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Educate

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Who's there for the directors?

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LISTENING TO NEW YORK CITY'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS: TOWARDS A MORE EQUITABLE POST-PANDEMIC ECE SYSTEM

Image: Bank Street College of Education

They showed up for their staff.
Who's there for the directors?

Mark K. Nagasawa

"We persevered and did the impossible…. There were days of despair, but there were also days of hope & success! We learned how to work remotely and engage children, parents, and community partners,"

said a center director in June 2021 as a part of the Listening to Teachers study, which seeks understanding of New York City's early childhood educators' pandemic experiences to inform the development of a more equitable post-COVID-19 Pandemic ECE system.

Her reflections call attention to the ways that the pandemic's funding interruptions, mask requirements, social distancing, difficult staffing decisions, unknowns about how COVID-19 affected young children, accessing emergency funding, the transition to online early care and education, supporting stressed-out staff, children, and parents were layered onto the pre-existing stresses involved in leading early childhood programs – amidst broader racial strife and pressures to "reopen the economy."

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ECE program leaders have been called,

> "...master multitaskers, seamlessly transitioning from comforting crying children to managing a plumbing problem; from writing a facilities report to meeting with a family to help them better understand their child's development." [1]

This description underscores the unseen complexities found in ECE settings. Yet throughout the Pandemic, early childhood educators' well-being has received scant public attention, let alone how ECE program leaders are doing. [2]

This third report from the Listening to Teacher study's second year focuses on the program leaders (*n*=113) who responded to a survey sent to all participants in New York's Aspire Registry who work in NYC. As emphasized in the preceding reports, *Nadie nos han preguntado (nobody has asked us)* and *Forgotten Frontline Workers - One Year Later*, the results from this study are limited to those who participated in it. That is, these findings cannot be used to draw conclusions about the experiences of NYC's early educators as a whole. That has never been this study's purpose, which is instead to use data to prompt reflection and action-oriented dialogue. [3]

HIGHLIGHTS
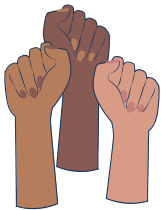
There was an overwhelming expression of fortitude; however, resilience must not be treated as a bottomless well.

Support from supervisors lowered the odds of survey participants reporting potential burnout.

Across multiple questions about workplace support, a majority noted the important role this played during the Pandemic.

The odds of program leaders reporting potential burnout were 1.7 times other respondents.

WHAT IS IN PLACE TO SUPPORT PROGRAM LEADERS?

[1] Barahal & Cruz, 2020, p. 42
[2] Tarrant & Nagasawa, 2020; Note: Pandemic is being capitalized as a proper noun.
[3] A Spanish-English survey was distributed to 23,020 Aspire participants between June 14 and July 2, 2021.The response rate was 3.6% (*n*=833). Those who did not complete the survey were assumed to have withdrawn their consent, leaving a usable sample of *n*=663. The self-selected nature of this sample means these findings cannot be generalized.

WHO RESPONDED?

57%
>15 years of experience
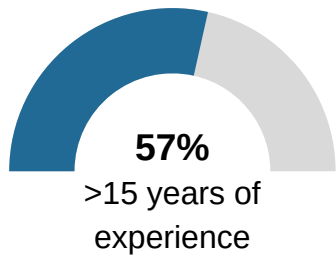
53% BIPOC
(69% of all others in the sample identified as BIPOC) [4]

82%
held masters degree+ (4 held doctorates)
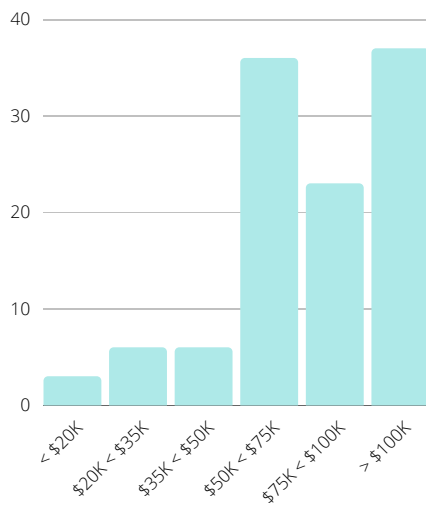
86% had a household income
> $50K

54% had a household income
> $75K (vs. 18% of all others)

#9

Participants identified
as lesbian, gay,
bisexual, pansexual,
or asexual

#5

Identified as
disabled

#5

Identified as men

#39

Identified as
parents (of at least
39 children)

STRESS & BURNOUT

As noted at the beginning of this report, leading an early care and education program is a difficult job that requires a broad skillset and involves navigating multiple layers of demands, which for this group included **37% having to lay off staff, 60% facing staff resignations, and 53% reporting difficulty filling open positions**.

