UNDERSTANDING HOW PARENT CHOICE AND PROGRAM LEADERSHIP
FOSTER SOCIOECONOMIC DIVERSITY WITHIN HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING
PROGRAMS:
A CASE STUDY OF TWO BALTIMORE CITY SITES

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ABSTRACT

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In the last two decades, research has increasingly demonstrated that public
investment in high-quality early care and education, particularly when focused on low-
income children, pays off in terms of improved outcomes for young learners in academic
achievement and overall well-being (Heckman, 2011). Now, a growing evidence base
within the early childhood field also demonstrates that socioeconomic status (SES)
diversity in early learning settings improves kindergarten readiness and social-emotional
development for all children (Reid, 2012).

To contribute to the early childhood field’s efforts to better understand how
parent choice and program leadership foster SES diversity within community early
learning programs, this in-depth case study examined two high-quality SES-diverse
community early education program sites operating in Baltimore City. Interviews were
conducted with program executive-level and site-level leaders, staff, and a purposeful
sample of parents of varying income levels. A parent focus group was also conducted. In
addition, program-level leadership of early learning community programs in Baltimore
City with a Maryland quality rating of two or more stars were surveyed.

Key findings of this study include, 1) Despite their shared belief in its implicit
value, parents across the income continuum aren’t explicitly seeking out enrollment in
socioeconomically diverse early care and learning programs; 2) Within the two selected
socioeconomically diverse program sites, program recruitment and engagement
approaches are neither explicit or refined enough to appeal universally to parents across
varying economic backgrounds; and 3) Both parents and leaders also may struggle
against their own class-based social identities and deeply internalized value systems in
enacting either the program choice or transformational leadership that drives the
development of socioeconomically diverse settings. Finally, this study informs leadership
actions policymakers may take to promote the development and sustainability of
socioeconomically diverse high-quality early learning programs.
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Chapter 1: AT A POLICY CROSSROAD: REALIZING THE PROMISE OF SOCIOECONOMICALLY DIVERSE EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In the last two decades, research has increasingly demonstrated that public investment in high-quality early care and education, particularly when focused on low-income children, pays off in terms of improved outcomes for young learners in academic achievement and overall well-being (Heckman, 2011). These findings, informed by developmental neuroscience (Phillips, D. A., & Shonkoff, J. P. (Eds.), 2000), as well as rigorous program evaluation and policy research (Barnett, 1995), have driven the steady growth of public funding for pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) programs. In no small part, the case for public investment in high-quality early childhood education is fueled by the promise it holds for closing our longstanding national education achievement gap and equalizing disparities in lifelong health and economic well-being. However, even as public spending on early childhood learning and care increases, our national dialogue stops short of addressing a central feature of the achievement gap: the effect of socioeconomic status (SES) disparities on academic achievement.

Within the past several years, two bodies of work have informed our understanding of the factors that contribute strongly to young children’s preparation for school. First, a preliminary evidence base within early childhood has demonstrated that SES diversity in high-quality early learning settings improves kindergarten preparedness for all children (Reid, 2012). Second, research suggests that both SES diversity and the quality of teacher interactions, long considered a primary indicator of program quality, produce peer learning effects that strengthen language and cognitive development for all children, as well as improve the social-emotional development of children from low-income backgrounds (Reid, 2012; Bagby, 2004; National Research Council, 2015).
In the last decade, increasing the SES diversity within high-quality early childhood programs has also emerged as a potential policy strategy for strengthening the equity of educational opportunity for low-income children, and narrowing our national achievement gap. Recent analysis of the interplay between program quality and SES diversity states that “programs that are segregated by race or ethnicity and income are rarely of equal quality, and that efforts to make early childhood investments sustainable must take this into account” (Reid & Kagan, 2015, p. 24).

Since the inception of the federally funded Head Start program in 1965 as a frontline War on Poverty intervention program, researchers have sounded a steady, and increasingly louder, drumbeat emphasizing the negative relationship between SES and achievement (Zigler & Valentine, 1979). Now over 50 years later, evidence of the SES-based “school readiness gap” rests on a substantial body of research, including the resonant Abecedarian study (Ramey, Campbell, & Blair, 1998) and the Chicago Child Parent Center study (Fuerst & Fuerst, 1993).

Gaps in emergent language and pre-literacy skill acquisition between low-income children and their higher-income peers have been identified as early as 18 months of age (Fernald & Marchman, 2012). Most recently the Inequalities at the Starting Gate study yielded findings consistent with other research analyses (Reardon, 2011) that students’ levels of readiness and development are closely associated with their parents’ socioeconomic status” (Garcia, 2015).

While SES-based peer effects and classroom contextual influences have been primarily examined in elementary- and high-school classrooms (Reid, 2012), they may also represent an important unexamined element in understanding early achievement gaps. The recognition of the interplay between SES and school readiness has resulted in a complex system of publically funded programs designed to target supports towards
low-income families, including subsidized child care, Head Start, and Pre-K. Ironically though, these income-targeted efforts now threaten to replicate the K-12 system’s deeply entrenched educational opportunity gap. Traditional models of early childhood programming that target low-income children produce programs that operate along socioeconomically segregated parameters and run the risk of perpetuating the socioeconomic K-12 disparities in educational opportunity that are driven by the intersection of the school finance system and residential concentrations of poverty (Baker, 2014).

**The Rationale for Addressing the Socioeconomic Diversity Challenge in Early Learning Programs**

Despite the growing public investment in universal Pre-K, the majority of low-income young children remain less likely to experience early care and learning in a high-quality center-based (which includes school settings) environment (Reid & Kagan, 2015), reducing the likelihood that socioeconomically diverse settings will organically take shape. Income-based residential segregation remains a formidable obstacle to achieving socioeconomically integrated early learning settings. Evaluations of city-led efforts to expand access to high-quality early learning programs in localities such as Boston, Chicago and Tulsa, while demonstrating the return on investment in terms of school readiness outcomes, also highlight the challenge of achieving equalized levels of access to high-quality program sites among families of varying income backgrounds (Karoly and Auger, 2016). Recent research on universal Pre-K expansion in New York City also raises questions as to whether that initiative’s geographical distribution of high-quality Pre-K options throughout the city is in fact promoting higher levels of access among low-income families (Fuller & Castillo, 2015).
Johnathon Kozol (2006) quotes K-12 school choice scholar Gary Orfield’s observation, “Choice, left to itself will increase stratification. Nothing in the way choice systems actually work favors class or racial integration” (p. 19). Unless policies that foster SES diversity are intentional, the potential return on investment of public early childhood education dollars may stagnate. With the promise of early childhood education’s return on investment so strongly demonstrated, it is alarming to consider how lessons gleaned from K-12 research on SES-based disparities are not readily transferring to policies and practices that target increased SES diversity within early learning classrooms. New research about the benefits of socioeconomic diversity and a burgeoning Universal Pre-K movement—which invites program access to children of all socioeconomic backgrounds—are reframing early education’s traditional policy rationales and targeted funding mechanisms.

**The Need for Further Study of Drivers of Socioeconomic Diversity within Early Learning Programs**

The implementation of programs that directly apply what we are learning about the influence of SES classroom diversity on strengthening early learning outcomes holds considerable promise, particularly in relation to parental choice and the critical role of early childhood program leadership. As the research base on the effectiveness of socioeconomically diverse early learning settings continues to grow, new gaps in our understanding and knowledge of how best to develop and sustain these environments also emerge on these fronts, one that focuses on parent choice in the early learning marketplace, and a second that focuses on program leadership.

**Parent choice within the early learning marketplace.** Early childhood public policies characterize parents as free market consumers who are able to exercise personal choice—within individually determined parameters of affordability and access—
to select the most appropriate early care and learning option for their child (Henry & Gordon, 2006). Although the full range of factors that contribute to parents choosing one site over another have not been definitively determined, some data show that parents across the income continuum who choose a community program option may base their decision on a number of factors, e.g. program quality, the ease of transportation and proximity to their place of employment, or other factors (Myers & Jordan, 2006).

However, degrees of parent choice are a function of socioeconomic class and availability of options based on parental income. Lower income families often confront challenge of accessing high-quality early care and learning programs based on their availability and affordability (Riley & Glass, 2002). And, parents of all income levels may also face challenges in accessing programs that align with their work schedules or proximity to home or work. Ultimately, many families may instead make do with compromises to their ideal preference for early care and learning arrangements (Fuller, Holloway, Rambaud, & Liang, 1996).

Despite these challenges, parent choice within the early learning marketplace still offers parents program options that may supersede SES-based limitations. Further, as cities and states move to expand their Pre-K programs beyond targeting solely low-income children (Wong, 2015), the resulting “universal” accessibility of programs may result in parents across the income continuum being more likely to send their children to programs that operate with the support of public Pre-K funds—regardless of the school- or community-based setting in which they operate. And, while Pre-K programs tend to be delivered in large part by public schools—which may struggle to forge SES-diverse environments in the face of district and residential income concentrations—there are a substantial number of high-quality early education community-based providers that
operate in private and non-profit community settings serving children from birth through school age (KidsCount, 2016).

The influence of program leadership on socioeconomically diverse early learning programs. Like principal leadership within the K-12 domain, program leadership in early childhood is critical. The visionary and aggressive leadership at the executive and site director program levels that supports the development and implementation of SES-diverse early childhood programs goes beyond the categorical leadership functions needed to sustain a high-quality learning environment—the linchpin of producing positive child academic and social-emotional outcomes (Muijs, et al., 2001). Developing a socioeconomically diverse early learning program demands that organizational executive- and program-level leaders rise above merely serving their own immediate interests as leaders, such as consistently keeping enrollment up, and meeting program costs—both of which might mean opting to not prioritize enrollment of low-income children. In order to develop and sustain SES-diverse programs, leaders must leverage key aspects of program administration and operations to promote parent recruitment, enrollment, and engagement strategies that may result in increased SES diversity.

This study examines two primary factors that contribute to increased SES diversity in high-quality community early education programs within an urban setting: 1) Parent decision making that determines program enrollment and engagement; and 2) The role leaders at the executive- and site-levels of high-quality community programs play in fostering SES-diverse early learning programs.

Research Questions

To contribute to the early childhood field’s efforts to better understand how parent choice and program leadership foster SES diversity within community early

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learning programs, this study examines two primary factors that research suggests contribute to increased SES diversity in high-quality community early education programs within an urban setting: 1) Parent decision making that determines program enrollment; and 2) The role leaders at the executive- and site-levels of high-quality community programs play in fostering SES-diverse early learning programs.

This in-depth case study examined two high-quality, SES-diverse community early education program sites operating in Baltimore City. Interviews were conducted with program executive-level and site-level leaders, staff, and a purposeful sample of parents of varying income levels. A parent focus group was also conducted. In addition, program-level leadership of early learning community programs in Baltimore City meeting certain rating criteria in Maryland’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) were surveyed. This study seeks to enhance our understanding of the following questions:

1) What are participating parents’ perspectives on their experience of choosing and participating in a socioeconomically diverse program?

2) What are organizational executive and site-level program leader perspectives on how their leadership practices allow their early care and learning programs to serve a socioeconomically diverse population of children and families?

**Dissertation Organization**

The remainder of this dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter 2 presents the conceptual and theoretical framing of these issues, as well as a review of the relevant literature, Chapter 3 provides the background and context to this study. Chapter 4 presents this study’s research design and methodology. Chapters 5 and 6, respectively, provide an analysis, summary and discussion of this study’s key findings regarding parent choice and leadership actions that shape the development and sustainability of
socioeconomically diverse early learning programs. Chapter 7 synthesizes these findings, considers their implications and poses policy recommendations regarding socioeconomically diverse early learning programming.
Chapter 2: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS, AND REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Although there is growing interest in socioeconomically diverse early learning sites, the literature base is still relatively limited. Little is known about the parents who choose these programs, the reasons for the choice, the leaders in the programs, or the success or challenges faced by the programs. This chapter provides an overview of the small but strong body of research on these issues, focusing on the role SES diversity plays within maximizing the return on investment in high-quality public early learning programs.

I begin by presenting the conceptual and theoretical framing for this study. I then briefly summarize what we know from K-12 research on SES and student achievement outcomes that underscores the relationship between SES diversity and school success. Next, I discuss research on SES diversity and achievement outcomes within early childhood learning environments, with a focus on peer learning effects. I then present research on the implications of parent choice for the development and sustainability of SES diverse early learning programs, and theoretical framing about the factors that drive parent choices within the early childhood marketplace. I next consider the role of early childhood program leadership in developing and sustaining SES diverse early learning programs. Finally, I focus on the research that examines the intersections between race and SES.

**Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

I have selected four theoretical frameworks to frame concepts undergirding the approach and analysis for this study. They are summarized below and explored more in depth throughout the literature review and discussion of findings and implications.
Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how these frameworks interact to contextualize this study's conceptual elements.

1. Social identity theory. Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) theory of social identity is predicated on Bordieu’s (1977) conceptualization of social capital. Within the context of this study, social identity provides a foundation for the consideration of how social networks, social capital constructs, and class identity play into parent choices of SES-diverse programs and engagement once enrolled. It provides a critical perspective in understanding how parents who have enrolled their children in SES diverse programs perceive their own sense of agency in both the choice process and program engagement.

Figure 1: Theoretical Frameworks
Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory posits that the group affiliation an individual self-identifies drives that individual’s conception of personal self. An individual may have multiple selves and identities defined by their group affiliation. Further, an individual’s self-selected groups constitute their “ingroups,” while those comparable groups an individual does not identify with are termed “outgroups.” As they move through dominant and more peripheral ingroups, an individual’s behavior may shift based on the prioritization of their self-identification.

The ingroup-outgroup sense of belonging hinges on three processes: 1) Social Categorization, which creates broad groupings that define individual identities within them; 2) Social Identification, which extends the notion of group self-identification to normative behavior that forms the basis of individual self-esteem and sense of belonging; and 3) Social Comparison, which entails members of ingroups viewing outgroup members negatively as a means of maintaining their self-esteem or sense of externally generated privilege or superiority (p. 36). Moreover, three core theoretical principles within the concepts of social identity and social comparison that are relevant to this study are:

“1) Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity.

2) Positive social identity is based to a large extent on favorable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-group.

3) When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40).

Finally, Tajfel and Turner (1979) recognize a continuum between actions determined interpersonal and ingroup self-identification. They observe, in relevance to how this framework shapes interpretations of parent perceptions in this study, “Many
social intergroup situations that contain, for whatever reasons, strong elements of stratification perceived as such will move social behavior away from the pole of interpersonal patterns toward the pole of intergroup patterns” (p. 35). This framework proves useful in this study’s effort to better understand how parents of differing economic backgrounds choose to enroll and participate in socioeconomically diverse early learning programs.

2. Transformational leadership. Transformational leadership provides a particularly compelling theoretical frame to further understand the role early childhood program leaders play fostering SES diversity in high-quality early learning settings. This theory provides a lens to interpret how leaders view their role specifically in relation to developing and sustaining SES diverse programs. In contrast to transactional leadership, in which organizational actors simply meet compliance expectations in anticipation of recognition and award (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003), transformational leadership involves “problem solving and rising above simply fulfilling a leadership role to involve pursuit of a principle-driven goal that may extend beyond an organization’s immediate purpose and mission” (Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1994, p. 790). The effectiveness of transformational leadership in focusing an organization’s mission and goals on achievement and growth beyond meeting basic organizational objectives is well documented (Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1994).

As a management approach, transformational leadership is oriented around five recognized dimensions: charisma, inspiration—vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1994, p.791). Transformational leadership grants leaders and staff the capacity to pursue “selfless pro-organizational behavior” (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013, p. 356) and “make people put up with personal
Several limitations within the transformational leadership frame are worth noting. First, there has been research suggesting that transformational leadership is biased in favor of top owners and managers (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013, p. 357). In addition, it is necessary to recognize that both effective and transformational leadership within community early education programs nonetheless must contend with the hurdles of residential segregation and the dynamics of parent choice within the early learning marketplace in developing and sustaining socioeconomic program diversity.

3. Psycho-social resistance to system change. Given the intersectionality of social identities within this study across both class and race, as well as parental and leadership roles, it is worthwhile to turn also to Baum’s (2002) psychoanalytic framework as a reconstruction of rational and social-political frameworks. Baum’s (2002) framing of psycho-social resistance to system change shapes the broader context for the individual and social identity constructs within which participants in this study may be operating. Baum (2002) examines systemic resistance to change as a manifestation of “largely unconscious psychological conditions...that hinder consideration and acceptance of new ideas and practices” (p. 175).

He first presents the rational and social-political perspectives of systemic change in terms of the resistance offered by system actors. Within the rational perspective, he writes, “reformers do not provide knowledge usable for the technical tasks of educating children” (p. 177), assume that the resources exist in terms of knowledge, political capital, buy in and literal resources exist to implement the best-practice models, and fail to take into account cultural and ability variance. He then presents the social-political perspective, emphasizing that reformers do not agree about what educational...
institutions should use knowledge for or how. Within this frame, stakeholders may work to build coalitions for change, yet must grapple with feasibility of these efforts within an environment of conflicting expectations and requirements.

Finally, he offers a psychoanalytic perspective, which suggests that systemic resistance to change stems from an almost subliminal resistance, often unrecognized by actors within the system themselves. This perspective accepts, “the possibility that individuals...and organizations have unconscious interests that matter more than using knowledge to educate children or even persuading the public that, in any case, they are doing so” (Baum, 2002, p. 180). Ultimately, Baum (2002) argues, racism, as well as defining beliefs about the purpose of education vis a vis a population of highly diverse learners, are often at the root of this form of resistance to systemic change.

4. Policy implementation analysis framework. McLaughlin’s policy implementation analysis framework (1987) provides further insights to understanding how this study speaks to inherent challenges within the early childhood system and might inform policy development. The frame addresses how program research may help to bridge the perspectives of policymakers and practitioners within the education domain by offering four key analytical principles, “policy cannot always mandate what matters to outcomes at the local level; individual incentives and beliefs are central to local responses; effective implementation requires a strategic balance of pressure and support; policy-directed change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit” (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 171).

This frame emphasizes the functional tensions between top-down or system level change and bottom-up reform led by programs or individual practitioners and leaders at the local level. McLaughlin’s recognition that the
smallest unit of change must be considered within its institutional or systemic context highlights the implementation gaps that may emerge between articulating clear policy objectives, providing sufficient resources to support local capacity, and motivating individual motivation for change among key stakeholders and actors within the change management process. She concludes that linking these “micro and macro levels of analysis” of policy change remains a fundamental challenge in supporting educational reform initiatives.

**Socioeconomic Integration in the K-12 Domain**

A substantial body of K-12 research showing that low-income students benefit from economically integrated school environments provides a context for understanding the focus on SES in early childhood. Richard Kahlenberg (2004) writes, “Forty years of research shows that the single most important predictor of academic achievement is the socioeconomic status of the family a child comes from, and the second most important predictor is the socioeconomic makeup of the school she attends” (p. 6; see also Aberger, Brown, Mantil, & Perkins, p. 2, 2009).

Several other studies reinforce Kahlenberg’s findings and those of others. For example, James Coleman’s Congressional report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966) found that, “The social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student’s own social background, than is any school factor (p. 325). One of three federal studies focused on the effects of racial inequity in the U.S, the report examined 600,000 students in 4,000 schools, and concluded that the influence of all other characteristics of the school environment on student achievement were eclipsed by the effect of the backgrounds of students’ peers. Despite critiques of the sampling approach and use of multiple regression analysis to probe the strength of school-wide effects on individual student outcomes (Borman & Dowling, 2010),
subsequent researchers have come to similar conclusions. Borman and Dowlin’s (2010) study based on Coleman’s 9th grade data found that the SES composition of the school was 1 3/4 times more important than individual student in predicting student academic success outcomes.

Because of the widespread racial inequality that school desegregation aimed to address, legislation such as Brown vs. Board of Education did not target class in the same way that it addressed racial imbalance. A recently released Government Accountability Office report on the progress of school desegregation suggests that America’s public education narrative inextricably links race and class (Government Accountability Office Report 16-345, 2016). Its findings show that in the 2000-01 school year, 9 percent of K-12 public schools had high proportions of poor and Black or Hispanic students. By school year 2013-14, that number was up to 16 percent.

However, the push for race-based desegregation was gradually eroded throughout the latter quarter of the 20th century through a series of Supreme Court decisions. This culminated with the Supreme Court’s 2007 decision on Parents involved in Community Schools v. Seattle, which ruled that districts could no longer assign students to schools based on race, in effect disallowing the use of voluntary desegregation plans that had served as the engine of racial desegregation since the Johnson administration (Aberber et al, 2009).

The first school district in the country that undertook desegregation based on SES instead of race was La Crosse, Wisconsin in 1981, beginning with its two high schools. The strategy included calibrations to concentrations of students based on family income by shifting students to schools regardless of their residential or district status. A decade later, the district broadened its strategy to include its elementary schools (Aberger et al, 2009). Socioeconomically driven desegregation initiatives have continued
to increase since the start of the 2000’s, from 39 districts engaged in this work in 2007 to 91 districts and charter networks in 2016 (Quick, 2016). District SES desegregation strategies have included attendance zone changes, controlled choice policies, magnet school admissions, charter school admissions and transfer policies (Quick, 2016). Federal policies in support of SES-driven integration have also emerged. In 2016, the U.S. Secretary of Education John King under the Obama Administration launched the “Stronger Together” program, which invites districts to compete for grant funding to support socioeconomic diversity initiatives (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Several compelling evaluations of student outcomes have shown the effectiveness of SES-driven integration policy initiatives. For example, a recent study of SES-integration policies in Montgomery County, MD shows that low-income K-6th grade students in more affluent schools with fewer resources performed better than their counterparts in higher-poverty schools that receive greater resources (Schwartz, 2012). A 2006 study—perhaps the largest of its kind (Kahlenberg, 2013)—analyzed math assessment outcomes across 22,000 schools and 18 million students and found that the ‘racial composition’ effects in racially integrated schools is more directly attributed to the interaction between SES and levels of peer achievement (Harris, 2006). Other studies have shown that when low-income students attend middle class schools in which less than 50% of students are eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (often used as a proxy for low-SES), they benefit from peer effects that influence higher achievement in reading and math. These peer effects include a focus on academics and engagement, parents who are more likely to hold school leadership accountable, and teachers who have higher expectations for students” (Kahlenberg, 2013).

