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Expanding and Improving High-Quality Early Care and Education in California: Is There Alignment Between Policymakers and the Public?

Heidi Schmidt Emberling
San Jose State University

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EXPANDING AND IMPROVING HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CARE AND
EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA: IS THERE ALIGNMENT BETWEEN
POLICYMAKERS AND THE PUBLIC?

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Educational Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Heidi Schmidt Emberling

May 2020

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The Designated Dissertation Committee Approves the Dissertation Titled

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EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA: IS THERE ALIGNMENT BETWEEN
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Heidi Schmidt Emberling

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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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May 2020

Emily Slusser, Ph.D.	Chair, Department of Child and Adolescent Development
Amy Leisenring, Ph.D.	Department of Sociology and Interdisciplinary Social Sciences
Arnold Danzig, Ph.D.	Founding Director, EdD Leadership Program

ABSTRACT

EXPANDING AND IMPROVING HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA: IS THERE ALIGNMENT BETWEEN POLICYMAKERS AND THE PUBLIC?

by Heidi Schmidt Emberling

Although there is widespread agreement about the life-long benefits of high-quality childcare and preschool, access for all children in California is limited. The negative effects of this inadequate landscape are borne predominantly by children living in poverty, and middle-income families who do not qualify for subsidies and cannot afford full-fee care. This mixed-methods study examines specific factors that impede expansion and improvement of childcare/preschool in California, from the perspective of five diverse policymakers. Findings reveal a variety of policy solutions in the areas of funding, teacher workforce, quality of care, policy development, and public perception of the importance of high-quality childcare/preschool. In the second phase of the study, an online survey was disseminated to gauge alignment between policymakers and the public, with results pointing to similarities and differences that contribute to understanding why, when there is unanimous agreement about moving towards universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool, California still struggles to make progress. The study concludes with a discussion of systems change and specific system traps that should be addressed, so California can positively impact outcomes for all children and families around the state.

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Chapter 1. The Early Care and Education Landscape

The field of early care and education (ECE) has gained national attention in recent years as more and more research has recognized the lifelong benefits of investing in the healthy development of young children, including decades of longitudinal research (Campbell et al., 2012; Englund, White, Reynolds, Schweinhart, & Campbell, 2014; Gormley & Phillips, 2005; Schweinhart et al., 2005), economic return on investment analyses (Elango, Garcia, Heckman, & Hojman, 2015; Heckman, 2011; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002; Temple & Reynolds, 2007), and neurological research highlighting the importance of early brain development (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornberg, 2009; Thompson, 2001). This ever-increasing body of research on the positive impact of high-quality ECE on a child's future has led to calls for increased investment in ECE from influential leaders, including Dr. James J. Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics, who stated, "The evidence is quite clear that inequality in the development of human capabilities produces negative social and economic outcomes that can and should be prevented with investments in early childhood education" (Heckman, 2011, 32).

Former President Barack Obama built on Heckman's argument, making an appeal for high quality ECE in his 2015 State of the Union address:

In today's economy, when having both parents in the work force is an economic necessity for many families, we need affordable, high-quality childcare more than ever. It's not a nice-to-have; it's a must-have. It's time we stop treating childcare as a side issue, or a women's issue, and treating it like the national economic priority that it is for all of us. (Obama, 2015)

Although there is widespread agreement about the benefits of high-quality early care and learning environments, each state has developed its own unique, often piecemeal, approach to expanding and improving ECE programs, policies, and services (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019). In fact, the National Institute for Early Education Research, an organization that has tracked the growth of early care and education since 2002, estimates that at the current pace of ECE expansion, it will take state policymakers nearly 20 more years to serve half of all 4-year old children in preschool, and nearly a century to serve half of all 3-year old children (Friedman-Krauss, et al., 2019).

The Curious Case of California

Currently, the states serving the highest number of young children in state-funded early care and education programs include Florida, Vermont, and Oklahoma, each of which provides ECE programs and services for more than 70% of their 4-year old children. Another six states serve about 50% of 4-year old children. California, on the other hand, serves only 37% of 4-year-old children and just 11% of 3-year-old children in its state-funded ECE programs (Friedman-Krauss, et al., 2019). Yet investment in expanding and improving ECE for all children in California has stagnated or even decreased in the past decade (Friedman-Krauss, et al., 2019). Young children and their families, predominantly those who live in poverty, have borne the brunt of this policy inaction.

The issue of inadequacy in California's ECE landscape, particularly for its most vulnerable populations, has been the focus of multiple high-profile research studies (California Assembly Blue Ribbon Commission on ECE, 2019; Melnick, Tinubu,

Gardner, Maier, & Wechsler, 2017; Stipek, 2018). These studies reveal that in California, 20% of families with children under 6 years of age live in poverty and cannot afford childcare (Anderson, 2019). Children of color are twice as likely than other children to live in poverty, largely due to the nation's legacy of systemic racism, implicit bias and ongoing discriminative policies and practices (Schumacher, 2019). Research has shown that quality childcare programs are often hard to find in communities with a large percentage of low-income families, and choice is restricted by the inability to afford higher quality care (Lipscomb, 2013).

In California, lack of consistent policy development has limited access to affordable ECE programs and services. Just 1 in 5 children in California who live in low to middle-income families and are eligible for state-funded ECE programs and services, are currently enrolled, due to lack of available spaces (Schumacher, 2019). Years of decreased investment in quality, coupled with persistently undervalued and underpaid ECE teachers and a highly fractured oversight system, has contributed to the current crisis in early care and education in California (Stipek, 2018). Because many high-quality early care and education programs are privately-run and prohibitively expensive for many families, a large proportion of children are currently enrolled in sub-standard care, with teacher compensation so low that 58% of childcare workers in California rely on some form of public assistance (Stipek, 2018).

With renewed national attention to the critical importance of the first five years of life as a foundation for all future learning and healthy growth, and a considerable body of research addressing the positive impact of high-quality early care and education

experiences, what factors prevent policymakers from expanding and improving high-quality ECE for all children? It's not just a question of financial limitations. California is currently ranked as the 5th largest economy in the world, and the largest in the United States. The state has the resources it needs to substantially increase the availability of early care and education programs and services, better compensate and train the ECE teacher workforce, and fund facilities, systems, and infrastructure as needed (California Assembly Blue Ribbon Commission on ECE, 2019). So why haven't California policymakers increased access to high-quality childcare/preschool throughout the state?

The Present Study

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to improve understanding of the specific factors that impede or interfere with expansion and improvement of high-quality childcare/preschool in California, as well as identify potential solutions, with a specific focus on the alignment between policymakers and the general public. There is already extensive research on the importance of high-quality ECE environments (Campbell et al., 2012; Gormley, Phillips, Newmark, Welti, & Adelstein, 2011; Schweinhart et al., 2005), the need to invest in the training and compensation of ECE teachers (Early, et al., 2007; Vu, Jeon, & Howes, 2008), and the difficulties in providing adequate access to subsidized childcare in California (Melnick, et al., 2017; Stipek, 2018). Inviting policymaking experts to identify leverage points and next steps to expand and improve the ECE system in California, coupled with a deeper understanding of how the general public sees this issue, may be an effective impetus for systemic change.

In Phase 1 of this study, a qualitative approach (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007; Harding, 2019) was utilized to guide the development of a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A). Five diverse policymaking experts were selected for their expertise and decades of experience in the field. The experts represent policymaking efforts at the federal, state, county, and local levels. They were prompted to think deeply about the specific factors that impede or interfere with the work of expanding and improving ECE programs and services in California, regardless of socio-economic status, special needs, race/ethnicity, or home language. They were also asked to identify potential solutions and next steps for moving the state forward towards universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool for all children.

In addition to the expert interviews, this study also used a broad-scale survey to examine public perception and beliefs about the ECE system in California. The online survey was designed after an initial analysis of the expert interviews, to benefit from the information and insight collected. Data was analyzed to identify common barriers and highlight potential solutions. This data then informed the creation of the public survey, which was distributed widely to California residents via social media, to gauge broad public opinion.

The findings from the survey and the ECE expert responses were then compared and contrasted, exposing areas of similarity and difference. This comparison further illuminated certain factors, some that haven't yet been thoroughly investigated in the literature, such as the question of whether California residents' values and perspectives align with those of the expert policymakers. In a democratic society, public participation

ensures that citizens have a direct voice in policy decisions (Wojcieszak, 2014). Public perception, however, can also be greatly influenced by the news media (King, Schneer & White, 2017). How the public understands the issues around early care and education in California is a critical consideration, as the state considers next steps to expand and improve access to high-quality childcare/preschool for all children.

Research Questions

To better understand the complex factors and public perceptions that may impede California from expanding and improving access to high-quality ECE, the following research questions were considered:

1. From the perspective of policymaking experts in California, what are the most significant factors impeding or interfering with expansion and improvement of ECE programs and services throughout the state?
2. From the perspective of policymaking experts in California, what are potential leverage points and next steps to improve expansion and improvement of high-quality ECE throughout the state?

Once these initial questions were answered and a preliminary analysis was completed, an online, fixed-response survey was developed to explore the perspectives of California residents. The research questions that guided this part of the study included:

3. Is universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool a priority for California voters?
4. Do California residents' views of the factors impeding or interfering with expansion and improvement of childcare/preschool align with the experts?

5. Would the solutions identified by the experts receive support from the public?

Key Terms: ECE

The terms “early care and education” and/or “early childhood education” (both abbreviated as ECE) refer to programs and strategies for children birth through 8 years old, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the nation’s largest professional ECE organization. Yet ECE is more widely understood by the general public to only encompass services for children ages birth to 5-years-old, the years prior to entering kindergarten. The field is further divided by age group as follows: infant/toddler or childcare (birth through age 2), preschool (predominantly ages 3-4), and early elementary (ages 5-8). Professionals within the ECE field are identified as caregivers, family childcare providers, infant/toddler caregivers, preschool teachers, nursery-school teachers, Transitional Kindergarten teachers (California only), and elementary school teachers. Administrators are usually described as Directors (ages 0-5) or Principals (ages 5-8). This study uses early care and education (ECE) to describe all programs and services for children ages birth to 5 years old.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

There are multiple benefits and challenges of serving as both an observer and a practitioner within the ECE field. In terms of my own positioning and role in this study, I used my status as a child development professional to develop the initial interview protocol, based on a desire to enrich and deepen my own understanding of the factors that influence progress towards universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool in

California. I also made a concerted effort to fairly represent all ideas from the experts and the general public, whether they confirmed or contradicted my own preconceptions.

My inquiry began by investigating how kindergarten became a part of the public school system in the United States. How can the ECE field learn and benefit from the tremendous efforts of its founding mothers at the beginning of the 20th century?

Chapter 2. A History of Early Care and Education

To understand the complexity of the current ECE landscape, it is beneficial to understand the evolution of kindergarten in our public education system in the late 19th and early 20th century. German theorist Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) coined the term “kindergarten” (literally, “child’s garden”) in 1840 (Moore, 2002). Froebel, who was influenced by the work of Swiss educational reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), believed that all children should be educated naturally through developmental activities and experiences, and that every citizen of a free republic, no matter how poor, deserved to be educated at public expense. Froebel’s educational theories would be developed further at the beginning of the 20th century by John Dewey (1859-1952), who asserted that teaching and curricula should be grounded in children’s interests, Maria Montessori (1870-1952), who believed independence is the goal of education, and psychologists Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) who believed that children construct knowledge themselves through their developmental stages and social experiences (Beatty, 2011).

In 1860, American Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804-1894), a devoted follower of Froebel’s ideas, opened the first English-language kindergarten in Boston for children ages 3-6 years old, and published the *American Guide to Kindergarten and the Moral Culture of Infancy*, the definitive resource on theory and practice of kindergarten of its time (Franzosa, 2015). Peabody opened model schools around the country and trained a national network of kindergarten advocates and teachers, becoming a well-known leader

of the American Kindergarten Movement. Peabody and her followers often traveled to Germany to study Froebel's methods and philosophy in action, which included specific manipulatives and "guided play, group collaboration, sensory and motor training, expressive arts, nature study, and creative self-activity" (Franzosa, 2015, p. 5).

Interest spread throughout the American teaching community and Susan Blow (1843-1916), a follower of Peabody and Froebel, convinced the Superintendent of the St. Louis public schools to open the first experimental kindergarten within a public school district in 1873. Around the same time, in 1871, African-American educator Fannie Richards (1840-1922), who studied in Germany under Froebel, fought to abolish segregated schools, and founded the first kindergarten classroom in Detroit, Michigan, where she taught for 44 years (Greger, 2014). Within public schools, kindergartens retained professional autonomy, led by women viewed as pedagogical experts creating and shaping a new field within education (Franzosa, 2015).

Women first began advocating for expanded early education within the sociological context of first-wave feminism and its focus on legal rights and gender equality. Years before the addition of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1920, guaranteeing women the right to vote, the National Congress of Mothers was formed in 1897, followed in 1911 with the formation of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers Association. These two organizations would not merge to become the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) until 1970, during second-wave feminism, when more African-American voices were included, even though white, middle-class women still

dominated and benefitted most from the movement at that time (Gordon & Collier-Thomas, 1997; hooks, 2015).

As women fought to have a voice in American democracy and in the education of their children, kindergartens expanded across the United States. As more young women joined the field of early education, tensions emerged between the rigid interpreters of Froebel's original work, and those who wanted to adapt the program, making it more modern and culturally-relevant to the local communities in which they operated. Kate Douglas Wiggin (1856-1923) founded the first free kindergarten in San Francisco in 1878, as well as the California Teacher Training School in 1880 (and became internationally famous as the author of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* in 1903). She argued that teachers had to reinterpret Froebel's pedagogy and specific curricula to meet the more modern needs of children, advocating for more child-centered teaching, strong relationships with families, and recruiting men into the early education field. As more and more kindergartens opened within public school districts across the country in the early 1900's, differing pedagogical approaches emerged, including those schools that wanted to focus on academic preparedness and those who wanted to preserve a more developmental, play-based, culturally-responsive approach (Franzosa, 2015).

By 1910, Teachers College at Columbia created a Department of Kindergarten Education, and scholars began to debate the speed of kindergarten's expansion across the nation. Many experienced women leaders within the kindergarten movement were concerned that the quality of kindergarten would be compromised with an influx of new college-trained teachers not taught through traditional apprenticeships. As kindergartens

opened in different states, women leaders and mentors within the kindergarten movement became more and more isolated from each other, and the apprenticeship model was eventually replaced altogether by formal teacher education programs at the university level (Franzosa, 2015; Greger, 2014). One unintended side effect of the loss of apprenticeship training was the elimination of a focus on parent education, which the colleges did not incorporate as part of the teacher preparation programs (Ladd, 1982).

As kindergarten teacher programs moved to the college level, a new academic focus on the study of child development emerged. One of the preeminent advocates for studying early learning and education was Lucy Sprague Mitchell (1878-1967), who founded Bank Street College of Education in New York in 1916. Mitchell's work was grounded in societal change, believing strongly in the rights of children and mothers. She argued that women (predominantly middle-class white women) could choose both a career and marriage. Her work benefitted greatly from the Suffrage Movement (which itself was built on the foundations of the anti-slavery movement of the 1860s). In the context of expanding women's rights, Bank Street College offered women access to academia, legitimized the field of child development, and contributed to the acceptance of kindergarten within the public education system throughout America. Throughout the 1930's, universities and colleges across the nation created programs in education and child development, including Spelman College, a historically black female institution in Atlanta founded in 1881 after emancipation. Like many women's colleges, Spelman already had strong programs in nursing and home economics. Education and child

development programs seemed a natural fit for its female students as the college focused heavily on teaching practical life skills (Bell-Scott, 1984).

By the 1930's, scholars began studying the effectiveness of kindergarten on elementary school achievement, and the field shifted from Froebel's strict definition of the kindergarten environment as a place where children can develop naturally, following their own interests, to a new focus on developing specific materials and activities with the express purpose of promoting school readiness (Beatty, 2011). In a 1927 report within the Kindergarten Division of the U.S. Bureau of Education, the term "early childhood education" was first recorded, to differentiate the more academic-oriented kindergarten from other early education efforts (Ladd, 1982). As kindergarten gained in popularity, the National Kindergarten Association (NKA) focused its efforts on advocating at the federal level for more public kindergartens across the country and, in a bid to secure more federal funding, narrowed the age range of kindergarten from serving children 3-6 years old to serving children only 5-6 years old (Ladd, 1982). Effectively, this tactical move eliminated all public funding of early care and education for children under the age of 5-years-old.