So it came as something of a surprise that, overall, the leaders in this survey did not report significantly different impact from the 11 economic, health, social, and emotional stressors in the survey, nor did they say they experienced significantly different concentrations of stressors (74% of leaders experienced 5+ of the 11 vs. 71% of all others). These findings provide a reminder of the Pandemic's widespread effects on the field.

However, these results are tempered by **the odds of this group reporting potential burnout being 1.7 times everyone else**. [5] 19 of the 56 in the "worry-about" group (34%) selected the most serious options: (a) *the feelings of burnout won't go away* or (b) *I feel completely burned out and wonder if I can go on*.

When asked what her takeaways have been, one participant put it succinctly, **"Emotionally and mentally exhausted."** [6]

<div>
WHAT IS IN PLACE TO SUPPORT PROGRAM LEADERS?

WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE?
</div>

fig. 1. Job Role : Risk of Burnout
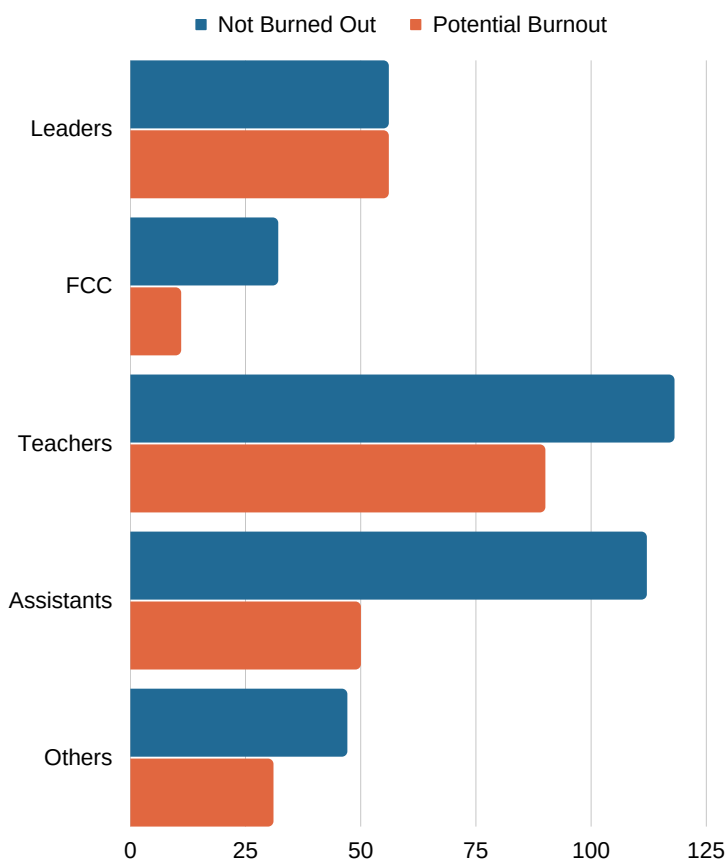
■ Not Burned Out   ■ Potential Burnout

4

COMMUNAL COPING

Burnout, resilience, and coping are typically thought of as universally-experienced, individual qualities. However a still-emerging research literature suggests that individuals' ability to weather stressors are related to social and cultural context – the ability of people's environments to help them survive adverse experiences, often through culturally-congruent values and practices [6]

Gabriela Barajas-Gonzalez has brought this ecological perspective of coping into early childhood by considering ECE professionals' job-related stress within a climate of anti-immigration (and other related socio-political strife) through Tamara Afifi's concept of communal coping, which can moderate the negative effects of natural disasters and other collective traumas. [7]

The concept is more than social support and involves three specific characteristics:

