

# We didn't know it was that bad: Unearthing parent perspectives on Universal Pre-K policy

Maria Mavrides Calderon<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Families are the ultimate recipients of the effects of policy, but seldom get a seat at the policymaking table. This study investigated how parents perceive the impacts of unequal teacher compensation policies on New York City's (NYC) Universal Pre-K (UPK) expansion. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory of social construction and policy design to create a rich conceptual framework, this qualitative study analyzed parents' voices through document and social media discourse analysis expanding from 2014 to 2021, and semi-structured interviews (n=15). Participants reflected the demographic diversity found in NYC, the largest school system in the country. The data analysis occurred in three sequential stages: (a) content analysis of documents, (b) thematic analysis of interview data, and (c) compilation of findings from these analyses to draw comprehensive conclusions. Findings revealed that while parents had limited engagement with policy, they were able to articulate the detrimental effects of compensation policies—particularly the effect of teacher turnover on their daily lives—with a disproportional effect on parents of racially minoritized backgrounds or living in low-income neighborhoods. The rich interviews unearthed the dissonance between the policy's intent and its effect on perpetuating racial and socio-economic biases. Recommendations for advocacy and engagement are provided.

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## Introduction

There is bipartisan support for access to high-quality early childhood education in the United States (US) (First Five Years Fund, 2022). This rare agreement acknowledges the importance of early education in the lives of children and families. American parents at large favor expanding preschool in their states (First Five Years Fund, 2022); however, this interest is not matched with actual implementations across the nation, with few states having successfully deployed UPK offerings to all children in their state. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), at least five million more seats would be needed to institute universal preschool nationwide, with only 17% of 3-year-olds being served (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). Consequently, many states and districts in the US are seeking to develop a universal approach to preschool education. As states and cities push for preschool expansion, Pre-K policies often include a mandate for parent involvement (Wilinski & Morley, 2019). Even President Obama's Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) prioritized states that demonstrated a goal to “involve parents as partners and decision-makers” (Center for the Study of Social Policy, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). However, in most instances, those mandates conceptualize that involvement using traditional frameworks, like that of Epstein (2010), which included involvement with parent-school communication, participation at school, parent engagement in learning at home, and even parent involvement in school decision-making and school-community connections. Notably absent in this framework is parent engagement and involvement in shaping policies, like teacher compensation policies. Wilinski and Morley (2019) found that even when preschool expansion narratives situate parent participation as active decision-makers, fostering “parent leadership and voice” policies designed to support families are, in reality, limited

<sup>1</sup> The City University of New York, Hunter College, Department of Curriculum and Teaching, New York, USA, e-mail: [mcal@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:mcal@hunter.cuny.edu), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2212-0174>

to traditional parent volunteer roles.

### **Why are Parent Perspectives Needed?**

Parent involvement in policy is crucial, as they are the ultimate recipients of policies that directly impact their children's learning environment(s). Despite being the primary stakeholders, parents often find themselves in a position where they have limited opportunities to effectively react to policies that shape their children's education. True parent involvement goes beyond mere compliance with established policies; it necessitates an active role in the policymaking process itself. This is particularly pertinent in the context of UPK expansions, where parents should be well-informed about the implications of policy implementation within classrooms and the educational system at large. To foster genuine collaboration between parents and policymakers, there is a pressing need for transparent communication, inclusive decision-making processes, and platforms that empower parents to contribute meaningfully to the development and evaluation of education policies. Only through active engagement can parents ensure that policies align with the diverse needs of students and address any potential biases that may inadvertently shape educational practices. Under this premise, this study aims to investigate how parents experience and view policy, and its effects and opportunities, in one of the largest UPK expansions in the US: NYC's Pre-K for All. The challenges parents have encountered are important to understand as the US and other countries seek to develop a national UPK policy (Herman et al., 2013; Shapiro, 2019).

### **The New York City Case**

In 2014, NYC took a significant step forward by expanding its UPK program, greatly enhancing access to early education for all 4-year-olds. The aggressive implementation of this landmark policy required Mayor de Blasio's administration to rely on centers already providing early childhood services: community-based organizations (CBOs), Head Start centers, and independent child care centers that offered tuition-based services for younger students (i.e., toddler rooms in addition to publicly funded services). Employing what is commonly referred to as a "mixed delivery system," the City allocated 60% of its UPK seats to non-public school centers, known as New York City Early Education Centers (NYCEECs), while the remaining 40% were established within public schools throughout NYC.

Non-public school centers remain independently operated as vendors of the Department of Education (DOE). However, they must meet a comprehensive set of program standards that include rigorous instruction, teacher preparation, professional development, and family engagement (New York City Department of Education, 2016). The intention was to create structurally similar experiences for children attending UPK in public or non-public Pre-K classrooms. All teachers at public Pre-K programs were already required to hold a New York State teaching certificate, and all non-public school teachers must earn one within three years of being hired (Reid et al., 2019).

While this implementation expanded Pre-K access to all families irrespective of their income, it neglected to provide equal salaries and work conditions between similarly qualified non-public school lead UPK teachers and their unionized public-school counterparts. In some cases, UPK non-public school teachers earned \$30,000 less than their public-school counterparts. This disparity resulted in a massive turnover in non-public school centers that resulted in regulatory violations, classroom closures, and in general, a sustainability crisis among non-public early childhood centers in NYC (Day Care Council of New York, 2016). Currently, the salaries of UPK teachers are based on their years of experience in UPK rather than their prior years of experience teaching in early childhood education, resulting in lower salaries than their public-school counterparts with equivalent years of service. In addition, due to the lack of certified teachers willing to work for non-public early childhood centers, most teachers working in these settings are uncertified. Uncertified teachers, which have amounted to 50% of all teachers teaching in non-public school settings, have yet to be subject to any regulatory oversight regarding compensation or work conditions, often resulting in exploitative conditions (Mavrides Calderon, 2022). In general, work conditions and access to resources between non-public and public UPK classrooms are still heavily divided by race and the income level of families attending those centers (Latham et al., 2021). Fuller and Leibovitz (2022, 2021) found that the children of White and Asian backgrounds benefited disproportionately from

the deployment of NYC's UPK. This discrepancy was primarily attributed to structural differences in the neighborhood centers attended by these children in comparison to UPK centers available to Black and Latinx children.

