RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Teaching and Learning Tightrope: Navigating Accountability Mandates While Maintaining Sound Pedagogical Practices

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Applying Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, this article describes how one Head Start classroom successfully navigated external accountability mandates and privileged student academic achievement and overall well-being by attending to person (organizational infrastructure), context (instructional capacity), and the intersection of both. Located in an economically under-resourced urban community, a government-funded preschool classroom achieved compliance with external mandates while maintaining pedagogically sound teaching practices. This 8-week case study complemented by video-based fieldwork examines local instructional practices and investigates the policies and protocols facilitating these practices. Field notes, artifacts, interviews, and video data informed the analysis. Findings indicate that while policies and protocols necessitated by external mandates impacted the organizational infrastructure, their intentional integration with sound pedagogy and the Center's mission facilitated instructional capacity in a climate where children thrive.

Keywords: early childhood policy; early childhood protocols; compliance; instructional practices; classroom interactions; Head Start

INTRODUCTION

It is a Tuesday afternoon, and the 17 students of the Triangle classroom are resting on their cots after lunch. A few have already drifted off to sleep. Others whisper and ask for yet another sip of water. Janiyah's[1] and Darien's cots are near the multi-stall bathroom shared with the adjoining classroom, and the florescent light spills onto their blankets.
"Ms. Zachmann, can you tuck me in like a race car driver?" Darien asks.

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[1] Participant-selected pseudonyms are used in place of all names and locations

"I can, but you are already like a race car driver, fast, and strong, and ready to go!" she replies.
"Mrs. Zachmann, can you tuck me in like a mermaid?"
"I can, but you are already like a mermaid, graceful, and swift, and ready for new adventures!"
While the two children settle in for nap time, Mrs. Zachmann retrieves her water bottle, her computer, and a Teaching Strategies GOLD® (TSG) manual. Along with Mr. Pearson and Mrs. O'Neal, she takes her seat in a wooden chair at a student work table, slightly larger than the others so that the weekly team meeting of the classroom's three teachers can begin.
Quietly, so as not to disrupt the children around them, she begins, "Ok, so how is the [tree] study going? Any thoughts or feelings?"
Mr. Pearson says, "It's going pretty good. You know, they are remembering [what we are learning] about the trees. I know that Taliah remembers, 'Deciduous!'"
"And even just that she pronounced it."
"...and she even pronounced it correctly too!"
"She didn't struggle with the word at all she was just like, 'Yeah, deciduous!' And I was like, 'Yeah!'"
"I was like, 'Kiss your brain!' You know?!"
"Yeah, and when we are on the carpet, and I ask her a question, I don't have to remind her to give me a complete sentence. She will say 'I prefer...' Yeah, so that's progress!"

This vignette from one Head Start preschool classroom evidences the ways in which teachers comply with externally imposed requirements (weekly team meetings guided by the TSG framework) while providing academic rigor for 3- and 4-year-olds in developmentally appropriate ways.

Whereas academic performance was previously expected as the result of engagement in formal schooling, an unprecedented level of academic performance is expected of children preceding elementary school entry. Improving children's preparedness for school success is a longstanding national priority (e.g., National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices, 2003, 2005) which increases pressure for and opportunities within early childhood education (ECE) (Goffin, 2010), especially for children from minoritized communities considered "at risk" of school failure. Definitions of school readiness focus on social and academic competencies children are presumed to need to start kindergarten ready to learn (Gallo-Fox & Cuccuini-Harmon, 2018; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). However, research has long emphasized the benefit of a 'process' over 'product' approach to defining the construct of school readiness, endorsing quality interactions as the most effective and productive sites of learning (Heath, 1983; Sheiffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

More young children in the United States are enrolled in preschool ECE settings than ever before, and more of these settings are being funded externally (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). Measures of mandated policy and protocol observance are necessary to prove accountability to external funders. Classroom-level evaluation is consistent with decades of ECE research (i.e., Mashburn, et al., 2008) reifying the developmental nature of children's learning by emphasizing the evaluation of

environment, emotional support, and instructional supports over measured student outcomes. However, meeting the requirements of increased external accountability is often prioritized in ECE settings when compliance is tied to funding, creating pragmatic challenges for centers with limited resources. Thus, compliance to policies and protocols imposed by external funding sources often takes center stage for ECE centers, especially where maintaining funds is crucial to a center's viability.