Several K-12 studies on the relationship between SES and student achievement have focused specifically on kindergarten and the early grades. For example, Aikens and
Barbarin (2008) examined reading assessment results among children from kindergarten through third grade and found that both the poverty concentration of a student’s school and the number of peers with low reading levels were a stronger predictor than family background for SES-based differences in assessment results. The study concludes that student SES composition was a more powerful influence on student learning than the quality of teacher experience and classroom literacy instruction. Benson and Borman’s (2010) study of monthly reading assessment results among kindergartners found significant differences between students in schools with large concentrations of low-SES students compared to those in schools more middle-income children attended. The findings produced by these studies are consistent with newly emerging research focused on children who have not yet reached school age.

**Strengthening Socioeconomic Diversity within Early Childhood Learning Environments**

The roots of an income-based academic achievement gap that begins in early childhood are well-documented. For example, Reardon’s (2011) analysis of multiple datasets from the past 50 years shows that as income inequality has widened as a national trend, so too have early learning gaps between children in high-income and low-income families. Moreover, there is a small but growing body of research showing that high-quality early learning opportunities improves learning outcomes among low-SES students (Gromley, 2007).

Although the question of what attributes constitute a high-quality program still remains open within the early childhood field, research tends to concur that it includes well-trained classroom teachers who are provided with ongoing professional-development supports through coaching and other mechanisms, a learning environment that supports teachers and children, a well-defined curriculum that is implemented with
fidelity in the classroom and aligned with the early elementary grades, and ongoing monitoring of program quality and other metrics that support continuous quality improvement. (Karoly, Auger, Kase, McDaniel & Rademacher, 2016).

There are also a small number of studies specifically focused on the effects of prekindergarten socioeconomic diversity on children’s levels of preparedness and achievement. One such study is Reid’s (2012) research on classroom data drawn from 11 state Pre-K programs serving four-year-olds yields several findings relevant to the question of whether SES-diverse classrooms benefit young children’s early learning. Reid’s study examined the extent to which SES composition within Pre-K classrooms was associated with language, math, and social skills acquisition, controlling for the direct association between the SES status of individual children and their learning outcomes. In addition, Reid explored the extent to which indicators of quality within Pre-K classrooms, including instructional quality, account for the association between SES composition and student learning, and how this varies across classrooms based on levels of income diversity and quality.

Overall, Reid (2012) found that the SES composition of preschool classrooms was a significant and positive predictor of children’s receptive language, expressive language and math learning, regardless of children’s own SES, other background factors and the racial/ethnic composition of the class. In addition, the study concludes that SES composition was not significantly related to children’s social skills development after controlling for children’s SES, other background factors and the classroom racial/ethnic composition. Reid also finds that key aspects of program quality, including higher levels of instructional quality and smaller class sizes, were not the explanation for the strong relationship between classroom SES composition and learning outcomes. What Reid terms “the socioeconomic compositional effect”—in which classroom SES composition
supersedes that of individual students’ backgrounds— is influenced more by peer-to-peer interactions, not directly by instructional quality.

In addition, Reid’s work revealed a phenomenon referred to as the “tipping point” of SES compositional effects. The study found a positive association between the average SES of children in a Pre-K classroom and their language and math learning, and moreover, that this relationship did not depend on the SES of individual children in the class. In other words, a socioeconomically diverse classroom environment improved learning outcomes for all children, not just low-income children. However, these effects are relative to the SES economic composition of the classroom itself. The notion of this “tipping point” effect does not demonstrate that income diversity within classrooms, as measured by the standard deviation of income, is solely related to children’s learning. Instead, such diversity appeared to produce significant effects on children’s learning in tandem with higher-SES overall classroom composition. In a subsequent analysis of the initial study, Reid (2012) notes that balancing the positive effects of the “tipping point” requires a balance in which lower-SES children are introduced to high-SES classrooms in proportions that would not affect the overall higher mean-SES and maintain the benefits of increasing classroom SES diversity overall.

There are limitations Reid (2012) recognizes within the study. These include issues of selection bias, which Reid worked to mitigate by controlling for a broad range of background characteristics among the study participants. In particular, maternal education was included as a control variable based on pre-existing findings that isolate it as a strong influence on the relationship between the quality of early learning settings and the extent of children’s learning (Reid, 2012). In addition, discussion of limitations of the study addresses a pervasive facet of interpreting the results of early childhood research—whether the true benefits of particular approaches and interventions impact
children’s learning experiences by enhancing social-emotional skills broadly referred to as executive function, including motivation, perseverance and high degrees of self-efficacy (Reid, 2012). Reid acknowledges that use of teacher survey data on observable social-emotional skill acquisition may not have captured the breadth of effects SES-diversity may produce in developing children and their perception of themselves, as well as the world around them.

Reid (2012) concludes that the independent strength of SES effects uncoupled from instructional quality suggest that “peer effects” are a key contributor to how young children derive learning benefits from SES diverse environments. Reid also suggests that the design of early learning environments in which young children engage in learning via peer interactions rather than teacher-directed activities may contribute to the peer effects phenomenon. This is also suggested by research by Fuchs and Fuchs (2005) on the effectiveness of peer assisted learning strategies among young children versus direct instruction. This study found that those kindergartners who received no direct instructional support outperformed those that had on phonological awareness measures, concluding that peer-mediated instruction can “enhance students’ reading outcomes in meaningful ways” (p. 44).

There are several additional smaller scale studies that also help to inform our understanding of the relationship between SES classroom diversity and young children’s outcomes. For example, Schechter and Bye’s (2007) comparative study of 85 low- and high-income preschool aged children indicates that children in SES-diverse Pre-K classrooms showed higher rates of cumulative annual growth in language skills compared to their counterparts in classrooms characterized by high poverty concentration. Yet, the relationship between instructional quality and other aspects of program quality, remains open to continued research. Bagby et al.’s 2004 study of a
single prekindergarten classroom in a university lab school setting suggested that socioeconomic diversity and the quality of teacher interactions positively affected language and cognitive development, as well as the social-emotional development, of children from low-income backgrounds only. This is also interesting to consider in light of Reid’s (2011) study, which found no relationship between socioeconomic diversity and social-emotional skills development.

Finally, it is important to underscore that, overall, there are not a large number of studies within in the current body of research on the strength of the association between classroom SES diversity and early learning outcomes among young children. This study readily acknowledges the present gaps, as well as the strength of validity and reliability within the current studies, including their relatively small sample sizes.

The remainder of this study’s conceptual framework explores how the implications of the early childhood education policy context, parent choice within the context of the early learning program marketplace, and program leadership practices may contribute to that likelihood.

The Early Childhood Education Policy Landscape and Parent Choice

Early childhood education constitutes a complex policy landscape. Overall, the estimated percentage of all children ages three to six (including those not yet enrolled in kindergarten) enrolled in any type of early care and education program has steadily grown throughout the last decade, reaching a rate of 61% in 2012 (Mead, 2014). These programs encompass community-based public and private child care, Early Head Start/Head Start and Pre-K programs serving children from birth through school age. Community-based programs that are termed “child care” may also be classified as a Pre-K program based on the age of the children served, as well as reliance on public pre-K funding. In addition, school districts now increasingly provide Pre-K delivered with the
support of public funding. District Pre-K programs may also partner with community providers to increase program capacity, as well as extend the service hours offered to families, whose hours of employment may not necessarily align with the traditional school day.

Most working families, regardless of their income level, struggle to afford high-quality early care and education. Since 2000, the cost of child care has increased twice as fast as the median family income (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). In many states, a family with two children in center-based child care pay more for this service than they do to cover their housing costs. Average annual fees for center-based care for just one preschool-age child range from $4,515 in Tennessee to $12,320 in Massachusetts (Child Care Aware, 2016). Families who select tuition-based, private programs often face high enrollment costs. For example, the annual cost of an early care and learning program for a four-year old may run as high as $12,280 or 13 percent of a two-parent family’s income (Potter & Kashen, 2015). Program fees for infants are significantly higher, a particular concern for parents with children of multiple ages in care.

Child care programs may be accessed by low-income parents with the support of a publically funded subsidy. The federal child care subsidy program, the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) currently serves approximately 1.4 million children between the ages of birth and 13 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Its funding stream, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) serves as the source of federally funded child care subsidy for working parents. States set varying levels of eligibility for the program, but according to federal law, the income level of eligible families cannot exceed 85% of the state median income level. Many states supplement federal dollars with state funds to widen this eligibility threshold. However, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2015) estimates that only 15% of
eligible families receive child care subsidy given the fiscal constraints on the program’s current funding levels. Families may use CCDBG funding assistance to access programs that offer both child care and Pre-K services.

However, it should be noted that pervasively low child care subsidy state reimbursement rates work to drive up the national cost of child care. Nationally, fewer than 20 states reimburse providers in the subsidy program above the recommended level of the 75th percentile of current state market rates, and can range as low as the 13th percentile (Schulman & Blank, 2016). This prompts many high-quality community center-based providers to grapple with shifting costs from lean public resources to tuition-paying parents. Some high-quality community programs may in fact perceive the disparity between reimbursement rates and fixed program investments in meeting the cost of delivering high-quality services as a disincentive to serve children supported by child care assistance (Schulman & Blank, 2016).

Families may also benefit from employee-subsidized or discounted child care based on their workplace policies. And finally, 27 states currently offer the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit that assists families in offsetting the costs of child care (Schulman & Blank, 2016).

The federally funded Head Start/Early Head Start program serves children from birth to four years-old whose family income level is below the federal poverty threshold. Parents who qualify and are able to access a space in the program pay no fee to attend Head Start. Programs do have the flexibility to enroll up to 10 percent of children from families above the poverty line, and up to 35% of children from families whose incomes are between 100 and 130 percent of the federal poverty level. Yet, children in these higher income brackets constitute only a small fraction of overall children served by Head Start (Reid & Kagan, 2015).
Although the United States does not have a federally funded Pre-K program, state Pre-K spending has continued to grow in recent years. Public pre-K funding is drawn from state and local budgets via tax, ballot, or lottery initiatives (Mead, 2014). In 2014, 29 percent of all of America’s four-year olds were enrolled in public Pre-K (Barnett et al., 2014). Currently, 41 states operate a state-funded Pre-K program, but only nine states served more than half of all four-year olds in the state, and the majority served less than 10 percent. Only three states – Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma – have implemented statewide Universal Pre-K programs, which may be defined as a voluntary program accessible to four-year olds, regardless of family income (Mead, 2014).

Finally, it is also helpful to note that public funding may be used to support both public and private programs serving children and families across the child care subsidy, Head Start, and state Pre-K program domains. A large proportion of Head Start grantees are in fact operated by private agencies, and of the 41 states that sponsor public Pre-K programs, only seven limit funding to public schools (Ryan & Heise, 2002).

**Parent Choice and Socioeconomically Diverse Early Learning Programs**

Parent choice plays a primary role in how SES diverse early learning settings may emerge within individual community contexts and how sustainable they are. While there is a substantial body of research and an increasing policy focus on the impact of parent choice in K-12 schooling, the early childhood space is markedly different based on the open marketplace model that contextualizes program enrollment. Unlike K-12 school choice that is traditionally framed by district boundaries, parents have a choice outside of these parameters whether and where to enroll their children in early learning settings. However, there are limitations to this choice defined by affordability, access, and perceptions of quality.
**Parent choice in the early childhood marketplace model.** The early childhood policy and program landscape spans a range of publically and privately funded program options that is commonly referred to as a “marketplace,” and as such is subject to the market forces of supply and demand (Fuller et al, 2004). The nexus of early childhood programs and funding mechanisms mean there are multiple entry-ways for parents to access the early learning marketplace. Parents who can afford to may opt to pay a tuition fee to access a program of their choosing. Low-income parents may also enter the market through this avenue, and, depending on their qualifying income level, may also benefit from subsidized child care, Head Start or a public Pre-K program. Ultimately though, all parent choices are most starkly defined by what programs they can access and afford in the communities where they live or work. As Reid (2011) notes, “This makes [parents] the ultimate arbiters of quality within the constraints of supply. For this reason, parents will also be the determinants of whether socio-economic diversity is possible through their decisions of where to send their children to preschool” (p. 72).

It is helpful to conceptualize the early childhood program options available to parents as a function of supply and demand within the early education marketplace (Reid, 2012). On the supply-side, some states leverage access to child care programs via public subsidy, including waiving parent co-payment fees, or offer universal enrollment to Pre-K programs to parents of all income levels. Other states instead adopt a demand-side approach in which families may use a federal or state-funded voucher or subsidy in order to access a child care or Pre-K program of their choice. On the demand side, higher income families wield both choice and purchase power to secure early care and education experiences for their children that tend to be center-based and of higher-quality.
Within a demand-side approach, low-income families may rely on government subsidy to supplement their limited purchase power and access higher-quality levels of care. In fact, research now supports the efficacy of this public investment strategy among low-income parents who opt for center-based, high quality care. Myers and Jordan (2006) note, the relationship between quality and income is “U” shaped, with higher-income families able to purchase better quality care and the lowest income families able to access subsidies. But, even though low-income families may pay less, on average their child care costs represent a larger fraction of their income. Myers and Jordan (2006) note that working families who pay for child care spend up to 7% of their total income, while families below the poverty threshold pay an average of 25% of earnings for child care.

Several states opt to implement a hybrid of the supply- and demand-side approaches. Either approach is feasible in promoting the potential of socioeconomically diverse early learning programs, as long as parents are able to exercise their own choice in selecting a high-quality program in either a school- or community-based setting that offers the potential of integrating families of varying income levels. This study seeks to examine the demand-side approach which may draw families across the income continuum to community-based programs in order to benefit from their level of quality or other program structural aspects.

However, it is important to emphasize that throughout the supply and demand equation, cost, access, and a host of additional factors may restrict or influence parent agency in choosing high-quality early care and learning experiences for their children. Several frameworks prove helpful in conceptualizing the contributing factors that influence parent choice regarding identification and selection of early education settings for their children.
Myers and Jordan’s (2006) framework speaks directly to decision-making processes that shape how parents identify and choose early care and learning opportunities for their children. They include parameters defined by parental preferences and beliefs, information and child care supply and resources. Parent preferences and beliefs represent a complex interplay between how the purposes of early education programs are conceptualized as addressing a range of needs such as a support that enables employment or an opportunity to engage children in targeted experiences that will enhance their school readiness, or a confluence of these (Myers & Jordan, 2006). Parents construct their preferences and beliefs about early care and education through the context of their own lives. Myers and Jordan (2006) write, “Social networks provide information and normative cues for specific choices; through repeated interactions, these discrete choices crystallize into taken-for-granted patterns of action. This model of decision-making suggests that although scholars observe a parent’s child care choice as a single, isolated consumption choice, the parent is likely to experience it as part of a dynamic process involving inter-related decisions about employment, child-rearing, and other family activities” (p. 62).

Processes parents rely on to gather information and understandings about the available supply and resources of early care and learning options are similar social constructs. Myers and Jordan observe that parent choices within the early childhood marketplace, “are rarely based on perfect information about preferences and alternatives, nor do they conform fully to traditional assumptions about cost/benefit optimization” (p. 64). Myers and Jordan’s (2006) consideration of the interaction of these factors leads them to conclude parent choice is ultimately shaped by “… market processes that set their budget constraints and determine the supply of alternatives to which they have access, and by social processes through which they obtain information
and receive signals about their resources and the legitimacy of these alternatives” (p. 65). Reid (2011) also proposes a framework for understanding the defining features of parent choice within the early childhood marketplace. These factors include parent impressions of program quality, capacity to provide school readiness experiences, cultural congruence, and convenience and services, including transportation accessibility and hours of operation (p.73-78).

**Social capital, social networks, and class identity constructs in the context of parent choice.** There is a substantial body of research within the K-12 domain focused on the interplay between parent choice and engagement with social capital constructs, social networks and class identity (Kahlenberberg, 2004). This research is also applicable to considering parent choice and engagement within the early childhood marketplace model. Cuchiara and Horvat (2009) note that the body of literature on K-12 parental involvement is helpful in informing interpretations of school diversity and parental choice patterns by increasing our understanding of how parental income and education backgrounds may influence the “social, cultural, and symbolic capital as key mechanisms through which parents—working in, with, and on their children’s schools—transmit their class advantage to their offspring” (p. 976). Further, they note that this literature raises questions they explored in their 2009 comparative qualitative case study of two urban elementary schools around the “individualistic” versus “collective” motivation rationales that ultimately drive middle-class parent involvement in mixed-income schools (p. 975).

Cuchiara and Horvat (2009) found that the the individualistic approach taken by some parents placed parent self-interest in their own child’s academic success over the collective good of the entire school community that might benefit from middle-class parent involvement. Interestingly, they also found that school efforts to recruit increased
numbers of middle class parents served to alienate lower income parents from engaging with the school community based on their perceived sense of social devaluing. Overall, however, they acknowledge that this research informs the dialogue around the value and benefit of supporting socioeconomically diverse schools. Their analysis reveals that parents who make intentional choices to foster diversity strongly value its benefits “...(as)...a source of social and cultural capital” (p.989).

It is also worthwhile to consider Cucchiara and Horvat’s (2009) findings within the market-based choice framework discussed by Simon, Gold and Cucchiara (2011). Echoing the social and cultural capital interpretative framework posed by Cucchiara and Horvat (2009), Simon, Gold and Cucchiara’s (2011) Philadelphia case study concludes that the city residents’ role within a citywide marketplace educational model was strongly influenced by their political, social, and cultural capital, which shaped their ability to both engage in and benefit from a consumer choice model of public education (p. 295).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandier’s (1995) model for understanding parent involvement, applied most readily within the K-12 domain, addresses several internal and external motivational factors that might be applied to our understanding of parent choice among early childhood programs. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandier (1995) describe multiple levels of engagement and involvement for parent choice in their children’s schooling that address a range of influencing factors. Several of these influencing factors may be seen in parallel to those defining broader parent choice processes regarding the identification and selection of early education settings for their children.

The foundational level of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandier’s (1995) model, Level 1, addresses a range of parents’ motivations for becoming involved in their children’s schooling and includes four variables: “motivational beliefs (role and self-efficacy);
perceptions of invitations to involvement (from school, teacher, and child); perceived life context (time and energy, skills and knowledge); and family culture” (p. 10). Level 2 variables include “parents' specific knowledge and skills (e.g., knowledge of a subject area); competing demands on their time (e.g., family demands, employment demands); and specific invitations from their children and their children's teachers” (p. 12). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandier (1995) also acknowledge that parent choices may be constrained by their individual context and life experience, which may bring a demanding work schedule and competing family demands that limit the amount of parents' time and energy.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandier (1995) presumed that the Level 1 variables were the most important variables in the model with respect to parents' general decision to be involved in their children’s schooling. Similar to the social constructs undergirding Myers and Jordan’s (2006) parent choice framework, the authors specific ways in which parents became involved were influenced by a complex overlay of internalized and externalized factors. They note that parent role construction in part arises from a sense of self-efficacy and parents' belief that their involvement in their child’s education is both valued and will produce results that benefit their children.

Small’s (2009) seminal study on social network development among low-income parents within child care centers, *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life* is also germane to framing a discussion of parent engagement. Small’s theoretical framing casts child care centers as organizations that “brokered social and organizational ties” effectively based on their ability to maintain relationships, remain resource-rich, and foster validation and collaboration among their participants (p. 179).

Finally, Reay’s (2008) research on understanding the role of class identity bridges concepts of how perceived levels of social capital based on parents' self-defined
SES and access to social networking interact to influence parent choice and engagement patterns within economically defined class brackets. Reay’s 2008 study of 63 urban middle-class parents in the United Kingdom who opted to enroll their children in struggling public schools that served predominantly lower-income students hones in on the self-conflicting and “psychosocial” nature of this choice. He observes that these parents are, in effect,

“managing deeply felt and unresolved tensions in relation to their children’s schooling. The white middle-class subject produced through ‘acting against the normative middle-class train’ is split, divided between the acquisitive self-interested self and a more altruistic, public-spirited self and has to live with the tensions generated through the contradictory interplay of cooperation and competition, consumerism and welfarism” (p. 1074).

Reay (2008) discussed the pressures felt among these parents who abandoned the “normative choices” dictated by social networks and embraced the “principled choice” of mixed income schooling. Certainly, this breakdown of a class-generated parental internal struggle echos the individualistic versus collective constructs also recognized by Cucchiara and Horvat (2009). Ultimately, Reay (2008) concluded that, “If we are to develop complex understandings of social reproduction and social privilege we need to give serious consideration to how class and race are lived psychologically and socially” (p. 1085).

**The impact of affordability, access, and quality on parent choice.** It is also important to note the research on how parent choice may be influenced by affordability, access and quality that differs across SES categories. Despite the relative flexibility that the early childhood marketplace model allows parents decision-making, families nonetheless remain segregated by income. Stemming from interplay between historical and persistent patterns of residential SES-driven segregation, the fact remains that “for low and middle-income families, the choices are often meager and low quality”
(Fuller, Kagan, Loeb & Chang, 2004). In an analysis of 384 urban areas, Kagan (2015) found that “many children who are three- to five-years old reside in neighborhoods with levels of racial and economic segregation that are very high, and higher than for older children (p. 6).” While the factors of affordability, accessibility, and availability of quality environments have been shown to be consistent concerns across parents of all income levels, the interaction between decision points and available options has resulted in decisions that “demonstrate stratification based on income and family background borne out by multiple studies” (Myers & Jordan, 2006, p. 52).