The NKA's legislative efforts to include kindergarten in the federal funding of America's public schools continued from the 1920's through the 1950's, but the organization was severely impacted by the lack of funds during the depression and increasing isolation in the years leading up to World War II. The NKA tried to stay relevant for families, introducing parent education pamphlets and advocating the importance of kindergarten to the general public. Instead of a place to play and develop,

the NKA touted the benefits of kindergarten as a place to form “desirable habits and attitudes” (Ladd, 1982, p. 135). The NKA attempted several more times to pass a Kindergarten bill through Congress, but failed, finally closing its offices in 1976 (Ladd, 1982). At that time, public enrollment in kindergarten was at its highest point in decades, mostly due to the post-World War II baby boom (Snyder, 1993).

Today, all 50 states offer public kindergarten, either full-day or half-day programs, but only fifteen states have enacted legislation making kindergarten attendance compulsory (California is not among them). Although kindergarten is not compulsory in most states, 86% of all 5-year old children in the United States are currently enrolled in a pre-primary program, including kindergarten (McFarland et al., 2019).

Early Care and Education: The Pre-Kinder Years

When the National Kindergarten Association disbanded in the late 1970’s, the National Association for Nursery Education (NANE), another professional ECE association founded in 1929, broadened its scope to include children birth through 8 years old, and changed its name to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in 1964. NAEYC is still the largest and most powerful voice within the field of ECE today, advocating at the federal, state, and local level for teachers, families, and children birth through 2nd grade (Ladd, 1982).

The biggest challenge for NAEYC, and other organizations working in the field of early care and education, is that the ECE landscape for children birth to 5-years old is an incredibly complex patchwork of programs and services that vary dramatically from one state to another. Since 2002, the National Institute for Early Education Research

(NIEER), has produced its annual State of Preschool Yearbook, documenting efforts across the country to provide access to high-quality state-funded early care and education for all families with children 3 to 4-years-old by tracking preschool enrollment data, analyzing state budget resources, and creating benchmarks for standards of quality, including data on the federal Head Start and Early Head Start programs (Friedman-Krauss et. al., 2019).

Interestingly, the introduction of Head Start in 1965 (serving children 3 to 5-years old) and Early Head Start (serving children birth to 3-years old) has its own unique history, separate from the kinder movement. Designed to solve a social problem, Head Start was created through the nation's antipoverty efforts, and funded by the federal Economic Opportunity Act (Kagen, 2002). With the 1960's Civil Rights Movement focusing on overcoming deprivation caused by systemic racism and poverty, activists were searching for alternatives to existing education structures and a way to empower and involve parents in their children's education (Kagen, 2002). In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson convened a committee of academics and civil rights activists who believed that public education, and particularly early education, could contribute to solving the nation's social ills (Kagen, 2002). The creation of Head Start was also situated within the context of second-wave feminism in the 1970's, which focused on challenging social norms and eliminating discrimination based on gender. As more and more middle-class white women entered the workplace, choosing to add a career onto their role as mothers, political attention towards accessible, affordable, high-quality early childhood education increased dramatically (Kagen, 2002; Ladd, 1982). But federal

funding remained stagnant and limited to families who qualified for Head Start. States began to look for alternative ways to fund early care and education.

The Funding Puzzle: Accessibility, Availability, and Affordability Issues

Because the current ECE system in the United States is both complicated and fragmented, there is a fundamental question as to whether the entire system can be improved at once. This is a systems-level question, with multiple complexities, that can be framed through a lens of systems theory. Thinking in systems requires an understanding of the individual elements within a system, the relationships of those elements, and an identification of the purpose or intent of the system (Meadows & Wright, 2008).

Additionally, systems change benefits from the influence of complexity theory, which posits that the potential for change lies in leveraging key factors within the system to reach critical mass, or a ‘tipping point,’ when a dynamic and complex web of factors begin mutually influencing and compounding each other to move the system in a new direction (Mason, 2016). Potentially, policymaking experts in California with different levels of experience, knowledge, and expertise are keenly positioned to analyze the ECE system, understand the interconnectedness of each element within the ECE landscape, and identify key leverage points to achieve the larger goal of universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool throughout the state.

One key leverage point identified in recent research studies on ECE funding is to reduce the complexity of ECE funding streams in California (Melnick, et al., 2017). Multiple federal, state, and local agencies control California’s ECE programs, creating a

web of administrative agencies that ECE providers must navigate when providing subsidized childcare spaces to families. These agencies, in turn, may provide access to only one piece of a larger funding puzzle that ECE providers must blend to support the total cost of care for each subsidized child. At times, one subsidized child may be the beneficiary of multiple sources of funding, each of which has its own reporting requirements. ECE providers of subsidized care are forced to manage this administrative burden if they elect to offer subsidized childcare spaces to families (Melnick, et al., 2017).

In addition to the multiplicity of public agencies involved in funding ECE programs and services, there is a disagreement about how much it costs to serve each child. While the federal Head Start program allocates \$11,512 in per child spending, the state of California allocates \$6,067 per child for children enrolled in the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), and \$7,083 per child for Transitional Kindergarten (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019). Once a child turns 5-years-old and enrolls in kindergarten, per child spending in California public schools increases to \$11,495 annually. This inequity in funding ignores the extensive research showing that the human brain undergoes rapid growth in both structure and function throughout the first five years, significantly influencing cognitive and behavioral development later in life (Berken, Gracco, & Klein, 2017; Cao, Huang, & He, 2017).

Understanding the complexity of funding is important for ECE providers, but arguably the biggest barrier in accessing high-quality care is the prohibitive cost for families seeking access to the ECE system. For low-income families, the subsidized care

that Head Start provides is a high-quality ECE option, especially because it includes a strong family engagement component and the curriculum is taught by certified teachers. In 2017, Head Start served nearly 1 million low-income children in the United States who qualify for subsidized care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). To qualify for Head Start, a family of four cannot exceed an annual income of \$25,100. If a family earns more than \$25,100, most states offer alternative, state-subsidized ECE options. In California, to qualify for the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), a family of four cannot exceed 70% of the State Median Income (SMI), or \$71,064 annually. Even if a family qualifies for subsidized care, there may not be enough slots to accommodate them, according to the California Budget and Policy Center (Schumacher, May 2019). In 2017, an estimated two million children ages birth through 12 were eligible for state-subsidized care, but only about 228,000 were able to participate in a subsidized full-day, full-year program, due to lack of available spaces and inadequate state and federal funding (Schumacher, January 2019).

For families who do not qualify for the California State Preschool Program, Head Start, or preschool special education (funded by the federal IDEA Act and provided by credentialed special education teachers in local public school districts), the only alternative is to search for a private preschool, which currently costs on average \$14,542 per year for full time care in California, according to the national Private School Review (2020), and may not meet the quality benchmarks of the ECE field (Friedman-Krauss, et al., 2019). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2015) defines the cost of childcare as affordable if it is no more than 7% of your income. To satisfy that

requirement, a family would have to earn about \$207,000 annually to afford full-time, private childcare/preschool. This presents a problem for moderate income families who earn more than \$71,064, but less than \$207,000 annually. These families may have the most difficulty finding affordable, quality ECE programs, often resorting to kinship care by extended family members, which tends to be lower in quality and less likely to meet children's developmental needs (Marshall, Robeson, Tracy, Frye, & Roberts, 2013).

Building a Professional ECE Teacher Workforce to Support Quality Outcomes

Another key leverage point identified in the literature is to increase the capacity, preparation, and compensation of ECE teachers, thus improving the quality of early care and education programs (Bassok, Greenberg, Fitzpatrick, & Loeb, 2016; Early, et al., 2007; Vu et al., 2008; Whitebook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009).

Recommendations from a recent meta-analysis that included data from multiple states included a need to identify benchmarks for ECE teacher compensation improvement, definitions of equivalent education, training, experience and working hours to K-12 teachers, and whether teacher parity between ECE teachers and K-12 teachers should happen incrementally or all at once (McLean, Dichter, & Whitebook, 2017). It is challenging to achieve equity when ECE teachers currently earn on average less than half the annual salary of their K-12 counterparts (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018).

Quality in both ECE and K-12 education systems is directly tied to the competencies of the teacher (Bassok, et al., 2016; Early, et al., 2007; Vu et al., 2008). Teachers within the K-12 system are required to have a college degree and a teaching credential. Within the ECE field, however, there are inconsistent professional requirements for levels of

teacher education and credentialing, years of preparation, fieldwork experiences, and ongoing professional development, all of which are important factors in assessing quality across ECE programs (Whitebook, et al., 2009). As an example, NIEER's State of Preschool Yearbook (2019) highlights ten minimum benchmark quality standards for early care and education programs. NIEER's quality benchmarks provide a coherent set of minimum policies to support young children's learning and development that enhances later educational and life achievement, including comprehensive Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS), curriculum supports, teacher degree and specialized training (for both lead and assistant teachers), at least 15 hours of annual professional development, a maximum class size of 20 and staff-child ratio of 1:10, developmental screenings and referrals, and continuous quality improvement systems (CQIS) (Friedman-Krauss, et al., 2019). Only three states currently meet all ten quality standards. The California State Preschool Program (CSPP) meets six of the benchmarks, while Transitional Kindergarten (TK) only meets two of them (Friedland-Krauss, et al., 2019).

As the field of ECE increases professional requirements to meet quality benchmarks for ECE teachers, policymakers must also consider concurrent increases in compensation (McLean et al., 2017). From 1997 to 2013, a sixteen-year period, the hourly wage for a childcare worker increased from 10.20 to just 10.33 (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014). Currently, the median hourly wage for a childcare worker is \$11.56, and preschool teachers in California earn an annual mean wage of \$30,520, about half of what kindergarten teachers earn, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020). In 2018, the Early Childhood Workforce Index noted that 58% of ECE teachers are currently

receiving some form of public assistance (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2018). The compensation inequity in ECE leads directly to high teacher turnover, job insecurity, and stress for teachers (Phillips, Austin, & Whitebook, 2016).

When ECE teachers receive low wages with low benefits, this can negatively affect their status and well-being, which may impede their ability to deliver high quality early care and education (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Also, collective bargaining processes, which have been studied as a mechanism to improve teacher compensation within the K-12 public education system, are not a unifying force within the field of ECE, possibly due to the fragmented and poorly coordinated delivery system of ECE programs and services (Joyner, 1998; Vogtman, 2017; West & Mykerezzi, 2011).

The Need for Consistent and Supportive Legislation and Policy Development

A final key leverage point identified in the literature is in developing comprehensive and supportive policies and legislation that expand and improve access to high-quality ECE for all children in California. These might include an increase in the duration of Paid Family Leave, so parents have the option to stay home longer to bond with their babies, a cap on childcare expenses as a manageable share of family income, and improved standards for quality early care and education programs and services, with sufficient funding to accomplish these goals (Gould, Austin, & Whitebook, 2017).

Policy development that supports expansion and improvement of high-quality early care and education programs and services tend to be piecemeal and vary state by state (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019), at times overlapping in purpose or leaving large gaps that

impede services (Reidt-Parker & Wallen, 2018). Many ECE programs are only offered part-day, but families need childcare that allows them to work full-time, especially low-income families with parents who often hold multiple jobs. In addition, children need high-quality early care and education programs with consistent access to responsive teachers and caregivers, a difficult problem when children move between a morning program and separate afternoon childcare (Reidt-Parker & Wallen, 2018). Because no single federal, state, or local funding source adequately addresses both needs, some ECE programs combine existing funding streams, which may result in high administrative costs and uneven quality within a local community (Reidt-Parker & Wallen, 2018). For low-income families and children, this lack of legislative and funding coordination means differing participation requirements that may restrict hours of service, in addition to burdensome requirements to prove eligibility, contributing to inconsistent programming for children and undermining long-term academic and social and emotional learning, particularly for children who live in challenging, stressful situations (Reidt-Parker & Wallen, 2018).

California's unique Transitional Kindergarten program. One substantial policy change within the field of ECE in California came with the passage of the Kindergarten Readiness Act in California in 2010 (SB 1381, Simitian). This bill moved the kindergarten cut-off date (the date by which children must be 5 years old to start school) from December 2nd to September 1st. For children with Fall birthdates between Sept. 2nd and Dec. 2nd who would previously have been eligible for kindergarten, this bill introduced a unique statewide program called Transitional Kindergarten (TK). The

program was phased in over four years and fully implemented in 2014. Public school districts in California are now legally required to offer TK as the first year of a two-year kinder program to all 4-year-old children with Fall birthdays who missed the cut-off date, effectively directing a fourth of all 4-year old children in California into a free, year-long public preschool experience.

TK classrooms within public school districts are different from private preschools, the California State Preschool Program, and family child care homes that serve 4-year-old children, because teachers in TK classrooms must meet elementary school teacher credentialing requirements, are eligible to participate in collective bargaining, and are ideally teaching a modified kinder curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for a younger age group (American Institutes for Research, 2016). Initial research suggests that TK has significantly improved kindergarten readiness for participating students, particularly dual-language learners (Holod, Ogut, Brodziak de los Reyes, Quick, & Manship, 2018; Manship, et al., 2017).

Because TK continues to serve only children with Fall birthdays, in 2015 additional legislation was enacted (AB 104, Education Finance Trailer Bill) that allows school districts to admit all 4-year old children (those with non-Fall birthdays) to a TK program, with the caveat that state education funds will not be provided until the child turns 5-years-old, sometime during that year. This change allows all 4-year-old children to be served in a TK program, effectively creating a one-year, free, statewide universal preschool option within public school districts. However, in 2017, only six of the 25 largest school districts throughout the state had budgeted resources to fully embrace the

new expanded TK option, including Los Angeles Unified, San Diego Unified, and Long Beach Unified, as well as Moreno Valley Unified, Oakland Unified, and Riverside Unified (Hopkinson, 2017).

Policy development for quality ECE in California. As the public becomes more attuned to the importance of high-quality early care and education, strong alignment, investment, and coordination is needed at the state and county level to support the field of ECE and improve overall outcomes for children and families (Reidt-Parker & Wallen, 2018). Over the past five years, development of California’s statewide quality rating improvement system (QRIS) increased in popularity as one way to assess and improve quality in ECE programs (Connors & Morris, 2014; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019; Zellman & Karoly, 2015). The CA-QRIS Consortium analyzes quality in ECE in three related areas: child development and readiness for school, teachers and teaching, and program and environmental quality. QRIS block grant funding is available to improve the quality of the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019). California’s QRIS system was originally created with funding from a federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant and is administered through First 5 California. Each of the 58 counties in California has its own First 5 Commission dedicated to improving the lives of families and children through education, health services, and childcare. Since the inception of First 5 (Proposition 10) in 1998, tobacco tax revenues have been collected at the state level and 80% of these funds are allocated to the counties based on annual birth rates. The remaining 20% is allocated to First 5 California to support statewide programs, research, and media campaigns

While First 5 and QRIS address the issue of quality in California's ECE programs, there is an ongoing need for more federal funding and support (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019). One current federal effort led by Congressional Democrats is the Child Care for Working Families Act (Committee on Education & Labor, 2019), introduced (and re-introduced) in both the House and the Senate for the past several years with the dual mandate to expand the supply of affordable, quality ECE for working families (especially infant care) and increase compensation, education, and training for ECE teachers. The bill's fact sheet (Committee on Education & Labor, 2019) notes that in 28 states, the cost of infant care currently exceeds the average cost of in-state college tuition at 4-year public universities. One provision of the bill is that no family earning 150% of the state median income (SMI) will pay more than 7% of their income on childcare and another provision is that families under 75% SMI will not pay anything at all for childcare (Renzulli, 2019). Republicans favor a different approach, focusing on childcare tax credits, childcare savings accounts, and removing regulatory burdens to allow the private sector to take the lead in meeting the needs of the childcare marketplace (Austermuhle, 2019; Salam, 2019).