While some ECE sites take an either/or approach to compliance and quality instruction—seeing the allocation of resources as capable of achieving only one of these aims successfully—others have integrated external mandates into practice in meaningful ways, continuing to foreground and value pedagogical excellence while also "checking the necessary boxes." This both/and approach results from a steadfast vision of the purpose and intent of ECE for all – one that is not waivered by fluctuating external influences but integrates them into their mission of quality instruction. The preschool classroom described here enacts the both/and approach, walking the tightrope between accountability to external funding agencies and accountability to the children and families they serve. Focusing on the policies and protocols facilitating the Triangle teachers' instructional practices, we ask: How does one preschool classroom balance the requirements of external accountability and the need for high quality instruction to meet the teaching and learning needs of teachers and students?

This classroom, and the center in which it is situated, are examples of success despite statistics predicting failure. The Center must comply with external mandates to secure funding in an economically under-resourced context while additionally contending with external social and economic factors. Such circumstances apply to numerous Head Start programs across the country and many of these programs effectively work within parameters to provide rigorous and caring educations to young children. However, Head Start programs are intentionally community-based, and successfully navigating policies is context-dependent. This article describes, through a bioecological lens, how one Head Start classroom successfully navigated external accountability and privileged student academic achievement and overall well-being.

SCHOOL CULTURE AS AN ECOLOGICAL NICHE

The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2015) has five central development domains to guide early learning contexts on young children's development. One of the five domains, named 'approaches to learning', focuses on how children engage in learning through incorporating emotional, behavioral, and cognitive skills and behaviors. Supporting children's skills within the approaches to learning domain helps children successfully navigate new learning experiences and develop consistent relationships through developing self-regulation and executive functioning skills. While there are many factors that influence children's approaches to learning, relationships with educators and instructional practices that support these relationships are critical to facilitating children's early learning development and school readiness. The supportive environment the school and subsequent classroom creates to support student/teacher relationships and practices is foundational to creating a climate that positively influences children's approach to learning.

The ecosystem of an early childhood classroom places a developing child within nested systems of interaction that rely on relationships with individuals, groups, and the wider world. School climate can be defined as "the affective and cognitive perceptions regarding social interactions, relationships, values, and beliefs held by students, teachers, administrators, and staff within a school" (Rudasill et al., 2018, p. 35). Included in such a definition is the implication that perceptions of various systems and interactions that happen outside the school building discernibly impacts the culture of individual classrooms. For example, normative influences of the community and funding amounts and sources have always impacted both the proposed and enacted social interactions, relationships, values, and beliefs by children and adults in schools (Rudasill et al., 2018). And while all these different systems impact the school culture, it is the instructors who ultimately need to develop an ecological niche (Brofenbrenner, 1992), or a context that meets the unique needs of students in classrooms on any particular day. No small feat, as a healthy and productive ecological niche needs to respond continually to various student characteristics, beliefs and behaviors of adults, the local community, and local through national policies (McCoy et al., 2013; Thapa et al., 2013).

In early childhood classrooms, there has been evidence of strong classroom cultures that produce an exceptional early learning context for children (Connors, 2016). The concept of rich normality (Cline et al., 2019) draws attention to the everyday moments that foster teaching and learning through classroom cultures that foster children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive growth (Edwards et al., 2012). By focusing on the rich normality of classroom culture, the small events that propel understanding and connection with local and broader contexts are brought to the foreground and examined (Cline et al., 2019). Through studying the rich normality of an early childhood classroom, this article investigates how teachers are able to successfully navigate systems of interaction and create an ecological niche.

BIOECOLOGICAL MODEL OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1979; 1992), the bioecological model of human development has an "interdisciplinary and integrative focus on the age periods of childhood and adolescence and its explicit interest in applications to policies and programs pertinent to enhancing youth and family development" (Brofenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 794). A bioecological model transitions the focus to processes instead of environment; participation in interactive and iterative processes over time produces the ability and motivation to partake in activities individually and collaboratively. This is seen in enduring patterns of proximal process such as group or solitary play, caring for others in distress, and reading (Brofenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Five systems are part of the processes: the microsystem, mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. Succinctly defined, these systems consider human biology, their immediate environments, their larger social contexts, the interactions among these contexts, and the sociohistorical circumstances throughout an individual's life course – from broad societal events to individual transitions (Clark et al., 2018).