In the case of the NYC UPK expansion, disparities in compensation and work conditions across the system, and the resulting teacher turnover, affected the experience of children and families attending non-public settings. The author aimed to capture the perspectives and experiences of parents<sup>2</sup> attending non-public early childhood settings as part of NYC's early childhood ecological system, acknowledging that families ultimately feel the brunt of policies that result in imbalances in the large early childhood educational system.

### **Purpose and Significance**

The purpose of this study was to understand how parents experience and make sense of the effects of policy, particularly teacher compensation policy, on their daily lives. More specifically, this study focused on exploring the lived experiences of parents as the ultimate recipients of policy, which, in the case of NYC, resulted in massive teacher turnover. By understanding how policy is perceived and experienced by parents, this study aims to provide recommendations for parent engagement in the policymaking process. The following research questions guided this study:

- How did families understand policy, including compensation policy, as supportive of their children's learning?
- How did families perceive the effects of policy on their daily lives?
- How did families react to policy awareness and possibilities for advocacy?

This study contributes to the early childhood education field by providing evidence, in the form of parent interviews, supporting the need for deeper parent engagement at the policymaking table, particularly in large-scale UPK implementations. As previously articulated, parent involvement in education policy is urgently needed. Currently, parents (and families) are often at the margins of the policymaking table, which is evident in the drought of literature focusing on parents' understanding of and impact on early childhood policy. The existing literature focuses mostly on K-12 parent awareness or reaction to policies related to accountability and school climate (Munn, 1998; Özdemir et al., 2021). A few studies investigated teacher turnover (Cassidy et al., 2011; Harris et al., 2019). In particular, Cassidy et al. (2011) explored parents' reactions to staffing shortages in preschools. This analysis focused on classroom quality and child outcomes, without linking them directly to the policies underlying the turnover. Furthermore, there is no literature focusing on preschool parents' reactions to or understanding of policy in large-scale implementations, and how these affect them and their children's learning. This study seeks to address this gap.

### **Theoretical Framing**

This study intertwined Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Schneider and Ingram's (1993, 2007) social construction and policy design theory to frame the data analysis and interpretation of results. (Please see Figure 1 for a graphic depiction of the conceptual framework.) Utilizing an ecological approach honors the complex influence of policy impacts on schools, teachers, and ultimately, families. As this study is part of a larger project looking at teachers, directors, and policymakers' reactions to policy (Mavrides Calderon, 2022), this ecological lens unearthed how parents perceive policy enacted at the system level and its impact on all the concentric systems of a child attending early childhood centers in NYC. Any immediate relationships or organizations the child interacts with, such as their family, peer group, or school setting, relate to the microsystem in the child's experience (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2008). Of particular interest for the current study is the analysis of the exosystem, which describes influences outside the microsystems, such as social policy decisions. While a child is not directly involved with his or her exosystem, the system influences the family or school and, indirectly, the child's experience (Mavrides

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<sup>2</sup> Recruitment included guardians; however, all participants self-reported as parents.

Calderon, 2022).

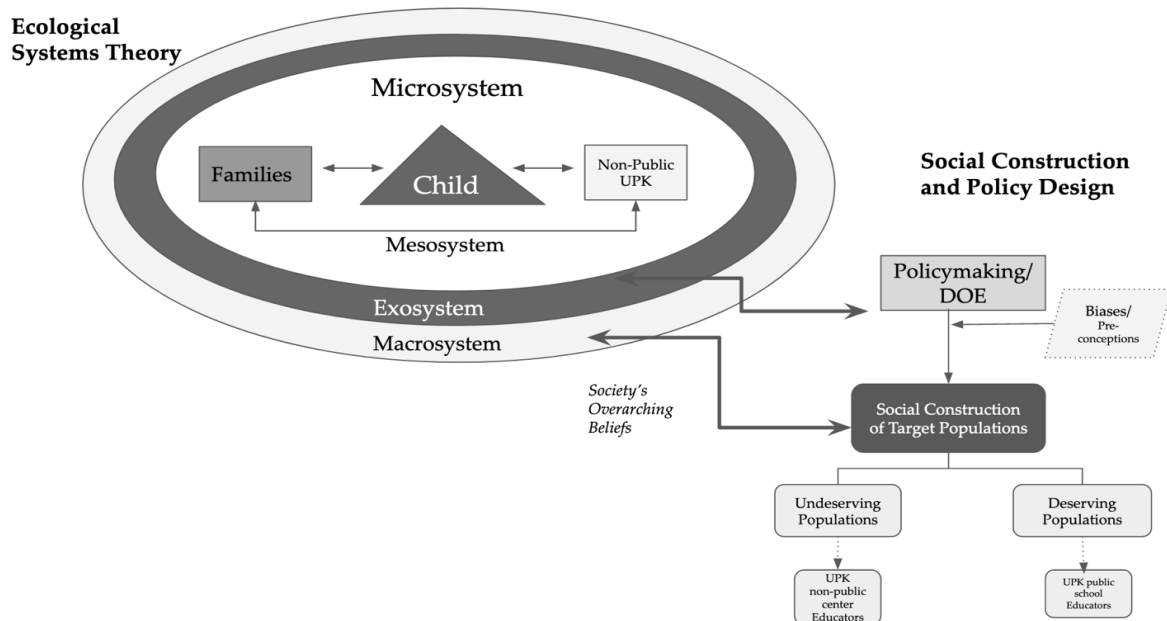


Figure 1. Conceptual framework (Mavrides Calderon, 2022)