A women's equity issue. Historically, policies addressing the lack of accessible, affordable, high-quality early care and education have struggled to get attention at the federal level because ECE has long been considered a women's equity issue, along with equal pay, affordable housing, social welfare, domestic violence, and maternal and infant health--issues that are best represented when women are in elected, policymaking positions (Burrell, 1996; Holman, 2015). Although women make up half the workforce in

the United States, and are the primary earners in 42% of families with children (Vogtman, 2017), in 2019 women constitute only 20.6% of Congress (110 out of 535 members) and 28.9% of state legislatures, including 31% in California (Center for American Women and Politics, 2019). Another reason children's issues may be sidelined or ignored altogether is that legislators know that children cannot vote, cannot participate in advocacy efforts, and do not donate to political campaigns (Gormley, 2011). Also, early care and education "has yet to be fully embraced as a public good" (Phillips et al., 2016, p. 141). Although well-designed research studies have established substantial benefits to children, there are still persistent beliefs that prevent the United States from moving forward with universal access to quality ECE programs, particularly the idea that mothers should care for their children at home (Gormley, 2011). Especially in more politically-conservative states that espouse traditional family values, politicians seem reluctant to fund universal access to quality preschool, despite the benefit to children and society (Gormley, 2011; Heckman, 2011).

Public Perception: Motherhood, Childcare, and the Workforce

As California's ECE policymaking experts identify additional leverage points and develop potential next steps, it is important to consider the views of parent consumers of ECE programs and services, as well as the general population in California. Posing questions to the public exposes the reasons for individual beliefs, which can then be investigated in a systematic review (Pawson & Wong, 2013). To explore public support for potential legislation and funding of ECE programs and services, it is important to develop an understanding of the issues that are most likely to garner public support

(Pawson & Wong, 2013). When California voters see ECE as a priority issue, it may become another leverage point for progress towards universal access to high-quality ECE for all children in the state.

Issues within the early care and education field are often closely tied to discussions of public perception of motherhood, coupled with beliefs about women's participation in the workforce, especially in the first five years of a child's life (Andringa, Nieuwenhuis, & Van Gerven, 2015; Borck & Wrohlich, 2011; Budig, Misra & Boeckmann, 2012). Cultural norms and attitudes greatly influence women's employment, earnings, and the development of supportive legislative policies around childcare (Budig, Misra, & Boeckmann, 2012). Countries with more gender egalitarianism and public childcare support generally see an increase in women's participation in the labor force (Andringa et al., 2015).

The reluctance in the United States to develop legislation and enact policies that support universal, high-quality early care and education can be further contextualized through a historical and sociological lens. In the late nineteenth century, when the United States shifted from an agrarian economy to an industrial one, child labor laws were introduced and a child's role changed from 'worker' to 'dependent' requiring adult care (Rindfuss, Brewster, & Kavee, 1996). Public perception of the role of 'housewife' was envisioned as a solution to the need for childcare, predominantly among the white middle class, and supported by a normative system that "extolled the roles of mother and wife as essential for women's personal fulfillment and necessary for the wellbeing of their children" (Rindfuss et al., 1996, p. 459). This domestic role was consistently reinforced

by religious leaders and civic authorities, reflected in Roosevelt's post-Depression social policies, and included in business-sector policies that prohibited the hiring of married women, a policy that persisted until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Goldin, 1990; Rindfuss et al., 1996). Influential parenting expert Dr. Benjamin Spock even called for the government to pay "a comfortable allowance to all mothers of young children who would otherwise be compelled to work." (Spock, 1971, as cited in Rindfuss et al., 1996, p. 460).

Even when legislators support the expansion of universal, quality early care and education, the voting public must be behind it as well. Contemporary studies of gender identity and parenting have found that entrenched beliefs about mothering as the domain of women continues to shape women's and men's identities and reinforce traditional gender roles, even among women dedicated to their careers and men dedicated to egalitarianism (Chesley, 2011). The normative assumption that men are primary providers and women are caregivers fails to factor in the significance of a woman's career in forming her identity and attitudes (Zhou, 2017). Identity theory, which suggests that individuals create meaning for their roles within a society through interactions with others (Stryker & Burke 2000), can be used to appreciate that working women's experience of motherhood is shaped in the interaction between her employment, her child-rearing responsibilities, and her sense of society's expectations about both (Zhou, 2017).

Mothers are also subjected to an onslaught of media and public opinion about their role in society. Recent headlines supporting at-home moms included "More Millennial

Women are Becoming Stay-At-Home Moms—Here’s Why” (Landrum, 2018, reported in *Forbes*), “Why I Don’t Regret Quitting My Job and Becoming a Stay-at-Home Mom” (Hamilton, 2018, reported in *Time Magazine*), “I Didn’t Become a Stay-at-Home Mother for My Kids. I Did it for Me” (Langerman, 2018, reported in the *New York Times*). At the same time, headlines supporting working moms included, “Having a Working Mom has Benefits for Kids Later in Life, Study Says” (Howard, 2018, reported on *CNN*), “The 2018 State of Motherhood Survey: Millennial Mothers Demand More Support from Government and Society” (Marcoux, 2018, reported in *Motherly*), and “Girls with Working Moms Get Better Jobs and Higher Pay, According to Research” (Bahler, 2018, reported in *Money*). Despite the persistent societal rhetoric and debate about whether women should be at-home or in the workplace, and despite the increasingly desperate economic times which often demand dual-income households, the percentage of at-home parents has not fluctuated much over the past three decades. Statistics show stay-at-home parenting decreased from 28% in 1989 to 23% in 2000, followed by an increase to 29% in 2010 and a subsequent decrease to 27% in 2016, according to the Pew Research Center (Livingston, 2018).

Media coverage tends to fuel the at-home versus working mom debate, rather than focusing attention on how access to universal, high-quality early care and education programs and services supports parents and benefits children. National media focuses on the costs of childcare, for example: “U.S. Parents Are Sweating and Hustling to Pay for Child Care” (Pao, 2016, reported on *NPR*), without addressing the hidden societal costs of sole maternal care, including the effects of post-partum depression, weak parent-child

attachment, or maternal well-being on children's development (Wolf, 2016). Also ignored in the national media are the positive effects early care and education teachers can have on parents, including sharing expertise about child development, promoting effective parenting strategies, and providing parental support (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Prior, & Kehoe, 2010; Peck, Maude & Brotherson, 2015; Sawyer, Manz, & Martin, 2017).

Mothers are not the only women affected by the barrage of media commentary on motherhood, early care and education teachers (predominantly women) are also targeted in the court of public opinion. Sample headlines undermine the field of early care and education as a resource for working parents: "Sorry Working Moms, Daycare is Bad For Your Kid" (Lovric, 2015, reported in the *Huffington Post*), "The Day Care Dilemma" (Moyer, 2013, reported in *Slate*), "Is Non-Parental Day Care Bad for Children?" (Shpancer, 2010, reported in *Psychology Today*).

ECE teachers and family childcare providers struggle to construct a professional identity as caregivers of young children who provide a valuable service to society (Gerstenblatt, Faulkner, Lee, Doan, & Travis, 2014). Sisson and Iverson (2014), using discourse theory to explore the role and identity of ECE teachers, compared the discourse of professionalism, with its focus on standardization and expertise, with the discourse of caregiving, with its focus on feminine traits of nurturing, collaboration, and compassionate relationships, and the tensions that exist within the identity of the preschool teacher and the understanding of her role in the larger society. Their research concluded that ECE teachers must work to resist this either/or dichotomy and embrace

counter-narratives that focus on high-quality teaching practices that benefit children in their care and ultimately benefit society as well.

Public media campaigns against the idea of universal access to high-quality early care and education have also been well-funded and organized (Burke, 2016; Whitehurst, 2013; Wong, 2014). Critics allege that the benefits of preschool are inflated and a waste of taxpayer money. As an example, *The Washington Post* published an article entitled, “Preschool Can Provide a Boost, But the Gains Can Fade Surprisingly Fast” (Bailey, Duncan, & Odgers, 2017) and *Business Insider* published an article entitled, “Evidence Suggests Preschool is a Waste of Time and Money” (Weller, 2016). Although supporters of ECE have fought back in the media with decades of scientific research providing a solid evidence base for the benefits of high-quality ECE, including a story from *NPR* entitled, “Pre-K: Decades Worth of Studies, One Strong Message” (Sanchez, 2017), and a Brookings Institution report entitled, “Puzzling It Out: The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects” (Phillips et al., 2017).

Despite the media headlines, the field of ECE has experienced a resurgence of positive public attention in recent years. A national bipartisan poll conducted by the First Five Years Fund (2019) found that both Democrat and Republican voters expect Congress to invest in childcare/preschool through tax incentives to businesses that could fund quality childcare/preschool for employees, increase federal funding to states, raise the child care tax credit for families, and provide greater support to Head Start and Early Head Start. More than one in four voters responded that early childhood education is a primary factor in deciding whether to support an elected official. In California, the 2018

election of Governor Gavin Newsom reflected one of California's top priorities-- universal preschool (Ward, 2019).

The Present Study

This study examines the ECE system in California from a policy development perspective. How will California capitalize on this resurgence of interest in high-quality childcare/preschool and its importance to a well-functioning society? This study explores the perspectives of expert policymakers with decades of experience at the local, county, state, and federal levels. Through these interviews, a snapshot of the factors impeding progress and potential next steps emerges. An understanding of these challenges and opportunities will help to establish a roadmap of changes that can be implemented as the state moves towards expansion and improvement of high-quality childcare/preschool for all children in California.

Chapter 3. Methodology to Compare Expert Predictions with Public Opinion

Research about the field of ECE has generally focused on aspects of teaching and pedagogy, quality of care, and educational outcomes for children, rather than on strategic planning within the field itself (Vannebo & Gotvassli, 2017). To better understand the complex factors and public perceptions that have impeded California from expanding and improving access to high-quality ECE programs and services, the following research questions were considered by policymaking experts working in the field for Phase 1 of the study:

1. From the perspective of policymaking experts in California, what are the most significant factors impeding or interfering with expansion and improvement of ECE programs and services throughout the state?
2. From the perspective of policymaking experts in California, what are potential leverage points and next steps to improve expansion and improvement of high-quality ECE throughout the state?

Once these initial questions were answered and a preliminary analysis was completed, a survey was developed for Phase 2 of the study, to explore the perspectives of California residents. For this phase, research questions to gauge public understanding and support of ECE included the following:

3. Is universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool a priority for California voters?
4. Do California residents' views of the factors impeding or interfering with expansion and improvement of childcare/preschool align with the experts?

5. Would the solutions identified by the experts receive support from the public?

This study utilized an exploratory sequential mixed methods design. In Phase 1, qualitative data from semi-structured interviews was used to contextualize the factors identified in the literature, discover any additional constraints identified by the interview participants, and explore potential solutions towards universal access to high-quality ECE in California. Interview participants were initially approached according to their policymaking role, level of experience, and expertise with one or more of the following pre-identified constraints: complicated funding mechanisms, teacher workforce issues, quality of care concerns, and inconsistent policy development and legislation (see Chapter 2). Experts were also asked about public perception, and how public understanding of the importance of high-quality childcare/preschool affects progress towards universal access in California.

To learn more about public opinion and gauge alignment with the expert predictions, an online survey was disseminated in Phase 2 of the study, publicized through social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. A unique QR Code was also created and disseminated through social media. The survey was developed after an initial analysis of the interview responses, to inform design of the survey items.

Description of Participants

Five diverse policymaking experts were interviewed for Phase 1, each with careers spanning more than 20 years of direct service, leadership positions, and/or policy development work at the local, county, and state level in California. Two have careers that include elected office. Two have experience working at the federal level, in addition

to broad participation in policy development within California. Experts were not asked for specific personal demographic information, but were chosen with consideration for their diverse areas of expertise, including partnering with African-American, Asian, Latinx, and low-income populations. Three of the experts are women and two are men. Two of the five are active with the LGBTQ community as well. All have experience working directly with early care and education providers, teachers, families, and advocates.

Since this study analyzes factors impeding California from expanding and improving high-quality childcare/preschool, the statewide perspective contextualizes the unique factors and constraints across California, while the county-level perspective offers a regionalized framework and understanding of the local ECE landscape. Often, one expert was able to address both local and statewide perspectives and experience.

Participants were identified based on their background, policymaking experience, and current knowledge of ECE in California. In addition, participants have thought deeply about the factors impeding universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool, and are thus well positioned to identify potential solutions that could move California forward. Each respondent was also asked to address specific policy initiatives and legislation, such as California's unique Transitional Kindergarten program. Finally, questions were posed to each respondent about public understanding of the issues and challenges facing the childcare/preschool field, and how those perceptions may impede or support progress.

An initial analysis of the interview responses was then used to design an online survey for Phase 2 of the study, implemented through the Qualtrics platform. Survey

participants were given a series of 33 statements, divided into 11 sub-sections, and were prompted to choose from a fixed-response Likert scale of: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3), and strongly agree (4). No neutral response was given.

The survey was anonymous, in that individually-identifying information such as name and birthdate was not collected. It was developed in English and translated into Spanish. The translation was verified for accuracy by three native Spanish speakers with master's level degrees. To better understand the demographic profile of the sample, the survey included questions about gender, age, parent status, ethnic background, and socioeconomic status, using a pre-selected range of income levels. The survey posed general statements about individual priorities for public funding, in addition to questions specific to supporting universal access to high-quality ECE in the state of California. Disaggregated data, such as adults with and without children, was analyzed to gauge factors that may influence beliefs and perceptions about childcare/preschool in California.

Respondents were also asked whether they are registered to vote (with an option to state their political party preference), to gauge likelihood of voting on issues that may eventually appear on a ballot. According to Pew Research Center data culled from the US Census Bureau, millennials born in 1981-1996 are the fastest rising age group of eligible voters, although adults age 50+ are still the largest group of active voters in the nation (Fry, 2018). The online survey approach allowed for a higher return rate, with an initial goal for this study of at least 100 survey responses, and an eventual return of about 300

completed surveys.

Study Procedures

Four of the Phase 1 interviews were completed in person, and one was conducted by phone. All interviews were audio-recorded. The confidentiality of participants is protected by using R1 through R5 to identify respondents. Before beginning the interview, participants were given a letter about the purpose and intent of this study and consent was obtained and documented. For validity purposes, a pilot interview with an county-level ECE professional was conducted and provided critical insight that was used to revise and clarify the interview prompts.

A semi-structured interview protocol was followed (see Appendix A), allowing for questions to be revised, and follow-up questions to be pursued, during the interview process. Interviews lasted for approximately an hour each. Audio recordings of each interview were transcribed verbatim within a few days of each interview. Interviewer memos were written directly after each interview as well, to capture initial thinking and reflections. Once transcribed, several different analytic methods were utilized, including thematic analyses to identify individual themes that emerged from the data, comparative analysis to compare data from different respondents, and content analysis to gauge the prevalence of particular themes (Harding, 2019). The data was coded, and the results summarized, to better understand the factors and potential solutions related to the research questions. This qualitative approach was effective for these interviews, because it provided an in-depth inquiry methodology that yields a deeper understanding of the

challenges and leverage points that may lead to systemic change (File, Mueller, Basler Wisneski, & Stremmel, 2017).

A quantitative approach for the online survey in Phase 2 provided additional context and insight about the perceptions of the public that could not have been obtained through an interview process. The survey was tested for construct validity by a focus group of ten participants before distribution (National Research Council, 2001). Suggested changes and clarifications were incorporated in the final version (see Appendix B). The survey link was distributed through popular social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) for 30 days. Invitations to complete the online survey were sent weekly during this collection period.

The mixed methods design of this study contextualizes the constraints that may impede progress towards universal access to high-quality ECE from both the perspective of policymaking experts and the public. In addition, potential solutions, identified through an analysis of the interview transcripts, were vetted through the public survey to gauge alignment between the experts and the public.

Chapter 4. Findings Reveal Support for Universal Childcare/Preschool

Findings from this mixed-methods study reveal overwhelming support for universal, high-quality childcare/preschool in California. Yet, from the perspective of policymaking experts interviewed in Phase 1 of this study, there remain significant factors that impede expansion and improvement of childcare/preschool across the state. And although there is widespread agreement that California needs to expand and improve ECE across its 58 counties, there are disparities among the policymaking experts in exactly how to accomplish this. The public survey respondents from Phase 2 of this study strongly agree with the experts, and identify universal, high-quality childcare/preschool as a priority issue for California residents. While there is some alignment with proposed solutions from the experts, key differences emerged as well.