Through processes, the person and the environment influence one another bidirectionally, causing a need for assessment at multiple levels (Clark et al., 2018). Through an estimation of how the processes across systems impacts the quality and ability of early childhood education, it is critical

to look at individuals, systems, and interactions that create the bioecological locality of study. Because of the complex interplay of these factors on children's development, ecological systems theory (1979) and subsequent bioecological models have long been used as a lens through which to investigate early childhood contexts. For example, studies of deaf children's kindergarten readiness (Clark et al., 2018), early learning opportunities for children in rural communities (Iruka et al., 2020), and children's literacy development (Jaeger, 2016) have applied Bronfenbrenner's approaches. This study investigates one classroom's navigation of accountability and instruction through looking at the power of proximal processes and their variations through both person and context, investigating both interpersonal relationships as well as the resources of ability, skill, and knowledge in one early childhood classroom.

METHODS

Community & Classroom Context

As a leading Social Service Agency (SSA), the parent organization of the Community Child Care Center (CCCC, or 'The Center') serves nearly 40,000 children and families each year, delivering over 70 social service programs throughout 40 Illinois counties. The SSA is recognized as a leading provider of quality programs and services to marginalized children and families at six CCCCs across the state. Responding to the growing need in one urban neighborhood, the SSA opened its second CCCC in the community in 2007. One measure of quality programing for Head Start Grantees is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) assessment. CLASS is an observation instrument that assesses teacher-child interactional quality in center-based preschool classrooms that support children's learning and development: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support (Downer, et al., 2010). In 2001, CLASS became a high-stakes assessment when Head Start issued new guidelines. Because of increasing demands for limited resources, Head Start grantees could be required to compete for renewed financial support if their CLASS scores were deemed subpar. Data from Head Start monitoring and CLASS reviews suggest roughly a third of grantees would be designated for competition based on the revised criteria (45 C. F. R. § 1307 2011). However, the CCCC preschools classrooms outperformed national averages on all CLASS dimensions in 2014.

Part of a Community Collaborative Childhood Center (CCCC), the Triangle classroom is financially supported by Head Start and the Department of Human Services' Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). The Agency overseeing the CCCC is the Head Start grantee and has established conditions provisionary of continued funding beyond those enforced by Head Start. The Triangle classroom is supported by Head Start and others because it provides early childhood educational (ECE) services to children whose families cannot otherwise afford these opportunities. Because of urban disinvestment, the local community has a national reputation for high rates of crime and unemployment. Unfavorable social conditions create strain for children and families pursuing economic and educational stability. Although many of their classroom practices relate to compliance and mandates, they are not compliance-driven. Classroom practices are, first and foremost, pedagogically sound, while also in compliance with external policies and protocols. The results (as characterized by how the teachers talked about the students in the opening depiction of

their planning time) are a highly productive and positive environment for young children traditionally categorized as 'at risk.'

Participants

The Triangle classroom is one of six preschool classrooms in the Center, consisting of three teachers and 17 students, and receiving blended funding from Head Start, Preschool for All, and the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). Mrs. Zachmann is a third-year teacher, having spent the entirety of those years in the Triangle classroom. Mr. Pearson and Mrs. O'Neal have 12 and 31 years of experience, respectively; both have prior experience in infant-toddler settings and have spent the last four years in the Triangle classroom. Previously a multi-age classroom, the Triangles now consists of only pre-kindergarten students, ages 4 and 5 in their last year in a preschool setting. This was the second year in the Triangle classroom for a handful of students because of the reorganization. The three classroom teachers, all 17 students, and three building administrators consented to participate in the study designed and approved under the guidelines of the participating university's IRB.

Qualitative Case Study

To make sense of complex social interactions and networks of influence, this 8-week case study (Yin, 2013) complemented by video-based fieldwork (Jewitt, 2012) described classroom instructional practices and the policies and protocols facilitating these practices. While video-based fieldwork facilitated a close look at sites of interaction between teachers and students, qualitative methods informed the understanding of the systemic structures at play. Field notes of team meetings and educator interviews served as primary data sources, supplemented by CCCC artifacts such as job descriptions, employee handbooks, parent communication, and classroom curricula, analyzed to consider the origins of the policies witnessed in practice.