Parent choice remains a function of marketplace dynamics defined—and limited—by affordability and accessibility. As Meyers and Jordan (2006) point out, decisions made by parents regarding early education choices, “may be best understood as accommodations—to family and employment demands, social and cultural expectations, available information, and financial, social and other resources. These accommodations serve as powerful engines for continued socio-economic stratification of child care arrangements in the United States” (p. 64).

It should also be acknowledged, however, that existing body of research on parent choice and engagement within the early education context admits shortcomings in fully understanding the role and interplay of the all parental decision factors, particularly quality. (Myers & Jordan, 2006) state that, within their framework, knowledge about the role of quality in parents’ child care choices is limited. (p.8). Reid (2011) boldly asserts, “If policies are capable of eliminating accessibility and affordability issues, the main driver for parents making a choice stems from their sense of what is a high-quality program (p. 78). Often, parent understandings of quality depend on their level of access to information about and understanding of the quality of early learning settings. This may be conveyed through ratings in state-run Quality Rating and
Improvement Systems (QRIS) or national accreditation standing. In addition, Gadsden (2013), while recognizing that family engagement with schools is associated with academic achievement and positive social-emotional functioning in school, notes that there is a “paucity of rigorous research on the effects of parent engagement efforts, including small numbers of experimental studies, small sample sizes, and few longitudinal studies” (p. 30).

Still, these studies and frameworks help explain some of the puzzling inconsistencies parent choice appears to produce within the early childhood field. The core inconsistency is that, although as Myers and Jordan (2006) note, "For center-based child care, the relationship between quality and income is “U” shaped, which may reflect the ability of higher-income families to purchase better quality care and the availability of subsidies,” low-income children remain less likely to be in a high-quality, center based setting (Reid & Kagan, 2015). Faced with daunting public systems to navigate, as well as questions about affordability and quality, it appears that low-income parents continue to opt for early care and learning experiences provided by home-based child care providers, which tend to be lower quality and less expensive. (Myers & Jordan, 2006). In addition, there is still a great deal to be learned about how parents arrive at determinations of quality. Equally puzzling, child care researchers find that while objective and rigorous program evaluation may rate settings as poor in quality, when surveyed, parents typically describe themselves as “very satisfied” with these setting arrangements (Myers & Jordan, 2006).

The Role of Program Leadership in Developing Socioeconomically Diverse Early Learning Environments

There is an implicit parallel that, based on growing understandings about the principals of high-achieving schools within income-driven integration reform efforts in
the K-12 community, strong program-level leadership must also be in place to reap the additional benefits of socioeconomic diversity within high-quality early learning programs (Holme, et al., 2014). At the program level, early childhood studies have focused on understanding the mediating influences of high quality instruction and peer learning effects on student achievement outcomes—and we are learning a great deal in these areas that will continue to better inform policy decisions moving forward (Reid & Kagan, 2015). But, current research has not yet examined the critical role leaders of early childhood programs—at both the organizational executive and program levels, play in developing and supporting socioeconomically diverse learning environments (Muijs et al., 2004).

Realizing socioeconomic diversity in early learning programs will require aggressive and innovative policy and program implementation changes to address aforementioned policy hurdles and the challenges, particularly that of residential segregation (Potter, 2015). Early childhood program leaders may in fact play a pivotal role in designing, implementing and supporting programs capable of achieving a new balance in socioeconomic diversity that will improve the academic preparedness and future achievement of our youngest learners.

Leadership has been shown to be an essential factor in the effectiveness of high-quality early childhood programs, which tend to embody characteristics such as a language-rich environment, sensitive and responsive teachers, child-focused communication with the child’s home, higher levels of teacher professional development, smaller child/adult ratios, and lower staff turnover (Rodd, 1997). In addition, a number of studies have found that organizational climate is strongly influenced by quality of leadership, which has been found to be related to lower levels of staff turnover (Muijs, D. et al., 2004). In turn, lower levels of staff turnover have been found to be associated with
involvement of staff in decision making and higher levels of distributed leadership among teachers (Heikka, 2012).

Supporting high-quality programs asks early childhood leaders to fulfil a range of roles and possess multi-faceted competencies. Bloom (2000) and Rodd’s (1996) research identifies core areas of leadership competencies that encompass organizational leadership skills, knowledge of child development and teaching strategies, staff support and development, parent engagement, as well as budgeting and management acumen. In addition, Rodd’s (2012) typology of early childhood leadership skills recognizes that early childhood leaders also play a vital role in acting as change agents both within the profession and outside of it as participants in larger scale policy and program change initiatives.

Similarly, Kagan and Hallmark (2001) suggest that early childhood professionals may also straddle various leadership contexts including administrative, community, advocacy, and conceptual—referring to early childhood leadership within the broader frameworks of social movements and change. Erwin (1998) also suggests a “contextual perspective” model that places early childhood leaders within a policy change context. Each of these stances suggest how early childhood leaders at both the executive and program director levels of their programs might directly impact the development and sustainability of SES-diverse programs.

Finally, the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Research at National Louis University’s (2014) evaluation of their leadership development curriculum and program, Taking Charge of Change (TCC) provides an additional composite framework for understanding important early childhood program leadership skills. Their study of 502 TCC participants across 20 cohorts and 138 alumni incorporated the use of the Training Needs Assessment Survey which addresses 18 areas of leadership, including knowledge
of how system development applies to early childhood program management, as well as how to implement organizational change in non-threatening ways (Talan, Bloom & Kelton, 2014). The study found that respondents valued training in organizational change management strategies that emphasized collaborative decision-making and problem solving skills (Talan, Bloom & Kelton, 2014).

Program leadership practices may address the challenges of serving a socioeconomically diverse population by articulating this aim in a program mission, targeting program recruitment, managing the learning environment and supporting staff to meet the needs of diverse learners, and engaging parents. Program leaders at the executive- and site-levels also play a key role in leveraging parent enrollment decisions that may result in increased SES diversity. Recent Pre-K policy analyses and implementation studies suggest that leadership at the organization and program levels must be viewed as integral factors in how these initiatives are playing out. These are the leaders who are making the decisions that shape the organizational vision capable of realizing socioeconomic diversity through program planning, which must address family recruitment, community engagement, and staff development and instructional support strategies (Potter, 2015).

**The Development and Sustainability of Socioeconomically Diverse Early Care and Learning Programs**

There is a great deal of emerging policy research on how socioeconomically diverse early care and learning programs develop and are sustained over time. Socioeconomic diversity is perhaps most strongly represented among the children who attend publically funded Pre-K programs, although with a caveat. While Pre-K, particularly as it expands as a universal model, promotes broader representation of enrolled children across the income continuum overall, concentrations of children in
SES groupings are maintained at the classroom level (Reid and Kagan, 2015). A 2001-3003 sample of 2,966 children across elven state Pre-K programs showed that roughly half of all children were from families whose income was $25,000 or below (Reid & Kagan, 2015). But these diverse concentrations are not necessarily maintained at the individual classroom level. For example, 2009 analysis of 169 Pre-K classrooms in a southern urban community found that in half of all classrooms, 38% or less of the children were from families whose income equaled 150% of the federal poverty level (Dotterer et al., 2009).

The scenario of SES concentrations maintained through Pre-K classroom makeup suggests that again, K-12 district-level SES segregation must be further explored. Yet, it is important to remember that, although similar SES concentrations exist across K-12 and early childhood systems, there are nonetheless stark policy divergences across these two educational domains in considering the implications of these findings. K-12 policy strategies addressing SES-based school integration may be broadly categorized as “school choice” approaches that include intra-district and inter-district desegregation strategies, controlled choice plans, i.e. magnet schools, and charter school and voucher programs. A politically and economically charged thread runs throughout these strategies that suggests increasing competition and parent choice among public schools will improve the quality of educational experiences all students might access (Ryan & Heise, 2002, p. 2115). But, as Ryan and Heise underscore, “…the choice must be fairly widespread and essentially require the abandonment of neighborhood assignments or neighborhood preferences” (Ryan & Heise, 2002, p. 2101).

To counterbalance the challenges of district-level residential segregation, ensuring access among lower-income families to high quality community Pre-K programs that serve tuition-paying families who tend to be higher SES is key to the
supply-side equation of socioeconomically diverse early learning programs, particularly in urban areas (Potter, 2015). This is perhaps the most salient policy implication to consider in addressing the pragmatic challenges of residential segregation and parent choice in order to foster socioeconomically diverse early learning settings.

In addition, the intersection of the public and private community center-based child care market with expanding Pre-K initiatives should not be overlooked as an additional factor in promoting SES diverse early learning environments. The impact of cost imbalances and gaps within the broader child care market have produced difficult policy and political contexts with which Pre-K initiatives across states and localities have had to contend. In several cases, the interplay of these marketplace dynamics have produced public Pre-K programs that rely heavily on community providers to produce the needed capacity—in terms of both physical space, as well as staffing—required by expansion of services to four-year olds.

This was certainly the case in Georgia’s scaling up of its universal Pre-K program, which relied heavily on private, high-quality center-based child care in meeting the increased demand for classroom space. In his comprehensive case study of the program’s implementation, Raden notes one year into its full expansion, “At a press conference in July [1995], Governor Miller, surrounded by children, announced that the state had awarded grants to 357 private child care centers and 145 local school systems to expand Pre-K, with over 4,000 more spaces to be awarded later” (Raden, 1999, p.21). A similar scenario unfolded in New York City, which since 2014 has undergone a rapid ramp-up of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s promised Universal Pre-K program. Writing in The Atlantic Monthly, Wong (2015) notes that, “About 40 percent of those 26,000 slots were created in public schools, while the rest were divvied up among some 500 private centers that were able to contract with the city.”
Parent choice driven by considerations of affordability serve as an important variable in considering how Pre-K settings both within schools and across community settings may or may not attract socioeconomically diverse concentrations of young students (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). Universal Pre-K initiatives undertake the heavy lift of shifting the longstanding early childhood program public investment strategy focused on targeting low-income families. However, universal Pre-K initiatives that are implemented in an intentional and strategic manner offer a policy context conducive to promoting parent choice (akin to school choice within the K-12 context) and potential socioeconomic integration. Working parents across the full income continuum may be drawn to a public Pre-K program because it serves as a free offset to the otherwise high cost of enrollment in an early care and learning program for a four-year old. And, low-income parents may be drawn from programs like Head Start or low-quality child care by the promise of increased academic rigor (Potter, 2015).

However, due to homogeneity of income concentrations based on residential segregation and district geographical boundaries, implementing a universal Pre-K program does not necessarily increase the likelihood of socioeconomic diversity within classrooms. And, there is an embedded caveat in many state Pre-K programs that serves to undermine the potential to foster socioeconomic diversity: they are operated by schools, superseding their ability to draw on geographic diversity in attracting families from various income levels (Potter, 2015).

As the Pre-K expansion movement continues to gain strength, we have a new opportunity to better understand how socioeconomic diversity in early learning classrooms may promote learning outcomes for young children rather than limiting our policy efforts to simply trying to make high-poverty programs better—what Jeanne Reid, echoing Richard Kahlenberg (2004), calls a “separate but equal” policy framework that
limits how we might think about expanding access to high-quality programs (2012, p. 69). Moreover, while some of these strategies discussed here represent higher-level policy decisions, many of the activities that directly impact parent choice stem from the actions of early childhood leaders at the executive and program site-levels.

Understanding Race and Resistance in Socioeconomic Integration

This study does not directly address the convergence of SES-based segregation with race-based disparities in both educational opportunity and academic achievement (Kahlenberg, 2013). Yet, this overlay should be recognized as an integral feature of any discussion that seeks to address SES diversity. Again, we may turn to the diversity dialogue within the K-12 education space to better understand the subtext beneath policy considerations regarding SES diversity in early education settings. As Richard Kahlenberg (2013) observes,

“...most policymakers—on both the left and the right—shy away from socioeconomic school integration because they think it’s politically safer to try to make separate but equal institutions for rich and poor work, even though no one knows how to make high-poverty schools work at scale, and there are many established ways to make socioeconomic integration politically palatable” (p. 3).

Further, Kahlenberg (2013) acknowledges that there are multiple approaches to reform: the technical, which focuses on instruction, improving the quality of teaching and learning; and the institutional approach—which focuses on the structure of school systems and their relations with the environment, including K-12 school choice. Yet, within this framework, there is considerable and deep-seated political pushback on the lengths to which our public education system should go to achieve SES integration, much less racial integration (Baker, 2004).

The true roots of this pushback are critical to consider within frames that take into account critical race theory, as well as other social, cultural and economic interpretations that can parse this persistent and pervasive policy problem. As Ryan &
Heise unflinchingly observe, “Unless political coalitions or preferences change, suburban parents will likely tolerate only a limited number of urban students in suburban schools, while only a limited number of suburban parents will choose urban schools” (Ryan & Heise, 2002, p. 2117). Even this language must be carefully considered and decoded for its charged implications of using “urban” and “suburban” as euphemistically broad characterizations of racially and economically diverse students.

DiAngelo (2016) also provides a helpful perspective for considering the intersectionality of race and class by observing, “Middle-class whites are generally the furthest away from people of color. They are the most likely to say that “there were no people of color in my neighborhood or school...These are examples of the intersection between race and class and how whites can use their class positions and socialization to unravel aspects of their racial socialization” (p. 220). She underscores how intertwined these dual modes of self-identity may become, but yet how critical it is that they be unpacked separately to truly discern aspects of perceived “white fragility” and racism that may underpin one’s social identity.

Finally, Lareau’s (2011) work on class-based differences in parenting also provides an interpretative lens for understanding the intersectionality of race and class. She recognizes that parents from differing economic backgrounds interact with educational institutions in starkly differing ways. For middle class parents, this interaction is characterized by a more positive embrace of an educational institution’s sense of authority and assets for nurturing their children, while lower income parents often viewed the same institutions with distrust and unease. Lareau attributes these divergent attitudes in part to the differing parenting approaches between classes—that of concerted cultivation among higher income parents and natural growth among lower income parents. Concerted cultivation may be described as parenting practices in which
parents actively focus on stimulating their children’s development and cultivating both cognitive and social skills through their efforts to involve children in structured activities outside the home and intervene on their children’s behalf within school environments. In comparison, within the natural growth parenting model, children play a more autonomous role within their own leisure time, and are reared to view institutional intervention as superfluous to their own developmental trajectories. She notes that both concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth offer intrinsic benefits, and burdens, for parents and their children. Yet, among institutions of education, these differing approaches are accorded different social values and grant middle class children intrinsic advantages and privilege based on their acceptance and cultural bias towards concerted cultivation. Lereau’s (2011) perspective will be explored in further depth in the discussion of findings related to parent choice.

The conversation about SES diversity—and therefore racial integration encompasses political, racial, social, cultural, and economic dimensions that are outside the scope of this study. So too is a comprehensive discussion of the role of critical race theory, culturally competent pedagogy, and an array of other potentially salient theoretical frameworks relevant to the dialogue surrounding SES integration. However, within the broader context of this discussion, and within the scope of this proposed study, I commit to remaining aware of language, and more so, the use of shadow language—euphemisms that mask larger agendas and ideological stances that are embedded in assumptions about race, class, and the ramifications of policy choices.
Chapter 3: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This study examines two high-quality, community-based early education program sites operating in Baltimore City. In addition, this study incorporates data collected via an electronic survey of program-level leaders in high-quality, community-based early education sites in Baltimore City that may or not self-identify as serving families from a diverse range of income backgrounds. All of the programs participating in this study meet the definition of high quality based on their rating of two stars or higher in Maryland’s five-star Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Each case study site serves a diverse proportion of low-income families who access the program with the support of child care subsidy and Head Start, and higher income families who privately cover their program fees. The chapter will present the study’s geographical setting and population demographics, including information about program availability and cost, as well as the study program settings, definitions of key terms, and my own personal and professional positionality.

Setting

The geographical and program settings of this study are discussed below.

Geographical Setting and Population Demographics. The geographical setting for this study was Baltimore City, the largest city in the state of Maryland. According to the 2015 US Census, Baltimore has a total population of approximately 622,000, is 63% Black, 32% White, and 5% Hispanic or Latino, and has an overall poverty rate of 23%; However, within that 23%, 45% of children under the age of six in Baltimore live in poverty (Retrieved from: http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/24510).

Program Availability. This study examined center-based programs that offer early care and learning services to children from birth to five-years old. The city school
district’s statistics do not consistently track the early learning settings children may attend throughout this full age continuum. However, a rough estimate shows that in the 2014-15 school year, more than half of the city’s 8,336 children aged four- to five-years old participated in public Pre-K (Retrieved from: http://www.readyatfive.org). Figure 2 below shows the breakdown of prior school experiences in this age band of the 4,445 children in the entering kindergarten class of the 2014-2015 school year (Retrieved from: http://www.readyatfive.org). These figures do not reflect duplicate program enrollment, which may straddle the categories of Pre-K, Child Care Centers, and Head Start, among others.

Figure 2: Baltimore City Enrollment in Early Childhood Program Settings

Currently, neither the state nor city fund universal Pre-K. The City School’s Pre-K enrollment policy prioritizes enrolling children who are “low-income, homeless or receive special education services” (Retrieved from: http://www.baltimorecityschools.org//site/Default.aspx?PageID=25018). Children who do not meet these criteria may be accepted on a first come, first served basis.
Maryland’s investment in publically funded Pre-K targeting enrollment among four-year olds began in 2002. Since then, statewide enrollment has risen approximately 10 percentage points from 25% to 35% (Sunderman & Titan, 2014). In addition to this state investment in Pre-K, Maryland received a $15 million funding boost for Pre-K in 2014 with its successful grant application to the new federally funded Preschool Development and Expansion program (Retrieved from: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/preschooldevelopmentgrants/index.html). Baltimore City received approximately $3.7 million based on the district’s size and concentration of four-year olds. (Retrieved from: http://www.wbaltv.com/education/15m-federal-grant-to-expand-prekindergarten-in-maryland/3018382).

**Program Cost.** The estimated median family income in Baltimore City is $57,368. The Maryland Family Network estimates the average weekly cost of a full-time center-based child care and early learning program for children by age group as the following (Retrieved from: http://www.marylandfamilynetwork.org/resources/child-care-demographics/, 2017):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Age</th>
<th>Weekly Center Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-23 months</td>
<td>$248.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>$165.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>$158.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Maryland Family Network cites cost as the leading reason parents were unable to access an early care and learning program in Baltimore City (Retrieved from: http://www.marylandfamilynetwork.org/resources/child-care-demographics/, 2017).

**Socioeconomic Diversity.** The setting of Baltimore, Maryland—a majority low-income city, offers an interesting opportunity to study the development and sustainability of SES-diverse early learning environments prior to the potential...
implementation of a statewide, universal Pre-K program. Like most American urban areas, Baltimore is starkly segregated along lines of both income and race. Currently, it is estimated that fewer than a dozen schools within the district’s 85 schools demonstrate racial and socioeconomic diversity, which are defined by, respectively, having a make-up of more than 90% of a single race and more than 75% low-income students. Statewide, Maryland 28% of schools are meet this definition of “racially isolated” and 23% are high-concentration low-income schools (http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/investigations/bs-md-school-segregation-series-henderson-20170321-story.html, Retrieved 2017).

Based on findings emerging from studies of universal Pre-K expansion in similar cities such as New York (Wong, 2015), a universal Pre-K expansion initiative will not supersede these barriers to socioeconomic segregation without aggressive policies specifically targeting integration. However, in 2015, the Maryland Legislature convened the Kirwan Commission in order to generate new recommendations for state school policy and funding reform. Initial recommendations from the Commission include implementing a statewide universal Pre-K program (Eilenberg, 2016).

Right now, the drivers for increased socioeconomic integration in publicly funded early learning programs stem from a small number of community-based programs that are spearheading this application of new research on socioeconomic diversity to program-level operation through what may be characterized as a step towards a bottom-up led policy shift (McLaughlin, 1987). Understanding how organically generated SES-diverse community early learning programs function outside of a policy mandate being carried out would be potentially useful for policymakers in the context of considering and potentially implementing a universal Pre-K policy, with a specific focus on Baltimore’s urban context.
Program Settings

The two community-based program sites selected for this study are:

Site 1: Y Preschool at Weinberg, YMCA of Central Maryland; and

Site 2: Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Early Childhood Center, Johns Hopkins School of Education.

Both programs were selected because their organizational missions articulate a commitment to socioeconomic, and other forms of diversity, and serve a range of families with varying income levels—an unusual scenario within an early childhood system that tends to group families by income based on a funding infrastructure that targets public dollars to low-income children via programs that include subsidized child care and Head Start (Reid & Kagan, 2015).

The two programs are located in two different areas of the city and have different organizational histories, detailed below.

The racial demographics within the enrollment populations of the two programs are roughly equivalent, serving 70% African-American children; 20% white children; and 10% of children identified as various other racial identities, including Asian, Latino and Other.

Site 1. Site 1 is located in a mixed-income neighborhood that is adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University. The program is affiliated with the Y, a national non-profit, and has operated in this location for 12 years. The program collaborates with multiple public, non-profit, and private partners, including a partnership with the city’s school system to provide early learning and after-school programming. It is also important to note that this program previously partnered with Johns Hopkins University to support the East Baltimore Development Initiative (EBDI), described below, but was no longer doing so at the time of this study.
Parents may access this program through a variety of channels. The full tuition of the program is approximately $225 per week for an infant or toddler to $210 for a three- or four-year old. Financial assistance to families is available in varying ways. This program site operates a Head Start program, accepts Maryland child care subsidy vouchers, and also offers a sliding scale of need-based financial assistance, dependent on the availability of program funds. Families are selected for financial assistance on a first-come-first-serve basis.