In this chapter, analyses of Phase 1 interview responses are categorized by domains (e.g. funding) and include both constraints and solutions that affect expansion and improvement of ECE in California. These are further delineated as either issues identified in the literature a priori, or new categories that emerged from the interviews. Phase 2 findings include results of a public survey, developed after an initial analysis of the interview responses, to gauge alignment between the views of ECE policymaking experts and those of the public. Responses from the public are then compared to the ECE expert predictions.

Phase 1: Interviews with Policymaking Experts.

Phase 1 findings include responses from comprehensive interviews of five policymaking experts. The experts interviewed for this study represent a diverse cross-

section of ethnicities, gender, and policymaking experience at the local, county, state, and federal levels. Most have direct experience working in the ECE field and/or the K-12 school system. Two have been elected officials for more than a decade, while the remainder have at least 25 years of experience with ECE policy development. All have worked as policymakers for at least 15 years; the majority have been working in the field more than 25 years. To preserve confidentiality, they will be identified as R1 (respondent 1) through R5 (respondent 5). A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) was used with all five respondents. These findings address two primary research questions: first, what are the most significant factors impeding or interfering with expansion and improvement of ECE programs and services throughout the state, and second, what are potential leverage points and next steps?

As a reminder, some key constraints were identified in the literature, including: complicated funding mechanisms, teacher workforce issues, quality of care concerns, insufficient legislation and policy development, and varied public understanding of the issues facing childcare/preschool in California (see Chapter 2). The experts were asked a series of open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews about the barriers they believe impede expansion and improvement of ECE in California, and all specifically identified these same constraints in their responses. In addition, a few additional constraints arose during the interviews, and are also included in these findings.

Interview respondents then addressed potential leverage points and solutions, some of which were directly connected to the literature and linked to the domains above. As a reminder, potential solutions identified and discussed in Chapter 2 included: reducing the

complexity of ECE funding streams in California (Melnick, et al., 2017), increasing the preparation and compensation of ECE teachers (Bassok et al., 2016; Early et al., 2007; Vu et al., 2008; Whitebook et al., 2009), and developing comprehensive structural policies such as an expansion of paid family leave. (Gould et al., 2017). Additional solutions emerged from the interviews and are considered within their respective domains or introduced in new categories later in the chapter.

Throughout the interviews, respondents were also asked to gauge public opinion about various aspects of childcare/preschool (e.g. does the general public believe ECE should be the sole responsibility of the families who use the service, or should it be publicly-funded and universally-accessible?). These predictive responses are summarized at the end of this section in a discussion about public understanding of the issues facing ECE and provide a basis for comparison with the public survey disseminated in Phase 2 of the study.

Funding. Complicated and inadequate funding was uniformly identified as the most significant constraint impeding expansion and improvement of high-quality ECE programs and services in California. Respondents referred to the patchwork of different funding streams that must be blended together to meet the cost of care, the narrow eligibility requirements for subsidized care, a lack of adequate facilities leading to long wait lists, insufficient reimbursement rates for providers serving children from low-income families, and an historic overall lack of investment in early care and education programs and services throughout the state. R4, a statewide ECE policymaker, noted the overwhelming challenge of fixing these systemic funding barriers:

These barriers are...collectively symptomatic of decades of under-investment in childcare in California and across the country that has reached, in a sense, almost a breaking point...[And it's] not as simple as redrawing the 'spaghetti' map of California funding streams. Each program has immense infrastructure where people are embedded in organizations that have a particular expertise, technology, and data. With 58 counties, it's exponentially daunting.

Suggested leverage points and solutions to systemic funding constraints included combining/braiding funding dollars, shifting the funding burden for 4-year old children to Prop 98 (K-12) funding, increasing reimbursement rates to be competitive with private pay families, drafting a statewide ballot initiative and county/local tax measures to fund early care and education, and allocating one-time funding to build and retrofit facilities. To ameliorate the cost of high-quality early care and education for families, an increase in eligibility guidelines for state subsidies was also suggested and explained by R4:

What we have is the very wealthy are getting what they want and some kids that are very poor are getting things, and then everybody in the middle is out of luck...there's just not enough help available. Even a small subsidy could make a huge difference for thousands of families.

Table 1 illustrates the general nature of the constraints and potential solutions that emerged from the interviews, with marks indicating topics that emerged from each respondent. For example, the constraint of inadequate public funding was raised by four of the five experts, while the cost of care for families was noted by only one respondent.

Table 1

Funding Constraints/Solutions Affecting Expansion/Improvement of ECE

Funding Constraint	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Patchwork/inadequate funding	X	X		X	X
Narrow range of eligibility–middle class “gap”				X	
Lack of adequate facilities	X		X	X	
Low reimbursement rates for providers	X			X	X
Historical lack of investment in ECE	X			X	X
Expensive as it relates to family income				X	
Funding Solution	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Streamline/consolidate funding streams	X			X	
Shift 4-year olds to Prop 98 education funding				X	
Increase eligibility guidelines for state-subsidies				X	
Raise reimbursement rates-to match private pay					X
Ballot initiative and county/local tax measures	X			X	X
One-time dollars allocated for facilities and retrofitting				X	

Note: X’s indicate the topic emerged or was addressed in the interview.

Teacher workforce issues. A second constraint, teacher workforce issues, was revealed across interviews as well. Nearly all respondents referred to the persistent low wages for early care and education teachers, who earn about half the salary of a kindergarten teacher in California. Two respondents believe that compensation for teachers should be tied to quality outcomes. Respondents also discussed the need for improved teacher training, credentialing, and professional development, challenges with recruitment and retention of ECE teachers in the field, and a persistent societal notion that the work of caregivers and preschool teachers is more custodial than instructional.

R2, an elected with policymaking experience at the local, county, and statewide level, discussed the perceived low level of respect for ECE professionals.

There is a tendency, unfortunately, to dismiss the worth of the work that people do with younger children—to somewhat derisively refer to it as ‘glorified babysitting.’...What can you do that’s more valuable than raise a next generation that’s ready to be successful in life? That’s the most important work you can do.

The gendered issue of early care and education (see Chapter 2) came up across interview respondents in a multitude of ways. Some discussed how gender bias affects the ECE teaching profession in economic ways, consistently underpaying women who, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, make up 94% of the 2 million childcare educators and 98% of preschool and kindergarten teachers (Whitebook, McLean, Austin, & Edwards, 2018). R3, an expert in county and statewide school district work, noted that while most teachers are women, the reverse is true for school leadership. Other respondents addressed gender and race as social constructs that may negatively affect not only ECE teachers, but also mothers who need childcare the most. R5 discussed systemic racism and gender bias, addressing cultural norms of the subjugation of women:

There’s this shame and blame for women of color and poor women around, ‘why would we want to help you?’...and it plays out in the economics of underpaying women, underpaying entry level work, and not putting ECE into schools...We can change licensing regulations, but we aren’t changing the fundamental system that says, ‘you know what? We don’t really care about kids and we really don’t care about the poor women who have kids.

To address teacher workforce issues, interview respondents discussed increasing wages and potentially connecting those increases to quality outcomes for children, granting ECE teachers the right to participate in collective bargaining, and giving monetary incentives to increase teacher education and qualifications. Not all respondents,

however, believed that union protections for teachers are necessary, or even desired. R5, an expert in policy development, talked about the relationship between teacher evaluation, accountability for student outcomes, and the K-12 public school system:

The government's response to anything is just get more government workers to do less work...so I don't think there's accountability at the public sector level. And that's a real challenge around school districts especially...without that accountability built in, my students could leave knowing absolutely nothing, or they could be leaving as the new Piaget. It doesn't matter because no one knows.

The discussion about issues facing the ECE teacher workforce is reflected in Table 2, which shows that the low level of compensation for teachers is the most common barrier to improving ECE in California, followed by the need for additional teacher preparation and training. Most of the experts believe that ECE teachers are underpaid because childcare and preschool are undervalued as a profession and often marginalized as being solely in the purview of women.

Table 2

ECE Workforce Constraints/Solutions Affecting Expansion/Improvement

Teacher Workforce Constraint	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Low wages	X	X		X	X
Need for improved training/professional development	X		X		
Recruitment and retention issues				X	
Gendered economic issue		X	X		X
No teaching credential in ECE environments		X			
Compensation is not tied to quality outcomes	X			X	X
Teacher Workforce Solution	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Increase teacher wages	X			X	
Improve teacher preparation, capacity, and training	X		X		
Add collective bargaining rights for ECE teachers				X	
Compensate teachers for additional education					X
Tie teacher compensation to quality outcomes	X			X	X

Note: X's indicate the topic emerged or was addressed in the interview.

Quality of care. Inconsistent and low quality of care issues were also addressed across respondents, acknowledging a lack of consistent quality measurement tools, minimal data on outcomes, and the lack of quality alignment between early care and education curricula and the expectations of kindergarten. While there were differences among respondents about the definition of quality and how it is measured, respondents generally agreed that a lack of consistent metrics or evaluative framework leads to confusion, not only within the ECE field, but also for parents attempting to select high-quality programs and services. R4, a statewide ECE expert, summarizes the impact on

families, where there is no consistent rating system for quality ECE programs and services:

I don't think people are terribly sophisticated consumers. They don't have a strong sense of what a quality classroom experience looks like, what a quality teacher looks like...we regulate the quality of restaurants, where that rating means something to people. We haven't landed on a consistent approach to quality, and we haven't marketed it in a way that helps everybody know what they're getting.

When asked for potential solutions to improve the quality of care in ECE, respondents focused first on the challenge of defining quality, because of the multiple, complex factors that influence outcomes for children. Despite this challenge, suggestions to improve quality included: identifying a menu of evidence-based curricula for ECE programs, avoiding creation of poverty-only preschools by blending children from high and low income families, and measuring outcomes by family satisfaction and other appropriate data inputs (defined differently across respondents). R1, a countywide policymaker, spoke about the critical link between data, quality outcomes, and accountability as they connect to policy initiatives, "Outcomes make for more level-headed policymaking...you have to have data to make sure concrete progress is being made."

R3, an ECE expert with county and state experience, agreed that a focus on outcomes is important, but cautioned that there are multiple ways to measure quality outcomes in ways that are informative, rather than punitive, "Quality can be measured in three different ways. We measured it based on our teachers. We measured it based on what our school was doing to make changes. And we measured it on outcomes for children." R3

also raised the issue of quality and accountability in relation to the persistent racial disadvantage facing children of color throughout their school experience:

It's not quality unless it directly impacts the end results for children...you may have a whole bunch of 'quality,' but African-Americans and Latinos are still disproportionately struggling. Would we be okay talking about doctors the way we talk about teachers? 'Oh, he's a quality doctor, but his black and brown patients die.'

Although all the experts mentioned the importance of quality outcomes for children, Table 3 illustrates that there was no clear agreement on how to either define or measure quality across ECE programs and services in California.

Table 3

Quality Constraints/Solutions Affecting Expansion/Improvement of ECE

Quality Constraint	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Lack of consistent quality measures/data/assessments	X		X	X	
Quality metrics are not aligned with curriculum			X		
No standard definition/understanding of quality				X	X
Not quality unless impacts outcomes for children			X		
Quality is not tied to funding	X				X
No accountability/evaluation in public sector	X				X
Quality solution	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Define quality: teachers, school improvement, outcomes	X		X		X
Avoid poverty-only schools – all benefit from diversity			X		X
Identify menu of evidence-based curricula				X	
Assess for quality (family satisfaction, child outcomes)	X		X		
Focus on data that supports teachers/children	X		X		
Tie funding to quality measures	X				

Note: X's indicate the topic emerged or was addressed in the interview.

Policy/legislation. Insufficient policy development and legislation was discussed by all respondents as the area most in need of improvement. Respondents noted that policymaking and legislation, because they are systemic in nature, affect all other factors impeding expansion and improvement of ECE programs and services, including funding, teacher workforce issues, and quality concerns. The constraint of policy/legislation is

further divided into two sub-categories: structural and alignment constraints, and the connection (or lack thereof) between policymakers and policy implementers.

The largest structural constraint discussed across respondents is that California has a bifurcated early care and education system that divides children into two distinct departments. Children ages 0-2 years old are managed by the California Department of Health and Human Services, and children ages 3-5 years old are managed by the California Department of Education. Families are often not aware of this difference, which adds complexity and confusion as to where to go for help with locating affordable, high-quality childcare and preschool.

In addition, some experts mentioned a lack of transparency in California's budget, so it is difficult to track and understand the many different funding streams intended to support ECE programs. Other issues that arose included a severe shortage of infant care options, not enough support for pregnant women, and an overall patchwork of public and private programs that are difficult to assess, navigate and improve in a systemic way. ECE programs, unlike the K-12 public education system, do not have access to centralized funding, adequate neighborhood facilities, nor the administrative structure to uniformly address problems at the local, county or state level. R2, a countywide policymaker with statewide experience, contextualized these issues within the ECE field as a result of a larger societal mindset that divides our free public education system from the variegated collection of public and private early care and education programs, stating,

We are trapped in a prison of our own making when we limit the defined range of free public education to K through 12...If I went out and said we should get rid of kindergarten or make it only available to people who pay for it, all hell would break loose. People would say, 'Are you out of your mind?'

However, R5, a policymaker with local, county, state, and federal experience, disagreed, arguing that the flexibility and diversity of independent and non-profit, state-funded and private-pay ECE programs makes them more responsive to the needs of families and children than the larger and more impersonal K-12 system, stating,

I don't have any desire to see [ECE programs] folded into the K-12 system because I think the K-12 system is really not good for brown and black kids in our state...Segregation has happened again--it's just economic segregation that produces poor schools, poor housing, poor neighborhoods.

In addition to these large structural complexities, three of the five respondents also noted considerable alignment issues between ECE programs (0-5 years old) and elementary schools (6-12 years old). One reason, according to the experts, is that there is no consistent curriculum that links preschool to kindergarten. ECE teachers and kindergarten teachers also attend completely different college-level educational tracks and do not traditionally attend professional trainings together. And there is little or no connection between childcare/preschool directors and elementary principals.

This may lead to confusion about school readiness expectations for children who may have attended either a traditional, community-based preschool program (public or private), or a Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program on an elementary school campus. Although these programs both serve preschool-age children, the models are notably different, with teachers who have very different education, preparation, and training requirements. The TK program is, therefore, an important illustration of some of the challenges (and potential opportunities) that arise when an early education program is situated on a public elementary school campus.

Policymaking in action: The Transitional Kindergarten law. California's

Transitional Kindergarten program, introduced with the Kindergarten Readiness Act in 2010 (SB 1381, Simitian), was created after two elementary teachers raised the issue of school readiness with their local legislator, advocating for an earlier birthdate cutoff date (from December to September) so all children would have to be five years old before starting kindergarten. The argument presented by the teachers was that there are six million kids enrolled in kindergarten in California, with about a million and a half not realizing their full potential because they were too young to learn the curriculum. But moving the cutoff date meant that a group of children with Fall birthdates were now ineligible for kindergarten. So, a new program, Transitional Kindergarten (TK), was created to accommodate these children, with a goal of increasing school readiness for elementary school and beyond.

From its inception, ECE professionals, as well as elementary school teachers, principals and administrators, had concerns about the implementation of TK. Because it was billed as an additional year of kindergarten, a credentialed, well-compensated elementary teacher would be in the classroom. However, because it was intended to be a modified kindergarten program for 4-year old children, these elementary school teachers may not have strong child development backgrounds or adequate knowledge about developmentally-appropriate instruction for young children.

Wary of this new TK program, R5 recalled widespread fears within the ECE community that a primary focus on child development and hands-on, child-directed learning would be subsumed by a focus on academic instruction. In addition, with more

4-year olds enrolled in TK at local elementary schools, the enrollment at community-based preschools would decrease, threatening many programs with closure. And state funding, which had been directed towards 4-year olds in preschool, would now be re-routed into school district general budgets, with the goal that it be directed towards TK children.

TK was a total windfall for the districts...It's been a government takeover and it's hurt a lot of our programs because the district took all those kids. And I don't think they are implementing TK because they have some deep commitment to early childhood. They barely have a commitment to kindergarten.

