

**Child Care Centers' Experience with the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership Program**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to take a qualitative approach to identify what quality changes did staff members of childcare centers experience after partnering with the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership Program. Six childcare programs that partnered with Drake University Early Head Start through the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership Program was selected as the program of focus. Staff members like teachers, teacher associates, and program leaders were sent electronic surveys with closed and open-ended questions in order to identify the quality changes they experienced. This information is used to help understand the impact of public policy like the EHS-CCP it has on those that carry out the services in behalf of the federal government and add to the literature on EHS-CCP.

*Keywords:* Early Head Start Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP), Drake University Early Head Start (DUEHS), Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS)

### **Child Care Centers' Experience with the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership Program**

Public organizations are tasked to perform crucial functions within communities across the United States. Organizations such as Head Start play an important role in putting federal policy into action and influence the field of early childhood education since 1965. Drake University Head Start and Early Head Start are one of those programs in the state of Iowa tasked in promoting, "school readiness of children ages birth to five from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive and social emotional competence," (Fed. Reg. Vol. 80, No. 118 (June 2015) (Proposed Rules p. 35430).

Drake University Head Start and Drake University Early Head Start are one of those programs in the State of Iowa, tasked in carrying out early childhood education (ECE) policies on behalf of the federal government. These policies play an important role in influencing the field of ECE and the staff member of these organizations. These grants are not just designed to provide resources for those receiving services but are also designed to improve the human capital within these organizations. The Early Head Start Child Care Partnership Program (EHS-CCP) is one of those programs.

#### **Head Start**

Head Start is one of the largest organizations that provides services to children age birth to five in the United States. Head Start uses funds appropriated by congress to award "public agencies, private nonprofit and for-profit organizations, tribal governments, and school systems to operate Head Start programs in local communities," and allocates funds for training and technical assistance (TTA) (ECKLC, 2020). TTA funds are used to expand staff qualification, improving teaching, management systems and "other uses identified by and specific to each individual grantee."

#### **Early Head Start**

While EHS provides preschool services similar to Head Start, EHS is formatted exclusively to meet the needs of infants and toddlers ages birth to two years old. EHS programs are designed to "promote the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of infants and toddlers through safe and

developmentally enriching caregiving,” as well as “assist families in meeting their own personal goals and achieving self-sufficiency across a wide variety of domains, such as housing stability, continued education, and financial security,” (ECLKC, 2020).

### **DUEHS and the EHS-CC Partnership**

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) awarded the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership grant (EHS-CCP) to 250 grantee Head Start Programs in 2014, which included Drake University Early Head Start. There are currently six programs within Des Moines that partnered with DUEHS through the EHS-CCP.

### **EHS-CCP Requirements**

The EHS-CCP requires partnering programs to reduce class sizes to eight children per classroom, provide education and support for families receiving services, an increase in professional development and instructional coaching, require staff members to have or obtain a Child Associates Development (CDA) certificate, and require programs and staff to follow Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS). 25% of the childcare program slots are made up of children from families that are receiving some type of assistance like Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, as well as meet local childcare licensing requirements, (Makowsky et al., 2019, xxi-xxii).

The long-term goals of the EHS-CCP are to ensure an educated and fully qualified workforce providing infant/toddler care and education, increase the number of high-quality early childcare programs for infants and toddlers within a community, and increase family and child well-being and progress toward school readiness, (Office of Early Childhood Development, 2020).

### **Contemporary Literature on EHS-CCP and Head Start**

The presented literature will help demonstrate the importance on researching programs like EHS-CCP as well as highlight a missing element that this research project aims to fill. Evaluating public programs and policy is important not just for transparency purposes but also helps to inform the institutions,

leadership members, and human resources on any readjustments needed to save time, resources or improve the quality of services being provided to those in need.

In "Improving Child Care Quality in Early Head Start Programs: A Partnership Model," Ontai, Hinrichs, Beard and Wilcox set out to "report on the efforts of a partnership between an EHS program and community childcare agency," and "systematically identify changes in quality made within the EHS program as the result of a system of monitoring and assessment carried out under the partnership," (Hinrichs, 2002, p. 48).