Table 2: Program Site 1 Classroom Enrollment Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>Age(s) Served</th>
<th># of Children</th>
<th># Early Head Start/Head Start</th>
<th># Full Tuition</th>
<th># Tuition Assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 1</td>
<td>2 Year-Olds</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 2</td>
<td>2 and 3 Year-Olds</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 3</td>
<td>3 Year-Olds</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 4</td>
<td>3-4 Year-Olds</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 5</td>
<td>3-4 Year-Olds</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Site 2. Site 2 is located in a historically African-American and low-income neighborhood in East Baltimore that surrounds the Johns Hopkins medical campus and primary hospital. In 2011, Johns Hopkins University, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and several city nonprofit entities committed to a dramatic reinvention of this East Baltimore neighborhood under the umbrella of the East Baltimore Development Inc. (EBDI). The EBDI involves the introduction of mixed-income housing and a new retail hub, as well as an operational shift for the neighborhood school, now run as a charter by
the Johns Hopkins School of Education. The early childhood center is collocated with the school, although it is not operationally joined. The early childhood center has been open just over three years.

However, it is important to emphasize that this has been a controversial neighborhood revitalization initiative. More than 740 families, including more than 300 homeowners, were relocated with financial assistance (Retrieved from: http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/investigations/bs-md-school-segregation-series-henderson-20170321-story.html, 2017). In general, this gentrification push was not viewed with a great deal of trust within the neighborhood, but has been more readily embraced by the professional population employed by the university. In addition, The Baltimore Sun published a series of articles in the past year profiling the initiative within the context of struggling city and statewide school desegregation efforts, which brought a measure of public scrutiny and raised questions as to EBDI’s success in achieving its aims.

Organizationally, this program has been struggling to achieve diversity balance and manage programmatically overall. Within the EBDI, three tiers of priority enrollment are recognized: 1) Neighborhood resident; 2) Employment by Johns Hopkins University/Hospital; and 3) Having a sibling enrolled in the early childhood program or K-8 neighborhood charter school. The cost for the program can range up to $19,000 a year for an infant/toddler-aged child.
Table 3: Program Site 2 Classroom Enrollment Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>Age(s) Served</th>
<th># of Children</th>
<th># Early Head Start/Head Start</th>
<th># Full Tuition</th>
<th># Tuition Assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 1</td>
<td>6wks – 12mos</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 2</td>
<td>6wks – 12mos</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 3</td>
<td>6wks – 12mos</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 4</td>
<td>12mos – 24mos (1-2)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 5</td>
<td>12mos – 24mos</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 6</td>
<td>12mos – 24mos</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 7</td>
<td>24mos – 36mos (2-3)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 8</td>
<td>24mos – 36mos</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 9</td>
<td>24mos – 36mos</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 10</td>
<td>3 – 5 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Definitions of Key Terms

The terms below are defined for purposes of use within this study only. The context of this study is limited in scope to high-quality community-based programs that offer early care and learning services to children from birth to five-years old.

- *Community, center-based early learning program:* Both Pre-K and child care can be delivered in a range of settings that serve children from birth to age five.
For purposes of this study we consider only high-quality, community, center-based settings that can offer the potential for socioeconomic integration versus care provided in an individual’s home. Center-based settings include non-profit and for-profit sites, as well as university affiliated. These programs may contract with the state or city publically funded Pre-K program and often straddle a community identity or public perception as both a child care center and Pre-K program.

- **High-Quality:** Maryland’s Quality Rating and Improvement System, EXCELS is a five-level system. To meet the standards for Level 1, programs must be fully licensed, open and operating for at least 6 months, and demonstrate compliance with specific state licensing requirements. With each higher level, a program is required to meet increasingly higher quality standards in the following categories: Licensing and Compliance, Staff Qualifications and Professional Development, Accreditation and Rating Scales, Developmentally Appropriate Learning and Practice and Administrative Policies and Practices. Additional information is available at http://www.marylandexcels.org/. For the purposes of this study, high-quality will mean a rating of 2 or higher in EXCELS.

- **Early care and education funding assistance to families:** For the purposes of this study, forms of funding assistance to families to mitigate the cost of child care refer broadly to any public funding source, including child care subsidy and Early Head Start/Head Start services that are free to families who meet the federal income qualification of 100% of poverty.

- **Full Tuition Parent:** A parent who pays full program tuition.

- **Tuition Support Parent:** A parent who pays partial or no program tuition due to support from another funding resource, including Early Head Start/Head Start,
Personal and Professional Positionality

I am aware that my strong interest in early childhood education has been shaped by my sense that the public education system may ultimately serve as a barrier rather than a springboard to achievement for most low-income students. High-quality early childhood programs represent an effective early intervention strategy to counteract the strong correlation between low-SES and longitudinal achievement (Gromley, 2007). I was drawn to the early childhood field based primarily on the robust body of research showing that investment in high-quality early learning programs offers the promise of improving achievement and overall economic well-being for children in poverty (Heckman, 2011).

Overall, I now have more than 15 years of experience working in early childhood research, program evaluation, and policy. Currently, I serve as a Program Specialist within the Office of Child Care in the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. My role in this position to serve as a policy liaison between the Offices of Child Care and Head Start to ensure coordination around several joint initiatives underway.

However, this study’s focus on the development and sustainability of SES-diverse early learning programs presents some inherent challenges to my strong personal conviction that public investment should be geared primarily toward enhancing equity of opportunity for young children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as my current professional position. The very premise of this proposed study might be misconstrued as an affront to the primacy of Head Start as a highly politicized “sacred cow”—to question Head Start’s effectiveness and targeted funding strategy may be viewed as akin to echoing the policy recommendation that Head Start simply be folded into a broader state
early childhood block grant fund—a move many advocates fear would dramatically reduce the program’s budget capacity.

It is critically important that my theoretical framing serve as a construct that emphasizes the need for improved implementation and alignment of all public programs that serve low-SES young children, not as rationale that suggests their ineffectiveness or as a call for a policy referendum on Head Start itself. And yet, I also must remain mindful that I currently work in a position that is nonetheless committed to the success of all federally funded early care and education programs. To ensure that my vision within this study remains unbiased and clear in regard to the full range of public and private stakeholders within the early care and learning marketplace, I engaged in dialogic inquiry check-ins with several professional mentors who, as advocates, serve as sounding boards external to government interests or biases.

It is also helpful to note the national and local contexts of this research, as well as my own social identity, as additional influences on my positionality as a researcher. Baltimore has a long history of class-and race-based residential segregation that is represented in both its community and school make-ups (Pietila, 2010). In the summer of 2018, while this research was being conducted, the city was intensely attuned to racial attitudes based on the recent unrest in Charlottesville, Virginia, as well as the simmering tensions lingering the city’s focus on the Freddie Gray trial and its resulting dismissal of all charges against city policy (Fenton, 2017). While interacting with both the African-American and white parent participants in the study, I remained cognizant of my own social identity as a white, upper-middle class resident of the city, and how this outward persona may have been perceived and shaped our interactions.
Chapter 4: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study incorporates the central tenets of critical qualitative research design. Ravitch and Carl (2016) state that in order for research methodology and design to embody this “critical” approach, it must be “attentive...to social equity issues” (p.105) and prioritize the “authentic process of deeply understanding each person's perspective,” (p.106), particularly within intra-group variability. The nature of my inquiry represents a challenge to current policies and structurally embedded inequity within the early childhood funding system. Despite the small scope of this qualitative study, I believe that it reflects a critical stance in its stated goals of developing a deeper understanding of leadership and parent choice practices that support the implementation of socioeconomically diverse early care and learning programs through the perspectives of policymakers, program leaders, and parents.

Given the stated goals for this study, my methodology is based on a naturalist-interpretive-constructivist approach (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) which seeks to increase understanding of how people view themselves and their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 20). The study’s research questions were designed to capture input from multiple participants based on their diverse range of perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.10). Because there is also an element of exploring the treatment of low-income families by a system in order to ultimately inform and impact policy change, this study also incorporates an action research frame (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.21).

The methodologies for this study were in-depth qualitative interviewing, focus groups, and an electronic survey. These methodologies are well suited to the stated study goals. As Ravitch and Carl (2016) state, qualitative interviewing research “can suggest new ways of understanding a problem, opening up the possibility of new solutions” (p. 51) and also “seek range and variation in people’s meaning-making processes,
experiences and points of view…” (p. 147). I implemented a responsive, semi-structured interviewing model by “…picking people to talk to who are knowledgeable, listening to what they have to say, and asking new questions based on the answers they provide” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.5). The flexibility and adaptability of semi-structured interviewing was chosen to produce effective working partnerships between myself as a researcher and the study participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 37).

Parent focus groups were conducted in order to generate additional data on parent views of their experience of choosing and participating in an SES-diverse early learning program. A program leader survey was administered to all center-based programs within the Maryland Family Network’s data base of licensed programs rated two stars or higher by Maryland’s Quality Rating and Improvement System, EXCELS.

In addition, as a means of employing reflexive research practices (Ravitch & Carl, p. 116), I relied on a variety of researcher-generated data strategies that include the development of a research log and field notes, as well as a series of research memos. Together, the components of this methodology have allowed me to engage in the iterative process of building a data set (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p.113) that have produced a comprehensive, accurate, balanced, and multifaceted reflection of the study participants’ perspectives and experiences. Ideally, my aim was to produce, within a reasonable scale, a likeness of Rubin and Rubin’s metaphor of a broad canvas that yields a new perspective which informs the early child field and furthers the importance of this research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

**Rationale of the Methodological Approach**

As discussed in my conceptual framework, this study explored parent choice and leadership practices within the context of two socioeconomically diverse early care and learning programs through a series of theoretical lenses.
My literature review emphasizes that parent choice and program leadership are key contributors to socioeconomically diverse early childhood programs taking shape. This theoretical framing led me to employ in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviewing of executive and site-level program leaders and parents as my primary methodology. In-depth qualitative interviews “can suggest new ways of understanding a problem, opening up the possibility of new solutions” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 51). Further, a semi-structured responsive interviewing model that involves “…picking people to talk to who are knowledgeable, listening to what they have to say, and asking new questions based on the answers they provide” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 5) served as a key strategy in gaining the cross-perspective comparison between parent and program leaders needed to answer my research questions.

My interview and focus group protocols, and leadership survey were thoughtfully constructed to elicit participants’ insights regarding their own perspectives regarding socioeconomic learning environments for young children. The instruments and protocols were also designed to capture participants’ thinking in such a way that reflects the theoretical framing of each facet of this study. For example, the program leader and parent interview instruments were designed to capture their perceptions of how leadership decisions operationalize the effective leadership through program implementation—particularly around articulating a program mission or goal, operationalizing program recruitment, managing the learning environment, providing professional development, and supporting parent engagement as key leadership actions that support socioeconomic diversity. Overall, my methodology, detailed below, strives to yield data that are fresh and real, rich and detailed, credible, balanced and thorough, and inclusive of a range of perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).
Site and Participant Selection

The context of this study is limited in scope to socioeconomically diverse, high-quality, center-based community early learning programs that offer early care and learning services to children ages who are aged birth to five years-old. Within this context, two sites serving socioeconomically diverse populations of children that meet these criteria were identified as the primary units of analysis:

*Non-Profit, Community Center-Based Site 1: Y Preschool at Weinberg, YMCA of Central Maryland, (Retrieved from: [https://ymaryland.org/programs/preschool/preschool](https://ymaryland.org/programs/preschool/preschool), 2016).*

*Non-Profit, Community Center-Based Site 2: Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Early Childhood Center, Johns Hopkins School of Education (Retrieved from: [http://hendersonhopkins.org/ecc/](http://hendersonhopkins.org/ecc/), 2016).*

Within each site, study participants were the program executive director, the program site director, as well as ten parents of children who attend the program. To answer my first research question, I worked with program staff to purposefully select 10 parents to participate in an individual interview based on their representation of the range of family income scales served by each program. From this sample, 6-8 parent volunteers participated in a focus group. To answer my second research question, I interviewed the executive director of each operator organization and the program leaders at the two identified sites, detailed below.

To generate additional data on program leader perspectives, I conducted an electronically administered survey of program leaders of community early learning programs in Baltimore City. Programs that meet the criteria of being centers (as opposed to in-home) and having a rating of two or more stars in EXELS, Maryland’s Quality
Rating and Improvement System were selected from the Maryland Family Network’s online data base of licensed early care and learning settings.

**Selection Criteria.** The primary reasons I chose the two identified sites as the units of analysis for this research study are that each particular setting articulates a commitment to and serves a diverse range of families with varying income levels—an unusual scenario within an early childhood system that tends to group families by income based on a funding infrastructure that targets public dollars to low-income children via programs that include subsidized child care and Head Start (Reid & Kagan, 2015).

In addition, I selected these sites as the primary units of analysis for this proposed research study based on a series of criteria presented as frameworks by both Rubin and Rubin (2012). First, as previously stated, each site meets the specific parameters set by my research goal and questions, substantiating its relevance (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 53). Second, these attributes allowed me to pose tentative explanations and explore possible underlying factors as an iterative process as I conducted the study, analyzed my data, and parsed my findings. (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 54). I also considered the criteria of feasibility in my selection of these sites as my units of primary analysis, given their geographical proximity (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 53).

The selection of additional community early learning settings was based off of the database of licensed, center-based programs maintained by the Maryland Quality Rating and Improvement System, EXCELS. This database is publically available online. All of the participants in this proposed research study were selected based on their ability to bring a range of differing perspectives given their individual roles within Baltimore City’s early childhood policy and program landscape.
Methods and Research Design

All of the methods and research design of this proposed study incorporated collaborative input with participants, as well as vetting with critical colleagues as means of addressing transactional validity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 87).

Data Collection. Where sampling is required in selecting program parent participants, I relied on a purposeful random sampling (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 132), which may reduce bias even in a small sample size. This purposeful sampling strategy entails randomly selecting participants within identified income categories. I opted to randomly select ten parent participants at each site to align with the number suggested by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana “as a minimum for multiple-case sampling adequacy” (p. 34).

Parent and program executive and site leader interviews. The primary methodology for this study was in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviewing. Each type of study participant—parents, and program executive-level and site-level leaders—participated in a separate interview protocol. Each in-depth qualitative interview instrument was designed to guide a semi-structured interview, which is intended to produce rich and detailed information through flexible and open-ended questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Each interview was designed to last 30 minutes and was conducted on site in private with each individual participant. Interviewing across participants who play varying roles as leaders, staff, and parents has allowed me to achieve a constructive level of perspectival triangulation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 196).

Based on the guidance of Ravitch and Carl (2016), as well as my research goals and questions, I included interview questions designed to elicit responses based on the following categories: experience and behavior, opinion and values questions, and knowledge questions (p. 153). For each participant type, the interview questions were
designed to be broad and malleable within a semi-structured interview protocol. For example, for the leader participants, the protocol focused on program leadership actions indicated as important by the research, e.g., articulating a program mission or goal, operationalizing program recruitment, managing the learning environment, providing professional development, and supporting parent engagement. Each parent participant also completed a background one-pager designed to capture information about key characteristics, including their levels of education and household income. Each interview participant received a $10.00 gift card as a ‘thank you’ for their participation.

I used the Rev recording app to capture each interview and then had it professionally transcribed by submitting it to Rev, a transcription service. Following receipt of my transcriptions, I reviewed each transcript for accuracy and edited participant responses as needed.

**Parent focus groups.** A parent focus group was held on-site at each study site. Each focus group was designed to last no more than an hour. Parents were selected for the focus group based on volunteering out of the 10 parents selected for interview participation. Dinner will be provided. Each focus group participant received a $10.00 gift card as a ‘thank you’ for their participation. I used a phone recording app to capture each focus group and then had it professionally transcribed by submitting it to Rev, a transcription service. Following receipt of my transcriptions, I reviewed each transcript for accuracy and edit participant responses as needed.

**Program site leader survey.** The selection of additional community early learning settings was based off of the database of these programs maintained by Maryland’s Quality Rating and Improvement System, EXCELS. This database is publically available online. There are 170 center-based programs in Baltimore City that have an Excels rating of 2 stars or higher, which correlates to the selection criteria of the
two primary case study sites. Program site leaders received an email survey to complete via the Qualtrics platform, one follow-up reminder email, and a thank-you email. In order to increase the response rate, I partnered with the Maryland Resource and Referral Network, which promoted the survey through their Facebook page. Each survey participant was entered into a lottery to win one of two $25 Target gift cards or an iPad Mini. The survey was developed and analyzed in Qualtrics and Excel. 37 completed surveys were received in response, a response rate of 65%.

In addition, I plan used the following instruments to generate additional reflexive data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 115):

**Research log.** Ravitch and Carl suggest keeping a research log as a means of sustaining structured reflections on the research process, conceptual and methodological design, inform the iterative flow of a study, and devise meaningful questions for ongoing discussion with critical friends. (p. 125).

**Researcher memos.** This form of researcher-generated data supports the reflexivity of the research design (Ravitch & Carl, p. 116). In addition, researcher memos offer a means of generating “thematic synthesis to pave the way for coding—or categorizing the data into discreet grouping of information for analysis” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 107). I wrote memos that examine my own personal and professional positionality, and the policy context and implications of my research questions, as well as reflection on my initial coding and data analysis findings.

**Archival data.** These data included policy and program documents that document or demonstrate the operational decision making that is evidence of a transformational leadership approach and program implementation. These included program mission statements and recruitment and enrollment tools.
Sequencing of Methods

As a critical first step in developing a sequencing of research methods, I devised a strategy for data management (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014, p. 52). The process of maintaining a research log, completing researcher memos, gathering archival data, and generating field notes took place continuously throughout the course of the study. In addition, I established a vetting process for participant interviews that involved review and vetting by both participants and critical friends. The sequence of methods is illustrated below in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Sequence of Methods

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with the initial step of reading interview transcripts (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105) and then moved to the coding data phase, followed by a phase in which findings were synthesized and analyzed across all of my methods and instruments. Based on the design of my interview instruments, the coding phase involved inductive coding and evaluation coding process, which produced a coding analytical framework structured around domains that correspond to core components of this proposed study's theoretical framework (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014, p. 74).

In order to probe connections and ultimately synthesize data on participant perspectives into an understandable relational frame that informed this study’s findings, I constructed a theoretical categorical coding matrix (Miles Huberman, & Saldana, p. 73). This process allowed engagement in what Maxwell (2013) terms “discovery coding” (p. 109). This matrix was refined to serve as a qualitative codebook, which included the
coding label, a definition for the code, as well as an example of the quote that illustrates the code (Cresswell, 2014).

The online survey response data were analyzed via the Qualtrics electronic survey platform and Excel. Finally, I engaged in analytic memoing as a means of analyzing my data, understanding the relationship between perspectives, and synthesizing my findings (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014, p. 96).

**Maintaining Data Security.** In order to maintain trustworthy data security, I used Penn+Box to store all data related to this study. This is a drop-box platform maintained and secured by the University of Pennsylvania.

**Researcher Roles/Issues of Validity.** While an iterative, responsive approach to qualitative research relies on “…what Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) refer to as “fidelity” to participants’ perspectives rather than to specific methods or hypotheses…” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p.103), validity remains an essential component. As Maxwell (2013) states, “All data should be treated critically, and not simply accepted at face value.” This study addressed validity through the following approaches noted by Ravitch & Carl (2016).

**Triangulation of participant perspectives.** I selected the participants based on their ability to bring a range of differing perspectives given their individual roles within the early childhood program landscape of Baltimore City (Golafshani, 2003).

**Participatory engagement.** As part of the interview protocol, I asked all of the participants in this proposed study sufficiently open-ended questions to allow them to reflect broadly on the overarching research questions.

**Shared reflection among critical colleagues.** I executed this means of ensuring validity by engaging in regular dialogic exchanges and sharing my research log and reflective memos with colleagues and mentors. This included dialogic engagement
with a professional mentor, academic colleagues, and my research mentor, Dr. Lynn Kagan at National Center for Children and Families, Teachers College, Columbia University, who I view as the preeminent researcher on this topic based on her body of work and thought leadership.

**Personal and professional positionality.** Finally, my own personal and professional positionality were considered in reflection memos.
Chapter 5: PARENT PERCEPTIONS ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a synthesis and discussion of the data gathered from parents at the two program study sites through individual interviews and one focus group session per site. In order to answer this study's research questions, findings generated by parent participants are considered separately from those generated by interviews with executive leaders and site-level leaders, and the program leader survey. Implications drawn from the findings across the two groups of study participants—parents and leaders—will then be considered in the concluding chapter.

Parent Characteristics and Analysis of Parent Perceptions

The methodology for this portion of my dissertation study relies on 20 individual parent interviews and a parent focus group at each site as a means of gathering perspectives and insights from parents regarding their decision making process in selecting this program, how they view the value of socioeconomic diversity in an early learning setting, and their program participation experience, with a focus on parent engagement. Parent participants in the interviews were selected based on purposeful random sampling based on income categories (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), a methodology which may reduce bias even in a small sample size. From this sample, between six and eight parent volunteers were selected for participation in parent focus groups. In addition, each parent in the sample completed a set of background questions to provide information on several key characteristics. A summary of parent characteristics collapsed across the two participating sites presented by parent answers to these background questions is provided below in Table 4.
Table 4. Summary of Program Parent Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Children In Program</th>
<th>Parent Percentage</th>
<th>Parent Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of Children in Program</th>
<th>Parent Percentage</th>
<th>Parent Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Year or Less</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Years</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Years</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship to Participating Child/ren</th>
<th>Parent Percentage</th>
<th>Parent Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Parent Percentage</th>
<th>Parent Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Highest Level of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
<th>Parent Percentage</th>
<th>Parent Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Graduate</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate School</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Annual Household Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual Household Income</th>
<th>Parent Percentage</th>
<th>Parent Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below $20,000</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between $21,000 - $50,000</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between $51,000 - $75,000</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between $76,000 - $100,000</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above $100,000</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Parent Percentage</th>
<th>Parent Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parent Perceptions Findings and Discussion

Analysis of parent interview and focus group data across the two high-quality community early learning sites identified for participation in this study yields several core findings that inform our understanding of factors that may motivate particular parent choices regarding the selection of a socioeconomically diverse early learning program. Consideration of these data also offers deeper insights regarding perceptions of how parents value socioeconomic diversity and view their experiences within an income-diverse program environment.