R3, who was working at a large, urban school district in California during the introduction of TK, recalled that the reaction from school districts was lukewarm at best. Principals weren't sure which teachers were most capable of teaching very young children, there were no established and vetted curricula, and district administrators struggled with creating and staffing a program that only served children with Fall birthdates.

Elementary schools did not like TK...One principal called it a quarter of a grade. He said to me, 'What the hell do I do with a quarter of a grade?'...Here's a policy that meant well, but policies often don't reconcile well with practice, with the implementers, and with the families.

This disconnect between policymakers and policy implementers was raised as a significant concern across respondents. A coordinated and sustained effort is needed to build strong partnerships between ECE policy experts, direct service providers, and elected officials. Otherwise, well-intentioned policies developed by the legislature may disrupt programs and services at the implementation level, as illustrated by the TK model.

Connecting with policymakers. The struggle to connect with elected policymakers was discussed at length across the expert interviews. Because numerous interest groups solicit support from electeds on a wide variety of topics, procuring attention for early care and education can be a challenge. One potential solution from the literature, reiterated in some of the expert interviews, was the idea that electing more women may increase attention to traditional women's issues (like childcare and preschool).

Another constraint mentioned by the experts is that the payoff of investing in high-quality childcare/preschool is too far removed from delivery of service, and therefore may not be perceived as urgent by legislators in a term-limited environment. R2, a policymaking expert with local, county, and state level experience, notes that electeds tend to see the budgeting process as a zero-sum game.

ECE is the ultimate challenge in the political arena because the payoff is long term in a system that rewards short term results...So, you want to spend money on a three-year old? And the return on investment is that when he's 23, he won't be incarcerated? Great. In a world where electeds are term-limited to six years in the California State Assembly, saying that there's a guarantee that 20 years from now, we'll get a better result—that's not a very persuasive argument.

Policy/legislation solutions. When asked about potential solutions to some of these policy/legislation constraints, the experts unanimously agreed that educating elected officials and developing partnerships with the legislature is critical for sustaining interest in the issues facing the ECE field. Inviting electeds to personally connect with teachers and families in ECE programs around the state was also suggested. And walking with legislators around local communities to hear the issues people face in accessing affordable, high-quality childcare and preschool might lend urgency to these issues as well.

In addition to partnering with electeds, the experts agreed that messaging to policymakers should be coordinated within the ECE community, focused on the goal of expanding and improving access to high-quality childcare and preschool in California. Interestingly, the experts differed widely on whether universal access should be publicly-funded and operated, or continued as a loose collection of public, non-profit, and privately-run small businesses. For those experts who prefer to blend private and public dollars, potential policy solutions include increasing public-private partnerships to meet the demand and providing families with vouchers for childcare and preschool (possibly tied to quality ratings). For those who prefer public funding, options include folding the cost of universal preschool into the public education budget and extending paid family leave policies so parents can bond with their infants. R4, a statewide ECE expert, believes an expansion of Paid Family Leave is a very attainable policy goal for California.

That actually is a childcare solution. If we're successful in increasing how long you can be on paid family leave to bond [with your baby], we might get many children to six months of age before their family needs to look for out-of-home care.

Table 4 captures the expert opinions about the policy constraints and potential solutions for structural and alignment issues that arise in the policy/legislation domain. Arguably, the most important finding in the policymaking arena is that all experts agreed that the ECE field should aim towards universal access to high-quality ECE for all children in California.

Table 4

Policy Constraints and Solutions: Structural/Alignment Issues

Structural/Alignment Policy Constraint	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Fragmented/bifurcated system	X			X	X
Least supply of infant care/support in utero			X	X	X
No agreement on targeted vs. universal preschool	X		X	X	X
Human driven barriers around fiefdoms			X		
Lack of connection between preK and TK			X	X	X
Structural/Alignment Policy Solution	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Universal preschool (public/non-profit/private)	X	X	X	X	X
Create a Department of Children's Services	X				
Expand programs for 0-3 ages/extend paid family leave	X			X	
Expand TK to all 4-year olds	X	X		X	
Build bridges/trust between ECE and elem. school			X		

Note: X's indicate the topic emerged or was addressed in the interview.

Table 5 captures the expert opinions about the policy constraints and potential solutions related to connecting with elected officials about ECE issues important to the field. As discussed, a majority of the experts agreed that building and sustaining relationships with local, county, and state elected officials is an effective way to influence policy decisions. And some suggested that more women in elected positions would mean more attention to traditional women's issues like childcare/preschool.

Table 5

Policy Constraints and Solutions: Connection with Electeds

Connection with Electeds Constraint	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Policymakers disconnected from ECE providers			X	X	X
Electeds see zero sum game for budgeting		X			
Electeds beholden to those who have privilege		X	X		
Electeds think incremental, not systemic change		X			X
ECE seen as “women’s issue”; men majority of electeds					X
Connection with Electeds Solution	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Educate electeds/promote political partnerships	X			X	X
Connect electeds to families/providers/teachers			X	X	
Support women candidates				X	X
Understand constraints and interests of electeds		X			X

Note: X’s indicate the topic emerged or was addressed in the interview.

The discussion about policy development and legislation prompted the experts to introduce two new constraints that may impede expansion and improvement of ECE throughout the state. These were identified and coded during the initial analysis of the interview transcripts as: messaging/communications, particularly as these relate to multiple perspectives about the purpose and goals of ECE, and underlying societal issues. These will be considered together, followed by a more extensive review of the experts’

predictions about how the public perceives the issues facing childcare/preschool in California.

Messaging/communications. Inconsistent and/or incoherent messaging, both within the ECE field and externally to the general public, was raised as a potential constraint for several reasons. Without a consistent set of messages, it is difficult to attract media attention to the importance of investing in high-quality ECE, especially because there are fewer education reporters working for large news outlets. In addition, the ECE community has a relatively weak and loosely-organized lobbying effort in Sacramento. Also, there may be a lack of consistent messaging because there are a variety of different goals associated with providing universal access to high-quality childcare and preschool, according to the experts. For example, there are educational goals (school readiness), economic goals (parental employment), societal goals (positive life outcomes), or even the goal of attracting workers to your company by offering childcare/preschool as a benefit.

Apple and Genentech and Google provide access to [childcare/preschool] because that's part of the incentive package they offer their employees. They're not doing it because they care about kids and they're not doing it because they care about the education of young children. They're doing it to attract the right engineers.

Despite these different goals, or maybe because of them, most of the experts agreed there is an opportunity for the field of ECE to frame strategic messages in multiple ways, depending on the point you want to make. R5, for example, believes that specific messages can be targeted to specific stakeholders (elected official, business leader, foundation, family, or member of the public).

[You have to] understand who are the people that can change policy and what is going to influence them to change it?...If you're going to talk about something that's on the education nexus, you should talk about preschool. If you're talking about the economic piece, then you are talking about childcare...You've just got to be smart about the frame of advocacy you're using to be able to get what you want.

Societal issues. Another set of constraints that emerged from the interviews could be classified as underlying societal factors, such as poverty, systemic racism and sexism, disproportionality, and economic segregation. R5, an ECE expert with decades of experience at the local/county, state, and federal levels, firmly believes that access to early care and education is a civil rights issue with a need for equity-oriented solutions: “Low-income kids have a right to a quality education. You can only change so much in the direct service realm. Eventually, you're going to have to change the system that put them there in the first place.”

Poverty and race-based exclusion policies also came up as an issue in several of the expert interviews. Addressing societal ills at their source, specifically with positive interventions and support beginning in utero, will have a dramatic effect on positive student outcomes in childcare/preschool and beyond, according to R3, a county and statewide ECE expert.

We're born and raised in certain zip codes that can predict how long we'll live, our diseases, and everything else...the truth is we have only so much money and sometimes you have this discussion from a place of risk. But we've got to stop pitting kids against each other...this is not a triage thing for children. Let's triage adults.

R3 also discussed the struggles parents face when living on the margins of society because of historical and institutionalized racism, redlining, and exclusionary bank loan policies. Sometimes, targeted messaging campaigns about the importance of ECE (such

as a recent First 5 media effort encouraging parents to “Talk, Read, and Sing” to their children) miss the mark when addressing the needs of families who might benefit the most from access to high-quality childcare and preschool.

How do you undo [the effects of our racist history]? I would love for that mother who has three jobs, that mother who’s worried about ICE showing up at her house, that mother who is high or has historically lived in a zip code that has eroded basic things for her family, and her family’s family, to be able to ‘talk, read, and sing.’ Until we dig down and have real conversations about how society functions, we won’t be able to find solutions that matter for everyone.

One respondent suggested that a regional approach might encourage neighboring communities to work together to solve intractable problems, like housing and homelessness, that affect outcomes for families and children. Blending ECE populations as much as possible so children are not segregated by zip code was also suggested. And scaling up a statewide human services portal may allow families to more easily identify and access high-quality ECE programs around the state.

Expert predictions about public perception of ECE. The final key constraint that was identified a priori and addressed by the experts, is how public perception of childcare/preschool affects expansion and improvement of ECE programs and services in California. Generally, the experts agreed that the most difficult constraint they encounter when interacting with the public is a belief that childcare/preschool should be the concern of individual families, not the larger society. In addition, respondents shared that childcare/preschool may be perceived as unskilled work (similar to babysitting), and not a high-quality early care and education environment with skilled teachers, a quality curriculum, and a facility designed to meet the developmental needs of a growing child.

A county policymaker, R1 acknowledges these perceptions, but also recognizes the very tangible need families have for quality childcare/preschool in the modern era.

There's certainly a segment of the population that thinks childcare/preschool is a family concern and responsibility and shouldn't be a societal burden...but the reality is that families are not as able [to provide it] because of working parents, because of different [socio-economic] situations. These children need support, and the community and society need to step up.

Respondents also noted that the lack of high-quality ECE programs and services is often a transient issue for families that is resolved when a child begins public school (although after-school care is still problematic for working parents). For that reason, it is difficult to activate parents as advocates. And because the public may see childcare/preschool as primarily custodial, rather than educational, this issue may be framed and understood as an individual family concern, rather than a societal one.

Potential leverage points and solutions encompass many of the solutions mentioned previously, including providing access to universal options for childcare/preschool that are not compulsory. Also, strategic messaging to the general public about the importance and value of high-quality childcare and preschool environments was mentioned multiple times by nearly all respondents. As R3, a county and statewide ECE expert stated, the messaging must resonate with the local community.

An African-American parent might want you to see their child as human and not someone to be thrown out of preschool. A white, middle-class parent might say, 'I want my child to play and be happy.' It depends which stakeholder you're talking to. We can't uniformly say all parents want the same things.

Table 6 contains the experts' predictions about how the general public perceives the issues facing childcare/preschool in California. These constraints informed the creation of the public survey used in Phase 2 of the study.

Table 6

Public Perception Constraints Affecting Expansion/Improvement of ECE

Public Perception Constraint	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Childcare/preschool is a family responsibility	X	X	X	X	X
ECE not a priority; a transient family concern (5 years)	X	X			X
Public doesn't understand issues/challenges in ECE	X		X		X
Public not sure if ECE is custodial, or educational		X	X	X	X
Public undervalues the field of ECE as a profession		X	X	X	
Only have children if you can afford them			X		X
People without children may not support ECE		X	X		X
Childcare/preschool is babysitting, not education	X	X		X	X
Public Perception Solution	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Universal childcare/preschool options (not compulsory)	X	X	X	X	X
Strategic messaging about importance of ECE	X	X	X	X	
All children (race, poverty, special need) are valued			X		X

Note: X's indicate the topic emerged or was addressed in the interview.

Most of the experts believe that public perception of issues facing ECE is a pivotal factor affecting expansion and improvement of ECE. Many of the solutions presented by the experts, such as a ballot initiative or a local tax measure, depend on public support. Elected policymakers also depend on public input for the policies they develop. To test alignment between the policymakers interviewed in Phase 1 of this study and the general public, Phase 2 includes a survey informed by these initial findings.

Phase 2: How the Public Sees the Issues Facing Childcare/Preschool in California.

To gauge public opinion about the issues raised by the experts, an online survey (Appendix B) was created and disseminated via social media. It consisted of 33 statements (e.g. “Society benefits in multiple ways when children have access to high-quality childcare/preschool”), divided into 11 sub-sections, with three statements per section. Each of these was presented alongside a four-point Likert scale: strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), strongly disagree (1). No neutral response was offered. Responses are grouped as positive or negative in the following analysis, combining agree/strongly agree and disagree/strongly disagree, unless otherwise noted.

The public was initially asked how they understand the varied purpose and goals of high-quality childcare/preschool. Other sections addressed the availability, accessibility, and cost of care (funding issues), and how they see the role of ECE teachers, including the teachers’ responsibilities for positive child outcomes. The survey also explored public beliefs around various ECE funding models (services paid by public, private, or a combination of funding sources). Finally, public reactions to some of the specific, proposed policy solutions by the experts was investigated, and the gendered nature of ECE was addressed. The discussion that follows reveals that public opinion both confirms and diverges from the expert assumptions in surprising ways.

Before analyzing the results for the remaining research questions, a demographic profile of survey respondents is provided for context.

Demographics. A total of 298 participants completed the survey, 295 in English, and 3 in Spanish. Unsurprisingly, due to the survey topic, women comprise 89% of

respondents, and most were between 36-50 years old. Ethnically, respondents primarily identified as white (71%), followed by Asian (12%), Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (4%), and Bi-racial/Multi-racial (3%), as shown in Table 7.

For comparison, the racial/ethnic makeup of California's population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), is 72% white (37% Non-Hispanic white), 15% Asian, 7% Black or African-American, and 4% Two or More Races. Census numbers also show those who identify as Hispanic in origin (across all races) constitute 39% of the population, the largest ethnic group in California. There is no separate racial category for Hispanic on the official Census (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program, 2019), as it is considered an ethnic origin and not a race. A limitation of this study is that there is no way to ascertain how many of the white respondents consider themselves Hispanic in origin.

Respondents primarily live in the Bay Area (80%) and Southern California (12%). A majority have children—with nearly a third of respondents reporting they have children birth to 5 years old. And more than half of respondents (60%) earn an annual family income at or above \$150,000 per year, as shown in Table 8.

Table 7

Demographics of Survey Respondents: Personal Characteristics

Personal Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	234	89%
Male	23	9%
Decline to State	6	2%
Age		
18-25	5	2%
26-35	34	13%
36-50	117	44%
51-65	79	30%
66+	31	12%
Ethnicity		
Black or African-American	3	1%
Amer. Indian/Alaska Native	2	1%
Asian	32	12%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	11	4%
Middle Eastern	3	1%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Is.	2	1%
Bi-racial/Multi-racial	8	3%
White	190	71%
Decline to State	16	6%

Table 8

Demographics of Survey Respondents: External Variables

External Variable	Number	Percentage
CA Region		
Northern Territory	12	4%
Bay Area	214	80%
Central Valley	4	2%
Coastal Cities	5	2%
Southern California	31	12%
Deserts/Inland Empire	1	0%
Children?		
Yes	234	89%
No	29	11%
Age of Child		
0-2	50	15%
3-5	45	14%
6-12	74	22%
13-18	72	22%
19+	90	27%
Annual Family Income		
\$0-\$75,000	26	10%
\$75,001-\$100,000	29	12%
\$100,001-\$150,000	43	17%
\$150,001-\$300,000	89	36%
\$300,001-\$500,000	38	15%
\$500,001-\$750,000	16	6%
\$750,001+	8	3%

Because some of the potential solutions raised by the interviewees include policies and legislation that may appear before the public as a ballot initiative or tax measure, two questions were included about voting preferences, see Table 9. Note that nearly all respondents are registered to vote (93%), with a majority identifying as Democrat (72%), a small percentage identifying as Republican (5%), and the remainder identifying as Independent, Other, or Decline to State (24%). As a comparison, in California 79% of eligible voters are registered to vote, with 43% identified as Democrat, 24% identified as Republican, and 28% identified as Independent, Decline to State, or No Party Preference (Baldassare, Bonner, Dykman, & Ward, 2019).

