

Immigrant Workers in Early Childcare and Education Pursuing Higher Education

Caroline Kyong-Jin Yi

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Ann Ishimaru

Soojin Oh Park

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Caroline Kyong-Jin Yi

University of Washington

**Abstract**

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Caroline Kyong-Jin Yi

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Ann Ishimaru

College of Education

What are immigrant childcare educators' perspectives on navigating the different stages towards obtaining a college degree? How do they narrate the role of their multifaceted identities in navigating unique challenges and enacting assets towards obtaining a college degree? Even with a shortage of childcare workers, individuals with post-secondary credentials are highly sought after to increase the quality of early childhood education. Many childcare workers are first-generation immigrants, but there is lack of research on their perspective in this field. By critically analyzing interviews and program documents, I found that immigrant childcare workers' multifaceted identities guided three key commonalities: their differing roles as a parent, educator, and student, their position on receiving government and school aid, and finally, their motivation to support their own goals, children, and other families in need.

## **Immigrant Workers in Early Childcare and Education Pursuing Higher Education**

High-quality childcare is critical in supporting children’s development and academic success – however, there is a nationwide shortage of childcare workers due to various reasons including low wages and lack of benefits. (Washington State Department of Commerce, 2022). In the midst of trying to fill the childcare workforce gap throughout the United States, researchers are recommending possible policy solutions to improve equitable access to early childhood teacher certification pathways. While balancing between providing high-quality childcare experiences and filling the workforce gap, many childcare centers are now requiring or encouraging childcare workers to have a college degree. Given that there are approximately 278,000 immigrants, not including undocumented workers, making up 17.7% of all workers at childcare centers (New American Economy, 2020), requiring a college degree may have negative unintended consequences for immigrant childcare workers as they do not have access to the necessary resources to navigate higher education, due to obstacles such as language barriers, documentation status, and lack of financial support.

Additionally, there is a lack of research on the true cost and effect of immigrant childcare workers obtaining a college degree. This is especially true when considering how immigrant childcare workers’ intersectionality of race, social class, and immigration status<sup>1</sup> affects their perception on navigating higher education. Immigrant childcare workers are a vital percentage within the educator population and shortage of childcare workers is extremely detrimental, leading to high teacher turnover rates, closure of centers, loss of educational opportunities, and negative impacts to the work schedule of parents (Kashen et al., 2023). These consequences can

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the term “immigration status” refers to the cultural differences and documentation status that may shape immigrants’ experience and access to resources within the United States.

hinder children's learning and development as they fail to participate in crucial early learning experiences. Therefore, centering immigrant workers' voices and perspectives on this matter is of importance to the field of early childhood education, childcare policy and practice to ensure equitable outcomes and their success.

Qualitative methodology allows individuals to ask questions that cannot be easily put into numbers to understand human experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this reason, a critical case study methodology centering interviews and program documents will be utilized to gain a better understanding of immigrant childcare workers' perspectives while considering the intersection of their race and other identities. Interviews from immigrant childcare workers who are a part of the online early care and education (ECE) program at a university within Washington state and supporting program documents will be reviewed in depth. To reach a wider range of immigrants, participants were recruited from an online program because of the geographical and demographic diversity of students. The purpose of the study is to understand immigrant childcare workers navigation to obtain a college degree, and how obtaining a degree impacts their quality of life. While considering the intersection of immigration status, race, and social class, this study will explore the following research questions:

1. What are immigrant childcare educators' perspectives on navigating the different stages towards obtaining a college degree?
2. How do immigrant childcare educators narrate the role of their multifaceted identities in navigating unique challenges and enacting assets towards obtaining a college degree?

This paper will review the existing literature on immigrant childcare workers and the increase of educational requirements within early childcare. After a brief positionality statement, there will

be an introduction of the theoretical framework, intersectionality within Critical Race Theory (CRT). This will be followed by an explanation of why a critical case study approach centering interview and document analysis was chosen as the methodology for my research. Data collection and analysis will be explained afterwards. By critically analyzing interviews and program documents, the paper will conclude with the findings that immigrant childcare workers' multifaceted identities impact not only the barriers they encounter but also highlight their key assets. In other words, the findings were not solely about their challenges, they also shared their key motivators and strengths.

### **Literature Review**

The demand for quality early education programs has focused on improving teacher qualifications and this demand is grounded in substantial research (Early et al., 2007; Pianta et al., 2005); there is a positive relationship between teacher qualifications and the quality of early education programs (Boyd, 2013). However, empirical research exploring the relationship between enhanced professional qualifications and improved teacher outcomes is limited. The study conducted by Boyd in 2013 found that additional professional development training and educational credentials may in fact reduce teachers' income as they would have to pay out of pocket. Essentially, an increase in professional qualifications does not always correspond with an increase in wages or benefits, which leads educators to consider leaving the early childcare workforce (Boyd, 2013). And since an increase in professional qualifications does not always correspond with positive outcomes, immigrant early childcare workers may face further barriers when considering higher education to stay within the profession.

Additionally, the well-being of teachers is critical to ensuring the quality of early childhood education programs. Research has shown that a healthy early childhood education

workforce is the key for better child social-emotional response and high-quality care (Kwon et al., 2024). This requires fundamentally reshaping the early childcare and education field such as providing fair compensation and supportive working conditions (McLean et al., 2024). In other words, prioritizing equity in the workforce development landscape is “a major step toward recognizing the value of historically feminized work and establishing a racially and gender-just society” (McLean et al., 2024, para. 7).

The exploitation of immigrant workers in this country in addition to the systemic barriers in place to hinder people of colors’ success in comparison to their white peers are just some of the issues. Immigrants make significant impacts within the early childcare workforce, and as this field already lacks enough human resources, it is important to bear in mind their perspectives when implementing policies. It is imperative to provide the appropriate resources and support, especially when considering their multifaceted identities. In the next few sections, I will be reviewing literature on the benefits and barriers immigrant educators experience while working within the early childcare workforce, their influence on the field, and the challenges and opportunities for them in obtaining higher education.

### ***Immigrants in Early Childcare and Education Workforce***

There are several benefits that come with immigrants working within the early childcare workforce, including promotion of cultural sensitivity, bilingual language acquisition of Dual Language Learners (DLLs), and family integration. All three advantages interlink as immigrant educators can connect and provide support for other immigrant families while promoting inclusivity within schools. Qualitative research has shown immigrant teachers practicing cultural sensitivity and feeling compelled to support students who are most marginalized because of their own experiences (Adair, 2011; McDevitt, 2020). For instance, in the Children Crossing Borders

study, immigrant early childhood teachers agreed about how students' home language should be responded to in everyday school scenarios – encouraging the enrichment of language learning and never perceiving the use of their home language as being wrong (Adair, 2011). Immigrant teachers bring cultural knowledge and language skills that are truly unique, and their lived experiences can have an influence on their desire to help promote cultural sensitivity, bilingual language acquisition, and family integration as it is important for all students to feel welcome in classrooms.