The study had childcare staff members fill out a questionnaire that assessed their education, professional intentions, beliefs about training and multiculturalism. In order to measure and assess quality improvements, the study relied on the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) and the Arnett Scale of Caregiver Behavior. These assessments were conducted twice, once at the beginning of the year and a second time six months later.

This particular study took place years before the EHS-CCP program was created but nevertheless the data demonstrated how important these partnerships would be years later. Some elements from Hinrichs' study that influence this study derive from the questionnaire given to staff members. Much of the questions that staff members were given pertained to demographic collection, teaching philosophy and lacked to examine how the partnerships influenced them. While the study conducted a before and after assessment on teaching skills, this study did not implement the same practice with its questionnaires. Ontai's study requires us to wonder if those staff member experience any changes with their point of view of the classroom, their responsibilities or on the partnership itself? While collecting information of individuals is important, collecting information on their experiences from their point of view can lend a hand into understanding the impact of policy and the betterment of programs.

The benefits of having a face-to-face qualitative approach to this study can be demonstrated in Donna Sedgwick's article (2014), "Managing Collaborative Paradox: Examining Collaboration Between

Head Start and the Virginia Preschool Initiative.” Using qualitative interviews, Sedgwick (2014), “examines the collaboration between Head Start and the Virginia Preschool Initiative to see how challenges can change with varying degrees of collaborative activity between programs,” (p.190).

In order to accomplish this Sedgwick (2014), “conducted 12 in-depth qualitative interviews with ECE experts and public preschool administrators (both Head Start and VPI) from localities across the Commonwealth of Virginia between fall 2011 and spring 2013. Informants include four early childhood experts, including policy experts and state-level directors or administrators. Five are regional Head Start directors and three are Virginia Preschool Administrators. Two of the four ECE experts had prior working experience as Head Start regional directors. In addition to the interviews, a 2010 survey of Virginia Head Start directors supports variation in degree of collaborative activity between Head Start and VPI across Virginia (Partnership for People with Disabilities, 2011),” (p.195).

Sedgwick asked participants (2014), “to describe all of the types of activities that they participated in with each other (Head Start or VPI depending on the respondent) [Sedgwick] also asked Virginia early childhood experts to discuss activities that they knew occurred throughout the state. Second, [Sedgwick] analyzed the informants’ responses to questions about any challenges that they have experienced when collaborating with each other. [Sedgwick] developed a structural coding scheme for both collaborative activities and challenges and used descriptive coding to categorize the responses (Saldaña, 2009),” (p.196). By coding the responses, Sedgwick noticed (2014), “a couple of themes and theoretical constructs emerged,” (p.197). While Sedgwick’s variables of focus do not necessarily relate to EHS-CCP, the method into how Sedgwick went analyzed the collaborations between Head Start and the Virginia Schools highlights the ideal route to embark.

Turning to some current studies on EHS-CCP on a national level, in a 2019 study using a web-based survey on 250 grantee programs that received funds from the EHS-CCP, some key elements within the report found that factors like “improving the quality of infant and toddler care and education,” motivated

childcare programs to partner, “about one-third of grantees had terminated at least one partnership by the time of the survey, which occurred about one year after ACF awarded grants. The most common reason for termination was the issues of complying with the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) and staff-child ratio and health and safety requirements were the most challenging standards to meet,” and that, “most child care partners reported receiving from grantees guidance on meeting the HSPPS, support for individualizing services for families, various materials or supplies, quality monitoring activities, staff coaching and/or training, and the opportunity to obtain a Child Development Associate credential,” (Makowsky et al., 2019, viii).

It was reported that programs that terminated their partnership, had difficulty to comply with HSPPS or had differences in program philosophy and mission. With EHS-CCP having seven years partnering and working in the Des Moines area, I wonder if the partnering programs within DUEHS' EHS-CCP demonstrate similar trends. Seidman highlights in “Interviewing as Qualitative Research,” that while there is an abundance of research on schooling there is, “so little of it is based on studies involving the perspective of the students, teachers, administrators,” and for the sake of this study teacher associates, (Seidman, 2019, p. 9).