The findings summarized here categorize responses as similarities and differences across parents grouped as tuition support and full tuition. For purposes of this study, tuition support parents (N = 6) are defined as those who rely partially or fully on some form of public funding support to participate in an early learning program, while full tuition parents (N = 14) are defined as those who pay full program tuition.

Parent Choice Trends Across Affordability, Accessibility, and Quality

These findings highlight several similarities, as well as differences, in the perspectives parents from varying income backgrounds voiced on their experience of choosing and participating in a socioeconomically diverse early learning program.

Finding 1. All parents reported that cost, logistics, and transportation were primary factors in their program choice. Both full tuition and tuition support parents reported that their choice of program was primarily influenced by basic factors of cost, logistics, and transportation. While there was agreement across both groups of parents, the specific hurdles differed for some parents. For example, while all parents spoke about meeting transportation challenges, tuition support parents noted challenges in accessing public transportation, while full tuition
parents talked about navigating long driving times from the early learning program to both their homes and employment locations.

All parents also discussed meeting the challenge of affording the high cost of a quality early care and learning program. However, it is important to note that cost clearly poses a more significant challenge for parents with lower incomes. For example, one tuition support parent explained how hovering between meeting income qualifications for child care subsidy and maintaining a livable wage proved difficult, stating “And all the time vouchers don’t help. I’ve been denied vouchers. I don’t make much, but I’ve had years where I was denied vouchers or denied financial aid. It’s not always an option” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview). Another parent spoke about the need to rely on program financial aid, also referred to as program scholarships at one program site, as the means of affording the high-quality, mixed-income site she had selected, stating, in this exchange in a parent focus group,

“So...I assumed (this program) would be at a nice level. And something that was affordable when I found about the scholarships. I’m like, “Okay, that’s great...the tuition is this. I know that’s out of my range, I can forget about my child getting a good education as compared to someone else who could afford it” (Tuition Support Parent, Focus Group).

Another parent agreed with her, stating,

“Yeah, I think the scholarships are a really important part of the program model, because this is expensive. Childcare’s super expensive. And there’s a middle ground between being able to afford full-time child care and having to just use Early Head Start and be fully subsidized...And that middle ground, I don’t think, is served very well” (Full Tuition Parent, Focus Group).

Finding 2. All parents discussed the challenge of securing available slots. Parents across the economic continuum discussed the stress of securing a slot in a center of their choosing. Tuition support parents discussed waiting lists and limited availability of slots at public and non-profit program options, while full tuition parents
specifically discussed the challenge of securing a spot on long waiting lists at private pay centers. A full tuition parent remarked,

“...most of the places that we talked to had wait lists. So they couldn’t say with certainty, “You will have a slot.” So that’s kind of challenging in terms of just getting around the mentality of you can’t really control everything...It’s never you have have a plethora of choices and you get to choose so easily” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

Several tuition supported parents discussed the challenges of juggling waiting lists with cost-constraints, whereas full tuition paying parents voiced the ability to pay in advance to hold a slot in the center of their choice. Still, full tuition paying parents spoke to the broader context of access, availability, and affordability more readily than did tuition supported parents. One full tuition parent stated,

“It seems like, I don’t know if it’s from an economic lens, a market failure, or from a social cultural lens, that in the city, that there was the “white flight” decades ago...Maybe it’s a re-growing now of Baltimore City in terms of the demographics of families moving back or what have you, that there’s such limited choices in child care” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

**Finding 3. All parents reported relying heavily on word-of-mouth in identifying high quality program options.** The use of resources to aid in identifying and locating high-quality program options does not differ dramatically across parents from different income backgrounds. Parents across the income spectrum reported that they relied primarily on word-of-mouth among other parents in their neighborhoods and families, as well as public web sites. All parents also spoke to how important an on-site visit was to them in making their program choice. For example, one full tuition parent remarked, “I would say it was almost exclusively word of mouth from people that I knew had young children and asking them where they had their children” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview), while a tuition support parent noted, “I feel like I treat my children’s education as a job, so I definitely did a lot of research...I went to
websites. I read magazines, literature, pamphlets, brochures, I talked to other parents I did site tours and visits (Tuition Support Parent, Interview).

It is interesting to note that no parents specifically cited relying on Maryland’s Child Care Resource and Referral entity, the Maryland Family Network, which operates an online database of licensed early care and learning programs. In addition, because Site 2 is sponsored by Johns Hopkins University, several high-income parents who are employees of the university remarked that this was an additional referral source available to them. And, because Site 1, operated by the Y, has operated for a significantly longer period of time, participating parents noted that they could speak to friends and family members who had used the site previously as a form of reference.

Finding 4. *All parents reported that their perceptions of program quality were a primary driver of their program choice.* All parents reported that their perceptions of program quality constitute an important factor in their program selection decision. The majority of parents in both groupings identified similar criteria for making their decisions based on program quality, including the use of a structured curriculum and teacher-child ratios. One slight difference is that higher income parents tended to talk more frequently about the importance of opportunities for free play and the use of outdoor space.

It is also interesting to emphasize that no parents reported recognizing or using the state of Maryland’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) rating scale as an indicator of quality; although, several parents from across the income spectrum did note that they considered some form of “program accreditation” as a factor in determining program quality, but did not identify the source of accreditation.

Finding 5. *Most parents perceived teacher qualifications as a significant indicator of program quality.* Within discussions of program
quality, parents across the income continuum spoke about how significant teacher qualifications are as an indicator of quality. Ironically though, several parents who pay full program tuition recognized that they were benefiting from more highly-qualified staff because the socioeconomically diverse program they chose is required to meet Head Start standards, which requires lead teachers to have a BA (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Several full tuition paying parents mentioned that teachers in the SES-diverse program they chose were more qualified than staff in private program options they considered. For example, two parents who both paid full program tuition stated,

“Well, I mentioned one of the things that I think was really attractive and that could really lure a lot more parents into a mixed income center is that higher certification of the teachers that exists because of some of the federal regulations on where their Early Head Start and Head Start funding goes and the certification of the teachers...Given the benefits for children in mixed income settings, I think that they should supplement, they should reimburse on a higher level in a mixed income setting, so that it is easier to maintain those high-quality teachers, so that it will draw in middle income families who are generally not motivated to make choices against their own interests, or that they perceive to be against their own interests (Full Tuition Parent, Interview);”

and

“So, I’ll say that one thing that really I wanted to see in a center was a high level of certification for the teachers. This is kind of a negative and a positive for this particular day care because as I understand it, there’s a lot of different levels of certification that they need to meet for their teachers, so it can be sometimes hard for them to find the teachers that can match all of those because there’s a Hopkins level, there’s a Baltimore City level, there’s a Maryland level. And so that can be kind of tricky in this particular daycare in the the way that they’re run by different organizations. But at the same time, the teachers that you do get in here, you know that they have a high level certification...and I just felt like that was something that I really wanted to see (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).”

And, tuition support parents also spoke to this, for example,

“High quality is a factor, and I do definitely get that with this institution. A few of the things...that make me feel it was of high-quality is that the teachers need four-year degrees. That is a qualification of the instructors in each of the classrooms. Then their assistants have two-year degrees,
whereas with other programs, a lot of the instructors only needed a 90-hour certificate” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview).

It is also important to note that many full tuition parents recognized the tension between recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in an early learning program and their levels of compensation. One full tuition parent remarked about their center director,

“But since [center director] has come and really brought more structure around things...its increased [center administration] exponentially...She thinks she’s hired well, and she continues to cultivate good relationships with the teachers, so there’s less turnover. That’s still a concern though, honestly, turnover of teachers. I know it’s a huge issue with early education. But we need to do something about that here. I know it’s a complicated funding structure and that probably has a lot to do with it. But I really feel like we can do better, and our children deserve to have continuity in their educators” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

**Finding 6. Many parents felt that program brand matters as a quality indicator.** Program brand mattered to many parents, with parents across both groups regarding some brand affiliation of their program choice as a positive factor regarding setting quality. This finding is exacerbated by the nature of Johns Hopkins University’s involvement in the East Baltimore Development Initiative (EBDI) as the context for Site 2. Site 1 is operated by the Y of Central Maryland, which was also recognized as a positive brand affiliation. For example, a tuition support parent remarked,

“First of all, when I saw the school being built, I was excited. Then when I saw that it was a part of Johns Hopkins, I felt that it would be of a higher caliber because of the access to so many different resources I know that they would put in and that I’ve seen. I’ve seen people that are like, "This is absolutely wonderful that they have this thing going.” So I pretty much went to the school’s website and researched what was going on, what they offered” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview).

This sentiment was echoed by comments by full tuition parents, including,

“So when I saw that it was being built and I saw that it was a school, I was super excited. And then when I heard it was affiliated with Johns Hopkins, I felt that because of the influence and the partnerships that
Johns Hopkins has with the city, the state... I felt that there would be a lot added to the program, and it wasn’t just a standalone program where they had to find their own funding” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

Discussion. These findings about trends among parent perspectives on their choice process focused on program affordability, accessibility, and quality echo those of Myers and Jordan (2006), whose framework addresses decision-making processes that shape how parents identify and choose early care and learning opportunities for their children. Myers and Jordan observe that parent choices within the early childhood marketplace, “are rarely based on perfect information about preferences and alternatives, nor do they conform fully to traditional assumptions about cost/benefit optimization” (p. 64). The findings here that demonstrate parents across the income continuum make choices based on logistic factors, including location and transportation support this. Moreover, these findings show that parents ultimately consider cost and levels of quality, including teacher quality, as the primary factors in identifying and selecting early care and learning program options.

Here, study findings also confirm that parents across income levels made choices based on their perceptions of quality care options and relied on recommendations made through their social networks via primarily word-of-mouth input to inform their choice. Myers and Jordan (2006) also discussed how parents construct their preferences and beliefs about early care and education through the context of their own lives. They write, “Social networks provide information and normative cues for specific choices; through repeated interactions, these discrete choices crystallize into taken-for-granted patterns of action. This model of decision-making suggests that although scholars observe a parent’s child care choice as a single, isolated consumption choice, the parent is likely to experience it as part of a dynamic process involving inter-related decisions about employment, child-rearing, and other family activities” (p. 62).

Processes parents rely on to gather information and understandings about the available supply and resources of early care and learning options echo these social
constructs. It is important to note that, based on parent perspectives analyzed here, parent agency among low-income parents in selecting an early learning program was somewhat more restricted by cost, and parents across income ranges contended with challenges of program access. The strong connection between parent income levels and the expressed sense of program agency in both program choice and parent engagement are further discussed below.

**The Influence of Social Capital, Social Networks, and Class Identity on Perceived Parent Agency**

Findings on parent perspectives about both the program choice process and their experience of program engagement revealed some similarities across parent groups, as well as stark differences across parent groupings of full tuition and tuition support. These findings highlight the interplay between perceived senses of agency, social capital constructs, and self-defined class identities among parents.

**Finding 7. Parents across the income continuum are motivated by a sense of social justice in selecting an income-diverse program and recognize the benefits to their children; However, full tuition parents more readily expressed a sense of personal agency in contributing to program socioeconomic diversity.** As previously noted, both full tuition and tuition support families overwhelmingly recognize the benefits of socioeconomic diversity, as well as other forms of diversity, in relation to program quality. This finding additionally shows that parents across the income continuum also recognize that by choosing a socioeconomically diverse program they are enacting a form of social justice and exercising a conscious decision. Parents voiced perceptions about this wider perspective, stating,

“Another thing is, to be very honest with you, a lot of times, I like programs like that [diverse] because I feel like programs that are solely
low-income may be discriminated against, or may be looked down upon, whereas programs that are inclusive and include everyone across the board, there’s no differentiating factor. You don’t necessarily know what someone’s income level is, or where they come from, or what they do. I think it’s nice. It’s almost like it’s a melting pot, so to speak, because you pretty much put everybody in and nobody knows the difference” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview);

and,

“Public schools aren’t the worst, but sometimes they fall short and they’re neglected a lot. Our children suffer from that, and then they’re written off, and then they become part of a system where people turn their backs on them. It’s not fair to them, because as adults, it’s our responsibility to make sure we give them the very best” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview).

and,

“We are privileged...We have resources. We have the means not to have those worries, but some parents don’t. And so to be able to bring their child to a safe environment where they feel like their child is thriving, and they also get support in some of their life struggles, I think that’s incredibly important. In terms of what our daughter is getting out of it is that she’s able to be amongst a lot of different types of children from different backgrounds...there’s not a lot of programs where this is working because most of the time, it’s not even given a chance to work and the resources aren’t there to make it work at the beginning. But once it starts working, it seems like it really adds a lot to a community” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

Moreover, both full tuition and tuition support parents expressed the belief that their children would benefit by participating in a mixed-income environment. For example, one full tuition parent stated, “I think it’s very important for (child) to know that she lives a life of privilege, and that not everybody out there has the same resources that we do. And I think her growing up in this environment will be a real character strength for her” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview). Tuition support parents also spoke to this, remarking, “…I’m on, say, a lower end, not necessarily a poverty line income but just lower than what some other people make, so to have my child to connect or be in the same learning space with someone whose parents make three or four times more than what I do...just to be children and enjoy and learn from one another” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview.) and “I feel like no matter where [my child] is, there’s always going to
be some difference of income or some difference of background that I’m excited for him to be exposed to...to see how he develops from knowing or learning or being part of something than what he sees on a regular basis (Tuition Support Parent, Interview).

Many high-income parents also spoke to the desire to have their child exposed to a diverse community within their learning environment that is representative of the city in which they live.

However, several higher income parents discussed their view of participation in a socioeconomically diverse program as an enactment of their own agency and ability to serve a greater good within the community, or even more broadly on a societal level.

Comments from higher income parents included,

“I saw it as a benefit to [my child]; I also see it as a benefit to save other children. Like, that’s my savior complex. I mean I understand all of the issues around families feeling like they’re giving themselves credit for giving more than other families, but I do think it’s a benefit for other families. I don’t think children in poverty should be surrounded by children in poverty. I think that’s why I live in Baltimore City. I think it’s part of our moral obligation to be a part of the greater community” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview);

and,

“I grew up going to public school. I was a minority in my public school...and it was a pretty diverse school...I’ve always valued that part of my education and I think that’s the way to fix a lot of our education problems, after reading those articles and listening to some American Life podcasts. Integration is needed to fix a lot of the problems. I want to, as much as I can, help fix that. Not using my child, but having her be a part of that process” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview);

as well as, “Baltimore has some great areas, but it has some horrible areas too. So they need to have places like this” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

In contrast, tuition support parents also spoke about their ability to access a socioeconomically diverse program as a positive benefit to their children, but did not express decision to participate with the same sense of agency. They expressed the benefits of program participation as something they pursued, but unlike higher income
parents, not something they actively helped construct as an environmental dynamic. For example, a tuition support parent remarked,

“There’s a program...they provide scholarships to children from lower income families to get the same education as people that are more fortunate. I think that’s really important because for someone like me, I would do just about anything. I would work more. I would move out of my apartment, move back in with my parents, whatever I needed to do to invest in my child” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview);

and

“I think it means as just as much to the children as it does to the parents, because I feel like certain children are just lost because they feel like people don’t care. They’re not afforded the same things as other people and because they feel like...well, because I can’t afford it, I’m not worth it. That’s not the case. Children deserve a high-quality education no matter what” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview).

Finally, an additional nuance to this insight is that some full tuition parents expressed that they are self-aware that they are making this choice at an economic cost, and in fact forfeiting some of the individual benefit they may receive from a program that serves a more socio-economically homogenous population of higher-income families. For example, one full tuition parent stated, “I’m not proud of myself that I thought it but I have. Sometimes, I get a little indignant about the fact that we pay $19,000 to give [our daughter] this level of care and other people pay nothing...Ultimately, I know though, that we are privileged. We have the ability to do this, so we will and we can. Not many people can” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview). In contrast, low-income parents did not speak at all to this aspect of program participation.

**Finding 8. Full tuition parents are more aware than tuition support parents that they may actively strengthen program quality.** Although both groups of parents recognize that income diversity is a factor within overall program quality, only full tuition parents talked about how their participation in the program directly impacts other aspects of program quality. Several full tuition parents indicated
that they are actively aware that they can leverage their agency and influence to improve program functionality and quality. For example, one full tuition parent stated,

“...It’s not just caring about the school, but it’s actually knowing what questions to ask, and what strings to pull, and having the wherewithal to do their own research and to try to inject some change into the school. To know how to talk to administrators in a constructive way. If it’s just one of those parents, that would be enough. But one of those parents isn’t going to save the school” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

At one of the program sites, several full tuition parents referred to an issue that arose in the past year regarding the nutritional quality of breakfast foods served by the program. For the parents that spoke to this scenario, the debate highlighted cultural differences they perceived among the higher and lower income families participating in the program. For example, several full tuition parents made comments that included,

“I think the things they care about at the school...are different from the things I care about at the school. That’s also very interesting. I think it makes the school better. I’m sure at most daycares, like food and the quality of food that you’re getting is not the big topic. And that was a pretty controversial thing when I first joined...there was a clear type of meal that people from the neighborhood thought was appropriate...but having a hot breakfast was not an issue I had ever grown up with or thought of...Yeah, maybe if it was just all the people that really cared about hot breakfast, they may have said, ‘Okay, whatever. We’ll give them what they want. Stop complaining, it will be fine.’ But then the nutrition outcome might not have been as good” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

At another program site, full tuition parents in a focus group discussed their response to a proposed change in the center’s hours, illustrating the sense of personal agency they felt within the program, stating,

“I remember when [center director] first took over, there was some risk of the hours shrinking, which was a huge deal” (Full Tuition Parent 1, Focus Group).
“Yes. That was brought up at a parent meeting, and we made a big deal about it” (Full Tuition Parent 2, Focus Group).
“Huge deal, basically to the point where we just couldn’t keep [child] here if it was going to happen” (Full Tuition Parent 3, Focus Group).

This difference in parent interaction with the program across parents from varying income backgrounds was brought into particularly stark relief during one parent
focus group, in which a full tuition parent spoke directly to a tuition support parent about the need to engage with the program director about the quality of instruction being provided by one of the center’s teachers. When a tuition support parent shared her frustration about what she observed as poor quality instruction, a full tuition parent replied,

“Yeah, I think that’s a bad sign. That should be communicated to [the center director]. First of all, you need to tell [the center director] or whoever oversees those teachers...And it doesn’t sound like it bothered you, but if that were my daughter’s teacher, I would be really upset about that. If you want something to change, you have to tell the right people” (Full Tuition Parent, Focus Group).

This exchange highlights the depth of agency full tuition parents felt in their ability to influence the program, even to go so far as guiding lower income parents in how to effect program change themselves.

**Finding 9. Full tuition parents expressed feeling a lack of return on their investment of social capital into mixed-income programs, while tuition support parents emphasized feeling the individual benefits of their participation in a mixed-income program.** While full tuition paying parents tended to recognize that their sense of agency and the social capital they brought into the program yielded positive effects on program operations and quality overall, they also spoke about shortcomings in networking and social engagement opportunities they felt they experienced based on the program’s mixed socio-economic make-up. In these instances, full tuition parents expressed disappointment or frustration that they were missing out on the return in social networking capital within a more bidirectional or reciprocal relationship that a less socioeconomically diverse center might have afforded them. For example,

“And then the other thing, and I don’t know how parent engagement fits into this, but I take note of myself being very envious of some of my friends, who live in the suburbs of D.C., and have their children in centers
that are not mixed income models, and the automatic social group that they seem to sort of build, because, everybody, all of the families are exactly the same. You send your child to this center, then it becomes your social network. That doesn’t happen here in the same way, because not all families are the same, and we aren’t all experiencing the same things in our lives, and it’s more challenging for us to come together...So I just find myself feeling more socially isolated as a parent” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview);

and,

“I think that we see that in our public schools, where there’s more integrated education happening as well. I think that’s a real thing that parents struggle with, and I know parents who are feeling very lonely in their urban public schools because they don’t feel that they’re having a social network, and are making other school choices because of that...It’s just, you cannot underestimate that importance. And I think social networks drives so much of school choice. Much more than academic criteria for many people” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

In addition, higher income parents also expressed a sense of frustration with and disengagement in what they perceived as a programmatic focus skewed towards the interest of low-income parents. Their perceptions of program engagement they saw as inapplicable to their own needs as parents stood in direct contrast to views expressed by several tuition support parents, who spoke positively of how programs offered a wide range of parent supports and services they found to be helpful and relevant. For example, full tuition parents observed,

“...It’s been a strange experience as a non-low-income family coming into a center where all of the communications were initially geared toward low-income parents...I sat through a number of parent meetings where I knew I wanted to be a part of this program, because it was important to me for my values, but also everything that was being said, in my mind, I was just thinking, “This isn’t for me. This isn’t for me” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview);

and,

“I make an effort to go the parents’ club things here. I think it’s important that they do that. I don’t get to as many as I’d like to. Based on some of the type of topics, it’s clear I’m not the target of it...Going to the parents’ meetings...this sounds bad. I just sit through some of them. It’s almost like a sociological experiment. There are topics on workforce training, and how to expunge your criminal record, and how to deal with child custody cases... I think the things they care about at the school...are different from
the things I care about at the school. That’s also very interesting. I think it makes the school better.” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview);

and,

“When we were doing our initial meeting for enrollment with somebody who was a family support person, also handled the enrollment. So there were a lot of like strange, to us, forms and paperwork that didn’t make any sense. And questions that were not used to...Like she asked if [my child] had a pediatrician. And to me, I was like, “Of course, she has a pediatrician”...I understand why they would want to communicate with everyone equally, just not make assumptions about families. But also there were some really strange questions and communications” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

These attitudes appeared the opposite of those expressed by several tuition support parents who see the same program parent outreach and engagement efforts as relevant, helpful, and even advantageous. For example, one tuition support parent noted her appreciation of parent support services and meetings, stating,

“They have activities or seminars, you would say. They had one, it was a stress relieving seminar...They provide...flyers for if you need a job, if you want, not necessarily need food...but they have programs if you want to participate, like if you want to volunteer of if you need food, higher education. There’s so much that they provide” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview).