However, there are drawbacks for immigrants who work within the early childcare workforce. Early childhood educators continue to be among the poorest paid professionals regardless of education level or certification (Boyd, 2013). The field is dominated by women who are paid low wages and receive few to no work-related benefits. Furthermore, evidence increasingly demonstrates that immigrants provide most of the racial diversity present in the early childcare workforce, but there is also a decline in ethnic and racial diversity that accompanies the rise in wages and qualifications across professional roles (Park et al., 2015). Similarly, it is found that immigrants are more likely to be employed as private home- and family-based childcare workers and are much less likely to be program directors than their native counterparts (Park et al., 2015). Reasons for this can include language barriers, documentation status, and education level. In fact, many early childhood immigrant educators reported they were worried about harsher immigration policies impacting themselves and their families (Barajas-Gonzalez, 2021). These concerns could affect their decision in applying for higher education, which can ultimately hinder their opportunities to ascend the career ladder.

In addition to these concerns influencing their decision in applying for higher education, their well-being is also heavily impacted. Low wages, poor benefits, and an increasingly

complex workload contribute to feelings of frustration and persistent stress (Bull et al., 2024). Despite their important work in early childhood education, the current state of the field undermines their well-being and creates financial insecurity (McLean et al., 2024). These harmful conditions lead to teacher shortages and high turnover rates, which limit the availability of early childcare and education services (McLean et al., 2024).

As mentioned earlier, it is estimated that there are 278,000 immigrants, not including undocumented workers, making up 17.7% of all workers at childcare centers (New American Economy, 2020). Immigrant workers are vital contributors to the field considering there is a nationwide shortage of early childcare teachers and the necessity in diversifying the field to reflect the racial linguistic and cultural diversity of children enrolled in ECE programs. The trend of insufficient childcare support would be detrimental to our society because centers would be forced to close, and parents would have no choice but to leave jobs and educational opportunities (Kashen et al., 2023). For this reason, it is imperative for us to understand immigrant early childcare educators' experience in higher education to ensure the job market continues to be not only accessible but equitable to a diverse group of teacher candidates as well.

### ***Immigrants in Higher Education***

The key benefits for early childcare and education teachers to obtain higher education include field experience and learning resources. Earning a degree while working with children provides ongoing opportunities for teachers to practice their skills and grow professionally (Deutsch & Riffin, 2013). Through these field experiences, individuals have the ability to develop teacher efficacy, which has been associated with job satisfaction and retention (Zee & Koomen, 2016; Northey & Clark, 2025). Continuing to provide these opportunities could increase their sense of teacher efficacy and assist in retaining a qualified early childcare and

education workforce. And as studies have shown access to higher education is a significant determinant of social mobility, immigrants who attend post-secondary education are more likely to achieve upward mobility (Seela, 2025). In other words, education is ultimately one of the most effective means to help immigrant early childcare and education workers to improve their socio-economic status and foster their social mobility.

The extent to which education fosters mobility depends on the quality of education and systemic support. Unfortunately, this can make obtaining higher education and keeping up with the educational expectations within the early childcare and education workforce especially difficult for immigrant workers. For a variety of reason, many subgroups of immigrants do not do well in the U.S. post-secondary education system (Baum & Flores, 2011). The risk factors associated with low attainment in higher education are more prevalent amongst immigrant undergraduate students (Baum & Flores, 2011). And since standards for training of educators in early childhood programs are generally set by each state, obtaining a degree in early childhood education can become more complex because preparation pathways for educators vary, as do requirements for qualification to practice (Allen & Kelly, 2015).

Without addressing these overarching issues, an increasing number of states, as well as the Head Start Bureau at the federal level, have called for higher professional standards for early childhood education workers, including stricter education requirements (Park et al., 2015). For example, many states are requiring state pre-K teachers to possess a bachelor's degree or teacher certification. However, educational attainment levels within the early childcare workforce vary greatly by occupation. Low-educated early childhood education workers are concentrated in the informal sector – 48% of immigrant workers and 38% of native workers with less than a high school diploma are employed as family-based childcare workers (Park et al., 2015). On the other

hand, 32% of immigrant early childhood education workers with an associate's or higher degree work as preschool teachers, as do 41% of their native counterparts (Park et al., 2015). This study demonstrates immigrants' relative levels of access to education and barriers to such opportunities. And even if they do obtain a bachelor's degree, it is not guaranteed that professional status, compensation, and benefits will also increase.

Once again, it is important to learn from and center the voices of immigrant childcare workers to advance equity in the field of ECE. Hence, this study will extend the research by answering what are immigrant childcare educators' perspectives on navigating the stages (currently enrolled and graduated from college) towards obtaining a college degree? And how do they narrate the role of their multifaceted identities in navigating unique challenges and enacting assets towards obtaining a college degree?

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality**

To conduct this research, I adopted Critical Race Theory (CRT). Although there are different tenets within CRT, this study will focus on investigating intersectionality of immigrant childcare workers' race, immigration status, and social class. Through intersectionality, some of the nuanced experiences of immigrant childcare workers as people of color, first-generation immigrants, and working-class within higher education will be uncovered. This framework is based on CRT in education which highlights educational inequities relative to the intersection of race and other social categorizations (Ladson-Billing, 1998). Since its introduction to education, CRT has been used to address racial inequalities faced by different marginalized groups. Intersectionality helps target and uncover much more detailed experiences of individuals as it considers the intersection of race with other identities (Crenshaw, 1991). This is imperative because where systems of race, class structure, and immigration status converge, as they do in

the experiences of immigrant childcare workers, analysis based solely on the experiences of childcare workers who do not share the same background will be of limited understanding as immigrant childcare workers face different obstacles (Crenshaw, 1991). Hence, through the CRT intersectionality lens, I will be able to explore how immigrant childcare workers' race and other identities intertwine, and how their multiple marginalized identities affect their unique perception and experience of obtaining a college degree as well as their cultural assets that support their educational journeys.

As the students I interviewed held different identities, it was imperative for me to understand their experiences through an intersectionality lens. They have a unique experience where their race, class, and immigration backgrounds are not distinct, but rather overlap and intersect with social systems of oppression. In this case, their roles as a parent, student, and educator and the financial support (or lack of) from the government and school are highly impacted by their identities as people of color and first-generation immigrants from a working-class background. There is also a better understanding of their source of motivation to obtain higher education through the intersectionality lens due to their unique background experiences. Essentially, the CRT intersectionality lens gives us the opportunity to address complex issues that immigrant early childcare educators experience when pursuing higher education.

### **Positionality**

My interest in this topic stems from my experiences volunteering at a non-profit educational organization and working as an early childcare educator. At the non-profit organization, we advocate for systems that include immigrants at every level and provide English classes and U.S. citizenship support. I have personally experienced the shortcomings of the current early childcare system as there is a labor shortage due to various issues surrounding

wages and educational requirements. Due to this, I am approaching my research from a perspective of trying to learn more about the experiences of immigrant childcare workers navigating the different stages towards obtaining a college degree, and how obtaining a degree impacts their quality of life. I am hoping the case-based themes that arise from my research can provide potential benefits toward improving early childcare education programs for future immigrant students.