### **Purpose for Study**

The study on EHS-CCP is fairly new and continues to gain new information and perspectives. These mentioned articles demonstrate a need to understand what is happening with those who are tasked in carrying out the goals of EHS-CCP and those affected by policy guidelines. There is a small void currently and this study hopes to illustrate and inform DUEHS on its handling of EHS-CCP from the perspective of partnering members. The purpose of this study is to identify what quality changes did staff members of childcare centers experience after partnering with the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership Program.

### **Method**

This study was formulated to take a qualitative approach in understanding what quality changes, did staff members of childcare centers experience after partnering with the EHS-CCP program. A qualitative approach allows this study to understand, “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences,” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.6).

Specifically, this study was formulated to implement closed and open-ended questioning through the use of an electronic survey and virtual interviews for data collection from teachers, teacher associates and program directors of six partnering childcare center locations in the city of Des Moines (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.37). By incorporating a mixed-method this study aims to use the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand the changes experienced by staff members, (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.45).

### **Design**

Participants for this study were sent an electronic survey. The survey consisted of 19 questions. These questions were designed to include both closed and open-ended questions. The questions were designed for participants to rate and expand on their experiences with professional development, instructional coaches, the Head Start Program Performance Standards, their interpretation of how EHS-CCP has impacted their profession, job task and environment. Questions also had participants rate their understanding of HSPPS, how supportive they felt with their program leaders, the EHS-CCP partnership and the services they are providing as teachers.

Participants were also encouraged to volunteer in a one-on-one virtual interview with myself. Interviewing participants is part of the qualitative process because “individuals’ consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people,” (Seidman, 2019, p. 7). The goal of the interviewing process was to collect in-depth anecdotes from participants on their experience and collect

detailed information that the surveys may not be able to demonstrate. The responses would then be coded using Johnny Saldana's, "The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers," for guidance. These methods and resource would allow the study to validate information and avoid bias on behalf of participants and researcher.

Using Excel, the raw data of participants' responses were organized in one column. column 2 was used as pre-coding. Codes were used to help identify the kinds of changes participants experienced. Within the third column of the excel spreadsheet, codes were refined in order to categorize the data. Codes initially began as categorizing feeling like confidence and support and were later refined as codes of actions like learning new ideas, brainstorming, providing access. Finally, those codes were organized to reflect categories in relation to profession developing, coaching, and teaching materials. Online word clouds were used to analyze how often certain words were used in the responses in order to help develop categories and codes, (Saldana, 2021, p. 27 – 46).

### **Participants**

Drake University Early Head Start's Child Care Partnership program was selected as the program to study. The EHS-CCP program consists of 6 program locations in Des Moines, Iowa. Drake University Head Start was contacted in order to gain access and permission to contact staff members within the EHS-CCP program. The EHS-CCP program director and the directors from the six locations were contacted after receiving approval from the DUHS director. Program leaders and teaching staff were made aware of their rights as participants, the objective of the study and any distress that may occur during the process. The electronic survey was sent to 40 staff members made up of teachers and teacher associates and 8 staff leaders like program directors and program owners.

### **Response Rate**

Participants had three weeks to voluntarily submit responses to the survey and volunteer for a virtual interview. After the three-week time frame, 39% of the surveyed population responded. None of the participants volunteered to take part in the virtual interview. On average participants that responded spent an average of 15 minutes answering the electronic survey. While none of the participants volunteered to participate in the one-on-one virtual interview, some of the questions within the survey were designed as open-ended questions in order for participants to expand on their experiences. Information from Saldana's book was used in order to help code the written responses of participants.

