

Reimagining professional identity: Early childhood educators amid California policy shifts

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Abstract: Early Childhood Education is undergoing structural transformation in California with the expansion of Universal Transitional Kindergarten and the PK-3 Early Childhood Education Specialist Credential. While these policies aim to professionalize the field, they risk reinforcing historical inequities by prioritizing TK-12 centric credentialing over community-rooted expertise. This study explores how ECE practitioners navigate, resist, and reimagine their professional identities amid these systemic shifts. Grounded in Critical Feminist Theory and conceptualized through Intersectionality and Community Cultural Wealth, this research employs Critical Phenomenology Research to illuminate the lived experiences of ECE practitioners with specialized early childhood expertise. Findings reveal three key themes: (1) Reclaiming Professional Identity, (2) Resisting Systemic Marginalization, and (3) Envisioning Transformative Leadership. The study calls for equity-driven professionalization, advocating for credentialing pathways that affirm lived experience and community-based knowledge, contributing to critical dialogues on workforce equity, educational sovereignty, and the future of early learning.

Article History

Received: 25 March 2025

Accepted: 02 July 2025

Keywords

Early childhood education; Professional identity; Policy reform; Social justice; Credentialing

Introduction

Early Childhood Education and the Politics of Professionalization

Early Childhood Education (ECE) has long been undervalued and systematically shaped by race, gender, and class hierarchies that dictate who is seen as an “expert” in teaching young children (Austin et al., 2015; Lubeck, 1998; Souto-Manning, 2019). The field has been historically framed as women’s work, often racialized and feminized in ways that devalue both its intellectual contributions and its labor (Glenn, 1992; Whitebook et al., 2018). Practitioners—predominantly women, many from Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities—have sustained early learning environments for generations, yet their pedagogical knowledge has been systematically excluded from dominant discourses of professionalization (Meier & Stremmel, 2010).

This study focuses on California, USA, where the introduction of Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) and the PK-3 Early Childhood Education (ECE) Specialist Credential represents a broader neoliberal agenda within the state’s public education system. While positioned as reforms to expand access and elevate professional standards, these policies may serve as budgetary strategies to stabilize California’s struggling public school system by increasing student enrollment through an additional grade level. However, this cost-saving measure risks undermining the specialized expertise of ECE practitioners, whose work has historically been undervalued due to feminized labor dynamics (Federici, 2011; Fraser, 2013).

The PK-3 ECE credential aims to align early education with the K-12 model, but it prioritizes multi-subject credentialing over the developmentally appropriate practices central to ECE, creating a pathway that may inadvertently replace play-based, inquiry-driven pedagogy with standardized instruction. Similarly, UTK’s implementation offers free transitional kindergarten to all four-year-olds but reinforces a

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two-tiered workforce, where ECE practitioners without K-12 credentials face systemic exclusion (McLean et al., 2021). These policies not only affect practitioners' professional identities but also exacerbate inequities by relegating a predominantly women-led workforce to precarious labor conditions, reinforcing historical patterns of marginalization and disposability (Souto-Manning, 2019; Whitebook et al., 2018).

This research situates these policy shifts within a Critical Feminist Theory framework, examining how credential-based gatekeeping intersects with race, gender, and class dynamics, impacting ECE practitioners' professional recognition and career mobility. The study advances a counter-narrative that centers lived experiences and advocates for equity-driven professionalization, aligning with broader social justice movements in education (Yosso, 2005).

Historical Context of ECE as a Profession

ECE in the U.S. has been shaped by structural inequities that trace back to enslavement, settler colonialism, and industrial capitalism (Lubeck, 1998). In the post-slavery era, Black women were confined to domestic work and caregiving, roles that continue to shape perceptions of ECE as feminized labor rather than intellectual labor (Austin et al., 2015; Glenn, 1992). Indigenous knowledge systems of childrearing and education were actively suppressed through boarding schools and forced assimilation policies, further reinforcing Eurocentric models of early learning that ignored intergenerational, community-based approaches (Brayboy, 2005; Tuck, 2009).