A sense of joint ownership of a stressor

Communication about it

Shared action to address it

In essence, this is sending messages of *we're in this together*, backed up by tangible action, a collective set of experiences that has been lacking in the U.S. during the Pandemic. [8] The buffering potential can be seen in what this leader shared last year,

> "*I feel that our small center is one that has fared very well so far... We have stayed open and been supported by our larger agency who has taken the situation very seriously… Upper management has been very supportive, as have our regional OCFS [Office of Children and Family Services] office and our local CCR&R [Child Care Resource & Referral]. While we do have very low census currently and have had to enact lay-offs, we have been able to prioritize staff who were more comfortable being at home or had loved ones that needed care.*" [all emphases added]

[6] Raghavan & Sandanapitchai, 2020; Rivera-González & Hak Hepburn, 2022; Ungar, 2013
[7] Afifi et al., 2020; Barajas-Gonzalez, 2021
[8] Altman, 2020; Barajas-Gonzalez, 2021

HINTS OF COMMUNAL COPING

So while there was ample evidence of Pandemic-related stress, there were also illustrations of key aspects of communal coping, both its presence and the effects of its absence. For instance, the overwhelming majority of leaders said that their "staff rose to the occasion" (*fig. 2.*), with one saying,

"*I discovered the power of community and the importance of transparency. In some weird way, **this whole experience brought me closer to my teaching staff and colleagues as we were all experiencing immense pressure and fear**. As I desperately managed all of the parent/family anxiety, I learned to be as transparent as possible. The more information the better! The more communication the better. In this case, more was more!*"

While not explicitly addressing the key qualities of communal coping, this quote suggests a commitment to *we're in this together*.

Another added, "...***with coworkers who are supportive, I can adapt*** *better than I thought I could*."

However, an additional leader cautioned about the limits of individual resilience without wider organizational and systemic support,

"*...**I am stronger than I realized but also that I am a human being**.... This year made me wonder if I want to continue [as a director]. The lack of support and guidance from the organization to perform my job remotely was frustrating…. It has been a very challenging year*."

This last perspective may give insight on the lower percentages of felt support in *fig. 2*. [9] Leaders' ability to be supportive may be influenced by the support they receive.

fig. 2. Feelings of Support (%)
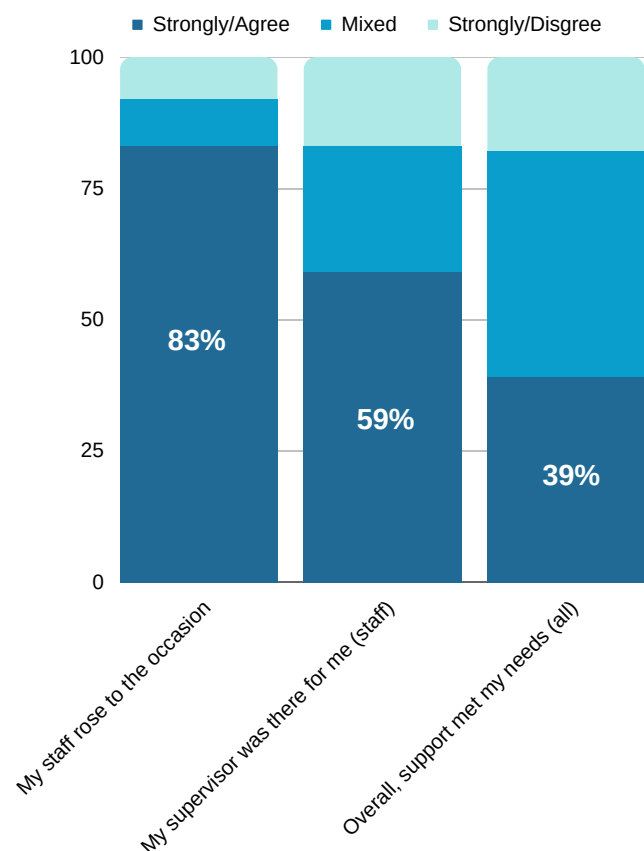
■ Strongly/Agree ■ Mixed ■ Strongly/Disagree

- My staff rose to the occasion: 83%
- My supervisor was there for me (staff): 59%
- Overall, support met my needs (all): 39%

WHAT NEEDS TO BE IN PLACE TO SUPPORT LEADERS?