It is interesting to note that this finding is also corroborated by perceptions of parent engagement within mixed income programs voiced by some program-level leaders, which are discussed in depth in the following chapter.

**Discussion.** Analysis of the most striking differences between parent viewpoints based on their respective income backgrounds yields several insights regarding the influence of social capital, social networks, and class identity on perceived parent agency. First, it shows that while both higher and lower income families recognize the value and benefits of socioeconomically diverse programs, full tuition parents appeared to be more consciously aware of their own sense of agency and leverage in investing their social capital in an income-diverse program as a means of effecting social justice and promoting collective equity of
opportunity among all children, regardless of income background. Second, although both groups of parents saw how income diversity is a factor within program quality, only full tuition parents talked more readily about their capacity to directly impact other aspects of program quality as a collective benefit to the program overall. Higher income parents acknowledge that they are able to invest social capital in improving program quality by actively advocating for leadership actions and operational changes that they believe will positively impact the overall level of program functionality and improve the experience children are having within the program.

It is helpful to return to Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory in interpreting these results. The stronger sense of personal agency that was consistently expressed by higher income parents appeared to influence those parents’ decision to leverage their social capital investment to support socioeconomically diverse programming. Parents remained aware of this sense of agency and choice even as they voiced their frustrations with serving this role. This may be interpreted as a manifestation of the social comparison process, in which Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) note that “[a] social competitive pattern of intergroup behavior holds even when it conflicts with obvious self-interest” (p. 42). In other words, among full tuition parents, the lack of return on their social investment they expressed was superseded by their sense that they are nonetheless executing a class-based sense of privilege (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1996) in opting to participate in socioeconomically diverse programs. In addition, the fact that tuition support parents adopted a more passive role as the beneficiaries of rather than the generators of the value of socioeconomic diversity within the program, reinforces Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) observation that, “Subordinate groups often seem to internalize a wider social evaluation of themselves as “inferior” or “second class” (p. 37).
The sense of influence expressed among full tuition parents in terms of their ability to shape program operations and quality may also be interpreted as an extension of their internalized, class-based sense of agency. The focus group exchange in which a higher income parent literally told a tuition support parent what she “should do” to address her concerns about her child’s quality of instruction is a particularly rich example of the enactment of agency, again influenced privilege among higher income parents. While the tuition support parent may have recognized shortcomings in quality instruction as readily as full tuition parents, she appeared reluctant to voice her concerns to the program. This is a stark illustration of McIntosh’s (1990) observation that, “The ability to challenge authority without fear is another aspect of privilege.” These findings also speak to the class-based differences observed by Leraue (2011), who notes that middle-class parents tended to approach their interactions with educational institutions through a lens of cultural advantage and privilege, conscious that their sense of entitlement would yield advantageous results for their children within a shared value system (p. 404).

It is also worthwhile to return to Reay’s (2008) examination of social networks among middle-class parents in the UK who opted to enroll their children in lower performing and socioeconomically diverse local schools. Reay (2008) discussed the pressures felt among these parents who abandoned the “normative choices” dictated by their ingroup social networks and embraced the “principled choice” of mixed income schooling. In addition, she recognizes the stress among those parents who opted for the rejection of their normative group behavior, writing, “Parents who embraced a positive “The white middle classes sending their children to urban comprehensives are struggling with varying degrees of success to resolve the tensions between the desirous openness and sublimated elitism” (p. 1086). This may also be applied to an interpretation of
parent findings for this study, in which higher income parents expressed a conscious sense of wishing to leverage their social capital within socioeconomically diverse programs, yet feeling disassociated from their lower income counterparts, and even expressing the awareness that they were forgoing returns on their social capital investment they felt entitled to based on their ingroup affiliation and privilege. Parents may also be motivated mitigate this tension by exerting influence directly on program leadership and operations, in some senses reasserting their sense of superiority and privilege by enacting their personal agency.

However, given the complexities of understanding parent choice within the context of their social identities and the interplay of class-based group affiliations, an alternative interpretation of these findings also emerges. These findings may in fact suggest that the availability and accessibility of a socioeconomically diverse, high-quality program in which parents of varying income backgrounds may choose to enroll in fact mitigate the ingroup-outgroup tensions between class-based groupings. Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) state, “Whenever social stratification is based upon an unequal division of scarce resources—such as power, prestige or wealth—between social groups, the social situation should be characterized by pervasive ethnocentrism and out-group antagonism between the over- and under-privileged groups (p. 36).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) further reflect that interpersonal interactions between individual members of divergent groups may emerge in certain environments and positively counteract the damaging effects of social comparison driven by superiority and suppression. “It follows that status systems may reduce social conflict by restricting the range of meaningful comparisons available to any given group” (p. 37). As a resource, high quality programs tend to be less accessible and available among lower income parents (Reid & Kagan, 2015). Because socioeconomically diverse programs essentially
offer both higher and lower income parents access to the same resource—a high-quality program experience regardless of income background, socioeconomically diverse early learning programs may in fact serve as the arena for “restricting the range of meaningful comparisons” between parents of differing socioeconomic backgrounds.

This study’s parent findings may also be interpreted within Cucchiara and Horvat’s (2009) discussion of the absence of bidirectional social capital benefits. They found that while middle-class parent perceptions appear to value socioeconomic diversity as both, “a basic respect for and appreciation of difference and in parents’ interest in preparing their children for success in a diverse world...they did not speak of their children as learning from low-income or minority children. These students and their parents were seen as the beneficiaries of middle-class parents’ efforts but as having little to offer in return” (p. 989). Findings here diverge from Cucchiara and Horvat’s (2009) conclusion, illustrating that higher income parents recognized that, like the children of lower income parents, their children too would reap individual benefits in social-emotional development and awareness through their participation in a socioeconomically diverse program.

In addition, these findings contradict Cucchiara and Horvat’s (2009) collective versus individualistic dichotomy. In their collective view, parents tended to express either a “commitment to the well-being of all children and a belief in the intrinsic value of diversity” (p. 975), while the individualistic approach expressed a more “normative view of social class and interest in improving the school by attracting more middle-class families” (p. 975). Ultimately, Cucchiara and Horvat’s (2009) comparative analysis found that the collective approach was more instrumental in improving school experiences for all children in the long run. The finding of this study, however, suggest that the collective and individualistic positions may in fact operate in tandem—
straddling parent socioeconomic backgrounds—to foster the development of socioeconomically diverse learning environments.

And finally, full tuition paying parents recognized that the return on their investment of social capital may suffer in a mixed-income program setting that gears its parent engagement to low income families. In addition, they noted that they felt denied opportunities for engagement and networking with other parents. This finding suggests the notion of Small’s (2009) “negative social capital” (p. 121) in higher income families’ perceived absence of a bidirectional relationship between available program network and engagement opportunities in return for their infusion of social capital.

Small frames his discussion of negative social capital as an organizationally driven action with undesirable consequences by actors within the organization (p. 120). Within this study’s findings, the notion of negative social capital may also be viewed seen as an undesirable by-product of parent decisions to participate in a particular program. It represents an imbalance in the reciprocal relationship between higher income parents bringing high levels of social capital into the organization, but not feeling a return in this capacity. And in fact, rather than benefiting from what Small recognized as “access to an extended support network (p. 121),” several higher income parents instead articulating feeling a net loss in social capital based on their program selection. This inverse relationship between socioeconomic diversity within programs and perceived parent benefits of social capital echoes Small’s theoretical framing of child care centers as organizations that “brokered social and organizational ties” effectively based on their ability to maintain relationships, remain resource-rich, and foster validation and collaboration among their participants (p. 179).
How Parent Perceptions of Choice, Socioeconomic Diversity and Quality Intersect with Cultural and Racial Bias

**Finding 10.** Most parents perceive socioeconomic diversity as an element of program quality. Parents across the income spectrum consider socioeconomic diversity as an element of program quality, with some slight differences. Both higher-income and lower-income parents recognized the benefit of choosing a socioeconomically diverse program, while the majority of parents in neither group expressed an explicit intentionality about seeking out a setting with this particular program characteristic. For example, “…it was just an added benefit that I thought was appealing. I heard about it in advance of, well in advance of me having my child...It such in my mind as, this is a place that has an added thing that they can offer (Full Tuition Parent, Interview);” and, “Now I would probably seek something like that out, but I didn’t even know it was a thing that I cared about” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview); as well as, “Also, diversity is a taught behavior. And so I think that they’re good with teaching that here. You know, that’s not something that you learn automatically” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview).

Yet, while all of the full tuition parents and many tuition supported parents spoke of socioeconomic diversity within the program as an asset, several tuition supported parents did not express any positive or negative reactions to SES diversity benefits. For example, one tuition support parent stated, “I’ve been here a long time and we’ve always had...families with different financial situations so it doesn’t make a difference” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview); and, “The children are still getting the proper care they need whether it’s high income or low income” (Tuition Support Parent, Interview).

**Finding 11.** Assumptions about program quality may disincentivize full tuition parents from selecting a mixed-income program. Finally, a
number of full tuition parents remarked on the assumptions about quality within a socioeconomically diverse program that may in effect drive higher income parents away. Even though these parents in fact chose a socioeconomically diverse program, they spoke of having to overcome their own doubts and reservations, acknowledging that they may be rooted in deep-seated cultural assumptions or biases. For example, several high-income parents made comments, including,

“I just feel like people make all these assumptions, not based on anything really. They don’t have any meetings with the principals, or they don’t go on tours. Or they don’t talk to other parents. And so, I feel like, at a bare minimum, is our responsibility as citizens to educate ourselves on what those options are. Whether or not we choose our neighborhood school will depend on a lot of factors” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview);

and,

“I personally like the fact that [my son] is exposed to people from different backgrounds. People who live in the city, right, we’re going to live in the city for a while. So that, to me, is important...There’s some good and some bad. You know, I definitely feel like some of the things that he learns at school from the children, what he hears he definitely wouldn’t hear in our household but I’d rather him be exposed to that than not be. I think my husband was a little hesitant at first, when he was like, ‘Oh, it’s in Waverly?’ And I was like, ‘You’ve got to get over that. It’s a great facility.’ And he loves it now. He did kind of have to be convinced a little bit” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview);

and,

“...And it’s actually really funny, I was always brought up against guns. My parents would never have a gun. My brother was never even allowed to have a toy gun, so no guns in our household growing up. And it’s interesting because a month ago, [my son] went from, ‘I’m gonna get you,’ with a fire hose to ‘I’m gonna get you, pew, pew, pew,’...And I realized it’s from [his friend] and it’s more a super hero thing, but one would obviously assume, you know, from differences in socioeconomic background, you know. And that’s just a racial assumption that someone would make” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

These sentiments were not expressed in either interviews or focus groups by the low-income parent participants at either center. However, there was some consistency in full-tuition parents voicing their own sense that lower-income populations were perceived negatively by high-income families. For example a full tuition parent
remarked, “I just feel like people make all these assumptions, not based on anything, really. They don’t have any meetings with principals, or they don’t go on tours, or they don’t talk to other parents. And so, I feel like that, at a bare minimum, is our responsibility as citizens to educate ourselves on what those options are” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview). And, “I can think of times I’ve heard in the news where it’s been very controversial, like where certain parents who want [it] to remain segregated...they’re showing up at town halls and they’re very angry that students from depressed and underprivileged areas are forcing integration...I can understand that perspective that might disadvantage their own children” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

Discussion. These findings underscore that there is still a great deal to be learned about how parents arrive at determinations of program quality that influence their choice of early childhood program, but that consideration of socioeconomic diversity may play a key role as a decision factor. Further, these findings confirm that socioeconomic diversity may also be perceived by parents as a feature of quality within the setting of their choice. As one higher income parent remarked,

“I mean, so, cost was certainly a consideration. We were fortunate enough to be able to afford a variety of options, so it wasn’t the number one consideration. Location was a consideration. And then, all things being equal, the thing that made me more interested in this facility versus the other Bright Horizons Hopkins facility, was primarily the mixed income model here. That was something that was very appealing to me, and was a selling feature for the center” (Full Tuition Parent, Interview).

Yet, these findings do not help to bridge our gap in understanding the disconnect previous research has revealed in parent perceptions of quality that showed parents typically describe themselves as “very satisfied” with their child care setting arrangements even in the face of objective and rigorous program evaluations that rate those settings as poor in quality (Myers & Jordan, 2006). They do, however, illuminate
how parent perceptions of quality, including socioeconomic diversity within programs, inform their decision making.

Finally, this analysis suggests the need to further unpack questions of parental reluctance to participate in socioeconomically diverse programs based on assumptions that may be driven by cultural and racial biases. The sense of social justice articulated by many of the higher income parent participants appears to be counterbalanced by their reluctance to intentionally seek out socioeconomically diverse early learning programs. As Reay (2008) suggests, this inconsistency may be better understood by posing deeper, more complex questions of how families defined by their middle-class cultural identity react to the societal challenges of addressing income inequity within an urban setting shaped by intergenerational patterns of race- and class-based residential segregation. She notes that “the majority of the middle classes to continue instrumentally, and from a distance to use its others in order to play out the disorders of its own identity” “the barriers...to leaving one’s group are strong, unsatisfactory social identity may stimulate social creativity that tends to reduce the salience of the subordinate conflict of interest...” (p. 1086).

Because it was not a core focus of this study, it is challenging to parse the intersectionality of race and class without deeper analysis of parent and program demographics. However, it is important to recognize that racial bias plays a role in parental assumptions and program decisions. DiAngelo (2016) provides a helpful perspective for considering the intersectionality of race and class by observing, “Middle-class whites are generally the furthest away from people of color. They are the most likely to say that “there were no people of color in my neighborhood or school...These are examples of the intersection between race and class and how whites can use their class positions and socialization to unravel aspects of their racial socialization” (p. 220).
DiAngelo (2016) further underscores how intertwined these dual modes of self-identity may become, but yet how critical it is that they be unpacked separately to truly discern aspects of perceived “white fragility” and racism that may underpin one’s social identity. This raises additional questions as to how Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory may be applied to enhance our understanding of differentiation between secure and insecure intergroup comparisons. In addition, Lereau’s findings that racial identity among lower-income parents was a contributing factor to their reluctance to have their child to be the only child of a race in a classroom setting and also may shape how they may define perceptions of quality based on both race and class are applicable here as well. Because of the dual identities at play between socioeconomic class and race, it would be necessary to directly probe how parents across racial and class identity groups who are making the choice to enroll in a socioeconomically diverse early learning setting.
Chapter 6: PROGRAM LEADER PERCEPTIONS ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a synthesis and discussion of the data gathered from executive and site-level program leaders at the two program study sites, as well program leader participants in the online survey. In order to answer this study’s research questions, findings generated by leader interviews are considered separately from those generated by the program leader survey. Implications drawn from the findings across the two groups of study participants—parents and leaders—are then considered in the concluding chapter.

Leader Characteristics and Analysis of Leader Perceptions

The methodology for this portion of this study relies on individual interviews of one executive-level leader and one site-level leader at each site, as well as electronic survey data (N = 37) collected from site-level leaders of center-based programs within Baltimore City with a rating of two or more stars in Maryland’s Quality Rating and Improvement System, EXELS. Individual leader interviews and the online survey included corresponding questions in order to consistently gather data to inform this study’s research questions regarding program leader perspectives. A summary of leader characteristics, as well as general perspectives on program characteristics and leadership practices, collapsing information from surveys and interviews, is provided below in Figures 4 – 9.
Figure 4. Length of Time in Current Leadership Position

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<th>Length of Time in Current Leadership Position</th>
<th>Number of Leaders</th>
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<tr>
<td>More Than 20 Years</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>15-20 Years</td>
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<td>10-15 Years</td>
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<td>5-10 Years</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>1-5 Years</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Less Than 1 Year</td>
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Figure 5. Highest Level of Academic Study or Professional Qualifications

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<tr>
<th>Highest Level of Academic Study or Professional Qualifications</th>
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<td>AA in Early Childhood or a Related Field</td>
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<td>BA in Early Childhood or a Related Field</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child Development Associate Credential (CDA)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA in Early Childhood or a Related Field</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 6. Most Common Leadership Responsibilities

- Supporting parent engagement
- Managing the learning environment
- Providing professional development
- Ensuring services are in place that meet...
- Articulating a program mission or goal
- Targeting family recruitment
- Blending and braiding funding sources
- Other

Figure 7. Program Resource Streams that Support Parent Access

- Full Program Tuition
- Program Financial Assistance
- Head Start
- Early Head Start
- Child Care Subsidy Voucher
- Other
Figure 8. Leaders Who Define Their Program as Socioeconomically Diverse

![Bar chart showing leaders who define their program as socioeconomically diverse.]

Yes: 25 leaders
No: 5 leaders

Figure 9. Leaders Who Plan to Remain Early Childhood Leaders

![Bar chart showing leaders who plan to remain early childhood leaders.]

Yes: 25 leaders
No: 5 leaders
Findings and Discussion of Leader Perceptions

Analysis of program leader interviews and survey data yields several core findings that inform our understanding of factors that influence and shape the leadership of socioeconomically diverse early learning program. Consideration of these data also offers deeper insights regarding perceptions of how early childhood leaders value socioeconomic diversity and view their experiences within an income-diverse program environment. These findings explore themes across several areas, including the value of socioeconomically diverse programs; operational challenges such as recruitment, parent engagement, and meeting diverse family needs; blending and braiding funding streams; and other early childhood systemic factors that affect how leaders may be meeting the challenges of achieving high-quality programming. This analysis also explores biases that challenge both parent choice and leadership actions.

Finding 1. Both executive and site-level leaders overwhelmingly recognize the importance and value of socioeconomic diversity. Leaders consistently expressed their belief in the importance and value of socioeconomically diverse early care and learning programs. This belief was communicated across executive- and site-level leaders who were interviewed and surveyed, as illustrated in Figure 10 below.
Leader reflections on this value articulated in interviews and survey feedback included statements such as,

“I don’t see our vision of a mixed income, mixed ethnic, racial community as anything but an asset to attract multi-income families. I think it’s an asset that is ... it’s such a valuable asset. The only challenge is how do you maintain it fiscally?” (Executive Leader);

as well as, “Policies should hinder socioeconomic homogenous grouping of children. Research suggests that diverse populations foster greater learning outcomes for all children” (Site Leader), and, “I think the biggest predictor of a child living in poverty all his or her life is to attend schools, to live in a community all his or her life, that is high poverty community” (Executive Leader).

However, there is one important caveat to note within this finding. Drawing on the limited sample of in-person interviews (N = 4), both the Executive and Site Leader of Site 1 recognized the value of socioeconomic diversity within their program, but expressed less of a belief that it is an important quality for early learning programs to
embrace overall. For example, the Executive Leader stated the following in response to the question about operating a program that is socioeconomically diverse,

“Yeah, I think one of the biggest things is just having an understanding that we are in a diverse community...and just really acknowledging that and understanding that we all don't think or act the same way, and we come from different backgrounds. The Y actually has a large focus on that” (Executive Leader, Site 1).

However, when discussing whether or not socioeconomically diverse programs are important in a larger sense within the early childhood field, this leader remarked, “...I don’t really think at this age, the kids notice. I think they just like their friends, you know. I don’t think from that aspect, I don’t know if they’re gaining anything” (Executive Leader, Site 1).

This is a contrasting view to those expressed by both the Executive and Site Leaders at Site 2, who voiced opinions that more directly connected the nature of their leadership to the diverse socioeconomic make-up of the program they lead. For example,

“On the highest level, it is that articulating the vision and mission all the time. As the leader, I can get done in the week too and make some really specific suggestions as I have about how to bring in families that we're trying to attract, just from my own experiences” (Executive Leader, Site 2);

and,

“The leader's the one's who's always articulating why we do it. This is what we do and this is why we do it. It has to be in front of folks all the time. That balance between those thinking, ‘Oh, we're just going to get all these market-base families coming in here and there, our financial problems are solved.’ No they’re not. Or, ‘We're going to make it a full Head Start program.’ Well, that's fine, but you still need philanthropy, because you still need to fill in that funding gap (Executive Leader, Site 2).

The views expressed by leaders at Site 2 may be considered within the program’s context within a broader urban renewal initiative that emphasizes socioeconomic diversity as cornerstone of its theory of change.

**Finding 2. Although a higher proportion of leaders recognized challenges in operating socioeconomically diverse programs, they did not**
necessarily recognize distinct areas of program operations as affected by the program serving mixed-income families. The majority of leaders interviewed and surveyed reported experiencing leadership challenges within their programs based on their mixed-income population, as seen in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Leaders Who Report Leadership Challenges Based on Socioeconomic Diversity

And as reflected in Figure 12, leaders also appeared to believe that these leadership challenges affected all domains of their roles, with only slight variation across key program areas including providing professional development, ensuring services are in place to meet each family’s needs, articulating a program mission or goal, and targeting family recruitment.
These findings are further informed by statements by leaders indicating that while socioeconomic programs may pose some distinct challenge to leadership, ultimately they grapple more with the general challenges associated with achieving program quality, regardless of serving low-income children. Several leaders made statements that this overarching leadership challenge supersedes challenges that may be viewed as distinct to operating a socioeconomically diverse program, including,

“It’s all of it, you know?...There are some things that matter, but when we’re talking about high quality in a holistic approach, it all matters. Everything that’s happening on the front end, in terms of what’s happening with children and families, within the classrooms, and with everything that is happening in the background, it all adds up to high quality. You don’t achieve that very easily” (Site Leader);

and

“...the crux, the heart of this model is that this is an environment where we truly believe that all children deserve the best, and we’re going to do whatever we need to do to make that happen, whether you’re paying full tuition or are federally funded, it doesn’t matter...” (Site Leader).