The marginalization of ECE is also linked to the historical construction of care work as feminized and undervalued labor (Davis, 1983; Federici, 2011). The emergence of public kindergarten in the 19th century, for instance, was framed as an extension of gendered care work rather than a specialized field of education (Bloch, 1991). Even as early childhood research affirmed the cognitive, social, and emotional significance of early learning, ECE remained structurally underfunded and politically sidelined, reinforcing economic and racialized stratifications within the workforce (Whitebook et al., 2018).

The Shift Toward K-12 Credentialing: Opportunity or Exclusion?

Historically, ECE has been structured around relational, play-based, and inquiry-driven learning, shaped by educators who understand child development beyond test-driven outcomes (Ginsburg, 2007; Whitebook et al., 2018). However, the push toward PK-3 ECE credentialing reflects a broader policy shift that collapses ECE into the TK-12 structure, treating early learning as merely a preparatory stage for elementary school rather than a distinct pedagogical field (Melnick et al., 2022).

This shift is not neutral—it reconfigures who is seen as a legitimate educator, often privileging multi-subject credentialed teachers over experienced ECE practitioners (Montoya et al., 2022). The PK-3 ECE credential does not recognize the unique pedagogical expertise of ECE professionals, instead prioritizing alignment with standardized curricular models designed for TK-12 settings (Souto-Manning, 2019). This risks replacing play-based, developmentally appropriate learning with rigid, academic-driven instruction, thereby undermining the very principles that define high-quality ECE (Austin et al., 2015; Rameka, 2022).

Additionally, UTK's implementation exacerbates workforce disparities by creating a two-tiered labor system, wherein multiple-subject credentialed teachers are prioritized for new teaching positions while experienced ECE professionals—who have been historically marginalized—are sidelined in their own field (Kim, 2013; Melnick et al., 2022). This policy approach reinforces a hierarchical restructuring of labor that reflects neoliberal trends in market-driven credentialing, wherein professional legitimacy is contingent on costly, standardized, and state-sanctioned qualifications (Fraser, 2013; Osgood, 2006).

Theoretical Framework: Reimagining Expertise in ECE

This study challenges these exclusionary policies by reframing professional identity in ECE as an expansive and justice-centered praxis (Yosso, 2005). It critiques the deficit narratives that render ECE practitioners as “underqualified,” arguing instead that they hold expertise that is deliberately marginalized within dominant credentialing systems (Moloney, 2010; Osgood, 2006). Grounded in Critical Feminist Theory (CFT), this research makes visible how care work, especially work associated with young children,

has been systematically devalued because of its association with women, particularly women of color, immigrants, and working-class communities (Davis, 1983; Federici, 2011; Fraser, 2013). CFT examines how power operates through labor hierarchies, positioning feminized pedagogical work as less skilled or professional, which in turn shapes credentialing policy and workforce structures. This study employs CFT to critique how the concept of “qualified” becomes a socially constructed category that upholds racialized and gendered exclusions (Glenn, 1992), rather than a neutral or merit-based designation. CFT foregrounds the political nature of labor hierarchies, revealing how feminized pedagogical knowledge is framed as less professional or legitimate. This theoretical lens guides the study’s deconstruction of credentialing regimes that privilege state-sanctioned qualifications while sidelining community-rooted forms of knowledge.

Additionally, Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005) provide critical tools for analyzing how early learning expertise is racialized, dismissed, and reclaimed through everyday pedagogical practices (Gutiérrez, 2005; Souto-Manning, 2019). These frameworks surface the ways educators draw on linguistic, familial, and navigational capital, forms of knowledge that remain undervalued in credential-focused systems.

By employing Critical Phenomenology Research (CPR) (Ahmed, 2006; Guenther, 2013; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), this study foregrounds the lived experiences of ECE practitioners, positioning them as agents of knowledge production rather than passive recipients of top-down policy shifts (Madison, 2012). Unlike traditional or descriptive phenomenology, CPR does not stop at describing experience—it asks what forces shape those experiences and how people carry them in their daily lives. It invites us to consider: What does it mean to be an expert in a system that refuses to name you as one? And what might justice look like if it started with those already doing the work?