All these systems operate within the larger framework of societal culture and beliefs, known as the macrosystem, establishing a dynamic interplay that ultimately shapes the child (Marshall, 2004). This study examines how NYC's UPK policies align or diverge from the broader societal beliefs concerning the role and significance of educators and families in non-public school centers within the overarching context of educational policy. Building on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of reciprocal influences among variables, this study explores how policy influences (exosystem) and beliefs (macrosystem) regarding non-public school centers (and who works and attends them) may impact the micro and mesosystem of parents attending UPK in such centers (Mavrides Calderon, 2022).

This framework was used to examine whether the policies established by NYC, situated in the exosystem, exert an influence on the interconnected systems within the families and children's ecology. In this way, the exosystem of government policies, like Pre-K for All, can potentially affect schools in terms of teacher retention, child care arrangements, job attendance, and prosperity. This framework guided our purpose and analysis, as the researcher aimed to assemble the ecological puzzle of relationships affected by NYC's UPK expansion policy.

Schneider and Ingram's (1993) social construction and policy design theory directly relates to the exosystem and macrosystem in our model, as it influences not only policy in the exosystem, but also cultural beliefs about early childhood educators at the macrosystem, which ultimately reach the microsystem of children and families attending non-public school centers. Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory highlights the role that social constructions of target populations play in policy design and implementation. A crucial component of this theory is that policymakers bring their own biases to constructing policy, prioritizing some groups over others as "deserving" or "undeserving" of certain benefits or burdens. As such, "Policy influencers can rectify or exacerbate existing racial inequities through social constructions that reflect implicit bias and racialized assumptions or stereotypes about target groups and become embedded in policy design" (Jabbar et al., 2022, p. 489).

The proposed argument suggests that policymakers in NYC have formulated compensation policies with a bias against early childhood non-public school teachers, a group predominantly composed of women of color (84%) (NYC Administration for Children's Services, 2019). This bias is evident in the perceived notion that these educators are less deserving of fair compensation compared to their

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counterparts in UPK located in public schools, who are predominantly white (60%). Consequently, parents attending those centers, predominantly Black and Latinx families, are viewed as less deserving of policies resulting in stable and consistent care. To explore the reasons behind these conceptualizations, we must look to the historical perceptions of early childhood educators as babysitters or caregivers rather than educators doing a job for “unskilled” women. This assumption is heavily charged with racial and gender bias, as confirmed by Shpancer et al. (2008) and the work of Tuominen (2008). Tuominen (2008) clarified these ideas as she stated:

Women of color (Asian/Pacific, black, and Hispanic) are more highly concentrated in lower-paid and lower-status care work occupations conceptualized as non-nurturant, reproductive labor. This conceptual dichotomizing of care work by scholars contributes to the invisibility and the further devaluation of care work performed by women of color (p.152).

By exploring the research questions with an ecological lens, supplemented by Schneider and Ingram’s (1993) analytical interrogation of power dynamics, this study took a critical multi-theoretical approach to recognize the complexities of how policy was designed (Young & Diem, 2017) and its effect on racially and socio-economically marginalized families.

### **Method**

This study was part of a larger project (Mavrides Calderon, 2022) that included an ecological view (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of the UPK policy effects by analyzing directors’, teachers’, and parents’ perspectives on compensation policies. The author utilized a qualitative approach to illuminate the participants’ (parents) lived experiences. To gain deeper insights into the intricate interplay between policy design, implementation, and the interconnected realities of stakeholders involved in the Pre-K for All expansion, this study embraced an exploratory case study methodology, as advocated by Yin (2014). The case study methodology was chosen because it enabled the author to create “an extensive and in-depth description of some complex social phenomenon” (Yin, 2014, p.5). Document discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews were selected as complementary data collection methods. The document discourse analysis investigated how parents’ perspectives were portrayed by the media, social media, and presented in City Hall hearings, while interviews unearthed parents’ voices as they conceptualized the effects of policy on their daily lives. The selection of these two distinct qualitative data sources was supported by Morse (2003), who suggested that this approach aims to triangulate individual data sources to form a complete whole, enriching the overall robustness of a study. Johnson et al. (2007) suggested that these methods could be used “in parallel or sequence but are not integrated until inferences are being made” (p. 119). Following Johnson et al. (2007), this study analyzed documents and interviews sequentially, integrating findings at the last stage of the analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Document collection included material from 2014 to 2021 covering 40 media articles, City Hall hearings, transcripts related to compensation policy in NYC’s UPK, and advocacy documents. Documents were selected if they mentioned salary or compensation for teachers working at UPK non-public school centers. Six years of tweets related to compensation policies were captured, including posts created by the Department of Education, advocates, teachers, and families, for a total of 240 Twitter posts. Twitter (re-named X as of 2023) is a very popular microblogging social media platform with over 175 million registered users, who can post messages of up to 280 characters (Twitter, 2022). The availability, short format, and immediacy of distribution make Tweets ideal for capturing important and authentic perspectives from those posting. In addition, Twitter was chosen as the social media platform for this study due to its ease of use, ability to capture retroactive data, and potential to catalyze activism and the voices of typically racially or socio-economically marginalized groups. Boyd (2010) and Zappavigna (2012) have explored the potential of this platform for social activism, and others like Keller (2012) and Konnelly (2015) have documented the use of Twitter as a platform for social movements.