Table 9

Demographics of Survey Respondents: Voting Preferences

Voter Variable	Number	Percentage
Registered Voter?		
Yes	247	93%
No	15	6%
Not Sure	3	1%
Political Party		
Democrat	190	72%
Republican	12	5%
Independent	20	8%
Other	9	3%
Decline to State	34	13%

Universal access. The initial research question that guided Phase 2 of this study is whether California residents favor the idea of universal access to high-quality

childcare/preschool for all families in the state. Nearly all respondents (95%) believe that high-quality childcare/preschool should be a priority issue—one that should be considered an important investment by policymakers. Interestingly, however, most (61%), do not think this view is widely shared by the public. On the question of access, 84% of respondents prefer a universal, rather than targeted, option. These responses are illustrated in Table 10. On this central question, experts and survey respondents are aligned.

Table 10

Public Opinion About the Importance of Universal Childcare/Preschool

Topic and Question	M	[SD]	SD	D	A	SA	Total Agree
CA Priority							
ECE should be priority	3.5	[0.6]	1%	4%	36%	59%	95%
Public thinks it's a priority	2.4	[0.7]	6%	53%	31%	8%	39%
Policymakers should invest	3.5	[0.5]	1%	3%	32%	63%	95%
Universal Access							
ECE should be universal	3.1	[0.8]	3%	17%	43%	41%	84%
Target families in poverty	2.0	[0.8]	27%	56%	13%	9%	23%

Notes: SD = “Strongly Disagree”; D = “Disagree”; A = “Agree”; and SA = “Strongly Agree”. The “Total Agree” column includes both agree and strongly agree responses.

A comparison of expert predictions and public opinion. The two remaining research questions for Phase 2 of the study compare how the experts and the public understand the constraints and potential solutions that affect expansion and improvement of ECE in California. For the subsequent analysis, responses will be grouped in the same domains used in Phase 1 of the study (funding, teacher workforce and quality of care,

policy/legislation, and the expert predictions of how the public understands the issues facing ECE). Within each domain, alignment and disagreement will be highlighted.

Funding. For the public, the issue of funding is less about the wide variety of funding sources that are blended together to support subsidized childcare/preschool in California. Families are primarily concerned with availability, accessibility, and affordability of high-quality childcare/preschool in their community. And nearly all respondents believe that affordable childcare/preschool is a scarce resource throughout California. In terms of paying for childcare/preschool, the experts predict that the public believes it is solely a family responsibility, but, surprisingly, a majority of respondents (75-77%) prefer the cost of childcare/preschool be paid through tax revenue (like police, fire, and public schools), or at a minimum, shared on an as-needed basis between families and public subsidies (see Table 11).

Survey respondents were also asked to consider some of the funding solutions presented by the experts. Interestingly, incorporating childcare/preschool costs into the overall education budget in California was the most popular option, supported by nearly 90% of survey respondents. The idea that businesses should include childcare/preschool as a benefit for employees was equally endorsed. And the idea that childcare/preschools should operate as private businesses, subject to market economics, received the least support (less than 25% agree or strongly agree).

Table 11

Public Opinion About Childcare/Preschool Funding Options

Topic and Question	M	[SD]	SD	D	A	SA	Total Agree
Accessibility							
Not enough ECE in CA	3.6	[0.5]	0%	4%	31%	69%	100%
Easy to access near me	1.8	[0.7]	39%	49%	14%	3%	17%
Cost							
Family	2.1	[0.6]	16%	56%	27%	2%	29%
Public Funding	2.9	[0.7]	4%	23%	52%	23%	75%
Combination	2.9	[0.7]	5%	19%	59%	18%	77%
Funding							
Include in CA Ed. budget	3.3	[0.7]	3%	8%	44%	45%	88%
Businesses – HR benefit	3.1	[0.8]	4%	14%	40%	40%	81%
Privately operated	2.0	[0.7]	19%	56%	21%	2%	23%

Notes: SD = “Strongly Disagree”; D = “Disagree”; A = “Agree”; and SA = “Strongly Agree”. The “Total Agree” column includes both agree and strongly agree responses.

Teacher workforce and quality of care. The experts from Phase 1 of the study identified, consistent with the literature, that ECE teachers suffer from extremely low wages, a factor that inhibits both recruitment and retention. They also explained that higher-quality programs tend to have more educated, experienced, and better compensated teachers. The public agreed, widely supporting (89%) the idea that the quality of a childcare/preschool is directly related to the quality of the teacher. While none of the experts explicitly suggested ECE teachers should be paid equitably with their elementary colleagues, survey respondents firmly believe this should happen (91%). It is not clear whether the public understands the pay gap between ECE teachers and their kindergarten counterparts (ECE teachers earn about half of what a kinder teacher earns). Pay equity would come at an enormous cost, unlikely to be borne by families alone, who

already believe there is an affordability issue. Further research into this issue is warranted, with a majority of survey respondents in favor of eliminating this wage gap (see Table 12).

In addition, respondents believe teachers should reflect the ethnic diversity of the children in their care (83%), an idea that did not arise from the experts, but is consistent with some of the literature. The public is aligned with the experts, however, with improving teacher preparation, capacity, and training, with 75% agreeing that childcare/preschool teachers should earn a college degree and/or teaching credential. And there is clear support from the public (85%) that childcare/preschool teachers (including TK teachers) should have a strong child development background. Exactly what level of educational attainment, and whether there is a need for a teaching credential, was an area of disagreement among the experts, and is unquestionably an area worthy of further study and analysis.

In terms of quality childcare/preschool, the public was also not sure how to measure it. Some 54% of survey respondents were in favor of measuring outcomes by parent satisfaction, 61% in favor of using standardized assessments, and 72% in favor of teachers measuring outcomes for children's learning, all of which are ideas that surfaced in the expert interviews. There was also disagreement among the experts about how to measure quality outcomes and whether this data should be punitive, with some arguing that outcomes should be tied to funding, and others contending that data should inform and support continual improvement. The public is similarly divided on the idea of

whether public funding for childcare/preschool should be tied to quality outcomes, with just over half (58%) in support of this idea.

Table 12

Public Opinion About Childcare/Preschool Teachers

Topic and Question	M	[SD]	SD	D	A	SA	Total Agree
ECE Teachers							
Quality program / teacher	3.3	[0.6]	0%	11%	42%	47%	90%
Teacher pay equity	3.4	[0.6]	0%	9%	40%	51%	91%
Teachers are diverse	3.1	[0.7]	0%	17%	46%	36%	83%
Teachers credentialed	3.0	[0.7]	2%	22%	45%	27%	73%
Teachers CD experts	3.2	[0.7]	1%	14%	44%	39%	83%
Quality Outcomes							
Parent satisfaction	2.5	[0.6]	4%	42%	49%	5%	55%
Measured by teacher	2.7	[0.5]	1%	26%	65%	8%	73%
Standardized assessments	2.2	[0.8]	20%	41%	31%	8%	39%
Funding tied to quality	2.6	[0.7]	4%	34%	47%	12%	58%

Notes: SD = “Strongly Disagree”; D = “Disagree”; A = “Agree”; and SA = “Strongly Agree”. The “Total Agree” column includes both agree and strongly agree responses.

Policy/legislation. Survey respondents were not asked about specific structural and alignment issues within the ECE field, as those require a more complex and nuanced understanding of how programs and services are structured and funded in the state of California. They were also not asked about the connection between policymakers and policy implementers, which is an area of interest for ECE professionals, but not necessarily for the public. Instead, survey questions addressed potential policy and legislation solutions generated by the experts that might appear on a ballot initiative or ballot measure (see Table 13).

For example, extending Paid Family Leave for up to one year, so parents can stay home and bond with their baby, was well-received by a majority (76%) of survey

respondents. When asked if California should provide vouchers directly to families to pay for childcare/preschool, fewer respondents agreed (66%). The idea of expanding public schools to serve preschool-aged children received slightly more support, with 68% of survey respondents in agreement. Direct public policy efforts, including a statewide ballot initiative and local/county tax measures in support of childcare/preschool were heavily favored by public respondents (94% and 90%, respectively).

Two questions on gender that arose during the expert interviews were also included in the survey. Overwhelmingly, the public agreed (84%) that the issues facing childcare/preschool would benefit from more women in elected positions in California. Interestingly, the idea that women should not have children if they can't afford them, a gender bias against poor women raised by some of the experts, was not confirmed, with 75% opposed to this statement.

Table 13

Public Support for Specific Policy Recommendations From the Experts

Topic and Question	M	[SD]	SD	D	A	SA	Total Agree
Policy Proposals							
PFL should be 1 year	3.1	[0.8]	3%	20%	30%	46%	76%
Family vouchers	2.7	[0.8]	6%	26%	44%	18%	63%
Fold into public school	2.9	[0.8]	3%	27%	39%	29%	68%
Ballot initiative	3.4	[0.6]	2%	4%	40%	51%	91%
Local tax measures	3.3	[0.7]	3%	7%	41%	46%	87%
Elect more women	3.2	[0.7]	1%	14%	45%	37%	82%
Shouldn't have kids if can't afford them	1.8	[0.8]	37%	36%	20%	4%	23%

Notes: SD = “Strongly Disagree”; D = “Disagree”; A = “Agree”; and SA = “Strongly Agree”. The “Total Agree” column includes both agree and strongly agree responses.

Public understanding of the issues facing ECE. Interestingly, the experts focused quite a bit on the different goals contained within the ECE field, noting that messaging needs to be targeted specifically to each stakeholder. The public, however, when given several different options to more narrowly define the purpose of childcare/preschool, seemed to support all of them, including the idea that access to high-quality childcare/preschool supports school readiness, parental employment, positive life outcomes, and society (see Table 14). This may be a strength, rather than a limitation, to public understanding the importance of childcare/preschool.

Other expert assumptions, such as the public believes childcare/preschool is solely a family responsibility, were disproven by the aggregate data (though see below for a discussion of how the responses vary by political party preference). The experts also predicted that the public sees childcare/preschool as primarily custodial, but the public favors both goals. And the experts predicted the public would undervalue

childcare/preschool teachers as professionals, and instead survey respondents believe ECE teachers should be well-compensated and well-educated, and trust that teachers are the best arbiters of quality outcomes for children.

Table 14

Public Perceptions About the Importance of Childcare/Preschool

Topic and Question	M	[SD]	SD	D	A	SA	Total Agree
Importance of ECE							
School readiness/achieve	3.6	[0.6]	1%	5%	25%	75%	100%
Parental employment	3.6	[0.6]	1%	5%	30%	71%	100%
Positive life outcomes	3.6	[0.6]	1%	5%	27%	73%	100%
Societal benefits	3.7	[0.4]	0%	1%	21%	74%	96%

Notes: SD = “Strongly Disagree”; D = “Disagree”; A = “Agree”; and SA = “Strongly Agree”. The “Total Agree” column includes both agree and strongly agree responses.

Interactions among demographic variables. A deeper look into the data reveals some differences and interactions across demographic groups. For example, a multivariate ANOVA with age as the independent variable and average survey responses as dependent variables, followed by Tukey’s B post-hoc analyses, shows that younger age groups are more inclined to agree with the statement “Paid Family Leave should be expanded to a full year, so a parent can stay home with their baby” (M=3.6, SD=.66 for 18-25 year olds), compared to older age groups (M=2.6, SD=.77 for 66+ years olds), $F(4, 220)=12.57$, $p<.001$. This may be because 18-25 year olds are looking to the future and anticipating a personal need for childcare, while the 66+ age group is further removed from that immediate need.

Beliefs about expanding Paid Family Leave also hinge on whether respondents have children of their own. Those with younger children at home are more likely to agree that

Paid Family Leave should be expanded (e.g., $M=3.6$, $SD=.61$ for those with children under 5 years old), as compared to those with older children (e.g., $M=2.7$, $SD=.92$ for those with children currently over 18 years old), or no children at all ($M=3.3$, $SD=.81$), $F(5, 261)=9.49$, $p<.001$.

With regards to access and affordability of early childhood care and education, those living in the Bay Area more strongly agree with the statement, “There is currently a lack of affordable, high-quality childcare/preschool programs in California ($M=3.7$, $SD=.49$), as compared with those living in southern California ($M=3.4$, $SD=.76$), $t(203)=11.14$, $p=.001$).

This sentiment also appears to be linked to annual income, with those in the middle-income bracket (earning \$100,000 - \$150,000 per year) strongly disagreeing with the statement, “It is easy to find affordable, high-quality childcare/preschool in my community” ($M=1.6$, $SD=.60$), as compared with those earning less than \$100,000 per year ($M=2.0$, $SD=.63$), or more than \$300,000 per year ($M=1.92$, $SD=.78$), $F(3, 245)=3.28$, $p=.02$. As discussed in the literature (Chapter 2), a lower-income family may qualify for a childcare/preschool subsidy, and a higher-income family can afford to pay market-rate, but middle-income families face unique accessibility issues because they may earn too much to qualify for a subsidy, but also cannot afford full fee for care.

Consistent with the divided political climate in California and across the nation, the most notable demographic differences emerge across political party preferences of respondents. It was not the intent of this study to consider political party preference as a variable of interest. Nevertheless, the findings were statistically significant enough to

include here, with the recommendation that future studies pursue a more representative sample.

As Figure 1 illustrates, while all respondents agree that childcare/preschool should be considered an important investment for all children in California, and that it is not easy to find affordable, high-quality childcare/preschool throughout the state, the differences across political parties were significant ($p < .001$, the threshold of significance when applying a Bonferroni correction).

Figure 1. Survey responses divided by political party (question set 1). Reports responses to the following statements: “Policymakers should consider childcare/preschool an important investment in CA,” “All families in California should have access to free or subsidized childcare/preschool,” and “There is currently a lack of affordable, high-quality preschool programs in CA.”

In addition, Figure 2 as illustrates, respondents also disagree on the extent to which childcare/preschool should be included in the overall education budget in California, or paid for by public taxes. Also, there are stark differences based on political party preference for whether families should bear the cost of childcare/preschool and whether

childcare/preschools should be private businesses, subject to market economics. These differences also reached a level of statistical significance ($p < .001$, the threshold of significance when applying a Bonferroni correction).

Figure 2. Survey responses divided by political party (question set 2). Reports responses to statements about childcare/preschool costs (“should become part of the overall education budget in CA;” “should be paid for by taxes (like police, fire, and schools);” “should be the responsibility of the family;” and “should be private businesses, subject to market economics”).

These findings indicate that further investigation may be useful to understand how ideology, values, and a divided political climate act as potential constraints to expansion and improvement of childcare/preschool in California.

Chapter 5. Optimism for Improving California's ECE System

With strong alignment between policymaking experts and the public for universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool in California, and general agreement for the policymaking initiatives proposed, the path towards universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool in California should be clear. Yet, widespread systemic change is still elusive. More needs to be done to contextualize the barriers to change.

To explore the results of this study, a systems model for change is used to consider root causes, interrelated variables, and the components and structures that influence movement and transformation within and across the ECE system itself. Thinking in systems can be a constructive way to understand the dichotomy between the aspirational goal of universal childcare/preschool and the barriers that prevent it from becoming a reality. A systemic approach also provides a convenient framework to understand the strategic leverage points for change, suggested by the policymaking experts and supported by the public.

A Systems Primer

The application of systems theory to any complex issue requires an understanding of the individual elements within a system, the relationships of those elements, and an identification of the purpose or intent of the system (Meadows & Wright, 2008).

Beginning with individual elements of the childcare/preschool system in California, this study explored funding, teacher workforce and quality of care, policy development and legislation, and public perception from both an insider (experts) and outsider (public) perspective. The expert interviews also addressed the interconnected relationships among

these elements, illustrating the challenge of focusing solely on one issue (e.g. funding) at the exclusion of the others (e.g. teacher workforce). In terms of identifying the overall purpose or intent of the ECE system, there is widespread agreement among experts and the public about the educational, economic, and societal benefits of a high-quality ECE experience.

In systems language, the ECE system is hierarchical (Meadows & Wright, 2008), meaning that the relationships within each sub-system (e.g. funding, teacher workforce, policy development) are stronger than relationships between sub-systems. By design, this allows each sub-system to work more efficiently, because each one focuses directly on the specific elements and relationships that help it function effectively.

For example, when teachers are well-trained, well-compensated, and well-respected as professionals, the number of people seeking to enter the field increases, making it easier to recruit and retain quality teachers in the field. This is a balanced feedback loop. The reverse is also true. If teachers are overworked, underpaid, and undervalued, fewer people enter the field and it is more difficult to recruit and retain staff. The strength of the teacher workforce sub-system is a critical determinant of the strength of the overall ECE system. At the same time, teachers, and others who work within the teacher workforce sub-system, do not need to understand exactly how policy development or funding works, in order to improve efficacy of their own sub-system.