This methodological approach also aligns with the values of the study: centering voice, challenging structural erasure, and holding space for complexity. In practice, this meant combining three forms of data, semi-structured interviews, a qualitative survey, and autoethnographic reflection. This multi-method design offered depth (through narrative interviews), breadth (through survey responses), and reflexivity (through my own layered standpoint). Together, these forms of knowledge reinforced one another, creating a justice-oriented methodological structure rooted in relational accountability, not extractive inquiry (Meier & Stremmel, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2019). The following sections will outline the study’s methodology, findings, and implications, offering policy recommendations that prioritize equity over exclusionary credentialing models

Method

Critical Phenomenology Research: A Justice-Oriented Approach

As introduced earlier, this study employs Critical Phenomenology Research (CPR) to examine the lived experiences of ECE practitioners navigating California’s shifting credentialing policies. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to uncover universal truths about human consciousness, CPR is explicitly political and relational—it centers embodied knowledge while interrogating the institutional and historical forces that shape professional identity (Madison, 2012; Spivak, 1988). This methodological approach is especially suited to research that challenges dominant definitions of “qualification” and foregrounds the lived expertise of practitioners historically excluded from policymaking and academic discourse (Ahmed, 2006; Yosso, 2005; Souto-Manning, 2019). In doing so, CPR supports a counternarrative to deficit framings that equate formal credentials with competence, while also creating space for reflexive, multi-layered analysis by the researcher.

CPR also allows for a multi-layered analysis, where I not only examine individual participant narratives but also reflect on my own positionality as an ECE practitioner and doctoral student. This approach ensures that the study is not merely about participants but also reflects my situated role within the larger socio-political context of ECE professionalization (Ahmed, 2006).

Data Collection and Participant Recruitment

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of ECE professionals credentialed in early childhood education who bring specialized expertise distinct from multiple-subject credential pathways. This group represents the practitioners most directly impacted by the UTK and PK-3 ECE credentialing shift. Recruitment took place through community networks, professional organizations, and graduate programs in ECE. The selection criteria included:

- Current or recent employment in early learning settings (preschool, transitional kindergarten, or early childhood education centers).
- ECE credentialed but without a multiple-subject credential, ensuring direct engagement with the policy tensions under examination.
- At least three years of teaching experience, allowing for reflections on long-term career trajectories and systemic shifts.
- Diverse racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, ensuring the inclusion of perspectives from historically underrepresented communities (Yosso, 2005).

A total of 9 participants were selected for semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes each. Interviews focused on participants' experiences with professional identity, credentialing processes, and policy adaptation strategies (McLean et al., 2021; Whitebook et al., 2018). The interview protocol was designed to elicit rich, narrative-based responses, allowing participants to describe their lived experiences in their own words. The interview guide was developed through an iterative process informed by the study's theoretical framework, piloted with two peer educators, and refined based on feedback regarding clarity, emotional sensitivity, and alignment with the research questions. I used consistent interview procedures across participants and included follow-up questions when needed to support narrative depth. To enhance trustworthiness, I conducted member-checking by sharing preliminary themes with select participants to confirm resonance and accuracy.

The decision to integrate interviews, a survey, and autoethnography was intentional and rooted in the study's commitment to both depth and breadth. Semi-structured interviews captured detailed personal narratives; the qualitative survey enabled broader pattern recognition across the field. Autoethnography offered a reflexive, embodied account that brought my own lived experience into dialogue with participants' stories. This triangulated, multi-method qualitative approach aligns with the principles of Critical Phenomenology, which centers both individual meaning-making and collective social patterning. Together, these complementary methods enhance the trustworthiness, depth, and relational accountability of the findings.

Additionally, I conducted autoethnographic reflections as both a method and a mode of inquiry, drawing from my lived experiences as an ECE practitioner, doctoral student, and advocate. Autoethnography allowed me to situate personal experience within broader structures of power, particularly those shaping professional identity and policy exclusion. This reflective practice included journaling, memo writing, and field notes that supported positional analysis and embodied engagement with the research. This autoethnographic layer of inquiry provided an opportunity to interweave my own story with the collective struggles of ECE practitioners, illuminating how affective, institutional, and policy forces shape lived experience in early education and professionalization.