After Institutional Research Board approval was granted, fifteen parents whose children were

enrolled in a non-public school center UPK were recruited from across the NYC to provide an ecological perspective on the effects of work and compensation policies on their personal lives. Participants were recruited through flyers in community-based organizations, recreational centers, emails sent by family workers and center directors, and social media postings. All participants provided written consent. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted via Zoom. Twenty parents responded to the recruitment call, and 15 met the recruitment criteria. Parents interviewed represented a variety of settings and demographics; all parents identified as female. (Please see Table 1 for participant data.) Eighty-five percent of all parent participants attended school at a center located in a low- or low-medium-income neighborhood, which mirrors the distribution of non-public school centers in the NYC early childhood system. Average parent interviews lasted 47 minutes. The author conducted all the interviews. Three interviews were conducted in Spanish at the participants' request. Participants received a copy of their transcript and consolidated findings as part of the study's member-checking procedures.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Child attends	Borough	Grade
Gina	Latine	CBO	Bronx	Pre-K
Raisa	Latine	CBO	Bronx	Pre-K
Edina	Latine	CBO	Bronx	Pre-K
Lily	Asian American	CBO	Queens	Pre-K
Silvia	White	CBO	Brooklyn	Pre-K
Maria	Latine	CBO/Head Start	Brooklyn	Pre-K
Jo	African American	CBO/Head Start	Bronx	Pre-K
Miriam	Latine	CBO/Head Start	Manhattan	Pre-K
Lola	African American	CBO/Head Start	Staten Island	Pre-K
Jessica	Latine	CBO/Head Start	Bronx	Pre-K
Elizabeth	African American	CBO/Head Start	Brooklyn	Pre-K
Julie	White	Independent Center	Manhattan	Pre-K
Linda	African American	Independent Center	Manhattan	Pre-K
April	White	Independent Center	Manhattan	3K/Pre-K
Jenny	Asian American	Independent Center	Queens	Pre-K

## Data Analysis

Given the qualitative nature of the study, data analysis utilized a constructivist paradigm as the study's methodology aimed at "meaning-making, sense-making activities" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 40), understanding that social, cultural, and historical experiences shape people's perceptions about the world (Crotty, 1998). Data analysis was conducted by the author with a secondary coder, a doctoral student. To check for inter-coder reliability, the two researchers used Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software to code 25% of all data. Once a consistent level of agreement (over 99%) was reached, coding of the remainder of the data was continued by the author. Trustworthiness was addressed by including the following: (1) a secondary coder to arrive to intercoder agreement, (2) member-checking of the interview transcripts as well as the consolidated findings, and (3) methodological triangulation. Having multiple data sources allowed for triangulation to support the validity of the qualitative conclusions (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The analysis unfolded in three distinct phases following Morse (2003) and Johnson et al. (2007): first, a content analysis of documents; second, a thematic analysis of interview data; and finally, the synthesis of insights derived from these analyses to formulate comprehensive conclusions (Please see Figure 2 for the flow of the study's analysis).