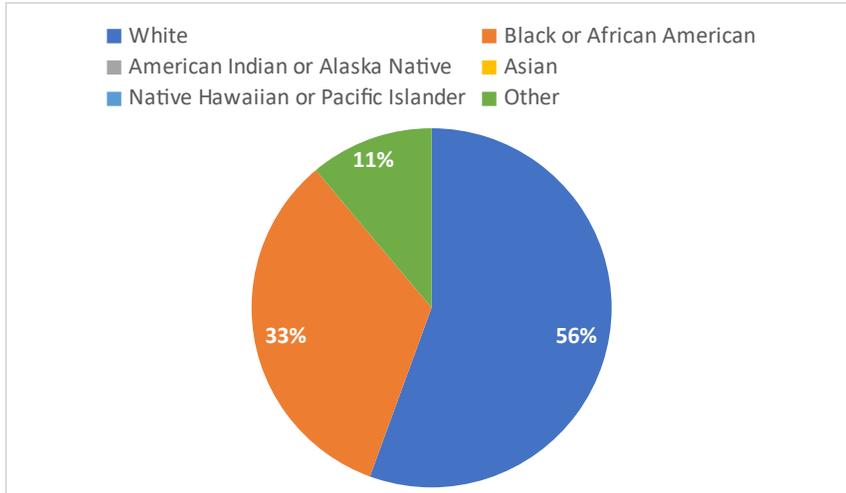
## **Findings**

### **Participant's Demographics**

In order to get a picture of who the participants are, the survey asked individuals to share their job title, how many years they have been serving in their current position and how many years they have been working within the field of early Childhood educations. 87% of participants were made up of EHS-CCP teachers, 7% of participants were teacher associates and 6% of participants were program leaders or directors. Figure 1 demonstrates the racial demographics of participants. Figure 2 highlights the number of years participants have been serving in current position. Figure 3 demonstrates the number of years participants have been working within the field of ECE.

### **Figure 1**

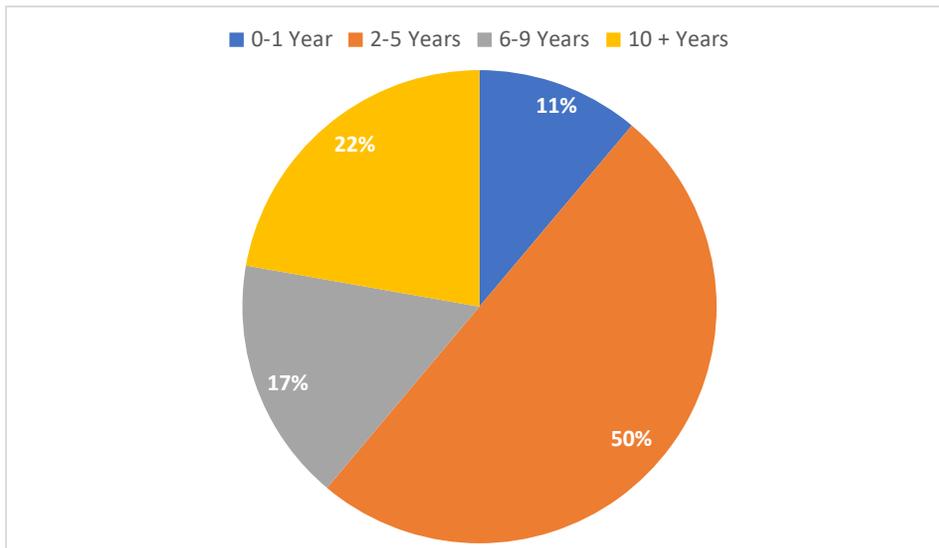
Racial Profile of EHS-CCP Participants



Note: individuals that identified as Other, wrote in that they identified as Latino.