I also integrated a qualitative survey distributed to 45 ECE practitioners, designed to capture demographic insights and broader patterns in identity negotiation. The survey consisted of 10 mixed-methods questions, covering topics such as:

- Years of experience in ECE to assess how professional identity evolves over time.
- Perceptions of credentialing and how it impacts practitioners' sense of legitimacy within the field.

- Narratives of systemic challenges and resistance, using open-ended questions to capture qualitative depth.
- Demographic variables, including gender, racial identity, and linguistic background, to contextualize the experiences of practitioners in relation to broader workforce trends (McLean et al., 2021).

Ethical considerations were integrated at every stage of research design and data collection. Participants were provided with clear information about the study's purpose, their rights, and how their confidentiality would be protected. Informed consent was obtained through signed forms and verbal confirmation. Names and identifying details were removed or altered, and audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely. As a practitioner-researcher working in overlapping communities, I remained attentive to power dynamics and made efforts to avoid extractive practices, such as offering opportunities for participants to review and reflect on preliminary findings.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Reflexivity is central to Critical Phenomenology Research, requiring me to continuously examine my own positionality within the study (Ahmed, 2006; Madison, 2012). As an ECE practitioner and doctoral candidate, I navigate both insider and outsider perspectives, which shape the interpretation of findings. Recognizing the potential for bias, I engaged in:

- Journaling and memos to document assumptions, emotional responses, and evolving insights.
- Member-checking with participants to validate interpretations and prevent misrepresentation.
- Engagement with critical colleagues to challenge and refine analytical perspectives.

This reflexive process was not separate from ethical practice; it was part of it. By acknowledging my own standpoint and vulnerabilities, I was able to approach participants' stories with humility and care. Positionality informed the questions I asked, the silences I noticed, and the choices I made about what to include in the final analysis.

My reflexivity process also involved engaging with historical and political analyses of ECE labor, drawing connections between personal experiences and larger structural forces that have shaped workforce policies over time (Fraser, 2013; Spivak, 1988). This ensured that my analysis did not remain at the level of individual experiences but also critically examined how policy decisions shape professional identity and access to professionalization pathways.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using a Critical Phenomenological approach, identifying patterns across participant narratives while situating them within larger policy structures. Key analytical techniques included:

- Iterative coding: Identifying emergent themes related to professional identity, exclusion, and resistance (Souto-Manning, 2019).
- Positionality analysis: Examining how practitioners navigate institutional constraints and agency within policy shifts (Ahmed, 2006; Fraser, 2013).
- Narrative reconstruction: Contextualizing personal experiences within historical and socio-political frameworks (Spivak, 1988; Yosso, 2005).
- Intersectional analysis: Exploring how race, gender, and class intersect to shape participants' experiences of credentialing and professional identity (Crenshaw, 1989).

By integrating practitioner narratives, reflexive analysis, and structural critique, this methodology advances a counter-hegemonic framework for understanding ECE professionalization.

Findings

This section presents the key findings derived from semi-structured interviews with nine ECE practitioners, a qualitative survey with forty-five respondents, and autoethnographic reflections drawn from my own professional experiences. The findings are structured around three interrelated themes: (1) Reclaiming Professional Identity, (2) Resisting Systemic Marginalization, and (3) Envisioning Transformative Leadership. These themes illuminate how early childhood educators navigate credentialing policies, advocate for equitable recognition of their expertise, and reimagine leadership within the field. All participant quotes below are clearly identified by data source (e.g., survey, interview, or autoethnographic reflection) to ensure transparency in attribution. Each theme is discussed in relation to broader structural issues in early childhood education (ECE) and framed within Critical Feminist Theory (CFT) (Fraser, 2013; Federici, 2011), Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Reclaiming Professional Identity: Centering Practitioner Expertise

Participants consistently emphasized the deep expertise they bring to early learning environments, yet they described ongoing struggles to have their work recognized within dominant policy frameworks. Many reflected on the disconnect between their professional knowledge and institutional definitions of professionalism embedded in UTK and PK-3 ECE credentialing policies (McLean et al., 2021). One of my own reflections as a longtime ECE practitioner echoes these tensions:

I've built relationships with children and families for over a decade, tailoring learning experiences to each child's needs. But without the 'right' credential, it's like my experience doesn't count.