Prior to the Pandemic there was (somewhat) greater attention being paid to educators' well-being, although the predominant focus was and is on classroom teachers and what leaders can do to support them. [10] Perhaps it is stating the obvious that leadership matters not only to instructional and program quality but also to school culture and climate, illustrated by this study's finding that **support from supervisors reduced the odds of someone reporting potential burnout**. [11] However, if this is the case, why is there so little done to prepare and support leaders? As one new director responded **when asked about the preparation she has received for her role,** *"To be a director? … [laughing],"* she asked, before explaining that her graduate program helped her to think deeply about teaching but not about the other aspects of her job.

What has become clear through this study, is the Pandemic has added to what is already a complex role, punctuating the importance of addressing questions about how to support program leaders. As this director presciently observed last year,

> *"The impact of trauma has been heavy. Not only for our children and families, but also for our teachers and ourselves. Real grief is being experienced in real time and vicariously.* ***Our profession does not do enough to support teachers with trauma informed care, nor does it educate leaders in trauma informed supervision. COVID 19 is a collective trauma and the aftermath will change all of us.*** *I am not sure we are prepared for the catch-up game we will be playing as we watch and experience recovery."*

Again, what is in place and needs to be in place to support leaders? **Furthermore, this study's finding about racial and ethnic disparities between those who hold leadership roles (p. 3) highlights the critical need to reimagine pathways to leadership for Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color which recognize that being trauma informed means addressing historical and racial trauma**. [12]

"I am not sure we are prepared for the catch-up game we will be playing as we watch and experience recovery."

[10] Koplow, 2021; Jennings, Jeon & Roberts, 2020; Whitebook, Schleiber, Hankey, Austin & George, 2018

[11] Barahal & Cruz, 2020; Collie, 2021; Douglas, 2019; Binomial logistic regression, $\chi2$(3)=36.693, *p*≤.001, *n*=399; support from colleagues (OR=.961, CI95% .682, 1.354); support from supervisors (OR=.655, 95%CI .485, .844); support from "the system" (OR=.596, 95% CI .468, .760), *Nagelkerke R* square=.119 (small effect)

[12] Irby, 2021; Comas-Díaz, Nagayama Hall & Neville, 2019; Saleem, Anderson & Williams, 2020; Talan, 2021

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

If there is a carry away message from this facet of the Listening to Teachers Study, it is that early childhood program leaders should not be punished for their competence. As has been described elsewhere in this report they are Jax of all trades who, for the most part, showed up for their staff during this crisis. This versatility and commitment must be recognized, nurtured, and meaningfully valued. And yet much of the focus on ECE leaders, to date, has been on defining technical aspects of leadership, such as minimum credentials (i.e., bachelor's degree) and competencies (e.g., instructional and administrative leadership, interpersonal skills, etc.). [13]

More recently attention has begun to shift towards equity, important because there is compelling evidence of racial bias in ECE hiring that cannot be disentangled from the field's demographics. **Nationally, approximately 63% of center directors are white**, 17% are Black, and 12% are Latine (a notable limitation in that analysis is that it did not consider Native American, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander, or Asian American ethnicities). While **53% of leaders in this study identified as BIPOC, the odds of a BIPOC participant being a leader were significantly lower than their white colleagues (p. 3)**. This has hypothetical connections to documented racial bias in ECE hiring, which may have further implications on the emerging evidence that Black and Latine children can benefit from having teachers who are culturally and linguistically similar to them. [14]

However, shifting diversity numbers is only a part of a solution. As it does for children, adults' experience of inclusion and belonging matters - particularly for BIPOC professionals. Therefore, professional learning for leaders must consider more than technical knowledge and skills, it must also be humanizing. For instance, Paula Jorde Bloom, the founder of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University believed that participants in their programs should feel pampered. This not only speaks to an ethos of caring and hospitality but also to **developmentally-meaningful learning experiences that center plural identities, respect adults' interests and which are multi-sensory, applicable, and joyful**. [15] The task ahead is to transform leadership development through new recruitment strategies, reimagined adult learning, and ongoing analysis of participants' experiences and outcomes to guide improvement efforts. If leaders are supported, they will be better able to continue showing up for the teachers, children, and families in their care.