Although I have firsthand experience with the shortcomings of the current early childcare system, my identity as a Korean American has made my experience receiving a higher education within the U.S. different from other immigrants. One of the reasons I can recognize my privilege is because of my interactions with English learners and hearing their personal stories about some of the challenges that comes with being a first-generation immigrant. It is imperative for me to continue recognizing my positionality and paying attention to my own and others' racialized and cultural systems of understanding and experiencing the world (Milner, 2007) through educating myself about different cultural backgrounds.

### **Methodology: Critical Case Study Approach Centering Interview and Document Study Analysis**

This study is categorized as a case study because Creswell (2013) describes case study research as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system over time, through in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and themes. I use a critical case study approach, but specifically center interviews and program documents because data was collected from two interviews with immigrant students who either are currently enrolled or graduated from an online early care and education program at a university within Washington state. I will be focusing on the students'

experience through the interviews while using program documents to contextualize and make sense of their experiences. This methodology is critical in gaining information and insight from the perspective of immigrant childcare workers who are in the process of obtaining or have obtained a college degree. Through these interviews and program documents, I am able to provide a case description and case-based themes to the university's early care and education program. I use pseudonyms throughout the manuscript to replace names of individuals and do not mention the university's name to protect participant privacy and maintain anonymity. This includes link, direct quotes, or citation for the online early care and education program's website to protect their confidentiality.

This case study is also combined with critical analysis and research of immigrant childcare workers' experiences to create a critical case study approach centering interview and document study analysis through CRT. This approach is imperative in understanding the complexities of immigrant childcare workers' experiences on obtaining a college degree. Critical research focuses on critiquing and challenging, transforming, and analyzing power relations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In fact, Patton's (2015, p. 692) observation on "what makes critical research critical is that 'it aims to critique existing conditions and through that critique bring about change'" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 59). To unmute the voices of the marginalized and explore the current early childcare system, the methodology of a critical case study approach centering interview and document study analysis was selected because of the ability to collect stories of participants' personal lived experiences and help address the research questions stated earlier.

### *Site*

The online early care and education program at a university within Washington's state provides a Bachelor of Arts degree in Early Care & Education. I specifically chose this online program to reach a wider range of immigrants, and many of the students live in different regions. The online nature of the program expands access to students who otherwise cannot afford to enroll full-time in an on-campus degree program. This program also primarily recruits from community colleges and applicants who aspire to build on their ECE experience and pursue a four-year degree. The duration of the program is about two to three years depending on whether the student is full or part-time. The program utilizes interdisciplinary coursework and practice-based learning rooted in diversity, equity, and inclusion to achieve their goal of centering and uplifting young children and communities. The program is promoted for its flexibility and affordability as students gain a four-year degree while continuing to work in their early childhood professions and serve their community.

### ***Data Collection***

This study utilized two methods of data collection – interviews and document analysis. One of the participants, Min, is currently enrolled in the online early care and education program and works as a part-time teacher at a private preschool. Before immigrating to the United States, she obtained her master's degree and was an educator in China. She identifies as a Chinese American immigrant, a mother, and an educator. The second participant, Ada, is a graduate from the online early care and education program and currently working towards obtaining her master's degree through another program. She worked as an early childcare educator at a Head Start and ECEAP center but now works within a college childcare program. She identifies as a Nigerian American immigrant, a single mother, an educator, a daughter, and a caregiver.

### ***Interviews***

The purpose of the interviews is to understand the personal lived experiences of immigrant childcare workers (specifically, those who are a part of the online early care and education program at a university within Washington state) to uncover their perspectives, beliefs, and processes with respect to obtaining a college degree. Maximum variation sampling was utilized to select immigrant students who are currently enrolled or graduated from the program. The assistant director of academic and student services of the online early care and education program sent a mass email invitation on my behalf to recruit volunteers within the program. Three students volunteered to participate, but one eventually requested to have their interview withdrawn from this research project.

All the interviews adopted a semi-structured interview protocol to allow for standardization of information collected while also responding to the situation at hand and new ideas on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The questions focused on getting the students to reflect on and share their perspective of the navigation process of obtaining a college degree. During the interviews, new lines of questioning did arise due to the interviewees' own beliefs of how receiving a college degree will affect their quality of life. The participants were interviewed separately over Zoom and the meetings were audio recorded while I took notes simultaneously to capture key points. The meetings were 30 minutes to an hour and there were no follow-up interviews. After the interviews were transcribed through Otter.ai, they were sent to the interviewees over email to clarify, change, or add on to the transcript. The students were notified that the interviews were recorded, and they gave verbal consent to share their experiences within this study.

I believe it is also important to mention that in addition to one of the three student interviewees requesting to have their interview withdrawn, two of the ECE program's staff

members declined to participate or stopped responding once it was mentioned the interviews would be recorded. The purpose for their interviews was to potentially uncover their positionality on the ECE program and if their beliefs aligned with the objectives listed on their website. However, I was unable to conduct interviews with a staff member within the program.

### ***Documents***

The online early care and education program's official website was also analyzed to retrieve general information about the program, including admission/curriculum requirements, cost/funding, faculty/staff members, and students' experiences. There were also sections about equity and providing support for the students, enabling further insight into how the program addresses systemic inequities and if they serve immigrant childcare workers who often face barriers when navigating higher education. Furthermore, additional research articles encompassing the topics of intersectionality and mental health for immigrant educators were reviewed. The connection between the document analysis and participants' interviews helped uncover and examine case-based themes.

### ***Data Analysis***

For the data analysis process, I utilized the highlighting and comment tools in Microsoft Word to help organize the data found in documents into respective categories. Significant passages were analyzed inductively to surface patterns and themes pertaining to how systemic inequities affect immigrant students and early childcare workers. Similarly for the interviews, the two interview transcriptions from Otter.ai were transferred onto Microsoft Word. The first round of coding was inductive, seeking to identify important themes and patterns across the participants in regards of identity and beliefs. Although these two participants are at different stages of obtaining a college degree, they are from the same program – which resulted in finding key

similarities such as mental health, financial concerns, and source of motivation. The surfaced themes from both documents and interviews were then compared to find divergence and convergence in immigrant students' perception of their experiences within the online early care and education program. Furthermore, based on my CRT theoretical framework, I was able to identify deductive codes based on the intersection of race, beliefs, education, culture, systemic inequities, immigration status, class status, mental health, and quality of life. Ultimately, the data analysis process that I adopted helped organize my findings and highlight the case-based themes that are relevant to answering the research questions.