Another survey respondent echoed similar frustrations:

It's frustrating to be told that a teacher fresh out of a multiple-subject program is more qualified than I am, despite my years of experience working with young children.

These responses highlight how credentialing structures devalue relational and experiential knowledge, reinforcing a system where professional legitimacy is defined through formalized pathways rather than lived expertise (Souto-Manning, 2019; Whitebook et al., 2018). Participants' reflections made visible the epistemic violence of current credentialing systems—how policies delegitimize ways of knowing rooted in care, community, and continuity. Many educators also described how historical legacies of ECE's feminization contribute to their struggle for recognition. Historically, early childhood teaching has been framed as “natural” work for women rather than a specialized field requiring pedagogical knowledge (Moloney, 2010; Osgood, 2006). As a result, contemporary policies continue to undervalue the intellectual labor of ECE practitioners by privileging formal credentials over experiential expertise (Austin et al., 2015).

Educators emphasized that their cultural knowledge, particularly the ability to communicate with families in their home languages, understand intergenerational caregiving practices, and draw on community-rooted teaching strategies, was central to their pedagogical approach.

One bilingual educator explained in a survey response:

Spanish with families builds trust. They share more about their child's learning, and I can adjust my approach based on what matters to them at home.

This theme connects directly to Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) by demonstrating that ECE professionals draw on familial, linguistic, and navigational capital not only to create meaningful learning experiences but also to bridge home-school connections, tailor curriculum responsively, and model inclusive practices for children. These forms of cultural capital challenge deficit-based frameworks and assert that practitioner knowledge is not ancillary, but foundational. Yet, these skills remain unacknowledged in dominant credentialing frameworks, reinforcing systemic inequities (Tobin, 2020).

Resisting Systemic Marginalization: Credentialing as a Gatekeeping Mechanism

The second major theme that emerged was credentialing as a barrier rather than a pathway to professional advancement. Many participants described how economic and linguistic barriers disproportionately impact ECE practitioners from multilingual and historically underpaid backgrounds (McLean et al., 2021).

One interviewee, a bilingual educator, stated:

ECE teachers who speak multiple languages should be seen as assets. Instead, we're told we need to 'prove' ourselves by passing credential exams that don't even reflect the realities of our classrooms.

Financial constraints were also a recurring theme. Several educators described the economic burden of additional credentialing requirements, explaining how the cost of coursework and exams created an exclusionary system. One survey participant explained:

I already make low wages, and now I'm supposed to take on student debt to get a credential that doesn't even recognize the skills I already have?

This reflects Fraser's (2013) critique of neoliberal restructuring in education, where the cost of professionalization is placed on individual educators rather than addressed through systemic policy solutions. The current model of credentialing reinforces inequities in access to career mobility, particularly for women from historically marginalized communities who make up the majority of the ECE workforce (Austin et al., 2015).

Several participants also pointed out that the multiple-subject credential model reinforces the schoolification of early childhood education, privileging teacher-centered approaches over play-based, inquiry-driven, and community-centered pedagogies (Souto-Manning, 2019). One participant reflected:

What we do in ECE is different from TK-12 teaching. We know how to foster inquiry, social-emotional development, and culturally responsive learning. But these policies make it seem like none of that matters unless we conform to a rigid, standardized model.

This theme surfaces how professional gatekeeping is not only structural but ideological, reproducing narrow definitions of quality and erasing the pedagogical foundations of early learning.

Envisioning Transformative Leadership: Redefining Expertise in ECE

Despite these systemic barriers, many participants expressed a commitment to redefining leadership in the field. They articulated a vision for a more inclusive, justice-oriented model of professionalization, one that centers experience, community knowledge, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

One interviewee reflected:

We need a credentialing system that values what we already bring—the deep relationships, the cultural knowledge, and the understanding of how children learn in diverse settings.