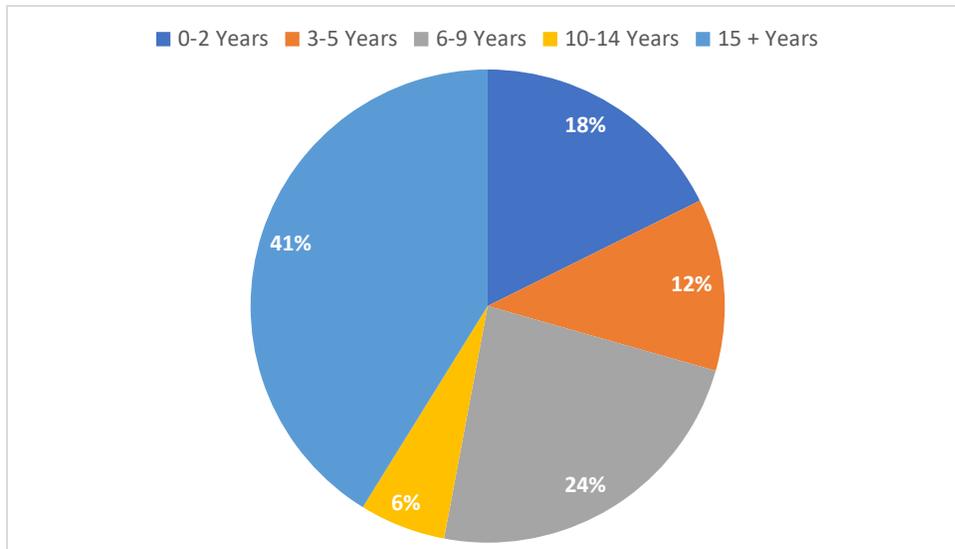
**Figure 2**

Years Serving in Current Position



**Figure 3**

Years Working in the Field of ECE



### Participant's Experiences

Open ended questions were included within the survey in order to generate qualitative data from participants. Questions asked participants to share challenges they have experienced within their current position, share how professional development affected their experience with staff, children and families they serve, describe their experiences with instructional coaches and share how EHS-CCP has impacted their experience?

Responses were categorized and reflected that participants experienced changes in professional development and teaching material, higher standards and predictability, improved interactions with children and families and leadership support.

### Professional Development and Teaching Material

Reviewing Figure 4 we can see that 33% of responses touched on the theme of professional development and teaching material. Participants shared that the EHS-CCP allowed their programs to purchase "quality material for children in the program," have access to a variety of trainings on ECE practices that "tend to be very expensive," and that the subjects within professional development have led to positive changes within their classrooms and their own interactions with those receiving their services.

The additional funding that EHS-CCP provides along with the guidelines and expectations has made it possible to help families have or find access to other resources within the community like, “diapers or formula,” (Anonymous Participant, 2021). As some participants explain, “PD helped refresh and give me new ideas to help,” “it allows someone to vent or brainstorm,” and it has allowed some staff to experience, “more confidence,” (Anonymous Participant, 2021).

### **Higher Standards and Predictability**

Reviewing Figure 4 we notice that 15% of participants responses hinted on the theme of higher standards and predictability. What we mean by that, are guidelines and requirements of the EHS-CCP. Participants mentioned that these types of requirements have made their line of work “more predictable,” and “help me know how to help provide what’s best for children in all aspects,” (Anonymous Participant, 2021). Some participants mentioned that the requirements of EHS-CCP is what sets them apart from other childcare programs even during a global pandemic. As one participant writes, “the program is nationally accredited, maintains a high QRS rating and been able to remain open despite the pandemic, (Anonymous Participant, 2021).” Some add that the requirements help raise the quality of teachers because, “stricter guidelines require staff to have degrees and training specific to their position,” (Anonymous Participant, 2021).

### **Improved Interactions with Children and Families**

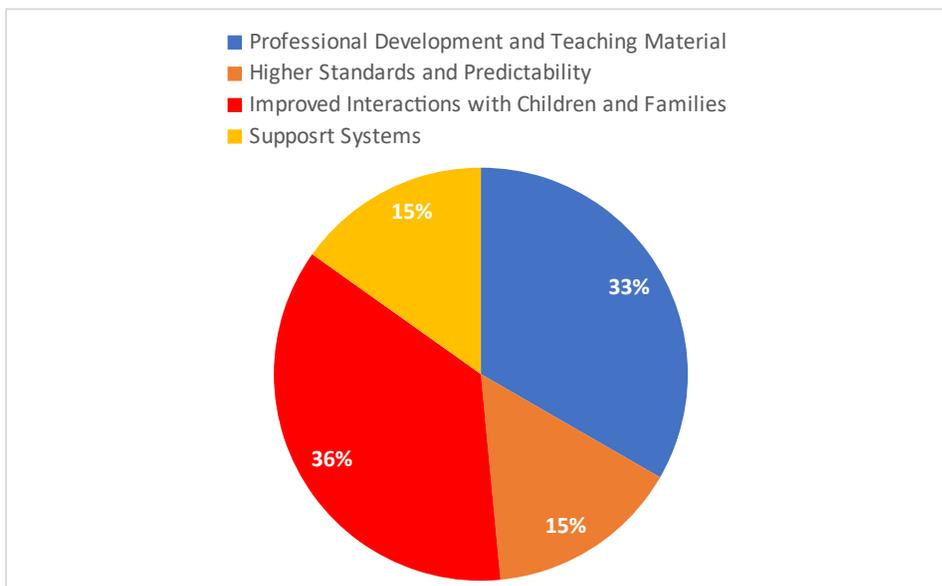
We see in Figure 4 that 37% of responses touched on the notion of improved interactions with children and families. Responses highlighted an improvement in how they communicate with children and families also mentioned that the information provided from professional development and well as instructional coaches influenced that improvement. As mentioned earlier, the EHS-CCP has made it possible for childcare providers to assist certain families to find access to resources. As one participant wrote, “we have a diverse population and needs,” and “we focus on the family and not just the child’s academic skills,” (Anonymous, 2021).