### **Findings**

There were several common threads between the students' interviews: compounding stressors, financial concerns, and their sources of motivation. More specifically, students had compounding stressors in their lives due to their roles as a student, parent and educator. The other overlapping theme, involving financial concerns, was due to being caught in the middle of multiple systems. And they mentioned key motivators, such as their children, that kept them driven to achieve their goals. However, the difference between these students' attitudes on how they approached these subjects at hand was unique based on their culture and background.

In the following sections, I will be discussing how the intersectionality of the participants' race, immigration, and class status influenced their roles and the outcome of their experiences. It is imperative to understand the complex experiences and intersecting social positions of these individuals, and how this impacts their roles in education (Maxwell et al., 2006; Sheridan et al., 2009). These interviews allow immigrant early childcare educators' voices to be heard and evaluate the early childcare system based on current literature and research provided. Immigrants are major contributors to the early childcare workforce, and it is important

that we include their experiences when considering solutions to providing higher-quality childcare services.

### ***Compounding Stressors***

Students in the online early care and education program experience multiple layers of stress due to their different roles as educators, parents, and students. Jeon et al. (2018) found early childcare educators' depressive symptoms and stress correlated with teaching efficacy and their working environments. However, it is important to note that their stress extends even further when considering the intersectionality of their identities and its impact on their committed roles. The cultural conflict as an immigrant educator to navigating student life with a learning disability are some of the experiences into which I will dive deeper to explain how they exacerbate students' stress level in the following paragraphs.

**Educator Role.** Min and Ada both mentioned how being an immigrant teacher influences their mental health as they must navigate cultural conflicts and pressure. Min explained the cultural conflict on what is expected from teachers in the U.S. versus in China. For example, when it is cold outside, she was able to make it mandatory for the students to wear their jackets in China while she cannot force them here in the U.S. She struggles with meeting parents' expectations as they express their concerns about their children while still trying to respect her students' choices. Min stated that teachers' choices were respected in China, "but here...I have to meet parents, students, my supervisors' needs. I have to communicate more with them" (personal communication). For this reason, she acknowledged that she is qualified to be a lead teacher, but chooses not to because "I don't want the pressure [of] the cultural conflict... I know it's challenging for me to meet parents' expectations. The parents and families are from different parts of the earth. I feel a lot of pressure for me, so I chose not to take [that] pressure" (personal

communication). There is cultural pressure that influences Min's decision in choosing not to become a lead teacher especially in regards of meeting supervisors and parents' expectations. Although there would be more medical and wage benefits with becoming a lead teacher, Min does not believe it is worth sacrificing her mental health.

Ada described her experience working at a childcare center as mostly positive as she strives to support families who have experienced similar hardships. However, she explained that she decided to quit her job as a teacher and pursue her master's degree because:

[the new director] does not have the same value our old director does. Our old director has values for staff families, staff well-being, knowing that as [teachers], we kind of have secondhand trauma from the families... You get that secondhand [trauma] because you meet with them to kind of help them [and] to help their kids (personal communication).

It is not just families and students who teachers need to be concerned with, but also their fellow peers and supervisors. The values and culture that a childcare center determines as important impact teachers' mental health because it can conflict with their own morals and expectations. As an educator, the pressure of meeting everyone's standards can feel overwhelming. It can be beneficial for educators to receive support from their workplace in managing stress, feeling validated, and working through secondhand trauma.

**Parental Role.** The role as a parent also induces stress due to the intersecting identities as an immigrant from a working-class background. As a parent, they must navigate single-parenting and home life challenges. For instance, Ada discussed about her personal experience with abuse – “My ex-husband and I were lost in a country where I don't know anybody. I have zero family. My husband was very abusive and so I hated my life. I try a couple times, actually, to commit suicide” (personal communication). Ada not only experienced spousal abuse which contributed

to considering taking her own life, but she also had to deal with the experience alone because she was in a new country where she did not have access to a support system. And even after escaping the abusive relationship, there were additional barriers waiting for her as she became a single parent:

One of these sad things I have done in the past...well, sometimes I still do it, it's one of the things you do as a single mom where you have a sick child and say, 'I'm sorry, child, I have to go to work. Yes, [take] medication, [so] you go [to school and] I can go [to work].' Because, you know, if you don't go, your income is reduced, then you can't pay your bills, and then it trickles down. And teachers are not paid well at all, we are not paid well at all...[and] as a parent, it is hard because you put your kids at daycare, you run to work, and you are going to school [at] the same time. You try. You know that the moment you pick up your kids as a single mom, you don't have time for your schoolwork. So, you try to take a little lunch break or after work to do your stuff. But then if you don't [pick them up from] daycare on time, then you're in trouble because they charge you a late fee per child and the state is complaining about it (personal communication).

Ada is responsible for being the breadwinner and the caretaker of her family, and it is clear she is trying to balance her roles as her attention is pulled in all different directions. Due to Ada's circumstances of being working-class, she is forced to make difficult decisions for her children because one "wrong" decision can have a domino effect. For instance, Ada cannot afford to let her sick children stay at home because missing work can lead to a lower paycheck which then prevents her from paying the bills.

As demanding as Ada described her personal life, she mentioned that applying and getting into a four-year university was a revelation. She stated:

I apply, I get in, and I was shocked because I never [imagined] going to college. I mean, community colleges seem like technical colleges like, you know, trade colleges, so, it didn't really bug me...but a university? That is above what I can ever dream of in my life! But so, I did. I came, I survived, and I made it through. And within this time, I separated myself [from my husband] and I was fine for a while without my husband. I make it through (personal communication).

In a sense, Ada believed she did not have the qualifications to attend a university or survive without her abusive partner. She had self-doubt because of her lack of confidence in learning and enduring years of abuse. However, after “surviving” higher education and graduating with a bachelor’s degree, she went through a revelation that acknowledges her effort while gaining a sense of identity and self-worth.

**Student Role.** Students in higher education already feel immense pressure to succeed academically and socially. However, for these immigrant early childcare educators, another inducer of stress stems from having additional roles as a parent and as a worker. Min felt the impact of being a mother and working part-time putting a strain on her well-being as she explained “I took like three courses for two quarters... and I think it's pretty heavy for me since I have two children and I work part-time” (personal communication). Additionally, the intersectionality of being a Black immigrant with a learning disability had a significant impact on Ada’s learning ability. She mentioned “English is a language of instruction back in my country [and] I hate it because English was hard, and I have a learning disability. I have speech problems, and I already have problems reading or understanding my home language” (personal communication) which further complicated her navigation of higher education. The online early care and education program’s official ECE equity statement page listed the ways in which the

school engages in equitable practices. However, it is worth considering how these statements are being transferred into action where students like Ada feel supported.