Problems arise when the needs of one sub-system (e.g. policymaking) dominate at the expense of the goals of the entire system (e.g. universal access). For example, the introduction of the Transitional Kindergarten program in California aimed to serve young

children but did not address teacher qualifications and quality of program from a child development perspective. And although the policymaking sub-system (and each sub-system) must preserve some autonomy to keep it operating smoothly, its efforts must be balanced with enough coordination and control across sub-systems to stay focused on the ultimate goal of the entire system (e.g. universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool in California). If this coordination and control is missing, the policy sub-system may achieve its desired outcome (e.g. moving the kindergarten cut-off date), while the needs of other sub-systems (e.g. increasing teacher qualifications to meet the needs of younger children) go unnoticed.

To understand the mechanisms of a highly-functional global system, the concept of hierarchy is appealing because it suggests complete and rational control. But this is misleading, because systems are, at their core, only a model of the way the world works. And the way in which one participant in the system understands the system as a whole is further constrained by the concept of bounded rationality (Simon, 1947, as cited in Cristofaro, 2017), which posits that people generally make reasonable decisions based on the information they have. But they can never know all the details about every aspect of the system, especially those parts of the system that are most distant from their own expertise. So, decision-making is often done without the full picture in mind.

What helps people step out of this bounded rationality is the opportunity to see the system from the perspective of another actor in a different sub-system. For example, if a teacher becomes a parent paying for care, their opinion about increasing teacher salaries may be affected by the cost of care for their own child. Or if a parent seeking care

becomes an elected official, they may understand the policy constraints, stress points, and potential solutions from a different angle. The more one moves across sub-systems, the broader the understanding of the system itself. For this reason, the methodological approach for this study included selecting specific policymaking experts for Phase 1 interviews who have decades of experience, with careers that cross sub-systems, to represent a broad understanding of the constraints and potential leverage points for systemic change and improvement.

In fact, these experts repeatedly explained that their personal motivation to move into policy work was a direct result of the frustration they each experienced when policies were developed, mandated, and implemented without eliciting specific knowledge and experience from those who provide direct service with families and children. These policy decisions are not intentionally myopic; this phenomenon is a natural by-product that occurs when actors primarily function within one sub-system. To influence movement within a system, it is necessary to improve connection across sub-systems, providing essential information about shared goals, existing constraints, and potential solutions that are likely to improve the entire system over time.

A Proposed Model for Early Care and Education

To visualize and think about the ECE system in its entirety, the following model is proposed. The arrows denote feedback loops that exist both within and across sub-systems (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. A systems model of ECE in California. This ECE system map includes four sub-systems: upper left quadrant represents teacher workforce, upper right quadrant represents funding (accessibility and availability of programs), lower left quadrant represents policymaking, and lower right quadrant represents the benefits and outcomes of high-quality programs. (B) represents a balancing feedback loop. A negative reinforcing feedback loop is represented by (-R). The arrows denote pathways within and across sub-systems.

In the center of the model is universal access to high-quality ECE. That is the goal or intent of the system. In the lower, right quadrant are the educational, economic, and societal benefits of these high-quality programs. These outcomes are achieved through developmentally-appropriate practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), and strong teacher-child relationships. The policymaking experts and the public agree that all three benefits are equally strong arguments in favor of universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool in California.

The upper right quadrant includes families in need of childcare/preschool. This is essentially a funding issue. If a family can afford the cost of care, they benefit from the system. If they cannot afford the full cost of care, but they are eligible for federal, state, or local subsidies that reduce the fee, they also benefit from accessing the system. If they cannot afford the cost of care, and there is no public funding available to them, they may be forced to choose sub-standard care, which leads to unprepared or underprepared students, unstable parental employment, and fewer long-term societal benefits. These unprepared students may, in turn, be unable to access high-quality ECE for their own children, which negatively reinforces this feedback loop across generations. Additionally, if fewer and fewer subsidies become available over time due to budget cuts or shifting policymaker priorities, more and more children may be routed into sub-standard care, with similar, negative outcomes.

The availability and accessibility of high-quality childcare/preschool is also directly affected by funding. Policymakers and the public agree that childcare/preschool has been historically underfunded in California, and there is not enough supply to meet demand. Although there is disagreement as to exactly how ECE funding should be increased (e.g. public vs. private solutions), it is clear that the fundamental operation of this sub-system is dependent on more overall financial support, particularly for families who cannot currently access care.

The ECE teacher workforce sub-system is mostly contained in the upper left quadrant and is regulated by a balanced feedback loop that can be either positive or negative. As discussed earlier, when teachers earn higher salaries, more people pursue ECE as a

career, complete their educational training, and stay in the field longer. Well-compensated and well-educated teachers amass more years of experience and have a positive effect on the overall quality of care. When salaries decrease or remain stagnant, fewer people enter the field, it is more difficult to retain teachers, and there is a subsequent decline in the overall quality of care. A majority of the policymaking experts and public agree that childcare/preschool teachers are significantly underpaid in comparison to their elementary colleagues. There is also agreement that teacher quality is directly connected to program quality, but policymaking experts believe there is no consistent method to assess or measure quality of care in California. The public is less interested in standardized assessment of quality, and more willing to trust teachers to accurately assess progress for their children.

Around the perimeter of the model are the policy decisions that substantially affect the overall system. This sub-system begins in the bottom left quadrant of the model. Policymaking is influenced by public understanding of the importance of high-quality ECE, which is, in turn, influenced by media messaging, word of mouth, and public dissemination of new research. As awareness of the benefits of high-quality ECE grows, the public begins advocating for policies and legislation that support expansion and improvement of ECE. The public may also work to elect more people (particularly women, according to the results of this study) who support these goals. Like the other sub-systems, the reverse is also true. If public interest in ECE fades, advocacy efforts decrease, fewer champions for ECE are elected to office, and fewer supportive policies are enacted. This lack of attention and interest may decrease the number of public

subsidies available to families seeking care, limiting access to high-quality childcare/preschool throughout the state.

System Traps. As a reminder, all system maps are merely theoretical models of how a system operates. In fact, even with representations like this one, systems are inherently complex and surprising. All systems produce unintended results, problems, or consequences; sometimes described as “system traps” (Meadows & Wright, 2008, p. 112). These occur because the world operates in a non-linear, unpredictable way. The only way to avoid these predicaments is to expect and plan for their inevitable appearance, especially during periods of systemic change. Figure 4 highlights potential traps within this ECE system model.

Figure 4. System traps within ECE system in California. This version of the systems map includes three system traps within the policymaking, teacher workforce, and funding (accessibility and availability) sub-systems.

The sub-system of policy development includes the trap of “policy resistance” (Meadows & Wright, 2008, p. 112), a trend that happens when the goals of one sub-system differ from the goals of another, or differ from the overarching goal or intent of the whole system. For example, most public respondents believe childcare/preschool should be funded by public dollars. If a goal is established within the policymaking sub-system to fold childcare/preschool costs into the current education budget (as proposed by one statewide policymaking expert), it has a higher chance of moving the system because it is aligned with the overarching goal of universal access. This is true for public-private solutions as well. The proposal to raise reimbursement rates so they are competitive with private pay is another way to expand the system towards universal access.

Policy resistance sets in when there is a proposal to increase universal access, such as the Transitional Kindergarten program, but the goals within other sub-systems are not addressed. TK teachers are credentialed (which some experts and members of the public support), but do not necessarily have a strong child development background (considered essential by most experts and members of the public). In addition, this program currently benefits only a small cohort of preschool-age children, so parents seeking high-quality childcare/preschool are not guaranteed access. When the goals across sub-systems are not aligned, the system, as mentioned previously, behaves in a sub-optimal way.

One of the most effective ways out of the trap of policy resistance is to find a mutually-agreeable solution that satisfies an overarching goal. For example, one suggestion that emerged from this study is to promote a dual-pronged approach; subsidizing the cost of care for families living in poverty, while offering a sliding scale to families who can afford to pay. This solution also addresses another issue that arose in the expert interviews—promoting the blending of families from different socio-economic backgrounds. If families living in poverty have access to the same quality of care as a family who can afford to pay, integration and universal access are both possible. Of course, policy resistance may also set in with this solution, because while it addresses the cost of care issue, it may not address the availability (lack of adequate facilities) issue.

For the teacher workforce sub-system, the trap is “drift to low performance” (Meadows & Wright, 2008, p. 121). This trap suggests that the desired state of the system (well-compensated, well-educated, and well-respected teachers) is influenced by the perceived state (underpaid, undervalued, and inexperienced teachers). This misperception

creates a negative reinforcing loop that lowers expectations and prevents corrective action from being taken, causing the system to degrade even further. In this study, the experts and public agreed that teacher salaries are low and there is a clear need for improved teacher preparation, capacity, education, and training. Interestingly, however, the experts disagree about whether teachers should be afforded collective bargaining rights and other union protections like their elementary colleagues, who earn on average twice their income.

The experts also shared very low expectations for public perception of ECE teachers. They predicted the public sees childcare/preschool as more custodial (babysitting), than educational, thinks that families should bear the full cost of care, and undervalues ECE as a profession. These predictions were consistently disproven by public survey respondents. More than 90% agreed that childcare/preschool teachers should be paid equitably with their elementary colleagues. About 89% support the idea of funding childcare/preschool in the overall education budget in California. And nearly all (98%) of respondents believe that society benefits in multiple ways when children have access to high-quality childcare/preschool. This difference between the experts and public survey respondents is worthy of further study. To avoid this trap, experts and the public may have to raise expectations about the possibility of creating and sustaining high-quality childcare/preschool throughout the state.

A third archetype, or system trap, addresses issues of equity and social justice and is known as “success to the successful” (Meadows & Wright, 2008, p. 126). Wealthy, privileged, often white, parents, can afford high-quality childcare/preschool, ensuring that

their child receives long-term educational and societal benefits. Low-income parents, often people of color who are most affected by policies created within a racist society, cannot afford high-quality childcare/preschools (without subsidies), therefore their child may not receive these same benefits. This is also known in the field of ecology as the “competitive exclusion principle” (Hardin, 1960, p. 1292), where two different species compete for the same resources. The one that dominates the available resources wins.

This means that neighborhoods of concentrated wealth provide fertile ground for well-appointed childcare/preschool programs that are well-funded by the predominantly white families they serve, staffed by well-educated and trained (and also mainly white) teachers who are adequately-compensated and who provide a high-quality experience. Impoverished and neglected neighborhoods populated with people of color may be left with sub-standard childcare/preschool options with low-paid, potentially entry-level teachers, who may struggle to provide a quality experience. In addition, neighborhoods with a high percentage of families who live in poverty may not have access to subsidized care at all, relying on a network of family and neighbors to provide inconsistent care during the day.

The experts addressed the issue of economic segregation directly, acknowledging that wealthy, white families can usually access private childcare/preschool, while very poor families of color can sometimes access subsidized childcare/preschool. Those in the middle, who do not qualify for subsidies but can’t afford private options, are excluded from the ECE system altogether. If universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool is the goal and intent of the ECE system, this becomes a civil rights issue of every citizen’s

right to a public education in California. To avoid this trap and equalize access, policy interventions are required. These may include public funding and support, private charity, the protections of labor unions that promote salary equity, and guaranteed universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool for all children.

Improving the Early Care and Education System

Understanding the ECE system (its individual elements, the interconnected relationships, and the overall purpose/goal), is the first step towards identifying mechanisms for change. The expert interviews, together with the public responses, help us piece together a model of the ECE system in California. The next critical step is to explore how systemic change happens, and which potential solutions have the best chance to move the system towards its identified goal.

Complexity theory is one effective way to examine systemic change, because it proposes leveraging key factors within the system to reach critical mass, or a “tipping point,” (Mason, 2016, p. 439) when a dynamic and complex web of factors begins influencing each other to move the system in a new direction. The experts interviewed for this study addressed potential leverage points and solutions that may positively affect the expansion and improvement of ECE in California, with consideration given to how these proposals might function across sub-systems.

As an example, a legislative attempt to address a concern about children’s readiness for school resulted in the Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010. The law’s original intent was to narrow the kindergarten age gap, but a new Transitional Kindergarten program was also created to serve those displaced younger children. This change in the

policy/legislation sub-system affected the teacher workforce sub-system, where elementary teachers are now responsible for teaching younger children with a more developmental approach. It affected the funding sub-system, because this new TK program had to be funded by the existing K-12 education budget. And it affected parents seeking preschool, who now have access to a free public pre-K option, albeit only for families with children who have Fall birthdates. In terms of quality outcomes, although the long-term societal benefits are still unknown, children who experience a full year of TK have shown improved school readiness skills, which positively affect behavioral, cognitive, and social and emotional growth, according to a 5-year study by the American Institutes for Research (Manship et al., 2017).

As illustrated by this example, policymaking is a complex process. Solving for one problem (kinder age gap) creates stress (positive or negative) across the whole system. Because of this complexity, policymakers can only hazard a guess as to the impact a new policy or piece of legislation will have on other sub-systems. Here, Kingdon's *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (2003) provides some assistance.

Kingdon (2003) describes three major process streams in government that must converge for systemic change to occur. These streams are described as: problem recognition, formation of policy proposals, and politics. Each of them acts as either an impetus or barrier for change. For example, a Governor could call for universal preschool in California, as California Governor Gavin Newsom did during his successful campaign in 2018. But unless there are policy proposals developed and ready for implementation within the ECE community, progress will be stalled. In addition, a "policy window"

(Kingdon, 2003, p. 165) must be simultaneously open, with the ideal conditions necessary to push a subject higher on the political agenda. Without all three streams converging, nothing happens.

Another impediment, according to Kingdon (2003), is the belief that rational, comprehensive decision-making is an accurate model for policymaking. There are some policymakers who believe that when a problem is clearly defined, potential solutions are generated, and if each solution is evaluated with a carefully-designed matrix of priorities, the state can actively control change across a system. Kingdon (2003) offers a different, nearly opposite model. He posits that solutions and problems float in the system together, and that change (either abrupt or incremental) happens spontaneously when the three streams (problem, policies, politics) combine during a brief window of opportunity, usually brought about by the ever-changing mood of the electorate. This explains why solutions exist in the policy stream for quite a long time before the political window opens, the problem generates traction, and the policy community coalesces around one idea. Once the problem, policy, and political streams converge, change occurs (again, either incrementally or abruptly, depending on the solution).

Although universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool is a goal of the ECE community, it will still take political will, a shift in public priorities, and a reframing of the problem to enact systemic change. As illustrated earlier with the example of Transitional Kindergarten, mandated by law in 2010, there are still school districts in California that do not offer TK as an option, a clear example of policy resistance at the

implementation level, with the most common reasons being lack of facilities and lack of funding (California Department of Education, 2017).

Limitations, Implications, and Recommendations for Further Study

The intent of this study is to improve understanding of the specific factors that impede or interfere with expansion and improvement of high-quality childcare/preschool in California, as well as identify potential solutions, with a specific focus on the alignment between policymakers and the public. Phase 1 interviews reveal five main areas of constraints (e.g. funding), with solutions that are both incremental and systemic. Phase 2 results from a public survey reveal specific areas of alignment or disconnect with the expert predictions.

Limitations of the methodology are reflected in the sample size for the public survey. Increasing the number of respondents to reflect the general population in California may increase consensus around the constraints and solutions discussed. There is also a selection bias, in that the survey was disseminated primarily through social media platforms, and may have reached a subset of the population who either work in the ECE field, or who are directly connected to the network of the researcher.

Because a large percentage of the survey respondents identified as white (71%) and female (89%), a future attempt to increase the number of diverse respondents is important. For this study, only 4% self-identified as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish, although respondents may be conditioned to choose white, since there is no official racial category for Hispanic/Latino on the Census (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program, 2019). And although the survey was translated into Spanish, only three Spanish

surveys were received. (Latinx respondents did submit responses to the survey in English as well.)

A concerted effort to recruit more male respondents would also increase validity of these findings, although one could argue that since this is a gendered issue, more women will inevitably respond to a survey on childcare/preschool than men. However, because most elected policymakers, particularly at the state level, are male, it is important to gauge how these issues are perceived by men as well.