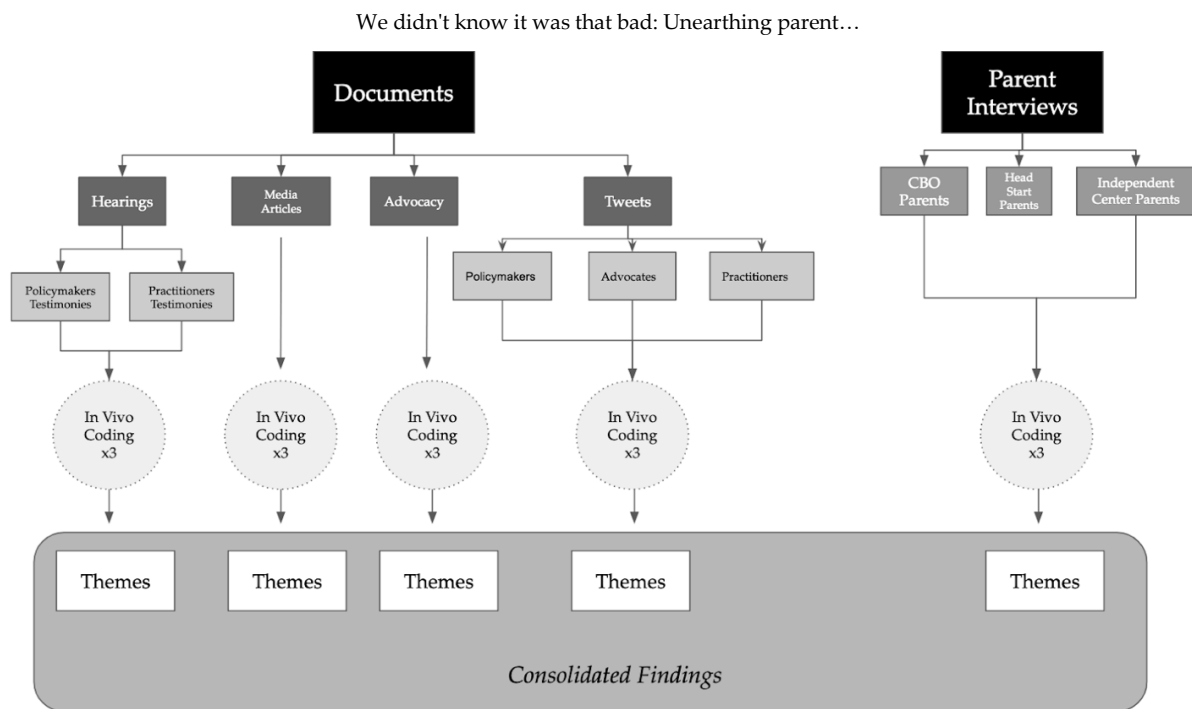


Figure 2. Flow of the analysis

### Document Analysis

The document analysis followed a specific order, where documents were categorized by their type to facilitate a comparative analysis. This approach allowed for a detailed examination of the discourse among different groups: policymakers (comprising hearings and social media), advocates (encompassing advocacy documents, hearings, and social media), and educators on the ground (including hearings and social media). This structured approach applied Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological lens looking at the varying perspectives and discussions surrounding UPK’s implementation effect on non-public school centers, including its impact on parents and families. In addition, the analysis focused on the discourse surrounding NYC’s UPK expansion and other early childhood education policies from the social construction and policy design theory point of view (how stakeholders are defined and privileged in the development of the policies). Coding was done iteratively to “manage, filter, highlight and focus the salient features into themes” (Saldaña & Miles, 2013, p.7) using in-vivo coding. Twenty-four in-vivo codes were initially found and later collapsed into themes. Patterns were identified based on established definitions as described by Saldaña and Miles (2013). These patterns included elements such as similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation. Ten themes were identified: *distribution of power and resources, resistance and advocacy, dissonance between rhetoric and reality, policy origins, crisis, equity, effects on children and families, sustainability, lack of transparency, and funding.*

### Interview Analysis

The interview analysis took place following the completion of the document analysis. Initially, in-vivo coding was conducted using the codes established during the document analysis. However, for the interview analysis, these codes were adjusted to align with the discourse gathered from the participants. It’s worth noting that further refinements were made to these codes following the third round of coding to better capture the topics discussed by interviewees. Three codes unique to the interview discourse were added to the ones found in the document analysis: *educator’s commitment, pandemic, and adaptations.* A total of 18 in-vivo codes were identified. Subsequently, these codes were condensed and analyzed to uncover overarching patterns, ultimately leading to the emergence of nine distinct themes: *distribution of power and resources, resistance and advocacy, policy origins, crisis, equity, effects on classrooms, effects on children and families, sustainability, and lack of transparency.*

To refine the data analysis, participant interviews were systematically categorized based on both

setting and geographical location, recognizing that these differences serve as proxies for socio-economic and racial distinctions. The chosen settings included community-based organizations (CBOs) lacking Head Start-sponsored classrooms, Head Starts (both directly administered and under the Department of Education), and independent centers (facilities hosting UPK classrooms alongside private tuition classrooms). This detailed breakdown played a vital role in examining variations in experiences across these categories, especially when viewed through the framework proposed by Schneider and Ingram (1993). (Please see Table 1 for the breakdown of participants by setting and geographical location).

**Mixing of Findings**

Once the analysis of the documents and interviews were completed separately, they were compared and contrasted to provide an in-depth look at this study's inquiry, as suggested by Johnson et al. (2007). Eight final themes depicted in Figure 3 arose from the previously identified themes in the documents (10) and interviews (9). Guided by the conceptual framework described previously, the analysis aimed at answering the research questions. Each part of the analysis contributed to the findings and informed the interrelations between stakeholders and policymakers. Additionally, since the data was organized into subcategories based on both setting and geographical location, the analysis also examined patterns within these specific subcategories to gain further insights.

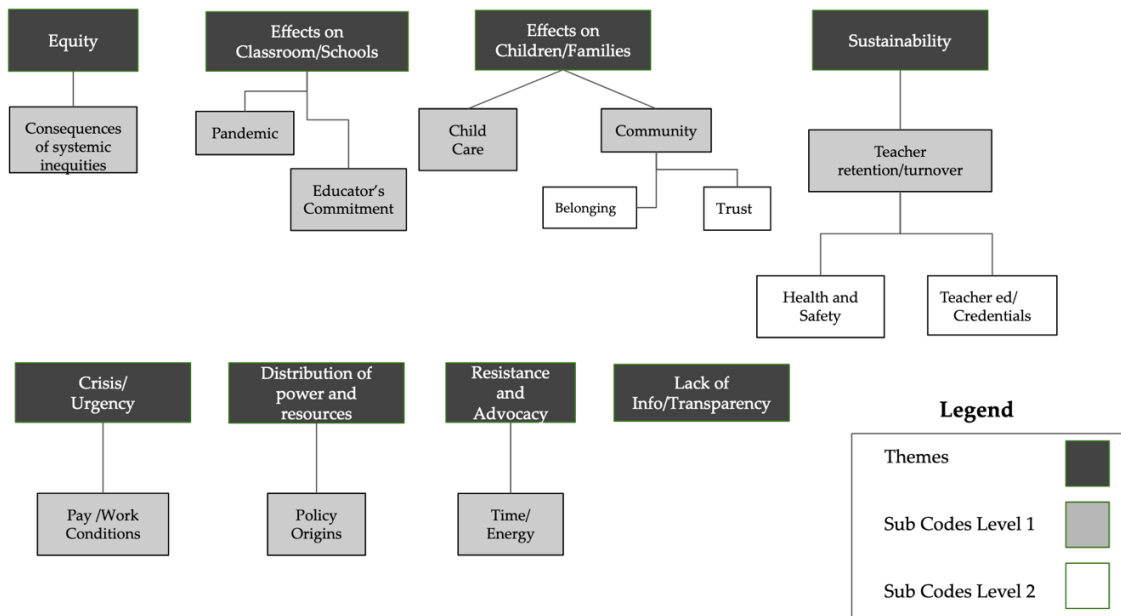


Figure 3. Final codes and subcodes

**Findings**

Overall, the study found that the policies surrounding NYC's UPK expansion—particularly, the disparity in teacher compensation policies—affect all levels of the ecological system in early childhood education, including (most importantly) children and families. Additionally, the study highlighted policymakers' perceptions of parents as being recipients of policies that conceptualize them as less deserving than parents attending UPK at public schools. This perception aligns with Schneider and Ingram's (1993) policy conceptualization as dynamic and dependent on policymakers' biases.