This statement amplifies the urgency of developing more inclusive credentialing pathways that acknowledge and integrate the existing expertise of ECE practitioners. Rather than imposing a rigid bifurcation between TK-12 credentialing and 0-4 infant/toddler/preschool care, state policy and higher education institutions must adopt a mixed-delivery system that holistically recognizes ECE professionals across diverse settings. Such a system must actively reject deficit frameworks and instead invest in community-embedded knowledge and culturally sustaining approaches. This includes streamlining teacher credentialing pathways to ensure that practitioners are not siloed into artificial categories but instead supported through competency-based, experience-validated models that honor their contributions to early learning (Whitebook et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2021).

A reimagined system must also incorporate prior learning assessments and alternative certification pathways that recognize the deep pedagogical knowledge already possessed by ECE educators. This approach aligns with broader efforts to reduce barriers to professionalization while maintaining high-

quality standards in the field (Souto-Manning, 2019). By embedding flexibility, equity, and practitioner voice into policy reforms, states can move toward a coherent, justice-oriented professionalization model that better serves children, families, and educators alike.

This aligns with Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), which highlights how practitioners' cultural and linguistic assets should be seen as strengths, not deficits. Many participants emphasized the need for alternative credentialing pathways, such as:

- Competency-based assessments that evaluate practical teaching skills rather than standardized tests.
- Portfolio-based credentialing models that honor experience, community engagement, and reflective practice.
- Employer-supported tuition assistance to remove economic barriers to professional advancement.

Some participants also pointed out that ECE professionals need a seat at the table in policy discussions, arguing that they should be leading—not merely responding to—decisions about the field's future. One survey participant shared:

Policies about early childhood education should be shaped by the people who actually do this work. We need to be at the center of these conversations, not just reacting to them.

Linking Findings to Broader Theoretical Frameworks

The findings from this study illustrate tensions between institutional definitions of professionalism and the lived experiences of ECE practitioners. These tensions are best understood through:

- Critical Feminist Theory (Fraser, 2013; Federici, 2011): The undervaluation of ECE labor is rooted in gendered and racialized hierarchies that position early education as feminized labor rather than intellectual work.
- Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989): Credentialing policies disproportionately impact women from historically marginalized communities, reinforcing existing inequities in access to professional advancement.
- Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005): ECE practitioners hold valuable knowledge systems that are systematically excluded from dominant policy frameworks, highlighting the need for a shift toward asset-based models of professionalization.

Implications for Policy and Practice

To address these issues, a reimagined approach to ECE credentialing must include:

- Formal recognition of lived, relational, and experiential expertise as valid forms of professional knowledge.
- Credentialing pathways that are culturally responsive, linguistically sustaining, and grounded in community-based pedagogies.
- Financial support to remove economic barriers to professionalization.

By centering the voices and experiences of ECE practitioners, this study calls for a radical shift in how professional identity is constructed in early childhood education—one that moves beyond exclusionary gatekeeping and toward a model of equity, recognition, and transformative leadership.

Conclusion and Discussion

Reimagining Professional Identity in Early Childhood Education

The findings of this study highlight the systemic challenges ECE practitioners face in navigating credentialing policies, the structural undervaluation of their expertise, and the urgent need for policy reform that acknowledges their contributions. The rigid TK-12 credentialing structures fail to account for the nuanced, relational, and community-driven pedagogies that define high-quality early childhood education. This research underscores the disconnect between institutional definitions of professionalism and the lived realities of ECE educators, emphasizing the need for a justice-centered, inclusive framework for professionalization (Souto-Manning, 2019; Whitebook et al., 2018).

Key themes that emerged include:

1. The need to recognize lived expertise as equally valid to formal credentialing processes.
2. The impact of systemic barriers, including financial, linguistic, and structural challenges, that disproportionately affect practitioners from historically marginalized communities.
3. A vision for transformative leadership that repositions ECE professionals as central decision-makers in shaping policies that affect their work.