**Support Systems**

The goal of the study was to understand the perspective and experiences of those affected by the EHS-CCP program. Based on the data collected from this open-ended question, I noticed during the coding and categorizing process, participants had experienced changes in how they interact with children and families they serve, a more predictable job because of guidelines and higher standards, teachers have been able to implement strategies within their classrooms because EHS-CCP has allowed them to access financially professional development trainings and new teaching materials, and EHS-CCP has made it possible for these programs to have support systems like instructional coaches.

**Figure 4**

**How has EHS-CCP Impacted My Experience?**

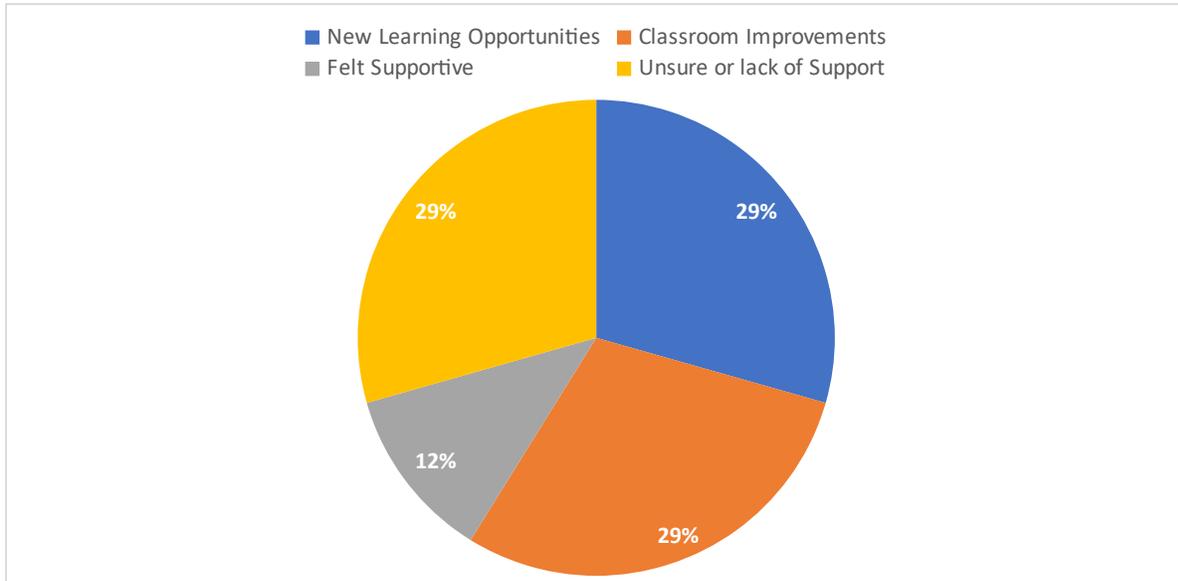


**Instructional Coaching**

While the ideal setting for this study was to incorporate data from a virtual one-on-one interview with participants, some questions were developed to dig deeper in understanding how the role of instructional coaches within the EHS-CCP influenced participants experiences. From the compiled responses, on figure 5 we can see that 25% of responses touched on new learning opportunities, 29% of responses talked about classroom improvements, 12% of responses highlighted the feeling of being supported and 29% of responses were either unsure or demonstrated lack of support. The 29% of unsure or lack of support answers were typically responses like, "I don't know," "no support," "nothing," "communication has been hard," and lacked to go into detail on exact instances. Participants wrote that instructional coaches have been the source of knowledge, have access to "new information" and ECE strategies and "raised the standard of care in my center," (Anonymous Participant, 2021).