**Parents' Policy Awareness and Understandings**

Interviews revealed that while parents were unaware of the policies and guidelines impacting their schools or centers, they were able to articulate the effects of the policies on their daily lives. Parents were aware of the inability of schools to retain teachers but lacked the information to provide the context of reasons for the turnover. Silvia shared during her interview: "I see the revolving door, but I couldn't tell



We didn't know it was that bad: Unearthing parent...

you why. No one told us. You tend to think the worst. Is this school so bad that the teachers are leaving?" This lack of awareness could be confirmed in the document analysis, which tangentially included reports from parents, and minimally included discourse about parents from the policymakers. When parents were mentioned in City Hall hearings, advocacy documents, or the media, they were referred to as passive policy receptors unaware of the consequences of such policies' implementation. This finding highlights the power dynamics in policy creation and the need for intentional involvement and information sharing between all stakeholders in the larger ecological system of early childhood in NYC.

Not surprisingly, parents were mainly isolated from learning about teacher compensation issues. Only three parents attending Head Start centers mentioned the salary disparities between teachers working at non-public and public-school schools as a cause for the turnover they experienced. Parents' discourse around disparities referred to resource distribution in their schools, in contrast with the resources available to public schools. Many parents mentioned the physical infrastructure and materials available to those attending public schools and the lack of those resources in their non-public early childhood centers. Elizabeth, a mother with children attending both a CBO and public-school kindergarten, explained this disparity:

It's night and day, really. My [older] son gets specials and the building is new. The center here is in a NYCHA [public housing] building, so my kid says he sees roaches sometimes. The teachers are lovely in both places, though.

Moreover, this perception reflected the perceived contrast between the DOE's response to the pandemic between public school and non-public school centers. Many mentioned how their children did not receive devices for online learning as opposed to siblings attending public school. Gina, a parent from the Bronx, explained: "My daughter has two electronics from the DOE, and the [child attending the center] has none. The teacher tried to give him an old phone. I didn't say anything again. It's like-it's like going through the battle without your guns." Contrarily, parents expressed their gratitude as centers opened in person in June of 2020, while public schools did so in September of that year. As Lily, a parent, articulated:

I loved the school mostly because the school opened in the summer of the pandemic. I had to go to work, and I knew it was rushed. But I had a place to send my kid, and I could go to work. Like my niece had no place to go. I told them, "you see, Head Starts are the best." I know it was scary, and teachers didn't want to come. Some got COVID there, but I needed to go to work.

On the other hand, NYC's reclassification of teachers working at non-public school centers as "essential workers", a move aimed at justifying the early opening of these centers, was frowned upon by teachers working at these centers (Shapiro, 2021). The mandated early opening exacerbated the distinctions outlined by Tajfel (1970) as "intergroup discrimination" between two groups – teachers at non-public school centers and public-school teachers. This reinforced the perception among the public that these centers primarily functioned as child care facilities, rather than educational and care centers, perpetuating existing stigmas. Consequently, the public's discourse about these centers shifted during the pandemic, aligning more with a narrative convenient for parents returning to work, rather than acknowledging the challenges faced by those working in centers lacking proper support and safety guidelines. It is noteworthy that this narrative contradicts the discourse presented by NYC, as revealed through document analysis, particularly in relation to their conceptualization of the UPK expansion as a way to provide education, beyond child care. Uninformed about the intricacies of policy, and its long-term impact on teachers, parents interpreted this policy as beneficial to their children's education.

### **Articulating the Effects of Policy**

Naturally, parents were primarily concerned with their firsthand experiences in the classroom and the impact of external factors, such as teacher turnover, classroom closures, and the pandemic, on their ability to ensure quality care and education for their children. Their attention was directed more towards these practical aspects than the policy mandates affecting the centers. For example, all parents were very explicit in articulating the effect of teacher turnover in their daily lives, with those in low-income neighborhoods experiencing the most disruptive effects. Edina, an immigrant mother, explained:

I don't know what is happening [in the classroom], but my girl doesn't get used to it because the teacher is never the

same. And now there is another one that doesn't speak Spanish, and that makes her more stressed. She can't ask her things. I'm worried that we can't stay if this revolving door continues. And I need to work.

Adverse experiences mentioned by parents included the lack of teacher consistency affecting parents' ability to get to work on time, either because of children's inability to separate in the mornings or because afterschool programs—and even in some cases, school days—were canceled due to inappropriate staffing. Jessica, a mother from the Bronx who has been with the same center for two consecutive years, explained:

It's definitely affected my work life. I felt a lot worse about leaving my child in the afterschool program...when I have to work late regularly; it's very challenging for me, knowing that my child is with someone they aren't comfortable with yet, same thing in the morning. It's very challenging for me to leave my child in the classroom. It's really just a struggle because my child really struggles to separate in the morning, and it's just been a really difficult experience in terms of relating with teachers. In particular, for example...it has been very difficult to try to talk to teachers just because they can't keep the teachers.