The program's official webpage provided a "We are here to support you!" section that listed personalized advising and community-based learning support, engaged faculty and community, and tech support when you needed it. However, Ada was very expressive of the university's lack of support for students of color making comments such as "here at [the university] as an immigrant parent [and] as a first gen, I was overwhelmed by the campus" (personal communication) and "[the university] does not do a good job in orienting their students and letting them know where things are. So, as a student of color sometimes or immigrants, you easily get lost or overwhelmed because you don't know where to go or what to do" (personal communication). When asked for specific examples, Ada mentioned not knowing about tech support where students can borrow laptops free of charge or understanding the benefits of student ID as an undergraduate student. As mentioned above, the official website for the program has a subsection for tech support, but it does not provide any specific contact information.

Ada mentioned a barrier that involved her personal experience as a Black immigrant which included the lack of BIPOC community groups on campus. In her words:

In my AA degree...we have like a student of color group, and I joined them. And sometimes it's just like a support group. [At the university], there was none. College of Ed has a place in OSS...that is available...only for master student or doctoral student. Undergraduates are not invited in. As an undergraduate, it was like, you don't have a place to go to feel like, 'Oh, there's somebody like me. I'm not alone here.' There's nothing because it's also online program for me... everybody is all over the U.S., so there's nobody closer to you...But, what I would have loved at that time, where I have all

younger kids at home [and] no adult conversation is... I need to do this assignment, and I need somebody to kind of talk about it and share my brain with, but there was nobody. Students that [go] to campus or have met each other in multiple classes, you become friends [and] you talk together. Online students don't have that (personal communication).

As a student of color, the lack of structured BIPOC community setting at the university had a negative impact on Ada's sense of belonging and social achievement. Unlike students who attend class in-person or have a social group on campus, Ada did not have accessibility to in-person connections with fellow classmates or peers who share the same ethnic background. The program's official website had a lack of information on ways to connect with fellow peers. This may be because the program is remote and catered towards students who would like to learn on their own.

Lastly, an issue Ada observed for immigrant students at all higher education institutions was required documents and exams:

Some barriers that I also see here is some of the requirement that you learn you need to have as an immigrant person to get in [college]. My education back at home was terrible, but there are some students who...have good education back in Africa or wherever they [are] coming from, but then they [come] here, and they can't get their... what do you call it? Their transcript? And then some of them have to start all over. It's ridiculous. And then they say, 'Oh, you need to have official something' and you're trying to communicate with [a] country that is so disorganized, they do not keep anything...it is hard. It's so frustrating and challenging. And sometimes you have some feelings, 'You know what? I don't think [I] want it.'...I'm grateful that they didn't make me do a second language test

that they do for some second English student, but sometimes that's another barrier. You already know that English is my second language, then you want me to test in English...? It's ridiculous (personal communication).

Although Ada personally did not have to experience these testing requirements, she acknowledges there are immigrant students of color who need to jump additional hoops just to apply for higher education. Requesting formal documents from countries who may not have individuals' education records can prevent them from obtaining higher education. These may be considered as technical requirements from the university's perspective, but from immigrant students' perspective, they are barriers and can negatively impact their desire to attend higher education. For this reason, it is imperative for stakeholders and those in charge of the early childcare education programs to consider the multiple barriers immigrant student of colors face. It is not just addressing a single problem of providing a community group or scholarships, as I will get into deeper in the next section, but also considering the intersectionality of students' backgrounds that can impact their educational experience. Next steps may require contemplating how to better support students who have additional roles as caretakers and breadwinners while considering the adversities that come with being an immigrant student of color.

### ***In the Middle of Multiple Systems***

The government and the school have systems to financially support low-income households. However, these systems are inadequate in supporting students who are immigrants and from working-class backgrounds. The students are caught in the middle of multiple federal, state, and school systems – trying to balance the delicate seesaw of pursuing better wages, but only making just enough to be cut from receiving federal aid. In fact, a study in 2017 showed that early childcare workers earned less than two-thirds of the median for all occupations

throughout the states (Otten et al., 2019). I will explain how these structural oppressions exacerbate students' stress when considering their different identities in the following section.

**Federal and State Government Aid.** The intersecting identities of an immigrant student from a working-class background have an impact on their navigation of receiving federal and state government support. Ada stated that the underlying issue stemmed from:

The system – I'm saying everything is politics... They says it's about your income, but if you make \$50 or \$10 over the cut off, then the amount you pay is worse than that extra benefit... it is very, very challenging... And so, the sacrifice you put in does not yield the income that comes out of it. It's like this constant [work], but it does not seem like you are doing anything... If you get a little salary increase, then [the government] say, you don't qualify for childcare anymore... So, you have to kind of go like, okay, how do I get this benefit?... If I have to pay [for] my childcare, I might as well not work because the amount [the] government pays [for] childcare is more than the amount you get paid as a salary. It will actually be best if [the] government pays me to raise my kids at home much like childcare – but it's all those little qualities. All those crazy little things they put in place that you have to find a way to manipulate on your own to make it successful (personal communication).

Many immigrant early childcare educators receive close to minimum wage which causes these working-class individuals to be disproportionately affected by the negligence of our government. It is a catch-22 situation where the individual is stuck between two contradictory conditions – the government funds childcare while searching for a job, but once hired, the government discontinues their funding even before the first paycheck. Due to this, it was no surprise to me

that Ada felt the need to express how they must manipulate the system to survive. Additionally, Ada expressed how:

The way this system is [while] you are looking for a job, [the government] may provide you [with] gas money, bus ticket, childcare, [and] all this. The moment you get a job, they stop [the support] right there. They don't even wait for you to get your first paycheck, so you can be on [your own]. They stop it. So, the system builds a bridge, but the bridge does not reach to the other side. There's a cliffhanger. When you get to that cliffhanger, they say, 'Sorry, we're not helping you.' Either you go back or you fall. And then when you fall, the only way to come back is back to the beginning again. It's the cycle, the upstream cycle (personal communication).

Ada described this cycle as a “cliffhanger” because the government does not have policies set up to support families until they reach a safe point with their household income. The current regulations surrounding the eligibility to receive financial aid are too abrupt and require modification to better support individuals to escape the cycle of poverty. Until actions are taken, immigrant early childcare educators like Ada have no choice but to rely on government support without a solution to escape the cycle.

**School Aid.** In addition to navigating federal and state government support, Min and Ada had similar experiences with the university's financial aid system. Especially as immigrants from working-class backgrounds, they depend on scholarships and financial support to attend higher education. Under the cost and funding section of the program's official webpage, it explains that since the program is fee-based, students are not eligible for tuition exemptions or university grants. Instead, there is information about FAFSA, WASFA, loans, scholarships, fellowships, and other awards provided for funding. However, Min expressed that she did not receive any

financial support from the school and was required to pay out of pocket, “I applied twice, but didn’t get any [scholarship]...the tuition is really a pressure for me. So, I paused two quarters, this is the second quarter I [took] off. I’m not registered for any courses” (personal communication). As Min has difficulty affording her tuition, she is required to take quarters off. This could influence her ability to retain the knowledge she learned from previous quarters compared to students who are not required to take academic breaks in between.