**Finding 3. Leaders most commonly cited meeting the diverse needs of families as the leadership practice most critical for operating a mixed-
income program. Although this finding is somewhat incongruous with the lack of variation in leader response when asked about recognizing the program leadership areas most affected by socioeconomic diversity, leaders clearly emphasized the need to meet the diverse needs families may have as the leadership practice most critical to effectively operating a mixed-income program. This emphasis is highlighted by Figure 13 below.

**Figure 13. Leadership Skills Most Critical within a Socioeconomically Diverse Program**

![Leadership Skills Most Critical within a Socioeconomically Diverse Program](image)

*Figure 14* depicts an overlay of this finding on the general leadership practices leaders cited as most important for their practice—in other words, those practices that do not bear a direct relationship to operating a socioeconomically diverse program. This analysis of leader response clearly demonstrates an emphasis on meeting diverse families’ needs as a function of leadership.
14. Program Leadership Practices Most Critical for Operating a Socioeconomically Diverse Program

Leader statements also strongly indicate the focus on meeting diverse family needs within a socioeconomically mixed program environment. For example, “Really it’s just in the individualization of not having a one-size-fits-all approach” (Site Leader); and,

“But if there is a multi-income group and that the school tends to only attract folks of the lower income and people of middle or higher incomes think they shouldn’t have access to that school, how do you make that school inviting? And one that everybody feels confident that their child will be able to succeed in and excel in. Again, that takes hard work. It takes the understanding that the school can and should meet every child’s need, no matter what” (Executive Leader).

Some leaders stressed that serving low-income children was accompanied with particular challenges in meeting family needs, noting,

“[There are a]...lack of resources to support children with trauma/poverty as a part of their family’s experience. [It’s] hard to integrate all learning goals for school readiness when some basic needs are the priority. [And there is] no real way to document/demonstrate this for outcomes” (Site Leader).

However, some leaders also raised a cautionary flag in how awareness of socio-cultural differences in how low-income children may be inappropriately subjected to
differential expectations of achievement or behavioral norms that are driven by race or class biases, stating, “Not giving poor children more didactic or controlling classroom practices” (Site Leader); and “Getting policy makers to understand that poor children need the same things that wealthy children need, as opposed to something didactic or remedial” (Site Leader).

A caveat to consider within this finding is that site leader survey responses don’t necessarily correlate to other anecdotal site and executive leader responses expressed verbally in interviews and through open response fields in the survey that suggest that another primary leadership challenge for socioeconomically diverse programs is blending and braiding funding to support program operations, quality and maximize access to parents. Leaders overwhelmingly expressed a focus on this particular challenge, for example stating,

“...the most challenging thing is, how do you operate that and make it financially viable? High quality, multi-income, and financially viable? I will tell you that even with the market ratio that we want, having Head Start and early Head Start, only pays about half or less of the cost. You know that, right?” (Executive Leader);

and,

“Because early childhood education is predominantly parent funded, with limited public funding, and because child care expenses are in the top three expenses that families with young children incur, it is difficult to fiscally sustainable program that can subsidize tuition for families with a need” (Site Leader);

as well as,

“It's the kind of setting that you want. It certainly not an inexpensive plant to run. All that coming together, that's the biggest challenge. Even the full market-based families can’t fill the gap of bringing in Head Start and Early Head Start. The university itself, is committing to be that philanthropist. There's been substantial contributions from this university in the last few years. That commitment will continue. It's a strong commitment that we want...to meet the vision and mission of all the incomes” (Executive Leader).
Leaders also recognized that program policies directly impact their capacity to leverage funding sources, particularly when programs were able to supplement parent tuition payments with some form of financial assistance. This appears to carry more fiscal impact for programs accepting lower-income families than relying on parents with full public payment through Early Head Start/Head Start or child care subsidy.

**Finding 4. Leader perceptions of parent choice align with what parents stated about primary drivers of cost, location, and quality.** Like parents across the income continuum, leader participants in this study recognized that cost, location, and quality are the primary drivers behind parent choice. Moreover, like parents across the income spectrum, although leaders recognize that parents do care deeply about program quality, they also indicated that cost and location may be deciding factors in program identification and selection. Several leaders made statements such as, “Parents attend mainly based on geographic location, so they tend to choose programs in proximity to their home so choice plays a major role as neighborhoods do not tend to be socioeconomically diverse” (Site Leader); and, “So I think that is the forefront, of parents feeling comfortable that their child is going to be nurtured and well-taken care of, and that they’re going to be prepared, socially and academically...I think another piece is convenience. The majority of our private pay parents work three blocks over, you know?” (Site Leader).

Several leaders suggested that logistical factors, and particularly cost, are in fact more important to parents than the quality of the program. For example, one leader stated, “Parent choice plays a huge role in the development of socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program. Parents usually ask about fees when they first inquire, and if the cost is more than they can afford, they look elsewhere, even if that care is in my opinion substandard. When inquiring about a child care placement, I find that cost is the major deciding factor, not quality. Not one parent who enrolled a new child this year has inquired about whether we participate in EXCELS or are accredited” (Site Leader).
Finally, like parent study participants across the income spectrum, program leaders also acknowledged the teacher qualifications are a significant indicator of program quality. Several leaders expressed concern that program capacity to recruit and retain high quality staff is particularly important in operating a socioeconomically diverse setting. This speaks to two aspects of serving children within a mixed-income setting. First, in order to meet Head Start Performance Standards (Retrieved from: https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii, 2017), programs that rely on this funding stream are required to recruit lead teachers who hold a Bachelor’s degree, a level of staff qualification that exceeds most child care licensure requirements. And second, several leaders spoke about the need to identify and recruit staff who possess the cultural competence to work with children of varying income backgrounds.

Finding 5. Like parents, leaders also acknowledge that word-of-mouth is the primary resource parents use to identify options and select their early care and learning program. Leaders, like parents, readily acknowledged that word-of-mouth is the most commonly used resource among parents in identifying and selecting an early care and learning program. Further, they spoke of the ability to leverage this parental communication network as an effective recruitment strategy for their programs. For example, leaders stated, “I do think in a lot of cases, it is word of mouth. I think that’s the best advertising” (Executive Leader); and,

“Yes, we’ve done a new website and a lot of families showing interest on that website. It’s really just getting the word out now. In all honesty, as I said, from the families who are there now and again, word of mouth is great. They love those teachers. They like the space” (Executive Leader). This finding is interesting to consider in light of the nuance that leaders acknowledged that parent endorsement plays a particularly important role for building a “following” for a socioeconomically diverse program. For example, one Site Leader
observed, “If families don’t enroll, diversity doesn’t happen. They can also be great advocates and marketing teams for programs” (Site Leader).

**Finding 6. Leader perceptions of parent engagement corroborate those programmatic gaps and shortcomings articulated by full tuition parents.** Leaders clearly recognize the need to structure socioeconomically diverse programs to feel inviting to parents across the income continuum. Within this perspective, leaders expressed a tacit recognition that programs tended to be skewed toward lower income parents in designing and executing their family engagement strategies. For example, one site leader remarked,

“So for me, I started becoming sensitive to not losing...and maybe ‘losing’ isn’t the right word, but I didn’t want the tuition paying parents to feel as if efforts weren’t being geared toward them, if that makes sense, where it’s this constant conversation of, “But oh, but this doesn’t apply to you. Oh, this doesn’t apply to you,” because that doesn’t really much match the model either. So it’s really about bringing that into more balance” (Site Leader)

This finding may also be viewed as an extension of the finding that leaders cited meeting the needs of diverse families as the most pressing leadership challenge to running a mixed-income program. However, although several leaders articulated the challenge of engaging socioeconomically diverse families—and particularly those who are higher income—more evenly and consistently, they did not elaborate on specific strategies to engage parents across the income spectrum.

**Finding 7. Leaders recognize that the social justice driver among high-income parents suggests a potential recruitment practice.** Leaders appeared to echo this study’s finding that higher income parents felt driven to enroll their children in a mixed-income early care and learning setting based on a sense of social justice. For example, one site leader observed,

“But a lot of our parents, I’ve found, are very social justice minded, and they love and really advocate the idea of a mixed model. It’s something
that they frequently talk about and share about the program, share with other parents, and really always come to me, “What can we do to spread the word?” Not just about the center, but they always mention the model, about it being mixed, and how much they appreciate their child being exposed to that very early on” (Site Leader).

Leaders indicated that they understood how this sensibility might be leveraged as a recruitment strategy among higher-income parents. It is interesting to note, however, that leaders did not readily reflect on what might motivate lower-income parents to seek out a socioeconomically diverse setting.

**Finding 8. Leaders also perceive negative assumptions among full tuition parents as a recruitment disincentive.** Although leaders did not identify recruitment as a primary challenge in effectively operating a socioeconomically diverse program, their responses to both survey and interview questions indicated that they recognize that negative assumptions among parents regarding the quality of mixed-income settings as a barrier to recruitment, particularly for higher-income parents. One site leader stated,

“It plays a big role! A lot of parents think that the child development center in a low socioeconomically neighborhood would not be good for their children. Most often than not, children receive better care, development, and get along better in a more diverse atmosphere. If some parents would get away from the stereotypical way of thinking and give those centers a chance, the neighborhood would grow” (Site Leader).

Leader perspectives also suggest that they recognize how socio-cultural and racial biases may be an underlying cause of parent assumptions and perceptions of mixed-income programs. For example,

“It is my experience that race plays a role in the decision making process. I have had parents ask about the racial make up of our children. One parent wanted their child in a diverse group. The others wanted their children with others of the same race. In this area the majority of African Americans are in a low socioeconomic area. There is one center very close to a majority African American community. They have trouble engaging people of other races to enroll their children” (Site Leader).
Again, although several leaders recognized how these assumptions on the part of parents may challenge the recruitment of socioeconomically diverse families—and particularly those who are higher income—they did not elaborate on specific strategies to counteract or address assumptions and biases within their recruitment strategies.

**Discussion.** Perhaps the most significant and outwardly simplistic finding among program executive and site leaders in this study is that they overwhelmingly recognize the importance of socioeconomic diversity within early childhood programs. However, when we turn to deriving deeper understanding about how this particular program characteristic may shape or challenge their leadership practice, we encounter more complex, and sometimes conflicting, responses. These responses become more challenging to interpret in part because it appears that program leaders found it difficult to isolate challenges stemming specifically from the operation of a socioeconomically diverse program from the larger leadership challenges endemic to the early childhood field.

In some sense, this is understandable since there is a great deal of overlap across these hurdles. Leaders struggle to leverage funding to operate high-quality programs—regardless of the diversity of families served—because this gap is pervasive across early care and learning settings. Supporting high-quality programs asks early childhood leaders to fulfil a range of roles and possess multi-faceted competencies. Bloom (2000) and Rodd’s (1996) research identifies core areas of leadership competencies that encompass organizational leadership skills, knowledge of child development and teaching strategies, staff support and development, parent engagement, as well as budgeting and management acumen.

However, despite the striking Venn diagram we may draw to illustrate the intersection of barriers across early childhood leadership practices writ large and those
specific to income-diverse programs, we may still draw some conclusions from what both executive and site leaders shared as to the latter. In particular, we saw that program leaders struggle to meet the diverse needs of families who participate in mixed-income programs. This may be interpreted as both brokering the necessary services and supports high-need children may need to improve their early learning experience, as well as communicating with and interacting meaningfully across family income levels regarding program options family engagement opportunities. Further, like parents, leaders also acknowledged that certain perceptions and assumptions about programs that serve socioeconomically diverse families may play a role in how parents make decisions about early care and learning program choice.

Two frameworks are helpful in interpreting the interplay between leader acknowledgement of the importance and value of socioeconomically diverse programs, the leadership challenge of meeting diverse needs among mixed-income families, and the recognition that their parent assumptions and preconceived impressions of their programs may play a role in parent decisions to seek them out. First, considering the demands of leadership practice within income-diverse programs through a transformational leadership lens provides insight as to why leaders struggle to discern barriers that are distinct from those that broadly characterize early childhood leadership. Second, Baum’s (2002) psychoanalytic framework offers additional interpretation of how leaders may be experiencing the challenge of embracing and articulating the mission of income diversity within both their own program and contextually within the early childhood field.

The findings analyzed here suggest that leadership enacted at the executive and site director program levels that supports the development and implementation of socioeconomically diverse early childhood programs goes beyond the categorical
leadership functions needed only to sustain a high-quality learning environment. The suite of leadership skills and proactive stance towards socially contextualized leadership challenges that leaders of socioeconomically diverse early learning programs may require strongly suggests that a transformational leadership frame (Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1994) applies to leading within the context of promoting socioeconomic diversity at the program level.

Developing a socioeconomically diverse early learning program demands that program-level leaders rise above merely serving their own immediate interests as leaders in order to execute leadership functions that may exceed generalized definitions of program quality or appear counter-intuitive to standardized program operations. One example of this form of leadership would be prioritizing the enrollment of tuition-paying children to meet program costs which would serve program “bottom-lines” at the expense of targeting the needs of low-income families in generating an SES-diverse learning setting. Certainly, the stress leaders described feeling around effectively blending and braiding public funding streams with parent tuition dollars illustrates this leadership tension. Another example of the demands of transformational leader within this study’s findings is meeting the professional staff qualification standards of Head Start, which poses staff recruitment, retention, and compensation challenges for leaders.

Given the complexities of developing and sustaining mixed income programs, fulfilling a transformational leadership role that addresses socioeconomic diversity may extend beyond program operational leadership to enacting broader leadership capacity and agency within the early childhood field. Rodd's (2012) typology of early childhood leadership skills recognizes that early childhood leaders also play a vital role in acting as change agents both within the profession and outside of it as participants in larger scale policy and program change initiatives.
Baum’s (2002) psychoanalytic framework offers additional interpretation of how leaders may be experiencing the challenge of embracing and articulating the mission of income diversity within both their own program and contextually within the early childhood field. His examination of systemic resistance to change in education reform suggests that it is a manifestation of “largely unconscious psychological conditions...that hinder consideration and acceptance of new ideas and practices” (p. 175). Baum’s psychoanalytic perspective posits that systemic resistance to change stems from an almost subliminal resistance, often unrecognized by actors within the system themselves. This perspective accepts, “the possibility that individuals...and organizations have unconscious interests that matter more them than using knowledge to educate children or even persuading the public that, in any case, they are doing so” (Baum, 2002, p. 180). Ultimately, Baum (2002) argues, racism, as well as defining beliefs about the purpose of education vis a vis a population of highly diverse learners, are often at the root of this form of resistance to systemic change.

Baum’s psychoanalytic frame has relevance in interpreting the findings of this study that suggest leaders struggle to relate to or embrace their positionality as change agents within their roles as leaders of socioeconomically diverse programs. Although they overwhelmingly can speak to need for programs with the capacity and mission to serve families across the income continuum, they falter in looking beyond their essential functionality as leaders and the challenges they face within the broader context of early childhood’s funding constraints and lack of policy coherence. Moreover, they articulate perspectives that mirror those of the parents they serve regarding assumptions and perceptions of how programs that serve a mixed-income population may operate as high-quality settings and successfully recruit higher income parents whose decision making may be swayed by deeply held socio-cultural biases. Ultimately, Baum’s (2002)
psychoanalytic lens on systemic resistance to change and the transformational leadership frame work may work in tandem as a means of better understanding the complexities of the leader perspectives reflected by this study.

These findings also illustrate the intersection of McLaughlin’s (1987) policy analysis implementation frame with Baum’s psychoanalytic lens. McLaughlin notes that, particularly within bottom-up led policy change initiatives, the implementation of new organization goals and procedures, particularly when they may be less concrete and without discreet resource funding streams, encounter implementation hurdles based on the value constructs of those key individuals (p. 172). This returns to the frame’s core principal that the smallest unit of change—in this case, the individual—becomes the most important implementation lever. She also notes that “motivation or will is also influenced by factors largely beyond the reach of policy...environmental stability, competing center of authority, contending properties or pressures and other aspects of the social-political milieu...” (p. 173). Leader perspectives captured here underscore that the degree to which they value socioeconomic diversity in their early learning program drives their administrative leadership towards realizing that end more than a sense of complying with a stated program vision that program diversity should be realized.

These leadership findings, in conjunction with consideration of the findings regarding parent perspectives summarized in the previous chapter, lead to the formulation of implications and policy recommendations. Together, these are the focus of the following chapter.
Chapter 7: IMPLICATIONS, POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS, AND SUGGESTED FURTHER RESEARCH

This final section synthesizes this study’s conceptual frameworks, literature review and findings in order to present broader implications for the early childhood field, several policy recommendations, and suggestions for further research. First, possible limitations of this study’s methodology and approach are discussed.

Possible Limitations of this Research

As previously noted in this study’s review of the relevant literature, despite the compelling study findings reviewed here, it is important to recognize first that there are not a large number of studies within in the current body of research on the strength of the association between classroom SES diversity and early learning outcomes among young children. This study readily acknowledges the present gaps, as well as the strength of validity and reliability within the current studies, including their relatively small sample sizes. Second, this study’s small sample size presents limitations on the implications that may be drawn from its findings. In addition, the response rate for the citywide leadership survey was 65%, which, while high, may not meet the threshold for generating meaningful findings (Cresswell, 2014).

Third, although the distribution parents of varying income levels within the parent sample reflects the distribution of parent enrollment income-levels in the selected program sites, overall, this study’s parent sample is skewed to those families at the higher end of the income continuum. For purposes of this study, tuition support parents (N = 6) were defined as those who rely partially or fully on some form of public funding support to participate in an early learning program, while full tuition parents (N = 14) are defined as those who pay full program tuition. Fourth, because this study setting is Baltimore City, its findings may be limited to interpretation within this particular urban...
context. And finally, potential response bias based on researcher positionality should be recognized. Because all in-depth interviews with parents and program executive and site-level leaders were conducted in person, my own external markers of social identity may have been a factor in how respondents chose to act and respond within interviews.

**Implications**

This study was designed to synthesize parent and early childhood program leader perspectives in order to enhance understanding of how parent experiences of choosing and participating in a socioeconomically diverse program interact with the nature of leader roles and programs themselves. Further analysis of the findings showed that parent decision making and program leadership actors are contextualized by concentrically positioned constructs that are molded by perceptions of individual social identity and the interplay of social networks, perceptions of individual professional identity, as well as larger institutional and societal constructs anchored by class and race, and the broader policy dimensions of the early childhood field itself. Within these theoretical frameworks, this study’s findings suggest several overarching implications by informing our understanding of a core conceptual gap between the beliefs and values expressed by study participants and their perceived capacity of their own personal agency to enact those beliefs and values.

All study participants, across parent and leaders, generally expressed a recognition in the value of socioeconomic diversity within early childhood care and learning programs. Further, this study’s findings suggest that parents across the income continuum feel that their children will individually benefit from participation in a socioeconomically diverse program in terms of their social-emotional development and awareness. Program leaders also expressed their belief in the universal benefits of high-quality, socioeconomically diverse programming for all children, regardless of their
family income background. If there is a shared belief in the value and positive benefits of socioeconomically diverse programs among both parent and leader participants within this study, what were the restrictions on their own personal agency they expressed in realizing this vision? This reflection on the findings suggest how leadership actions and program structure dovetail with parent choice actions to inform several interpretations of how this question might be answered.

*First, the findings reveal that despite their shared belief in its implicit value, parents across the income continuum aren’t explicitly seeking out enrollment in socioeconomically diverse early care and learning programs.* In this study, neither full tuition or tuition support parents expressed an explicit intentionality about seeking out a setting with this particular program characteristic. Further, the findings reveal that leaders recognized that targeted recruitment and engagement practices were needed to foster socioeconomic diversity within their programs, and that parent commitment to this value might also be leveraged as a recruitment strategy among higher-income parents. However, leaders did not readily reflect on what actions they might take to motivate lower-income parents to seek out a socioeconomically diverse setting.

These findings suggest several conditions that undergird and contribute to this disconnect. First, parent study participants reported that the primary means of gathering information about their program choice is via word of mouth within their own social networks. However, because parents are not explicitly seeking out socioeconomically diverse programs, their belief in the value of these programs does not appear to have been absorbed by their social networking communications. Unless their reported individualized value and belief in socioeconomic diversity becomes an articulated value among parents of all income backgrounds, it follows that parents will continue to suggest
program choices based on the key aspects of programming they prioritize—namely cost, proximity to home and work, and a perceived sense of the quality of the setting. Based on parent responses, a strong sense of personal agency within the choice process is further undermined among lower income parents who expressed more concern in meeting cost demands in securing a high-quality early learning program setting for their children.

Second, this study found that within the two selected socioeconomically diverse program sites, program recruitment and engagement approaches are neither explicit or refined enough to appeal universally to parents across varying economic backgrounds. This may be due to program leaders’ struggle to balance the leadership demands specific to operating a socioeconomic program within the broader challenges posed by the early childhood policy and program context. While leaders were able to articulate that they saw their greatest challenge in terms of meeting diverse family needs these responses become more challenging to interpret in part because it appears that program leaders found it difficult to isolate challenges stemming specifically from the operation of a socioeconomically diverse program from the larger leadership challenges endemic to the early childhood field. These challenges included blending and braiding funding resources needed to meeting the challenges of achieving high-quality programming, particularly in the areas of recruiting and retaining high quality staff. Although leader participants overwhelmingly spoke to need for programs with the capacity and mission to serve families across the income continuum, they faltered recognizing or speaking to their role as transformational leaders in meeting the challenges they face within the broader context of early childhood’s funding constraints and lack of policy coherence.