Beyond the emotional toll for parents and children readjusting to new staff in a classroom, parents articulated safety concerns. Many mentioned asking every week, "Who is the teacher in my child's classroom today?" as leadership often scrambled to find temporary solutions to maintain the mandated child-to-teacher ratio in the classroom. This lack of familiarity with teachers meant that information was often limited for teachers and parents alike. For children with health needs, this was particularly worrisome. Jessica explained:

Things that I've communicated to my child's original teachers really haven't been passed along. I feel as if I have to go and re-communicate information that really should have been kept on file for my child, like in the past, just the lack of organization due to the change in teachers. My child, for example, has a severe peanut allergy, and while yes, it's probably in some files for the student, I do feel obligated to go and make sure everyone is aware of it. Like, his original teacher was aware of it and thus was on the lookout, but I'm always afraid that with a new teacher, they might not be....Might not know my child as well, and there might be a slip-up that results in major consequences for my child. If he gets sick, who is going to take care of him?

Furthermore, given that most participants attended schools in low-income neighborhoods, parents expressed concern about the effects of missing work on their ability to provide for their families. Surprisingly, most parents did not mention how turnover may affect the quality of their child's instruction and learning, but focused on how care may be disrupted by teacher turnover and school leadership being distracted by staffing issues. The focus on the access and availability of care, rather than on what children are learning, could be attributed again to how parents view these centers as child-minding rather than learning centers; a misconception that often permeates how the public perceives the early childhood field. This conceptualization may be reinforced by the lack of visibility regarding what happened in the classroom daily, given the pandemic restrictions (e.g., parents being unable to enter the classroom).

Other effects mentioned by participants (n=4) included their inability to build relationships with teachers and leaders, at the expense of a sense of community and belonging, and the lack of follow-up on special education referrals. Raisa, a mother of a child applying to receive speech therapy, explained:

I know she needs to get evaluated. The other teacher had a talk with me about it. We had a plan. I know she doesn't have words. But the teacher left and now that is on hold, until they can track my child and write the [IEP or special needs services] goals. The director says they are hiring, but it is taking time, and the assistant can't do this. They don't have people to do this. More wait, more delay!

Raisa's narrative was representative of the state of frustration reported by parents. In general, parents often describe this revolving door as "unsettling" for their children and their families.

### **Reaction to Policy**

As previously mentioned, most parents were unaware of the disparities in compensation, work conditions, or lack of pandemic support for non-public school Pre-K teachers. When parents were made aware of the current policies, particularly those regarding compensation for UPK teachers, many had a guttural reaction toward those policies due to racism and institutionalized bias. Silvia, a mother of a 4-year-old, stated:

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I mean, children get there at eight o'clock in the morning. So, that means that they [teachers] have to be there at the latest seven o'clock to prepare their day, their lessons, and their classrooms. So, that means that they have pretty much...They're working pretty much 10 to 12 hours a day, and that's for 12 months, and it's the same pay, or less? That's not fair at all. So it is...It's upsetting. And I think that something has to be done about that. We didn't know it was that bad.

This realization was most evident among parents attending racially diverse settings in low-income neighborhoods, with many questioning policymakers' conceptualization of their centers and teachers as "less than" public school teachers. Linda, a mother from Harlem, believed that the NYC's UPK compensation policies were crafted with consideration of the makeup of her school:

I don't even think there's a white person in that school. I think like, I'm really trying to think, but all I've ever met were women of color and, and in that whole facility. Um, so I'm, uh, I'm not surprised, you know, to be honest, I'm not surprised, you know? That they thought they can pay them less.

Jo, a mother from the Bronx, supported the idea that there are systemic issues in education that contribute to compensation disparities:

I think in part, it's a question of bias, and injustice towards already vulnerable communities, in that those with power believe that they can pay teachers less, and provide a lower quality of life for teachers, and allow, create an inferior working environment for the students, because of the racial difference within our schools.

When asked for possible actionable items to reject unfair policies, many parents mentioned the need to advocate for better compensation for their center's teachers. However, some acknowledged that their connection to their centers, as opposed to other educational settings like elementary schools, was short given that many children attend these centers for only two years (3-K and Pre-K), and therefore, their commitment may not be viewed as a good investment of their time and energy. Jenny, a mother from Queens, explains:

I would like to be part of something to change things. But this is [my daughter's] last year and then we go to kindergarten. Like if they change something, by the time that changes, how does that affect my kid? I don't have another kid coming to this school.

Furthermore, parents acknowledged the limitations in time and energy to take on advocacy. A parent at an independent center explained: "I would like to help if there are meetings. But I work, and I have another girl. I don't have time. I feel bad because I know it is unfair, but if I don't work, I don't eat." Parents in Head Start were exceptions to this perception. Perhaps the presence of family workers in Head Start facilitated the organization and awareness among parents attending these centers. Many parents with older children also reported participating in previous advocacy campaigns in 2019 that resulted in some improvements for certified teachers. Their participation, however, was prompted by the leadership of each center. Miriam stated how she participated in the past:

When we went to City Hall before the pandemic, Ms. [Director] got us a bus and we met before. She explained the problems and what we needed to demand. We got posters, and we made them. It was like a field trip but with a purpose. We had time to prepare, and we felt like it was important and needed. We haven't had that in a while.

Miriam's narrative confirms the importance of leadership in not only creating community, but also in mobilizing parents for advocacy. The pandemic and the challenges it presented drew leaders' focus away from compensation advocacy, to pivot to other more pressing issues, like reopenings and dealing with post-pandemic trauma (Logan et al., 2021; Nagasawa, 2022). Mavrides Calderon (2022) also found that, in general, advocacy surrounding disparities in NYC decreased after 2019, and was non-existent for at least the next two years.