Similarly, Ada passionately expressed her disdain with the current system as it has barriers against working-class students trying to acquire higher education:

I was given two years to have a degree. Two years either I'm already in [the program] or done. There was nothing called a scholarship to go, there was nothing. *Nothing was provided, nothing.* It was like you [either] get [your] education or you lose your job. I have to provide for my kids [and] there was no childcare provided. There was nothing that [said] this is an incentive for you to go to school, it was just a requirement. And even when I finish, after all that hurdles and craziness, and all my credit card that I had to spend because I didn't want to take a loan – I had to use my credit card to pay for some of it [since] financial aid didn't cover it all. Even with all that, I think I got \$100 increasement in my salary for that. It's like you don't even want an increase in your salary because you get that and then the DSHS goes, the only benefits I accept from the government, ‘Sorry, now you make too much for childcare.’ So...what am I supposed to do now? You want me [to] get [my] education? I got [my] education [and] now that education gave me \$100 increases in my salary, and that \$100 push[ed] me over the cliff. Wait, there's no win, win. With the system, there's no win, win (personal communication).

It is clear how difficult it is to achieve a win-win situation when it comes to receiving enough financial aid to attend higher education. Due to strict budgets, small wage increases are enough to cut financial support for working-class students. This can be detrimental for students like Ada because she is attending school to increase her living wage, but the process of obtaining higher education for working-class single parents lacks support such as childcare or scholarships. In fact, Ada felt like there was no incentive to go to school, but it was a requirement for her if she wanted to retain her job. This is an interesting observation because schools often promote different resources for low-income and immigrant students. As Min and Ada qualify for these scholarships, this begs the question, where are these scholarships going?

Furthermore, there is an issue with working-class students finding the time to apply for scholarships. For example, the time Ada was able to receive scholarships was when she was obtaining her AA degree. However, this came with some difficulties of its own:

It took me eight years [to get my AA], but during [that]...eight-year period, the only way I was able to make it was through scholarship. Because of my craziness abuse [and] everything, I was able to get scholarship. [But], when I did my BA, I didn't have enough time. I was so busy; I was crazy at work and in life that I didn't even realize there was scholarship anyway. I didn't know. I didn't know College of ED [had] scholarships. I didn't know anything. And some of the scholarships I got [during] my AA degree portion... you can't reapply to them. It's only [a] one-time thing. So... there was no other option for me...things were difficult. It was a barrier (personal communication).

Working-class students have less time on their hand to apply for various scholarships. Especially as Min and Ada not only work as early childcare educators, but are also responsible for carrying their role as parents. This requires resource allocation to be reconsidered to ensure that

scholarships and other sources of financial aid are reaching the population they are meant to serve. It is alarming that these students in need have fallen through the cracks and were unable to obtain the support for them to achieve academic success.

### ***Key Motivators and Assets for a Better Future***

Evidence has shown that early childcare workers' intrinsic motivation to specifically work with children varies (Kontos et al., 1994). And so far, I have discussed how the students' intersecting identities conflicted with societal barriers which made it challenging to obtain academic success compared to peers who do not share these intersecting identities. However, it is important to mention that despite the students' hardships and difficult experiences, these identities should not be labeled as negative qualities. In fact, their intersecting identities are also their source of strength as a form of motivation towards achieving their different goals.

**Personal Growth.** The intersecting identity these students share as a first-generation immigrant coming from a working-class background have great influence over their motivation towards achieving personal growth and a better future. Min described feeling personal achievement and more confident in her work, “mentally, I think I achieved something...I learned many things that I didn't know before, like, how to be a resilient educator... I think those courses helped me, not only for the job, but for the further learning” (personal communication). The program's website promotes the idea of further learning and elevating their students' talents to excel in their career development by providing the necessary skills and knowledge. Furthermore, Min explained that her reason to attend higher education was to learn the “American” way of teaching children. Min had attended higher education and received a degree in China before immigrating to the United States, but she was determined to raise her children in an “American” way. Due to this, she recognized the benefits of attending a university in the United States by

learning theoretical knowledge for early childcare and skills to continue her education. This in return allowed her to “became more confident in applying for a new position in early childhood education area” (personal communication).

Ada already graduated with a bachelor’s degree from the online early care and education program, but is currently continuing her education by pursuing a master’s degree in ECE. She came to this decision because she realized to achieve her goal of a better future, she must have a master’s degree. When she was asked if there were benefits that came with having degrees when applying for jobs, she stated:

Yes and no...I ran second in [the DCYF] interview...Not [because of] my experience, it was my degree that threw me into second place, but tie[d] in everything [else]...when they look at our degree, the other person has... their master’s [and] I did not have my master’s. That is when I start thinking, maybe it's time for me to [get my master’s] if I really want advancement...that is why I'm in school right now. Not because I want to go back to school, but because I felt like I can't lose an opportunity where I have [an] opportunity for advancement, compared to just sitting down here... where there's no advancement in my position at all (personal communication).

Ada realized the benefits of having a “title” and recognized the hierarchy in education. She believes that climbing the education ladder through obtaining higher degrees will allow for more opportunities to open. Both Min and Ada ultimately pursued higher education to have better opportunities as they recognized the power a degree has when it comes to applying for jobs and even more so for a competitive role. It is imperative for them to maintain an edge to negotiate for better wages or have the liberty of applying for other positions. Especially as working-class

individuals, they must consider their financial responsibilities not only for themselves, but also for their families.

**Role Model and Providing for Their Children.** Being a working-class immigrant parent was also one of the most influential impacts on these students' motivation for obtaining a college degree. These students had a strong mindset about being role models and a sense of responsibility to provide for their children. As mentioned earlier, Min was determined to adapt an "American" parenting style. As she explained, "The reason I went back to college is [because] I became a mom of two children. I want[ed] to educate them in American way instead of Chinese traditional way" (personal communication). It was Min's preference to raise her children in an "American way" because of her personal experience with a Chinese parenting style.

Ada also spoke about her children as she explained how she got into teaching: "I got to take care of me, and I need to feed my kids...without employment in this country [is how] we die in this abusive relationship... And I said, well, teaching is there, so I decided to go into teaching" (personal communication). Ada considered her children when making career decisions because she had to not only survive an abusive relationship, but also earn enough to support her children. After her initial push into teaching, Ada acknowledged the difficulty within the field. However, she stayed because of several reasons regarding her children:

So, the way the system frame[s] everything, they make it impossible for families [or] for teachers to make it. But it depends on individual immigrants who decide... how [bad] do I want this? I didn't do the education for my workplace. I did it because I was the first gen and I want to show my kids, no matter how hard you think education is or school is, you can make it too. And you can, it may take a while, but you can get there. So, I did it for my children. There are times, many crying nights where I would call my instructors and

go, 'This is terrible, I've spent three days on this. I can't get it done.' And somebody will just laugh and say, 'Okay, it's alright.' ... So, it's not easy (personal communication).