**Figure 5**

How have Instructional Coaches Affected My Experience?



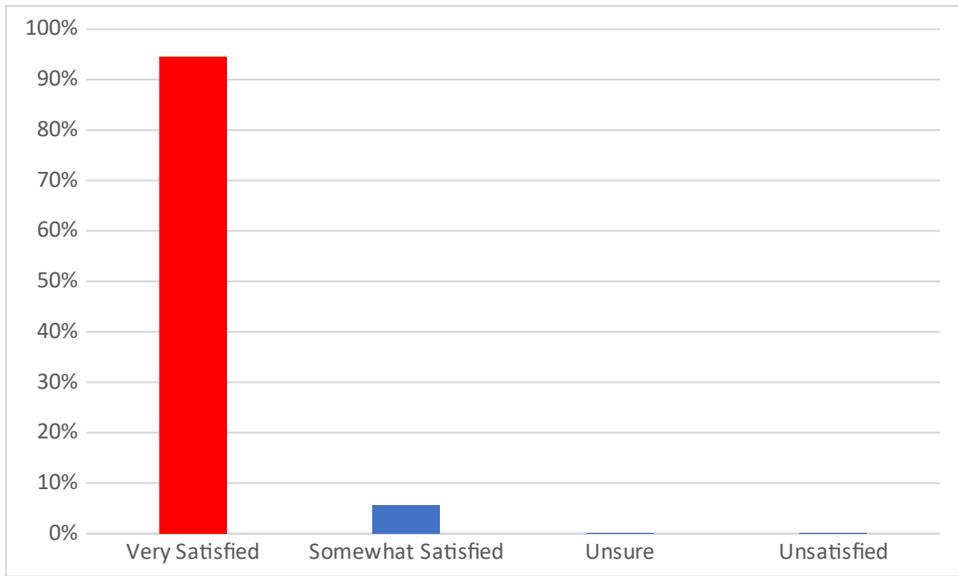
**Rating the EHS-CCP Experience**

Besides open-ended questions participants were asked to rate how satisfied they were in having EHS-CCP as a partner, how knowledgeable they are with the HSPPS and how satisfied they are with the services they provide children and families. In Figure 6 we can see that 94% of participants were very satisfied with their program being an EHS-CCP partner and 6% were somewhat satisfied. In Figure 7 we notice that 77% of participants were somewhat knowledgeable about the requirements within the HSPPS and 33% were very knowledgeable. Finally Figure 8 demonstrates that just 78% of participants are very satisfied with the services they provide children and families and 22% of participants were somewhat satisfied.

While participants demonstrated satisfaction with the EHS-CCP program, participants did share with me some challenges because of the EHS-CCP. Within in the survey, participants were asked to share challenges experienced. In Figure 8 we see that 65% of responses highlighted feeling overwhelmed by the job requirement, 15% of responses demonstrated feeling unqualified and 20% of responses discussed the notion of being understaffed. While there are positive attitudes towards the Early Head Start Partnership Program, we also see the challenges that staff are experiencing because of how the program is designed.