Policy Recommendations: Toward a More Inclusive Credentialing System

To address these challenges, policymakers and educational institutions must implement alternative pathways to professionalization that affirm diverse forms of expertise. The following policy recommendations provide actionable strategies to restructure credentialing frameworks, ensuring they are equitable, inclusive, and reflective of the realities of ECE work.

Establish Alternative Credentialing Pathways

A reimagined credentialing system must move beyond the traditional reliance on multiple-subject credentials and instead adopt models that recognize and validate the competencies that ECE practitioners already possess. Competency-based, experience-informed approaches offer more equitable avenues for acknowledging professional expertise developed through years of practice. For instance, portfolio-based certification allows educators to demonstrate their pedagogical knowledge through reflective documentation, curated teaching artifacts, and case studies that highlight their impact on child development and learning (McLean et al., 2021). In parallel, Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) provide opportunities for institutions to evaluate existing knowledge through rigorous, competency-based measures, eliminating the need for redundant coursework that often fails to honor prior experience (Souto-Manning, 2019). Apprenticeship models and stackable micro-credentials also offer more flexible, work-integrated credentialing pathways, enabling practitioners to advance professionally without stepping away from their current roles (Whitebook et al., 2018). Collectively, these alternative models reflect a more just and practical approach to professionalization in early childhood education.

Address Financial Barriers to Credentialing

The cost of obtaining additional credentials remains one of the most significant barriers to professionalization in early childhood education, particularly for educators from historically marginalized communities. To advance equity within the workforce, financial support mechanisms must be expanded and institutionalized. State-funded tuition assistance can alleviate the burden for practitioners pursuing credential completion programs, ensuring that cost is not a gatekeeping mechanism. Additionally, employer-sponsored credentialing initiatives, including coverage of coursework, exam fees, and ongoing professional development, would remove common financial hurdles while signaling institutional commitment to the field. Loan forgiveness programs and targeted stipends for educators who commit to staying in the early childhood education (ECE) workforce for a specified period can further support retention and career advancement. These strategies are especially critical for multilingual educators and those working in under-resourced settings, where economic barriers to professional growth are

compounded by systemic inequities (Austin et al., 2015). Addressing these financial burdens is not only a matter of economic justice but a necessary step toward sustaining a diverse and qualified ECE workforce.

Strengthen the Mixed-Delivery System in ECE

Current policy frameworks continue to fragment the early childhood education field by separating it into distinct categories, infant/toddler care, preschool programs, and TK–12 transitional systems, rather than recognizing ECE as a developmental and pedagogical continuum (Tobin, 2020). This stratification not only disrupts continuity of care but also creates unnecessary barriers to professional mobility, preventing educators from moving fluidly across age groups and settings. A more equitable credentialing system must integrate mixed-delivery models that enable educators to teach across age spans without encountering artificial limitations based on arbitrary program distinctions. Establishing universal teaching pathways would allow experienced early educators to transition into TK–12 settings without the burden of pursuing an entirely separate multiple-subject credential. In tandem, state policies must ensure parity between ECE and TK–12 professionals, affirming early educators as vital contributors within the broader educational landscape (McLean et al., 2021).

Center ECE Practitioners in Policy Development

Early childhood educators are too often left out of the very policy conversations that govern their professional lives, a pattern that perpetuates systemic marginalization and erases community-rooted knowledge. A justice-centered approach to policy must actively disrupt this exclusion by embedding practitioner voice at every level of decision-making. This begins with appointing educators to state credentialing advisory boards and continues through participatory processes that meaningfully engage practitioners in the design of reforms. Policies that directly shape early education should not be crafted in isolation from those who enact them daily. Moreover, leadership development opportunities must be reimagined to support ECE professionals not merely as implementers but as architects of change. By positioning practitioners as policy leaders and valuing their lived expertise, the field can move toward a future defined by shared power, collective vision, and the redefinition of what counts as educational expertise.