Third, both parents and leaders also may struggle against their own class-based social identities and deeply internalized value systems,
including perceived superiority and privilege, in enacting either the program choice or transformational leadership (Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1994) that drives the development socioeconomically diverse settings. Both leaders and parents spoke to their perceptions of assumptions held among higher income parents rooted in deeply held socio-cultural biases regarding the quality of programs that serve a mixed-income population. And, parents expressed their own internalized tensions drawn from the implicit challenge to their own class-based norms and expectations regarding their choice of where to enroll their children in early care and learning programs.

Yet, despite the class-based tensions shaped by social identities and class- and race-based biases discussed among both program leaders parents within higher and lower income groupings, this study’s findings suggest that the availability, accessibility, and affordability of socioeconomically diverse early learning programs to parents regardless of their income level may in fact serve as a potential arena for narrowing negative social comparisons (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) between between parents of differing socioeconomic backgrounds. Further, these findings highlight areas of professional leadership development that may also speak to the potential for mitigating institutional stratification that reinforces many of the complexities of normative class determined behaviors among parents choosing to participate in socioeconomically diverse programs. The policy recommendations below speak to more systematic approaches that may strengthen the capacity within the early childhood field to harness these potentialities.

**Policy Recommendations**

The theoretical frames applied in this study suggest that any suggested policy approaches must speak to the complex charge to bridge both the socioeconomic class
tensions defined by Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory in addressing parent choice processes, as well as Baum’s psycho-social frame in addressing hurdles anchored by institutional and societal racism and bias. Moreover, McLaughlin’s policy analysis implementation framework raises the need for policy solutions to bridge systemically contextualized gaps between organic, individual- and program-led change and top-down policy imperatives that may incentivize change. -top down & bottom up reform (bottom-up led policy shift (McLaughlin, 1987). In keeping with these framing guidelines, the policy recommendations generated by this study’s findings target both large and small scale reforms that may result in increased socioeconomic integration within high-quality, community early care and learning programs.

First, the design and operation of socioeconomically diverse programs should be strengthened via a two-pronged strategy: 1. Policies should seek to improve parent recruitment and engagement practices to promote income-diversity in programs where there is already a mix of lower and higher income families; and 2. Policy and funding alignment should seek to recruit more lower income families into high-quality programs where there is already concentration of higher income families.

This recommendation speaks to Reid’s (2011) research that reveals an SES-concentration “tipping point” that suggests school readiness outcomes among lower income students are most strengthened when they attend programs where higher concentrations of their middle-income peers. To date, this provides the strongest research-based rational for increasing potential return on public investment in high-quality programs by promoting socioeconomic diversity.

Both Reid (2011) and Potter (2016) suggest policies targeted to the supply side of the early childhood marketplace that may serve to boost family recruitment across the
income continuum, including subsidizing transportation, providing parent friendly information that includes parent education about school readiness, offering full-day, and extended-day program services. In addition, Ryan & Heise (2002) suggest these objectives might be met on the supply side of the early childhood marketplace equation by expanding universally available public Pre-K or by instituting a universal sliding fee scale that encourage more low-income parents to attend tuition-funded programs.

Hybrid approaches that account for both the supply and demand sides of the marketplace equation might involve increased selectivity in the positioning of high-quality programs (both publically and privately funded) that take into account residential patterns of income segregation, alternative services available within the same area, and ease of transportation for families (Reid, 2011, p. 171). In addition, a hybrid approach might promote continued blending and braiding of multiple funding sources for community early learning programs in order to promote the likelihood of SES-diverse families enrolling, as well as implementing SES-diversity targeted strategies in specifically within schools as districts as Pre-K initiatives develop and grow (Potter, 2016).

*Second, program leader support for leaders seeking to develop, operate and sustain socioeconomically diverse learning programs should incorporate the principles of a transformational leadership stance.* In addition, informed by the findings of this study, targeted professional development for leaders and prospective leaders of such programs should also address skills that enable them to best meet diverse family needs within a mixed income program environment, and institute effective family recruitment practices that attract families across the income continuum. Even within this frame, leaders should still be equipped with the administrative skills to address fundamental parent concerns regarding access and
availability, including program affordability via scholarship programs and sliding fee scales, and transportation support.

The findings of this study also suggest that within the scope of administrative needs among program leaders within the context of socioeconomically diverse programs, addressing teacher qualifications as a significant indicator of program quality is critical. Several leaders expressed concern that program capacity to recruit and retain high quality staff is particularly important in operating a socioeconomically diverse setting. This speaks to two aspects of serving children within a mixed-income setting. First, in order to meet Head Start Performance Standards (Retrieved from: https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii, 2017), programs that rely on this funding stream are required to recruit lead teachers who hold a Bachelor’s degree, a level of staff qualification that exceeds most child care licensure requirements. And second, several leaders spoke about the need to identify and recruit staff who possess the cultural competence to work with children of varying income backgrounds. Targeted professional development should also be designed to speak to staff recruitment and retention, with particular attention to these dimensions of mixed income programs.

**Third, although identifying a full inventory of policy challenges within the early childhood field is outside the scope of this study, its findings nonetheless underscore the urgent needs to address larger early childhood system issues.** These include strengthening the early childhood workforce pipeline by strengthening professional preparation, support, and equitable compensation as well as standards alignment across the diverse programs and funding streams that undergird the complexities of federal, state, and local early childhood systems. The findings of this study are further informed by statements by leaders indicating that while socioeconomically diverse programs may pose some distinct
challenge to leadership, ultimately they grapple more with the general challenges associated with achieving program quality, regardless of serving low-income children. Several leaders made statements that this overarching leadership challenge supersedes challenges that may be viewed as distinct to operating a socioeconomically diverse program. Leaders themselves offered potential large scale including, “Child care voucher rates should be higher in areas with high poverty levels in an effort to pay for high-quality programming and support for family engagement and early education. (Instead, vouchers in MD are currently based on market rate, which is lower in communities with the most need.)” (Program Leader, Survey) and, “Reforming early childhood systems to increase alignment (e.g. HS); equity of opportunity (e.g. subsidy); diversity (e.g. staff)” (Program Leader, Survey).

Finally, given the institutional and systemic nature of the challenges outlined throughout this chapter, high-level policy leadership that articulates the value and potential positive impacts of fostering socioeconomically diverse early learning programs is needed. However, this study of two sites operating in the absence of this larger policy leadership and vision also highlights the power of organic change that originates among key system actors as the agents of change themselves. As McLaughlin reflects, “...we have also begun to understand that this kind of incremental, creeping, locally defined change is often for the best” (p. 175). All future efforts to replicate and expand effective policy and programming decisions that support socioeconomically diverse, high-quality early learning programs should be researched-based. Below, several suggestions for further research are made.

**The Need for Further Research**

The findings discussed here suggest several areas for further research that would extend the design of this study and deepen our understanding of its findings. First, this
study’s setting was a mid-sized urban area with a high concentration of low-income residents. It would be worthwhile to explore, in particular, how parent choice might be affected based on differing contexts and geographic areas. This study might be replicated to examine similar choice trends among socioeconomically diverse programs within a suburban context. By the same token, expanding the scope of this research to consider differential leadership contexts would also be worthwhile. Such a study might focus on how operational characteristics of programs (e.g. non-profit, public, public-private partnerships) influence both parent and leader perspectives. Third, in order to better understand how race and class interact to influence these findings, this study might be replicated to include data on the racial distribution among program participants and leaders. Finally, it would be interesting to expand this study by collecting additional data on staff perceptions that may further inform leadership practices within socioeconomically diverse early learning programs.

The research base that informs this study also suggests several additional areas for inquiry. For example, Reid’s 2011 study is the only research to date that examines the relationship between certain components of quality—specifically aspects of instructional quality—on student achievement, and classroom socioeconomic diversity (p.1103). Further research is needed to explore the effects of socioeconomic diversity on young children’s social-emotional and cultural awareness that suggest, “the experience of a diverse preschool classroom is likely to provide rich learning opportunities that foster long term cross-cultural skills and friendships, and perhaps an appreciation of the strengths of diverse communities” (Reid, 2012, p. 105). In addition, new research should further explore the relationship between race and income within the context of socioeconomically diverse, high-quality early programs by examining the true impacts of racial bias within policy resistance to promoting this strategic approach to early
childhood system development. Finally, in order to strengthen the research base that might inform the efficacy of socioeconomically diverse early learning programs in terms of improving school readiness outcomes, further research is needed to examine the programmatic tipping points for turning the curve on child outcomes and learn more about how differential program characteristics impact child outcomes among subgroups of children by income.

**Conclusion**

Discussions regarding the importance of addressing the need for increased socioeconomic diversity within early care and learning programs stem from both an educational equity stance (Kagan, 2015), and empirical evidence showing improved student outcomes in school readiness and academic achievement (Reid, 2012). The rapid expansion of publicly funded, universal prekindergarten (Pre-K) programs represents a bellwether opportunity to leverage policy decisions and program design to support socioeconomically diverse early learning environments for young children (Potter & Kashen, 2015). These discussions and the current policy climate point to a need to address socioeconomic diversity directly through our public investments in early care and education as an important pathway to improving access to high-quality programs, particularly among the most disadvantaged young children.

This study’s findings provide additional understanding as to how socioeconomic diversity may serve as a key policy driver for improving access among low-income children to high-quality programs—a recognized gap by the field (Kagan, 2015). Given both the social equity and child outcomes rationales I have discussed, it is clear that increased understanding of the program leadership practices and parent choice frameworks that might best support the development of socioeconomically diverse, high-quality early childhood programs is urgently needed. The theoretical framing introduced
here provides additional credence for this proposed study’s ability to further inform the early childhood leadership community’s efforts to develop and implement socioeconomically diverse, high-quality programs. Without leaders driven to do so, the promising new policy horizon of Universal Pre-K is poised to mirror and extend K-12’s legacy of inequity of educational opportunity through a similar service infrastructure that segregates students based on SES.

The national policy discourse regarding early childhood education tends to oscillate between two poles of how programs might best demonstrate effectiveness: levels of access and determinations of quality. The most aggressive policy initiatives strive to bridge these two poles by: *improving access to high-quality* programs. Any consideration of SES diversity and racial integration raises questions that lead us—as parents, researchers and citizens—to deeper questions about the nature of publically funded education in our country and the equitable distribution of educational opportunity among all children, regardless of their family background and SES status. These are questions that challenge our most fundamental notions of what education is and aspires to be. It is my hope that this study will contribute actionable knowledge to the field around incorporating socioeconomic diversity as an effective policy strategy that ultimately will benefit all children by enhancing their early development and their readiness to succeed in school and beyond.
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Understanding how Parent Choice and Program Leadership
Foster Socioeconomic Diversity Within
High-Quality Early Learning Community Programs:
A Case Study of Two Baltimore City Sites

DISSENTATION STUDY DESCRIPTION

This proposed in-depth case study aims to contribute to efforts in early childhood research, practice, and policy efforts to understand how parent choice and program leadership influence socioeconomic diversity within early learning programs. Using a case study approach, this study will examine two high-quality community-based early learning sites in Baltimore City. Each site serves a roughly equal proportion of low-income families who access the program with the support of child care subsidy and Head Start, and higher income families who privately cover their program fees. Interviews will be conducted with program executive-level and site-level leaders, staff, and a purposeful sample of parents of varying income levels. A parent focus group will also be conducted. In addition, program-level leadership of early learning community programs in Baltimore City will be surveyed. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1) How do leaders and parents in early childhood programs serving diverse SES populations describe their roles, their expectations of the programs, and short and long-term goals?
a) What are organizational executive leader perspectives on how their leadership practices allow their early care and learning programs to serve a socioeconomically diverse population of children and families?

b) What are the perspectives among site-level program leaders about leadership practices that allow their early care and learning programs to serve a socioeconomically diverse population of children and families?

c) What are participating parents’ perspectives on their experience of choosing and participating in a socioeconomically diverse program?
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PROGRAM EXECUTIVE LEADER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Study Background:

This study serves as my dissertation research at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Education. I am interested in understanding the role of parent choice and program leadership in how socioeconomically diverse high-quality early care and learning programs develop and operate. These are high-quality programs in community settings serve children from birth to age five, and their families from a range of income levels. This study is seeking to answer the following question regarding program executive-level leadership:

What are organizational executive leader perspectives on how their leadership practices allow their early care and learning programs to serve a socioeconomically diverse population of children and families?
Questions:

1. Can you please tell me a little bit about your background, how you came to be a leader within this program, and your experience here?

2. How would you define a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program?
   Probe: What (e.g. experiences, policies) would you say informs your definition?

3. What does it mean to you to serve as a leader of Program X, an operator of a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program?
   Probe: What qualities constitute a leader and why are they important in this particular setting?

4. Are there specific areas of executive leadership do you see as affected by this particular characteristic of the program? Why?
   Probes: Articulating a program mission or goal, blending and braiding funding sources, targeting family recruitment, managing the learning environment, ensuring services are in place that meet each families’ needs, providing professional development, and supporting parent engagement.

5. Are there specific executive leadership skills do you think are critical for running a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program? What are they?
   Probes: Articulating a program mission or goal, blending and braiding funding sources, targeting family recruitment, managing the learning environment, ensuring services are in place that meet each families’ needs, providing professional development, and supporting parent engagement.

6. To what extent and in what ways do you feel the overall quality of the program is affected by the program’s socioeconomic diversity?
   Probe: Are there particular aspects of parent participation, staff development and support, or the experience children have here that are impacted by socioeconomic diversity?
7. Have you encountered any particular leadership challenges you have faced in light of this program characteristic? If yes, what are they? Are these policy or program challenges? (e.g. external or internal to the program). If no, what do you think accounts for the ease of implementation?

8. From your observations of the program, do you think that the fact this program is socioeconomically diverse affects site-level leaders, staff and teachers? If so, how? Probes: How they see the mission of the program; how they see their role and work in the program; everyday engagement with parents and children.

9. What policies at the federal, state, or local levels do you think foster or hinder the development and sustainability of socioeconomically diverse learning programs? Why and how?

10. How might these policies promote or restrict the development of leadership skills that you think are critical for operating a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program? Probe: What would be a reasonable approach to enhancing these skills?

11. What role, if any, do you think parent choice plays in the development of socioeconomically diverse early care and learning programs?

12. Do you believe SES-diverse early learning programs are important? What do you think they bring to the early childhood field? How is your leadership a part of this?
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May 2017

PROGRAM SITE LEADER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Study Background:

This study serves as my dissertation research at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Education. I am interested in understanding the role of parent choice and program leadership in how socioeconomically diverse high-quality early care and learning programs develop and operate. These are programs in community settings serve children from birth to five years-old, and their families from a range of income levels. This study is seeking to answer the following question regarding program leadership:

What are program leader perspectives on how leadership practices address socioeconomic diversity?
Questions:

1. Can you please tell me a little bit about your background, how you came to be a leader within this program, and your experience here?

2. How would you define a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program?
   Probe: What (e.g. experiences, policies) would you say informs your definition?

3. What does it mean to you to serve as a leader of Program X, an operator of a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program?
   Probe: What characteristics constitute a leader and why are they important in this particular setting?

4. Are there specific areas of your leadership you see as affected by this particular characteristic of the program? Why?
   Probes: Articulating a program mission or goal, blending and braiding funding sources, targeting family recruitment, managing the learning environment, ensuring services are in place that meet each families' needs, providing professional development, and supporting parent engagement.

5. Are there specific program leadership skills that are critical for running a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program? What are they?
   Probes: Articulating a program mission or goal, blending and braiding funding sources, targeting family recruitment, managing the learning environment, ensuring services are in place that meet each families' needs, providing professional development, and supporting parent engagement.
6. To what extent and in what ways do you feel the overall quality of the program is affected by socioeconomic diversity?  
Probe: Are there particular aspects of parent participation, staff development and support, or the experience children have here that is impacted by socioeconomic diversity?

7. Have you encountered any particular leadership challenges that you have faced in light of this program characteristic? If yes, what are they? Are these policy or program challenges? (e.g. external or internal to the program) If no, what do you think accounts for the ease of implementation?

8. From your observations in the program, do you think that the fact this program is socioeconomically diverse affects executive-level leaders? If so how? What about program staff and teachers? If so, how?  
Probe: Probes: How leaders and/or staff see the mission of the program; how they see their role and work in the program; everyday engagement with parents and children.

9. What policies at the federal, state, and local levels do you think could foster or hinder the development and sustainability of socioeconomically diverse learning programs? Why and how?

10. How might these policies promote or restrict the development the leadership skills that you think are critical for operating a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program?  
Probe: What would be a reasonable approach to enhancing these skills?

11. What role, if any, do you think parent choice plays in the development of socioeconomically diverse early care and learning programs?
12. Do you believe socioeconomically-diverse early learning programs are important? What do you think they bring to the early childhood field? How is your leadership a part of this?
Understanding how Parent Choice and Program Leadership Foster Socioeconomic Diversity Within High-Quality Early Learning Community Programs: A Case Study of Two Baltimore City Sites

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PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Study Background:

This study serves as my dissertation research at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Education. I am interested in understanding the role of parent choice and program leadership play in how socioeconomically diverse high-quality early care and learning programs develop and operate. These are programs in community settings that serve children from birth to five years-old, and their families from a range of income levels. This study is seeking to answer the following question regarding parents and socioeconomic diversity at (PROGRAM SITE NAME):
Questions:

1. Can you tell me what factors you considered in selecting this early care and learning program for your child?
2. What, in your opinion, makes a high quality early care and learning program?
3. What does socioeconomic diversity in a program mean to you?
4. Did you specifically seek out a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program for your child? Why or why not?
5. Do you believe your child’s early learning experience is affected by this particular characteristic of the program?
6. What information would be helpful for you as a parent to know in advance of selecting an early learning care and program for your child? How do you access this kind of information? Is it easily accessible or if not, what are the barriers to accessing it?
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May 2017

PARENT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Study Background:
This study serves as my dissertation research at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Education. I am interested in understanding the role of parent choice and program leadership play in how socioeconomically diverse high-quality early care and learning programs develop and operate. These are programs in community settings that serve children from birth to five years-old, and their families from a range of income levels. This study is seeking to answer the following question regarding parents and socioeconomic diversity at (PROGRAM SITE NAME):

Focus Group Ground Rules:

- We will be using first names only today. Everything you say is confidential.
- I will analyze the discussion we have today to inform my dissertation findings. Your name will not appear anywhere in my analysis.
• I’m interested in your thoughts and ideas, whether they are positive or negative.

• It is ok to disagree with one another. I’d like to hear everyone’s point of view. If you disagree, please do so respectfully.

• Only one person should talk at a time. I am tape recording this session so that we do not miss anything important.

• It would be great if everyone participates. You each do not have to answer every question. If, however, some of you are shy or I really want to know what you think about a particular issue, I may ask you about it.
Questions:

1. What have been your experiences in finding and using an early care and learning program in your community?

   Listen for issues related to availability, accessibility, cost, satisfaction with levels of quality.

2. What do you look for in choosing a program? What is most important to you in making this choice?

   Listen for issues related to availability, accessibility, cost, satisfaction with levels of quality, program characteristics including size, staff, activities.

3. How do you find out about early care and learning program options? Are there ways this could be made easier or not?

4. What do you think about the role of socioeconomic diversity in an early learning setting is? Is it important? Why or why not?
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May 2017

PROGRAM SITE LEADER SURVEY

Study Background:

This study serves as my dissertation research at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Education. I am interested in understanding the role of parent choice and program leadership in how socioeconomically diverse high-quality early care and learning programs develop and operate. These are programs in community settings serve children from birth to five years-old, and their families from a range of income levels. This study is seeking to answer the following question regarding program leadership:

What are program leader perspectives on how leadership practices address socioeconomic diversity?
This survey is voluntary. All survey data will remain confidential. If you choose to complete the survey, you will be entered into a lottery to win one of 5 $25 Target gift cards or an iPad Mini.

This survey has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pennsylvania. If you have any questions regarding this survey, please contact Rachel Demma at 202-421-5083 or rcdemma@gmail.com.
Questions:

1. How long have you served as a director at this program?
   ____Less than 1 year
   ____1 – 3 years
   ____3-5 years
   ____Over 5 years
   ____Other:

2. Please indicate your highest level of professional qualifications:
   _____High school diploma or GED
   _____AA in early childhood or a related field
   _____BA in early childhood or a related field
   _____Child Development Associate Credential (CDA)
   _____MA in early childhood or related field
   _____Other:

2. How would you define a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program?

3. Please indicate areas of your leadership that are affected by this program serving socioeconomically diverse children and families?
   (You may choose more than one response.)
   __ Articulating a program mission or goal
   __ Blending and braiding funding sources
   __ Targeting family recruitment
   __ Managing the learning environment,
   __ Ensuring services are in place that meet each families’ needs
   __ Providing professional development
   __ Supporting parent engagement
4. Please indicate specific program leadership skills that are critical for running a socioeconomically diverse early care and learning program. (You may choose more than one response.)
___ Articulating a program mission or goal
___ Blending and braiding funding sources
___ Targeting family recruitment
___ Managing the learning environment,
___ Ensuring services are in place that meet each families’ needs
___ Providing professional development
___ Supporting parent engagement
___ Other:

5. Please select the area(s) quality of the program is affected by socioeconomic diversity?
(You may choose more than one response.)
___ Parent engagement and program participation
___ Staff development and support
___ Early care and learning experiences children have in the program
___ Program resources
___ Other:

6. Have you encountered any particular leadership challenges that you have faced in light of this program serving a socioeconomically diverse group of families and children?
___ Yes
___ No
If yes, what are they? Are these policy or program challenges? (e.g. external or internal to the program)
_______________________________________________________

7. What policies at the federal, state, and local levels do you think could foster or hinder the development and sustainability of socioeconomically diverse learning programs? Why and how?
_______________________________________________________

8. What role, if any, do you think parent choice plays in the development of socioeconomically diverse early care and learning programs?
_______________________________________________________

9. Socioeconomically diverse early learning programs are important in the early childhood field.
   ____ Strongly Agree
   ____ Agree
   ____ Somewhat Agree
   ____ Disagree
   ____ Strongly Disagree
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