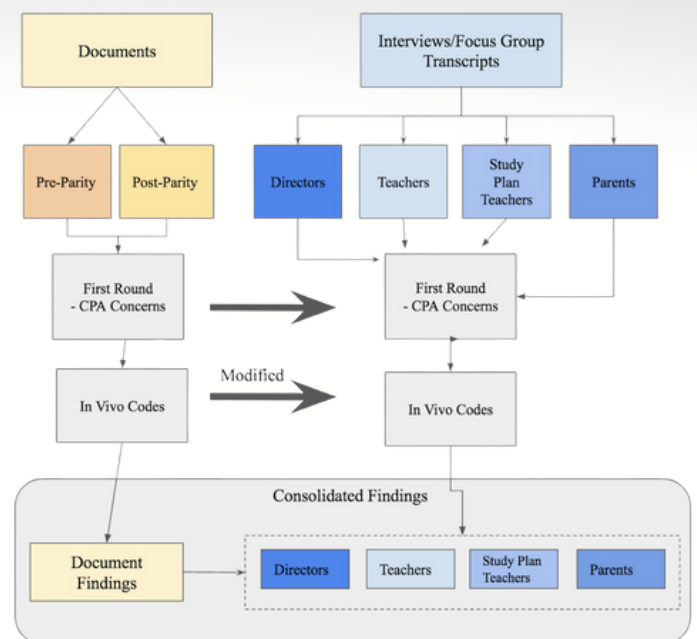
As this study examined the participant's lived experience and perspective, a qualitative approach was the primary form of analysis. This study used an exploratory case study methodology to better understand the relationship between policy design, implementation, and the interrelated nature of stakeholders' lived experience in the PKFA expansion (Yin, 2012). Critical Policy Analysis was utilized in conjunction with both the social construction and policy design theory (Schneider & Ingram, 1993) and the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This multi-theoretical approach "results in policy analysis that has more depth and breadth" (Diem et al., 2014).

This study included several layers of analysis:

1. Document discourse analysis from over 37 documents, including city hall hearings, advocacy documents from years 2014-2021, and six years of tweets from both teachers, advocates and public officials.
2. Focus groups and interviews (total n=40) from directors (n=10), teachers (n=10), study plan teachers (n=10) and parents (n=10) working or attending early childhood centers. Participants were recruited from all NYC boroughs, except Staten Island.

These methodological tools provided different data points to address the research questions and aimed to triangulate data to offer an accurate and comprehensive picture of the research problem. (Please refer to Figure I for the graphic depicting the flow of the analysis).

**Figure I. Flow of the Analysis**



# Take Aways

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This study investigated the effects of compensation and work conditions policy from 2014 to 2021. Documents from 2014 to 2021 provided a historical account of policy while interviews provided rich participant data. The analysis provided some robust findings. The main take aways of this study included:

## **1 Compensation and work condition disparities (including ancillary benefits and union membership) deeply affect every layer of the early childhood education ecological system, directors, teachers, and parents. Some stakeholders report more resilience depending on structural and systemic factors.**

Directors and certified teachers were more aware of policy origins and impacts, while study plan teachers and parents were less aware of the policy landscape. Regardless of the understanding and awareness of policy mandates, the study found that there was a difference in how teachers, directors, and parents in NYCEECs perceived and experienced policy and its impacts depending on the type of center they were affiliated with. Most directors reported concerns regarding being able to serve their communities with high-quality care and education. These concerns stemmed from issues with enrollment, staffing, and financial viability. Teacher turnover and burnout was at the forefront of their concerns.

Teachers were open about their dissatisfaction with work and salary conditions. Frequently, teachers mentioned their interest in leaving if offered a position at the DOE. For those deeply committed to teaching at NYCEES, two primary reasons guided their decision to stay: (1) Their commitment to work with the children and families in their community; (2) the family-like environment of their place of work.

For study plan teacher participants, compensation and work condition policies are intertwined in their ability to obtain certification to access better job opportunities. This set of participants reported that while working long hours during the 10-month school year, they were also required to be enrolled in a higher-education program to complete their master's degree. Some participants found it extremely difficult to juggle both work and school; this, in turn, caused stress among participants.

*The money is very important to a lot of people, but these people are my family, so I wouldn't leave. I would stay here. I mean, a lot of people like somebody else would be like, you're dumb. You should just go to where they offer you more money. But this place has helped me to become the person I am. How would I be? Just to leave them up in the air without having anything, you know, I wouldn't be able to do it. I've been here 20 years. I think I'll stay here.*

*Marylin, Teacher, Queens*

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*I'm drained. I'm physically tired, I just want to go home, lay on the couch, and that is it. And my hours before COVID, we were open for Early Learn from 8:00 to 6:00. So I would work either 8:00 to 5:00 or 9:00 to 6:00. You have to arrive early to prep at 7:00 or 8:00. So on the six o'clock day, doesn't even matter if you get enough sleep, it was just like six o'clock getting home at 7:00. You just, you just can't do anything. You just want to sleep.*

*Elaine, Study Plan Teacher, Manhattan*

Overall, this study overwhelmingly found members of the early childhood workforce exhausted and dissatisfied, contrasting with parents that at large loved the work teachers were doing with their children. This spoke volumes to the educators' commitments to connecting with families despite the challenges presented on the ground. Nonetheless, parent interviews identified the discomfort associated with the teacher and director turnover.