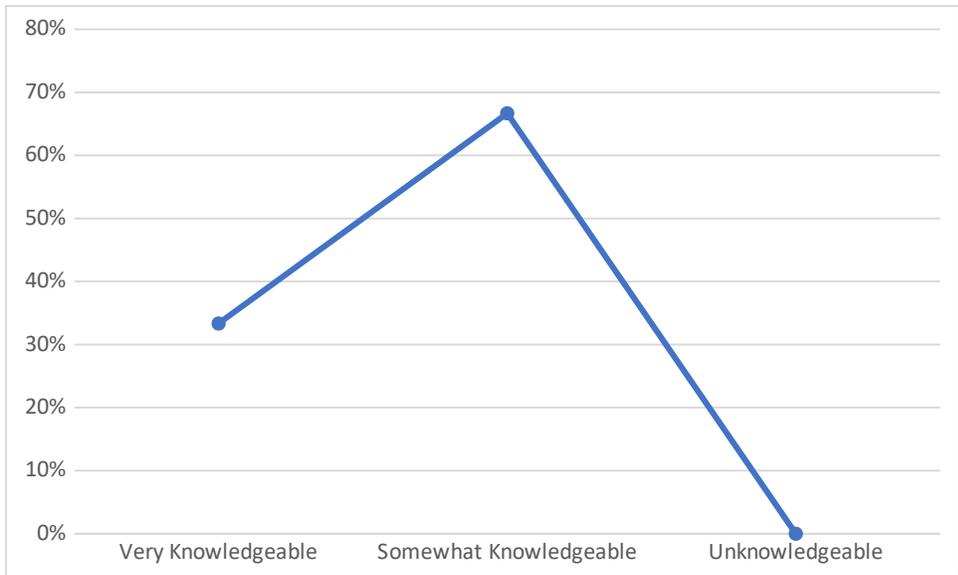
### **Figure 6**

How Satisfied are Participants with their Program being an EHS-CCP partner?



**Figure 7**

How Knowledgeable are Participants with Head Start Program Performance Standards?



**Figure 8**

Participant's Satisfaction with their Services Provided to Children and Families



### Limitation and Suggestions

While the information from participants suggests that individuals experienced changes because of the EHS-CCP program, we don't have a full picture. This study had six weeks to complete data collection and analysis. Limited time and the lack of volunteers for interviewing suggests that a future study is needed. One with the amount of time to carry out interviews. There is an art when it comes to qualitative analysis and the face-to-face interview process is necessary.

Most responses in the electronic survey came from single word answers to short paragraphs. In an actual interview, I have the ability to ask participants to expand on their experiences with instructional coaches, the types of materials and trainings provided by EHS-CCP as well as what help individuals transition into understanding and implementing the EHS-CCP policy and guidelines. Irving Seidman shares Ferrarotti's idea in, "Interviewing as Qualitative Research," that "social abstractions like "education" are best understood through the experiences of the individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built (Ferrarotti, 1981)," (Seidman, 2019, p.9) and the interview process helps synthesize those abstractions and paint a clearer picture.

Returning to Figures 2 and 3, the amount of time some participants have had working in the field of early childhood and the years working in their current position may suggest a study where we analyze whether they play a factor into how participants are successful in implementing a daunting policy like EHS-CCP. Another aspect to consider in that Drake University Early Head Start is not the only program in the state of Iowa with an EHS-CCP. There are other programs in the state with EHS-CCP programs and it is important to consider those individuals experiences when implementing a new study.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion the goal of this study was to identify what quality changes did staff members of childcare centers experience after partnering with the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership Program. Based on participants' point of view, individuals within this program experienced changes in areas of professional development and new materials, higher standards and work predictability, improved interactions with children and families and support systems. The EHS-CCP program was designed not just to improve early childcare programs and education, it was designed to raise the quality of the professionals. The results suggest that participants are experiencing those changes. The EHS-CCP guidelines like the HSPPS and support systems like instructional coaches and professional development have had greater impact on participants experience currently.

Hal G. Rainey highlights the notion of role ambiguity as a process where there is a, "lack of clear and sufficient information about how to carry out one's responsibilities in the organization," (Rainey, 2014, p.323). Reflecting on the responses of participants, it ;"suggests that the EHS-CCP program has provided an actual trail towards professional, classroom and service improvements for their partners. These individuals are "backbone to mission accomplishment," they are the individuals tasked in implementing and putting into action a nearly \$1 billion dollar policy into action within the city of Des Moines and across the country (Guy & Ely, 2018, p 129). It is important for research to consider the experiences of those within these

programs in order to understand how program such as EHS-CCP raise the quality and standards of early childcare and educations for years to come.

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