As a first-generation immigrant, Ada wanted to set an example for her children – working hard towards achieving one's dream and succeeding in a new country. The systemic barriers make it difficult for educators to financially succeed, so Ada had to rely on her strong motivation to illustrate perseverance and determination for her children. The responsibility and pressure as a parent were especially evident when Ada found out her daughter had the same speech disability as her. She expressed her concerns, "I thought I destroy[ed] my child's life. I don't want her life to be like [mine]. So, my goal was to go to school, make sure I got... my AA degree, so I can help my daughter. And in effort to do that, I found myself in...teaching" (personal communication). Ada felt immense pressure to not "destroy" her children's life and set a path for success by persevering through her own challenges.

In addition to her current goals of setting an example and supporting her children, Ada understood that as her children grew older, she needed the financial resources to provide for their academic dreams. Ada went on to explain, "... I need to do something because my kids are growing up now. I need to be able to pay for their education. I can't give my kids hope that they should follow and have a dream and then say, 'Sorry, I can't afford your dream'" (personal communication). Ada understood that she must provide for their basic needs first, then ignite hope within her children, and finally have the financial resources to support their dreams. It is phenomenal seeing how these students' deep motivation comes from their role as a parent. They are laying the groundwork for their children's success due to their own experiences. However, what was even more inspiring was that in addition to carrying out these responsibilities, they also had the urge to support other families in need.

**Supporting Families in Need.** In addition to her identity as a working-class immigrant impacting her motivation to pursue her own goals and supporting her children, Ada also felt very strongly about supporting families in need. A part of it is related to her cultural identity as Ada described her past experiences:

My cultural identity, my immigrants experience in this country, my family challenges, all affects how I work with families and children. It gives me a different perspective in the essence that, you know policies [are] rules, right? And so, I have always been the receiver of those rules. The implementation is always done on me. My family is always those at risk, [the] family that everybody talks about. I'm always that minority that everybody uses as a statistic. And I do not want to be one of those numbers, I want to be one of those numbers that says, well, yes, majority are like this except some... People help[ed] me to get to the other side, [so] I always want to help others to get to the other side (personal communication).

Ada's personal experience with being "one of those statistics" who are considered as families in need further enforced her desire to help others. Ada expressed cultural identity as an immigrant and her personal challenges all contributed towards how she works with families. Because she has first-hand experience of receiving invaluable community support, she believes she can help other families through a similar process. Due to this, she explained how she felt inclined to quit her job at an early childcare center and work at a university's early childcare program because:

All the new people they were hiring had zero value or experience in what we do, and so families were now being treated like just data. And I hate that. These families are not just a stick in the folder or a number in statistics to submit to the government for the grant.

They are not. They are human beings, and they didn't come to the program just so that the

program can keep them there. We want them to advance, so that their children will not end up back or their grandkids will not end up back in this because their parents are taking food stamps now. We don't want the kids on food stamps. We want to provide education, so that they can better themselves. Not passed on like my grandma said, 'Get a food stamp,' [so] I'm getting a food stamp. Then, what are we doing? And so, I didn't like that (personal communication).

The way her previous workplace treated their students and families did not align with Ada's morals and values. She considered the connection between the institutions and families to be resourceful and supportive, so that families in need can receive help to escape the cycle of poverty. Even as a working-class individual, Ada respected her values more than her source of income to the point where once the institution no longer promoted certain values, she decided to resign.

Her dedication in supporting her community continues as she explained her approach to working with those around her:

Knowing that...those identit[ies] shape how I view everything around me; how I deal with students, how I deal with parents, [and] how I deal with community partners that I currently work with as well, understanding that there's no bridge. And my goal is, even if there's not going to be a bridge because...the support system is not there, if I can extend a hand, one at a time to kind of flip somebody over to the other side, then I want to do that. And sometimes we take one try and sometimes take 10 million tries to get one person, but that is [how] that is. That's my view (personal communication).

Ada understood that not everyone shares the same perspective as her, but her intersecting identities as a working-class immigrant strongly influenced her work ethic and values. Not only

does she strive to have a better future for herself and children, but she has a desire to extend that to other families who are struggling. Relatedly, the program is rooted in the belief that all children have the right to equitable learning, and ECE students learn to reflect on how their identities and actions within and outside of classrooms are influenced by larger power systems. Aligning with the program's goal of transforming inequitable systems, it is clear a part of Ada's motivation for pursuing higher education and a career in early childcare stems from her strong desire for individual success and with that comes uplifting surrounding communities.

### **Conclusion**

I was originally inspired to write this paper because of the lack of research on immigrants' experience on pursuing higher education in early childhood and care. And as someone who has experienced and witnessed the disparities and low retention within the field, I was curious how the growing expectation of acquiring post-secondary credentials could impact immigrant workers. When analyzing the findings through a CRT and intersectionality lens, immigrants' experience in early childcare workforce and post-secondary education is heavily influenced by their multifaceted identities. Their perspective and expectations from the early childcare and education field are directed by their specific experiences as first-generation working-class immigrants. These identities guided three key commonalities: their differing roles as a parent, educator, and student, their position on receiving government and school aid, and finally, their motivation to support their own goals, children, and other families in need.

### ***Connection to Immigrant Early Childcare Workforce Literature and Framework***

From the findings, one of the common themes was feelings of stress due to working in the early childcare and education field. The feeling of stress stemmed from an overarching umbrella of cultural differences. In Min's case, she particularly felt immense pressure of meeting

parents' expectations to the point where she even chose not to pursue a higher position. This correlates to the research on the decline in ethnic and racial diversity that accompanies the rise in wages and qualifications across roles (Park et al., 2015). Immigrant educators are faced with a cultural dilemma that can have a negative impact on their sense of belonging and well-being which could prevent them from easily accepting opportunities to climb the ladder. Similarly, the cultural shift within Ada's work environment caused her distress as the program no longer aligned with her values. Work can cause stress for any individual, but immigrants can experience heightened anxiety and tension from the additional struggles of handling cultural differences. As most institutions are dominated by white-normative practices, immigrant workers may feel unwelcomed, and their knowledge undervalued within the early childcare and education workforce.

Aside from the stress directly induced from working within the field, there was also the emerging theme of stress that comes from navigating multiple systems. The financial and child support provided by the government is insufficient to truly give enough time for individuals to get back on their feet. This is catch-22 where one cannot fully escape from the cycle of relying on government support nor find stability once employed, hindering immigrant educators to comfortably transition. Research has shown that additional professional development training and obtaining educational credentials are usually the teachers' financial responsibility (Boyd, 2013) which can lead to being a less desired path. With the existing stress of navigating multiple systems, the requirement of professional development trainings, credentials, or post-secondary degrees may be a significant burden for immigrant educators.