*It (turnover) definitely affected my work life. I felt a lot worse about leaving my child, before COVID, just like after ... When I have to work late regularly; it's very challenging for me, knowing that my child is with someone that they aren't comfortable with yet, same thing in the morning. It's very challenging for me to leave my child there, knowing that our ... It's really just a struggle, because my child really struggles to separate in the morning, and it's just been a really difficult experience in terms of relating with teachers. In particular, for example, last year before the pandemic, it has been very difficult to try to talk to teachers just because they (centers) can't keep the teachers. Things that I've communicated to my child's original teachers really haven't been passed along.*

*Jacqueline, Mother, Bronx*

This study found that compensation and work condition policies affected not only the sustainability of centers, but also the professional and personal lives of directors, teachers and families attending NYCEECs. The discourse surrounding the effects of policy on children and families highlighted the issues arising from teacher and director inconsistency, but also revealed how nurturing and caring centers have been during times of crisis. Given that the sample of participants attended mostly Head Starts and CBOs, this finding confirmed the mission statement of these centers, whose model emphasized holistic support for the entire family in order to promote learning.

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## 2. While the salary sub-parity provided some needed relief to the teacher turnover crisis, it did not substantially reduce the impact of disparities, particularly disparities in total compensation among those working at NYCEECs.

The negative impacts of disparities in compensation policies are mitigated by the ability of centers and their leaders to advocate for their rights and to secure resources beyond those provided by the DOE. While all directors acknowledged that due to the pandemic, during 2020 and early 2021 their teacher turnover had decreased, most directors reported that the benefit of the sub-parity announcement was offset by the teacher shortage at DOE schools, and the expansion of 3K for All. Eleanor, a director from the Bronx, explained: *"But no, nothing has changed because I can't hire certified teachers before or after."*

The effect of the sub-parity on teachers working at NYCEECs was limited, mostly because the number of certified teachers working at those centers was and is relatively small. Anna, a director from Manhattan, confirmed: *"I think for those who have been here for a long time, they tend to stay put and the teachers who are licensed, they either move or they just get past the whole salary thing."* Other directors believed that the salary sub-parity was a "band aid" and had not fulfilled its original mission. Some directors acknowledged the positive impact the sub-parity had on the morale of certified teachers, as they saw that their advocacy enabled them to gain some ground in the negotiations and empowered the growth in coalitions. In addition, directors articulated that the salary sub-parity has served as a tangible incentive for their study plan teachers to obtain certification.

When experienced teachers were asked how the salary sub-parity announcement changed their practice, all considered that nothing had changed. Some considered the sub-parity not to be adequate or sufficient.

*It wasn't a right step [referring to parity]. It wasn't even the right step. If I say I'm gonna give you parity, or equality, which means the same or equal to, I first have to understand what you're saying you're equal to, and then I have to actually agree with that. You have 2 Master's degrees, you've been teaching with a New York State public school license for eleven years, you've gone to DOE professional developments, you've done all this other stuff, and I agree, "Well, okay, that's who you are, that's what you should be equal to." Then I have to go find out what the person in the DOE is making that you match up with. And the moment I do that, it says they make 80,000 dollars, then right then, you should make 80,000 dollars. You can't wait to bring somebody up 'cuz remember, these are contractual things, so 2020 the beginning of 2021, guess what, the DOE's going for another contract, so then that person's gonna make even more money. You know, if you're going to make me equal to, then you have to do it the right way.*

*Armand, Teacher, Manhattan*

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Most directors reported that, while they could not compete with the salaries and work conditions offered in DOE schools, they aimed to incentivize teachers to stay by providing flexibility, autonomy, a sense of purpose, and a community of practice that may be more difficult to achieve in a large public school. Most importantly, across the board, most centers had been able to staff their classrooms, not because of the salary sub-parity announced in July 2019, but because they were relying heavily on study plan teachers. This finding is consistent with an upward revision of the estimate reported by Miksic & Hurley (2019).

This finding also speaks to the need for solid leadership at the early childhood center level. Directors are at the core of policy implementation, staff motivation, and family engagement. This study found that directors with deep ideological positionality were able to retain more staff, motivate study plan teachers to obtain their degrees, and engage families in deeper ways than those directors that viewed their jobs as simply a job. This brings us to the issue of director turnover. This is perhaps one of the looming threats in the early childhood system.

### **3. Director pay disparities and centers' reliance on study plan teachers, without a path to solve these problems, threatens the sustainability of NYCEECs both in the long and short term.**

One of the study's surprising findings was that the majority of interviewed directors were planning on leaving, particularly in independent centers, partially because of the lack of appropriate compensation and partially because of the difficult work conditions due to regulations, labor shortages, and the pandemic.