[13] Allen & Kelly, 2015; Talan, 2021
[14] Boyd-Swan, & Herbst, 2019; Rasheed, Brown, Doyle & Jennings, 2020
[15] Barrett, 2022; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018; Irby, 2021; Puritty, Strickland, Alia, Blonder, Klein, Kohl, McGee, Quintana, Ridley, Tellman & Gerber, 2017; Talan, 2021

OTHER REPORTS FROM THE LISTENING TO TEACHERS STUDY

PHASE I

Forgotten frontline workers: A snapshot of COVID-19 and family child care in New York

Who will care for the early care and education workforce? COVID-19 and the need to support early childhood educators' emotional well-being

New York early care and education survey: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on New York's early childhood system

PHASE II

"Nadie nos han preguntado..." (Nobody has asked us...)

Forgotten frontline workers - One year later

The listening to teachers study: Technical report

These reports can be accessed here (link) or by following this QR code:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Straus Center for Young Children & Families at Bank Street College of Education was established in 2015 to conduct and promote *practice-oriented*, *policy-relevant*, and *equity committed* research, with a particular concern for inequities and traumas produced by the interaction of racism, classism, sexisms, and ableism. More information on the center can be found here (link).

APPENDICES

Table 1

Association Between Racial/Ethnic Identity & Job Role

		Leader	All Others	Total
BIPOC	Count	56	348	404
	Expected Count	73.3	330.7	404.0
	% within Race/Ethnicity (BIPOC/white)	13.9%	86.1%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	**-4.1**	**4.1**	
White	Count	49	126	175
	Expected Count	31.7	143.3	175.0
	% within Race/Ethnicity (BIPOC/white)	28.0%	72.0%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	**4.1**	**-4.1**	
Total	Count	105	474	579
	Expected Count	105.0	474.0	579.0
	% within Race/Ethnicity (BIPOC/white)	18.1%	81.9%	100.0%

Zero cells had an expected count < 5. $X^2(1) = 16.442$, $p < .001$, **$\varphi = -.169$** (inverse relationship, also seen in the adjusted residuals), Odds Ratio = .414 (95% CI: .268, .639), which speaks to the odds of a person with a BIPOC identity being a program leader vs. their white identifying counterparts.

Table 2

Differences in Burnout Ratings by Job Role

		Not feeling burned out	Potential Burnout	Total
Program Leader	Count	56	56	112
	Expected Count	67.8	44.2	112.0
	% within Job Role	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	**-2.5**	**2.5**	
Family Child Care Professional	Count	32	11	43
	Expected Count	26.0	17.0	43.0
	% within Job Role	74.4%	25.6%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	1.9	-1.9	
Lead Teacher	Count	118	90	208
	Expected Count	125.9	82.1	208.0
	% within Job Role	56.7%	43.3%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	-1.4	1.4	
Assistant Teacher	Count	112	50	162
	Expected Count	98.1	63.9	162.0
	% within Job Role	69.1%	30.9%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	**2.6**	**-2.6**	
Support Staff	Count	18	16	34
	Expected Count	20.6	13.4	34.0
	% within Job Role	52.9%	47.1%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	-.9	.9	
Other	Count	29	15	44
	Expected Count	26.6	17.4	44.0
	% within Job Role	65.9%	34.1%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	.8	-.8	
Total	Count	365	238	603
	Expected Count	365.0	238.0	603.0
	% within Job Role	60.5%	39.5%	100.0%

Zero cells had an expected count < 5. $X^2(5)$ = 16.301, p = .006, V = -.164

Table 3

Risk of Burnout, Program Leaders vs. All Others

		Potential Burn Out	Not Feeling Burned Out	Total
Leader	Count	56	56	112
	Expected Count	44.2	67.8	112.0
	% within Program Leaders/Others	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	2.5	-2.5	
All Others	Count	182	309	491
	Expected Count	193.8	297.2	491.0
	% within Program Leaders/Others	37.1%	62.9%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	-2.5	2.5	
Total	Count	238	365	603
	Expected Count	238.0	365.0	603.0
	% within Program Leaders/Others	39.5%	60.5%	100.0%

No cells had a expected count < 5. $X^2(1) = 6.385$, $p = .012$, $\varphi = .103$, Odds Ratio = 1.698 (95% CI: 1.123, 2.566)

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