Nonetheless, parents expressed a general desire to understand how policy is crafted, and some were eager to participate actively in future advocacy campaigns. Lola, a Head Start mother, reinforced this idea:

I think having legislative changes to make sure this doesn't happen in the future is very important. I also, before this interview, I wasn't really fully aware of the reasoning for the teacher turnover. So, I wasn't specifically aware of this salary disparity that you've pointed out to me, and I feel like it's really important to make sure parents are educated on this matter and are aware of the issues that are going on in this school so that they're able to fight for justice for the teachers so that their students are getting—their children are getting appropriate access to education, so that our schools are better, that our schools have a just future.

Given that NYC's UPK intended to reduce the inequities in educational access, the rich testimonials analyzed in this study present a profound dissonance between the policy's intent and its effect on perpetuating racial and socio-economic biases.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Understanding that the case of NYC is limited in scope, it is particularly relevant as many other states in the United States, and across the world, are planning on or considering implementing UPK. One important lesson learned in the NYC case is that access is important, as are policies that support equitable opportunities and quality for all children and families in the system. The rapid expansion and lack of a quick response to the issues of compensation disparity impacted the quality of the experience for parents. This finding is consistent with Bushouse (2009), Karch (2013), and Kirp (2007), who confirmed that quality and access to state investment in early childhood education are difficult to achieve because of the inherent political pressure of offering access to all, versus pacing the access to provide higher quality consistently to students as the program scales. Unfortunately, this study found that dislocations caused by the rapid expansion in one part of the early childhood education ecological system (teachers) have consequences for children and families.

Alarming, the repercussions are not proportionally distributed, with parents using centers in low-income neighborhoods (which, in NYC, tend to be also the centers with a more significant proportion of Black and Latinx families) feeling the brunt of the consequences of unequal policies, leading to teacher turnover, leadership distractions, and overall, a greater sense of dissatisfaction. Unsurprisingly, the adverse consequences of high teacher turnover are magnified in areas with higher incidences of poverty, areas in which many of the children who are enrolled in non-public Pre-K centers live. Paradoxically, children living in poor communities disproportionately benefit from the enrichment of a high-quality preschool environment. Beyond the effect on children's education, the sustainability of non-public school centers is paramount as these centers specifically cater to working parents. The negative impact of working parents being unable to find affordable and adequate child care has been documented extensively (Burgess et al., 2016). While public school Pre-K programs are free, they do not meet the needs of maternal employment among low-income families who need care after school hours (Fitzpatrick, 2010). Marshall et al. (2013) found that "almost one in four employed [low-income] mothers had irregular work schedules, and almost half worked hours other than the standard nine-to-five schedule" (p. 809). The shorter school day and the limited after-school offerings provided by public school UPKs fail to address the needs of working families in lower-income communities, unlike Head Starts, CBOs, or independent child care centers. This underscores the importance of non-public school UPKs in communities where working parents need additional child care hours. This intrinsic tie between the sustainability of non-public early childhood centers and supporting families who need it most makes the call for equal policies even more urgent.

In addition, this study's findings highlight how non-public school center families are conceptualized by policymakers in what Schneider and Ingram (1993) coined as an "undeserving" population. The interviews of families in this study exemplify these negative conceptualizations, portraying the impact of unequal policies between two target populations—public and non-public school centers—and their families. Furthermore, one of the goals of NYC's UPK was to close "race and income-based achievement gaps." This study provides evidence that brings into question this goal, as the current policies, inadvertently or not, perpetuate racial injustices in one of the most segregated school districts in the nation (Kucsera, 2014; Potter, 2016). This segregation manifests itself in a high degree of residential segregation, with 61% of students in Pre-K for All enrolled in a program within 0.5 miles of their home address (Latham et al., 2021), signaling historical structural inequities in urban populations (Gomez-Velez, 2015; Valentino, 2018).

The American news cycle is full of examples of destructive parent influence on policy focused on eroding any democratic progress (Gilbert, 2023; Jedeed, 2022). Their influence on policy development should not be underestimated. Knowing this, it is time that positive, democratic parental action is galvanized. This study points out the need to create mechanisms for families to learn about the policies

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affecting their children's school experience. The document analysis in this study found that policymakers view parents as inactive stakeholders; the recipients, not creators, of policy. There is some truth to this perception, as Mavrides Calderon (2022) found that non-public early childhood directors, advocates, and to a lesser extent teachers, have expressed deep concern regarding the survival of their programs, which were threatened by teacher turnover, Department of Health violations (due to lack of staffing), and enrollment. Meanwhile, parents did not report these concerns and appeared immune to the degree of the crisis on the ground.

Nonetheless, in this environment, it was clear that children and families were inevitably affected. We must stop sheltering parents from the realities of policy effects; instead, we should catalyze families' advocacy for a unified front to demand fair conditions. Recognizing that families hold significant voting power, they can have a great influence on how policy is conceptualized. Head Start presents a great family involvement model that could be leveraged to incorporate advocacy education. This model includes investing in staff in charge of parent engagement, and a shared decision/governance partnership between the parents' Policy Council and the school, impacting many aspects of the centers' functioning (Administration for Children and Families, 2021). Future studies should explore this and other mechanisms to bring families to the policymaking table. Ultimately, crafting policies should be a thoughtful process that prioritizes inclusion, specifically incorporating the voices and perspectives of those most directly impacted by these policies: children and their families.

### **Limitations**

The findings of the current study highlight the complexity of the policymaking process. As such, there were a few limitations in this study. While the qualitative nature of the study seeks to highlight the voices of selected participants, a larger sample size would have provided additional quantitative data to further triangulate this study. Surprisingly, participants were eager to be involved, facilitating a smooth recruitment process. However, most participants were based in four of the five boroughs in NYC; Staten Island, the most conservative and least diverse borough of the City, was represented by only one participant. Future studies should aim to include the experiences of all parents in NYC, including those with more conservative views.

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