*I'm not jumping through these hoops, and I'm getting less. I have a family that I have to take care of. The cost of living in New York is very expensive. What else can I do? As much as I love the children, I would love to help in the community, but I'm a widow. I have to look at the fact that there's no one helping me. How can I still be able to teach and yet lack insufficient areas and make sure that my needs are met? The survival skills first have to start with the first person before I can be an asset to any of my children. I have to make sure that I'm okay.*

*Aisha, Director, Queens*



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In general, directors deeply believed in the difference they were making in their communities. However, as mentioned before, half of the directors interviewed were also looking for an exit strategy. Without appropriate leadership, these centers are in peril for missing valuable opportunities to retain and train certified teachers, and to train and mentor study plan teachers. While lowering the standards required to become an educational leader may potentially avoid closures in centers that could not hire directors, this could backfire in the medium to long term, as certified teachers may leave, leading study plan teachers to suffer burnout.

The role and plight of study plan teachers in the system was also a surprising finding of this study. Study plan teachers have become the standard of instruction in NYCEECs; however, as this study found, not all study plan teachers are the same. While study plan teachers appear to have a diverse level of experience and education, they are in their majority minoritized women. The study highlighted the challenges post sub-parity that these educators are facing, most notably the lack of financial support and time for them to complete their degrees. This particular struggle exemplifies how policy has to be carefully evaluated before imposing mandates that further marginalize vulnerable populations as previously analyzed by NAEYC and Ed Trust (2020).

The study also corroborated that study plan teachers worked longer hours and received fewer resources (in the form of salaries, professional development, time-release, and benefits) than certified teachers working at NYCEECs. Most study plan teachers viewed the centers that they worked in as "training grounds" and did not consider them to be permanent places of employment.

*And with the turnover, by the time the teacher is even comfortable and is doing everything that they need to do, and their classroom is running like a well-oiled machine , and their lesson plans are up to par, they leave.*

*Honor, Director, Brooklyn*

The study interviewed study plan teachers with over ten years of experience teaching young children. All of them were women of color working in low-income communities. As older students, with families and responsibilities, they were having a difficult time completing their degrees. These study plan teachers should be recognized monetarily beyond those that just joined the workforce. It is paramount that we support these teachers and encourage them to continue sharing their expertise with the families they serve.

# Implications

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While there are challenges in the field, there is tremendous opportunity. This study found that after the sub-salary parity announcement, the advocacy movement slowed down but started to emerge again during the pandemic. It is imperative that coalitions are formed again to address the most pressing issues: director turnover, study plan support, teacher sustainability, and enrollment. The first two issues are heavily influenced by how unions are (or are not) playing a role in catalyzing advocacy. Most participants viewed the role of unions negatively, comparing them to the public school teacher union and therefore reporting that they did not feel appropriately represented. More work needs to be done by union representatives to engage its base.

As part of the advocacy process, grassroots organizations must take the lead, and for those grassroots organizations to have a wide base of support, more awareness needs to be conveyed among all stakeholders. The voice of families was not substantially reported in the advocacy documents and hearings during the initial advocacy in 2019. Moreover, the issue of awareness was a surprising finding in this study post-sub-parity. If we look at the advocacy of the movement in 2019, centers made a concerted effort to inform, provide time and financial resources for all teachers, and encouraged families to participate. This is crucial if any advocacy efforts are planned in the near future. This makes advocacy in the next year crucial if long-term sustainability for all PKFA is truly sought.

At the core of UPK expansions are compensation policies that should be crafted as total compensation policies, not only salary policies, with transparency and clear expectations, and equality in work conditions. Simply put, Pre-K teachers, regardless of where they work, should be fully part of the educational system in each state. This means that education requirements should be increased, and there should be support for those on the ground teaching young children to complete their degrees. Career ladder models and scholarships for supporting teachers considering higher education should also be explored at a national level. Programs like tuition reimbursement programs provided by independent centers or career ladder programs sponsored by the Day Care Council of New York/DC 1707 and the NYS B5 SUNY-CUNY Workforce Scholarship are clear examples of what could be done to support this emergent workforce while also solving the issue of retention of certified teachers at NYCEECs.

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These efforts should be consolidated to provide wider access to all study plan teachers in the system. Minoritized women, who comprise 80% of the current child care workforce, should not be left behind if they are not able due to age or lack access to attend schooling. We must recognize the experience and funds of 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. This is consistent with the Power to the Profession Unifying Framework (2020) and NAEYC and Ed Trusts (2020)'s 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).

Beyond the New York case, and understanding that the current study is not generalizable due to its scope, the researcher's findings support other literature signaling structural and equity challenges of scaling up Universal Pre-K implementations. This is particularly important when implementations are done using mixed delivery systems built-in historically negative/biased conceptions of child care. As found in this study, policy needs to be crafted with special care to include the workforce and families. Only then could UPK implementation make Pre-K truly for all.

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Dedicated to all the directors, teachers, and parents that shared their souls with me during the interviews.

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