Cultural experiences also played a role in immigrant workers' motivation to work within early childcare and education to not only support their children, but to also support other families

in need. Min and Ada's first push into pursuing a career in early childcare was to provide a better future for their children in a financial and cultural aspect. Due to their own experiences with education from their native country, it was important for them to provide the tools their children will need to succeed. Qualitative research has shown immigrant teachers practice cultural sensitivity and feel compelled to support students who are most marginalized because of their own experiences (Adair, 2011; McDevitt, 2020). In addition to supporting their own children, immigrant educators also feel the desire to provide guidance for marginalized students and their families. As Ada personally experienced the harsh reality of settling into the U.S. society as an immigrant, she was firm on helping her students and families integrate with more ease.

### ***Connection to Immigrants Pursuing Higher Education in ECE Literature and Framework***

I have found that the effects from working in early childcare and attending post-secondary education are interlinked as shown from the common findings: *compounding stressors, navigating multiple systems, and key motivators*. These findings support the current literature trend that there is insufficient cultural response to better support immigrant workers. In fact, their experiences are far more complex when considering their position from a CRT and intersectionality lens. For instance, Min and Ada experienced stress from multiple areas while juggling three different roles and navigating multiple systems to ensure stability. So, for immigrant workers who are enrolled in the early childcare and education post-secondary program, they are not only left with the immense responsibility of figuring out how to navigate higher education, but also how to overcome systemic barriers based on their race, immigration status, and class.

The exhaustive list of barriers that were accumulated by Min and Ada's interviews included (but not limited to) the lack of information on school resources, scholarships, and sense

of belonging. This is imperative because where systems of race, immigration status, and class background converge, as they do in the experiences of immigrant childcare workers, analysis based solely on the experiences of childcare workers who do not share the same background will be of limited use (Crenshaw, 1991).

Min and Ada also exemplified how immigrant workers' motivation to pursue post-secondary education were influenced by their multifaceted identities. There was the common belief that obtaining a college degree would allow them to be more financially secure, heighten their worth and self-confidence, and pave a better path for their children. Ada was motivated to attend post-secondary education to set an example and provide for her children, and to secure higher positions that have more potential in advocating for marginalized or hard to reach students. Similarly, Min acknowledged how post-secondary education deepened her theoretical knowledge of early childcare and she became more confident in applying for better positions. And as there are studies that show earning a degree while working with children provides ongoing opportunities for teachers to practice their skills and grow professionally (Deutsch & Riffin, 2013), our hope is that through this experience, immigrant students have the ability to develop teacher efficacy which has been associated with job satisfaction and retention (Zee & Koomen, 2016; Northey & Clark, 2025). It is clear that immigrant educators, like Min and Ada, have the desire to attend post-secondary education because of the belief that education allows them to obtain the tools to better support their community and is a step towards social mobility.

Although there is research on early childcare labor shortage and other systemic issues, there is a lack of research on the true cost and effect of obtaining a college degree for immigrants. It is crucial to consider immigrant workers when requiring new mandates because they are a vital percentage within the educator population. They are often ignored, and these

mandates become barriers to historically marginalized communities. By conducting a critical case study approach centering interview and document study analysis using CRT we gain a better understanding of immigrant childcare workers' experiences. Specifically, it helps us better understand the experience of obtaining a college degree while considering the intersectionality of their identities and beliefs, and ultimately how it affects their quality of life. Since its introduction to education, CRT has been used to address racial inequalities faced by different marginalized groups. Intersectionality helps target and uncover much more detailed experiences of individuals as it considers the intersection of race with other identities (Crenshaw, 1991). Without conducting a research study with the intention of improving the early childcare education programs by including the perspectives of immigrant early childcare workers, these educational requirements will continue to contribute towards the cycle of inequities within early childcare.

### **Implications**

To “raise the bar” in the early childcare teaching force, educators are highly encouraged or required to have post-secondary education. However, this movement creates barriers for immigrant workers who have limited access to higher education. As shown by Min and Ada, the path to obtaining a degree is much more complicated and difficult once you reflect how their multifaceted identities impact their life. For this reason, it is critical to consider some policy changes and implementation of practices that can support immigrant workers to achieve post-secondary education to ensure the retainment of workers within early childcare and education.

### ***Policy and Practice***

Immigrant workers bring valuable life experiences into the teaching workforce which positively impacts students and their families. Therefore, rather than focusing on standardizing

the workforce, we should put more effort into figuring out how to recruit and retain culturally diverse teachers (McDevitt, 2021; Souto-Manning & Dice, 2007). As a large portion of workers within the early childcare and education field, especially those working in family childcare, are unable to reach post-secondary education to advance their credentials, it is critical to provide them with the necessary tools to expand and retain the current workforce. For instance, post-secondary schools and early childcare programs collaborating to ease the transition period, encourage communication, and provide the appropriate support for immigrant educators. This would be crucial in reducing the stress and burden of handling the different responsibilities or navigating higher education culture on their own.

Especially when considering that the space could be intimidating for nontraditional immigrant educators who are unfamiliar with the language or culture compared to traditional college students, employing culturally responsive pedagogies that connect with immigrants' lived experiences within the early childcare and education program can help advocate for inclusivity (Garavuso, 2016). The usage of asset-based curriculum through a strength-based framework rather than a deficit one could also encourage immigrant educators to view themselves as creators of pedagogy and help reimagine how their lived experiences can be used as educational tools within the program (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012; Garavuso, 2016). Seeking and recruiting culturally diverse educators not only promote representation, but they also bring in valuable knowledge for the students. This movement is urgent as the fastest growing group of children in the U.S. are children of immigrants and early childcare programs are facing challenges of meeting their diverse needs (Park et al., 2015; Woods et al., 2016; McDevitt, 2021).

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Future research is necessary to uncover more stories and experiences of immigrant workers within the early childcare and education field. This study had a small sample size with only two interviewees, so a larger sample size could allow for additional themes to be revealed. Furthermore, this research was conducted at one institution, so it is important to consider that different institutions could have varying results. A study with a larger scale would be beneficial because a small sample is difficult to generalize immigrant educators' experiences within the early childcare workforce and post-secondary program. Immigrants' multifaceted identities impact their experiences from different angles, so I believe it would be highly beneficial to continue this study to suggest further improvement – in the hopes of recruiting and retaining a culturally diverse workforce while promoting inclusivity for immigrants to successfully integrate in higher education for the betterment of the early childcare and education field.

I end this paper with acknowledging the dedication and resilience of immigrant workers within the early childcare and education field as shown by Min and Ada. Immigrant workers have key assets that are essential in serving children well. However, I argue it is important to acknowledge that immigrant workers may be forced to climb the socio-economic ladder with these exemplifying qualities because of the systemic barriers and inequities. The early childcare and education field is already becoming more diverse, but we can strive to make it more inclusive and equitable for immigrant workers by advocating for necessary resources and culturally responsive pedagogies. I have stated repeatedly the crucial importance of immigrant educators and the wealth of knowledge they bring to the field. It is of urgent necessity to strengthen the partnership between universities, childcare programs and schools, policymakers, and communities to ensure the success of immigrant educators.

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