Promote Asset-Based Models of Professionalization

Efforts to professionalize the early childhood workforce must reject deficit-based narratives that portray ECE practitioners as unqualified or incomplete. Instead, a transformative approach to credentialing recognizes the rich, community-rooted knowledge that educators already hold. Linguistic and cultural expertise should be affirmed as foundational—not peripheral—competencies, especially in a field that serves diverse children and families. Likewise, relational pedagogy, long practiced by early educators, must be upheld as central to high-quality teaching rather than dismissed as informal or secondary. Asset-based models also call for honoring community-driven approaches to early learning that do not neatly align with Western, school-centric frameworks but offer equally valid and powerful contributions to child development (Yosso, 2005; Souto-Manning, 2019). By centering these forms of expertise, credentialing systems can move toward models that are not only more equitable and culturally sustaining but also more just in their recognition of who gets to be seen as a “professional.”

Future Research Directions

While this study offers critical insights into professional identity and early education policy reform, additional research is needed to understand the broader implications of credentialing systems and their impact on equity in the ECE workforce. Longitudinal studies could examine how credentialing barriers affect workforce retention, job satisfaction, and career trajectories over time, particularly among practitioners from historically marginalized communities. Future research should also evaluate the effectiveness of alternative credentialing pathways, including competency-based assessments, portfolio models, and micro-credentials, in promoting more inclusive and sustainable professionalization frameworks.

Further inquiry is needed to explore how race, gender, language, and class intersect to shape access to leadership roles within early childhood education, especially in public systems undergoing credential reform. Finally, comparative studies of international credentialing approaches, such as apprenticeship programs in New Zealand or Finland's teacher education model, could offer valuable insights into global best practices that support inclusive, culturally grounded, and equity-centered models of professional advancement.

Research Significance: Beyond Token Inclusion

This study does not seek to simply "include" ECE practitioners in policy conversations but rather to disrupt exclusionary professionalization models that frame them as secondary to TK-12 educators. By exposing the ways in which policy decisions erase, co-opt, or commodify ECE expertise, this research argues for alternative pathways that center lived experience, community pedagogies, and equity-driven leadership (Fraser, 2013).

If these issues remain unchallenged, the impact will extend far beyond educators. Children, families, and communities will bear the consequences of an ECE system that prioritizes credentialing over culturally sustaining practices, reinforcing inequities in learning environments and workforce stability (Tobin, 2020; McLean et al., 2021). Policymakers must critically assess whether current reforms advance equity or merely serve to further stratify the ECE workforce along classed and racialized lines (Souto-Manning, 2019; Yosso, 2005).

Ultimately, this study contributes to critical policy conversations about the future of early learning by advocating for a professionalization model that is not imposed from above but co-constructed with the very practitioners who sustain the field (Spivak, 1988).

Final Reflections: Moving Beyond Deficit-Based Frameworks

Ultimately, this research calls for a radical reimagining of early childhood education professionalization—one that moves beyond exclusionary, deficit-based policies. By centering ECE practitioners as experts, leaders, and policymakers, we can build a system that is rooted in equity, recognition, and transformative leadership. The recommendations outlined here serve as a starting point for systemic reform, challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge and paving the way for a justice-oriented, inclusive model of credentialing in early childhood education.

As one participant stated:

We are not just educators—we are the foundation of lifelong learning. It's time policymakers saw us that way.

This statement serves as a reminder that ECE practitioners are not passive recipients of policy but active agents in shaping the future of education. By implementing these recommendations, we can move toward a profession that honors, sustains, and uplifts the expertise that has always existed in early childhood education.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

Acknowledgments: The author thanks Dr. Mina Kim, my husband and thinking partner, Lawrence Mariner, and Cohort 17 of the EdD Program at SFSU, especially critical friends Angela Kollerer and Kathryn Lige, for their support. Special thanks to Brenda Hernandez for her contributions.

Authors' contributions: was responsible for the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation.

Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.

Funding: This research did not receive a specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: This study received IRB approval, adhered to ethical guidelines, maintained participant confidentiality, and ensured informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and voluntary participation.

Publisher's Declarations

Editorial Acknowledgement: The editorial process of this article was completed under the editorship of the thematic issue editors; Dr Sadia Habib, Dr Ümit Kemal Yıldız and Dr Mehmet Toran through a double-blind peer review with external reviewers.

Publisher's Note: Journal of Childhood, Education & Society remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliation.

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