And the findings related to political party preference would also be bolstered by a more representative sample. The statistical measurements should therefore be re-verified if the survey is repeated.

Implications: A ‘values’ constraint. Findings from this study hinted at an ideological divide that may act as a hidden constraint in policy discussions. A recommendation for future studies would be to openly explore ideology and individual values that inform policymaking within the ECE field. Here, again, Kingdon (2003) offers a useful concept, “value acceptability” (p. 132), the concept that proposals that survive and circulate within a policy community are usually compatible with the values of the experts within that policy community. These proposals become viable as solutions when there is general agreement it satisfies the tenets of the group (along with technical feasibility, tolerable costs, public acceptance, and receptivity among electeds). When the values within the policy community differ (as they inevitably do), this fragmentation impedes systemic change.

Although not the original intent of this study, survey results suggested some ideological differences for and against specific policy solutions based on political party preference of the respondent. Moreover, differences between political party preferences were more significant than other demographic interactions. (Although, as stated earlier, a more representative sample would allow for exploration of other interactions, including age and income level.) Because ideological factors did not arise overtly during the initial literature review, nor within the expert interviews, it may be considered a hidden constraint.

Does political party preference matter to the development of childcare policy? This was the central question explored in Hieda (2013), using a meta-analysis of 18 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries from 1980-2005. Findings included distinct preferences, with liberal parties favoring equality and public childcare/preschool programs, while conservative parties preferred a more conventional social order, raising children at home with some public support, and market-based solutions. Because of these diverse preferences, government representation widely influences the development of childcare/preschool programs (Hieda, 2013).

In this study, these ideological differences may appear as public or private solutions offered by the experts and favored or opposed by survey respondents, across all five domains. This is discussed briefly here, within the context of the limitations mentioned previously.

Funding. The constraint of funding, as discussed within the system model, is fundamentally an access, availability, and affordability issue for families with young

children. Experts and the public may generally agree that universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool is a common goal, but differences in implementation emerge along liberal-conservative lines, with those who identify as Democrats favoring collective access for all Californians, funded as part of the public education budget, and those who identify as Republican favoring increased access through private, market-based businesses, funded primarily by individual families who can afford it (with some public support for those living in poverty). Of course, this political duality between liberty (individualism) and equality (collectivism) is not a new phenomenon. However, it is important to understand this tension within the context of the rising cultural influence of neoliberalism, an ideology popularized in the last few decades, and championed by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, emphasizing political, economic, social, and ecological transformations to market-based approaches, and often favoring free-market fundamentalism and anti-government conservatism (Birch & Springer, 2019; Quinn, 2014).

For those rooted in a social-democratic, egalitarian ideology, the state is the central actor enabling equal participation and mobility for all citizens through delivery of free public education (Bialik, 2014; Boyd, 2004; Mitchell, Crowson, & Shipps, 2011). Public education systems under this model are strengthened, with a focus on civil rights and equality (Mitchell et al., 2011; Vinovskis, 2012). For those grounded in a social-economic, moral perspective, each citizen is given the freedom to succeed under free-market rules (Birch & Springer, 2019). Privatized education systems are favored under

this model, including school choice, school vouchers, and charter schools, with a focus on accountability for student outcomes (Mitchell et al., 2011; Vinovskis, 2012).

Experts interviewed for this study were not asked about their political party preference, but in analyzing potential funding solutions, there is a clear distinction between those who favor public funding for public education, and those who prefer public funding for market-based solutions. Consistent with the results of this study, what is needed are coherent solutions that unify, rather than divide the ECE field. Solutions must be acceptable across sub-systems, aligned with the overall goal or intent of the ECE system, and incorporate ways to bridge political divides. As R3, one of the ECE experts declared, “There’s more than one way to the promised land.” Finding opportunities for experts from each sub-system to strategize together, alongside families who represent a diverse cross-section of the population, may result in proposals that gain more traction to succeed.

Teacher workforce and quality of care. The liberal-conservative divide appears within the teacher workforce and quality of care results as well. Historically, the K-12 public education system has veered slowly away from a democratic focus on equality and a well-educated citizenry, and towards a reform movement focused on accountability and efficiency outcomes, beginning with Ronald Reagan’s report, *A Nation at Risk*, (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), and continuing with George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind law in 2001 (Graham, 2013).

The ECE system has apparently followed suit. In this study, survey participants who identify as Democrat favor wage increases, educational attainment, and union protections

for ECE teachers, while those who identify as Republican favor teacher wage increases tied directly to student outcomes, and standardized assessments as accountability measures for children's learning. The experts are divided between more liberal and conservative solutions for addressing the teacher wage gap. Some of the experts favor credentialing, additional teacher training, and collective bargaining rights for ECE teachers, while others favor linking teacher compensation to measured outcomes for children.

Here, again, solutions that act as leverage points for systemic change must meet the following criteria: acceptability across sub-systems, alignment with the overarching goal of universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool, and ability to bridge political divisions both within the ECE community and in the general public. Solutions that continue to increase teacher compensation and deepen preparation, education, and training are widely believed by both experts and the public to bring quality improvements to the overall childcare/preschool system.

Policy/legislation. A political framework is both useful and essential to engage and activate the policy/legislation sub-system. Because policymakers' political interests inform their advocacy efforts, it is critical to understand how issues of equality, equity, and efficiency are addressed for any potential solutions that may trigger the ECE system towards universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool in California. Here, too, the liberal-conservative divide was seen across the expert interviews and survey respondents. Potential solutions supported by self-identified Democrats included expanding public funding for programs that serve children birth-3 years old, lengthening Paid Family

Leave, and extending Transitional Kindergarten to accommodate all 4-year old children. On the other hand, potential solutions supported by self-identified Republicans included blending both private and public funding to preserve community-based, non-profit, and privately-run ECE programs and services.

In addition, there is a related issue that arose in this study of a gendered bias that permeates each sub-system, and the ECE system in its entirety. Within the domain of policy development, survey respondents who identify as Democrat strongly believe that more women in elected office will bring attention to issues in ECE, while those who identify as Republican are not so sure. R5, an ECE expert with decades of local, county, state, and federal advocacy experience, addressed this issue directly, declaring that advocates need to, “figure out a way to make this a male issue...It’s a very sexist strategy, but with the current power structure [of electeds in California], this can’t just be seen as a good white woman issue.”

Leverage points and potential solutions, consistent with the other two domains, must address this overarching values constraint between public and private solutions as proposals are vetted both within the ECE field and in the public. As discussed in this analysis, it is critical to keep the ultimate goal or intent of the system, universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool in California, in the forefront of these discussions.

The liberal-conservative divide that emerged from this study, and its connection to favoring public versus private solutions for expanding and improving childcare/preschool in California, is an area that has not been widely explored in the literature. Future studies could investigate whether more explicit conversations about this values constraint within

the ECE community might reveal additional pathways towards universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool for all children in the state.

Conclusions: Optimism and Progress in California

Overwhelming, this study revealed that policymaking experts and the public agree that universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool is a goal worthy of pursuit in California. Children who attend high-quality childcare/preschool are believed to be better prepared for school, and experience positive life outcomes that benefit society. Families benefit from more economic stability, because parents who have access to high-quality childcare/preschool can be employed in steady jobs.

So, what impedes California from moving forward? This study examined five central domains of constraints: funding, teacher workforce, quality of care, policy/legislation, and limitations of public perception about the importance of childcare/preschool, all of which are consistent with the existing literature. Additional constraints around inconsistent messaging and underlying social issues emerged as well. The experts then shared a broad range of potential solutions and leverage points within each of these domains, incorporating both public and private options.

Once identified, these constraints and potential solutions were presented in a public survey to gauge alignment between policymaking experts and the general population. Similarities emerged, including strong agreement that universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool should be a priority for California. Interestingly, the public diverged from the expert predictions in surprising ways, as discussed in the analysis. And, within

the disaggregated data, a hidden values constraint appeared, reflecting political divisions that merit further exploration.

This liberal-conservative divide reflects a dichotomy between those who favor expanding public options and those who prefer market-based solutions. This contrast is seen both within the expert interviews and reflected in the public survey responses and may function as an invisible barrier to moving the state towards universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool. An effort to deliberately and openly consider a values perspective in strategic planning within the ECE field may provide a constructive framework to consider options that prioritize equity (aligned with a more liberal perspective favoring public solutions) and options that prioritize efficiency (aligned with a more conservative view favoring private partnerships and market-based solutions). If left unexamined, finding consensus to reach a common goal may be difficult and elusive.

In addition, this study developed a model for understanding the ECE system to investigate global change. Using a systems theory framework, change must be coordinated within and across sub-systems (e.g. funding) or the overall goal or intent of the system is not achieved. If universal access to high-quality childcare/preschool is the goal, each sub-system must work together to achieve it. Bringing policymaking experts together to generate comprehensive solutions that can be implemented across sub-systems and align with the overall goal is one effective planning mechanism. These proposals should be vetted with the public before implementation, since it is the public who will vote for any policy initiatives or tax measures that support incremental or systemic change.

The topic of high-quality childcare/preschool has enjoyed a resurgence of interest over the past decade. If the policy community and public can find a way to keep the goal of universal access to high-quality ECE in mind, the time is ripe for change.

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Appendix A: A Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Policymakers

Thank you so much for participating in this research study. I am researching the specific factors that affect expansion and improvement of high-quality ECE programs and services. I'm also interested in potential leverage points and solutions that you may have considered or identified in your daily work.

I will make every effort to protect your confidentiality. You will be identified only as working at the state, county, or local level within the field of ECE. No specific job titles will be used. Pseudonyms will be assigned. You also have the right to skip any question or withdraw at any time from the study. I look forward to our conversation.

1. What drew you to policymaking work in California?
2. What are your current policymaking priorities?
3. What term(s) do you use when referring to the ECE field?
4. What ages does this cover?
5. What percentage of your work is policymaking?
6. Who or what influences your ideas about ECE?
7. What are the biggest policy problems facing the ECE field today?
8. What are factors that impede or support progress in ECE policymaking?
9. What do you see as next steps to expand and improve high-quality ECE in CA?
10. What's an example of a current effective ECE policy in California?
11. How do outcomes matter in the creation of ECE policies?
12. What is your vision of an ideal ECE landscape in California?
13. How do you think the general public understands the problems in ECE?

14. What factors influence people's perceptions and beliefs about ECE?
15. What influence does the media have on public perception? On policymakers?
16. Do you think the public considers ECE to be an individual family concern?
17. What can be done to increase public understanding of the issues in ECE in CA?

Thank you so much for your thoughtful responses to my questions. It's been a pleasure talking with you about these issues. I have a lot to consider for this research study! As I write up the interview, would it be okay for me to contact you with brief follow-up or clarification questions? I very much appreciate your time and all the work you do on behalf of families and children in our community.

Appendix B: A Public Survey to Gauge Alignment with Expert Interviews

Thank you for your interest in this study! This anonymous survey about childcare/preschool in California takes about 10-15 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, you will be prompted to provide your contact information to enter a raffle to win a \$75 VISA gift card. You do not need to complete the survey to be eligible to participate in the raffle and you do not need to provide your contact information to participate in the study.

Notice of Consent

Study Title: Early Education in California: Exploring the Public Perspective

Researchers: Heidi Emberling, SJSU Doctoral Candidate and Dr. Emily Slusser, SJSU Faculty

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to better understand the public's perception of childcare/preschool programs and services in California.

Procedures: This survey will ask you to rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with various statements about childcare and preschool programs offered in California. We anticipate that the survey should take no longer than 10-15 minutes to complete.

Compensation: At the end of the survey, you will have the opportunity to enter a raffle to win a \$75 VISA gift card.

Confidentiality: Survey responses will remain confidential. Contact information requested at the end of the survey will be dissociated from survey responses and will be used only to track raffle entries. No identifying information will be included in analyses or final reports.

Your Rights: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the entire study or any part of the study without any negative effect on your relations with San Jose State University. You also have the right to skip any question you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information: Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact one of the individuals listed here. For further information about this study, please contact Heidi Emberling (Principal Investigator) at heidi.emberling@sjsu.edu or Dr. Emily Slusser (Faculty Advisor) at emily.slusser@sjsu.edu. Complaints or concerns about the study may be directed to Dr. Bradley Porfilio (Educational Leadership Doctoral Program Director) at 408-924-3722. For questions about participant rights or if you feel you have been harmed in any way by your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Pamela Stacks (Associate Vice President of the Office of Research) at 408-924-2479.

This survey is for current or recent residents of California.

I am, or have been, a resident of California and I agree to participate in this study

I am not a California resident and/or I do not wish to participate in this study

For the purposes of this survey, the term “childcare/preschool” refers to all programs serving children age birth through 5 years old. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Importance of Childcare/Preschool

Childcare/preschool is important to the economy because it allows parents to work.

Childcare/preschool is important because it prepares children for school.

Childcare/preschool is important to society because children in high-quality childcare/preschool programs have improved life outcomes.

Accessibility of Childcare/Preschool

Only families living in poverty should have access to free or subsidized childcare/preschool.

All families in California should have access to free or subsidized childcare/preschool.

There is currently a lack of affordable, high-quality childcare/preschool programs in California.

It is easy to find affordable, high-quality childcare/preschool in my community.

Costs of Childcare/Preschool

Childcare/preschool costs should be the responsibility of the family.

Childcare/preschool costs should be paid for by taxes (like police, fire, and public schools).

Childcare/preschool costs should be paid for by the public and the family, on an as-needed basis.

Childcare/Preschool Teachers

The quality of childcare/preschool is directly related to the quality of the teacher.

Childcare/preschool teachers should be paid the same as kindergarten teachers.

It's important that childcare/preschool teachers reflect the ethnic diversity of the children in their care.

Outcomes of Childcare/Preschool

Childcare/preschool outcomes should be measured by parent satisfaction.

Childcare/preschool outcomes should be measured by caregivers/teachers.

Childcare/preschool outcomes should be measured by standardized assessments of children's learning.

California Priorities

Expanding access to high-quality childcare/preschool should be a priority issue in California.

A majority of the general public considers childcare/preschool a priority issue in California.

Policymakers should consider childcare/preschool an important investment in California.

Potential Funding Considerations

Businesses should provide childcare/preschool as a benefit for their employees.

Childcare/preschools should be private businesses, subject to market economics.

Childcare/preschool costs should become part of the overall education budget in California.

Potential Policy Considerations

Paid Family Leave should be expanded to a full year, so a parent can stay home with their baby.

California should provide vouchers to families to pay for childcare/preschool.

Public schools should be expanded to serve preschool-age children.

Potential Quality Considerations

State funding for childcare/preschool programs should be tied to the quality of the program.

All childcare/preschool teachers should earn a college degree and/or teaching credential.

Childcare/preschool teachers should be experts in child development.

Potential Legislative Considerations

I would support a statewide ballot initiative to fund more high-quality childcare/preschool programs in California.

I would support a local or countywide tax initiative to fund more high-quality childcare/preschool programs in my community.

A Women's Issue?

The issue of childcare/preschool would get more attention if more women were in elected policymaking positions in California.

Women shouldn't have children if they can't afford to take care of them.

Society benefits in multiple ways when children have access to high-quality childcare/preschool.

Demographic Questions

Where do you live?

Northern California/Sacramento Valley

Bay Area

Central Valley

Coastal Cities

Southern California/Los Angeles

Deserts/Inland Empire

Age

18-25

26-35

36-50

51-65

66+

Ethnicity

Black or African-American

American Indian/Alaska Native

Asian

Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish

Middle Eastern or North African

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

Bi-racial/Multi-racial

White

Gender

Male

Female

Non-Binary

Decline to State

Do you have children?

Yes

No

Age(s) of children? (Check as many as apply)

0-2

3-5

6-12

13-18

19+

Annual Family Income

0-\$25,000

\$25,001-\$50,000

\$50,001-\$75,000

\$75,001-\$100,000

\$100,001-\$150,000

\$150,001-\$300,000

\$300,001-\$500,000

\$500,001-\$750,000

\$750,000+

Are you registered to vote in California?

Yes

No

Not Sure

Political Party Preference

Republican

Democrat

Independent

Other

Decline to State

Thank you for your response. Would you like to enter a raffle for a chance to win a \$75 VISA gift card?

Yes

No