Field notes and initial interviews with the three classroom teachers were generated during the first two weeks of classroom observations. Beginning the third week, video data were collected for four sequential weeks, using multiple cameras simultaneously, resulting in a collective 144 hours of video data. During the final weeks of classroom observation follow up interviews were held with the three teachers and the three building administrators, as an opportunity to clarify or elaborate on conversation threads that developed out of the first interview. In total, 30 observational field notes, 12 interview transcripts, and 5 collaborative team meeting transcripts were generated and analyzed alongside classroom and center artifacts for evidence of center-level policies and protocols as the plausible causes of the rich interactions between teachers and children captured on video. This range of data collected in dual contexts allowed examination across contexts and through various perspectives to triangulate findings and identify themes. As white cisgender women immersed in the (D)iscourse of higher education (Gee, 1996, 2005), we relied on multiple data sources from multiple perspectives when attempting to understand the perspectives of primarily Black participants. Reviewing the video data alongside participants and seeking member-checks following initial stages of analysis served to mitigate potential misunderstandings arising from our social, political, and cultural differences.

Data Analysis

A recursive processes of data collection and analysis provided a systematic way to meaningfully filter large data sets that are the natural outcome of researching the "wonderful messiness of classroom interaction" (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 240). Each iteration contributed to a detailed account of the classroom practices and informed the construction of a preliminary codebook. Open coding of classroom observational data identified salient features of instruction, while interview and team meeting transcripts fleshed out the descriptions of enacted policies and protocols.

Mirroring Compton-Lilly's (2007) classroom level data contributed to a detailed account of the specific literacy experiences and perspectives for each of the interlocutors and informed the construction of a preliminary codebook. Open coding of classroom data identified salient topics; a constant comparative approach facilitated the identification, comparison, and sorting of data points according to similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, constant comparative methods and categorical analysis were applied to school-based data and the codebook was expanded and revised to accommodate additional data. Finally, categorical analysis allowed classroom interactions and school-wide insights, incidents, events, and activities be viewed side-by-side. Multiple sources of evidence, such as observation, interview, and artifacts, created a chain of evidence, presenting the claims in a linear fashion to explain how these codes contributed to the conclusions reached (Yin, 2013).

Policies and Protocols Operationally Defined

External accountability to an ECE site is often operationalized through mandated policies and protocols. For the purposes of this study, policies are defined as the principles, rules, and guidelines formulated or adopted by an organization to reach its long-term goals. Policies are designed to influence major decisions, actions, and activities taking place within the boundaries set by them. In the case of the CCCC, some of the policies in place explicitly derive from the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS, 2016). Others were developed by the CCCC's grantee, or the SSA. Additional policies were developed and implemented at the center level.

Protocols are the specific methods employed to express policies in action in day-to-day operations of the organization. Most protocols are internally derived or adopted from other sources to meet the specific needs of the CCCC. For example, hiring Family Support Staff is a policy instated by Head Start, but the way in which Family Support Staff are assigned their cases follows CCCC policies – Family Support Staff work with family units instead of classroom units. Local policies require the Triangle teachers to phone the front desk any time they exit the building outside of their assigned playground time. Together, policies and protocols ensure that a point of view held by the governing body of an organization is translated into steps that result in classroom practices compatible with that view.

FINDINGS

The policies and protocols necessitated by HSPPS, coupled with other external accountability factors, created multiple influences on the teacher-child interactions and instructional capacity of the Triangle classroom (Figure 1). Informed by the analysis of observational field notes, interview transcripts, and team meeting transcripts, these influences are related to either person through organizational infrastructure (yellow), context through instructional capacity (blue), or a combination of both person and context (green). Organizational infrastructure is defined as policies and protocols that support the healthy operation of the organization and the classroom but are not explicitly connected to teaching and learning outcomes. Instructional capacity refers to influences that are related directly to teaching and learning. This section defines each influence, describes the policies and protocols in place at the Center complying with the standard, and explains how classroom practices integrated compliance in intentional and purposeful ways while continuing to forefront student learning.

FIGURE 1. Influences on Teacher/Child Interactions
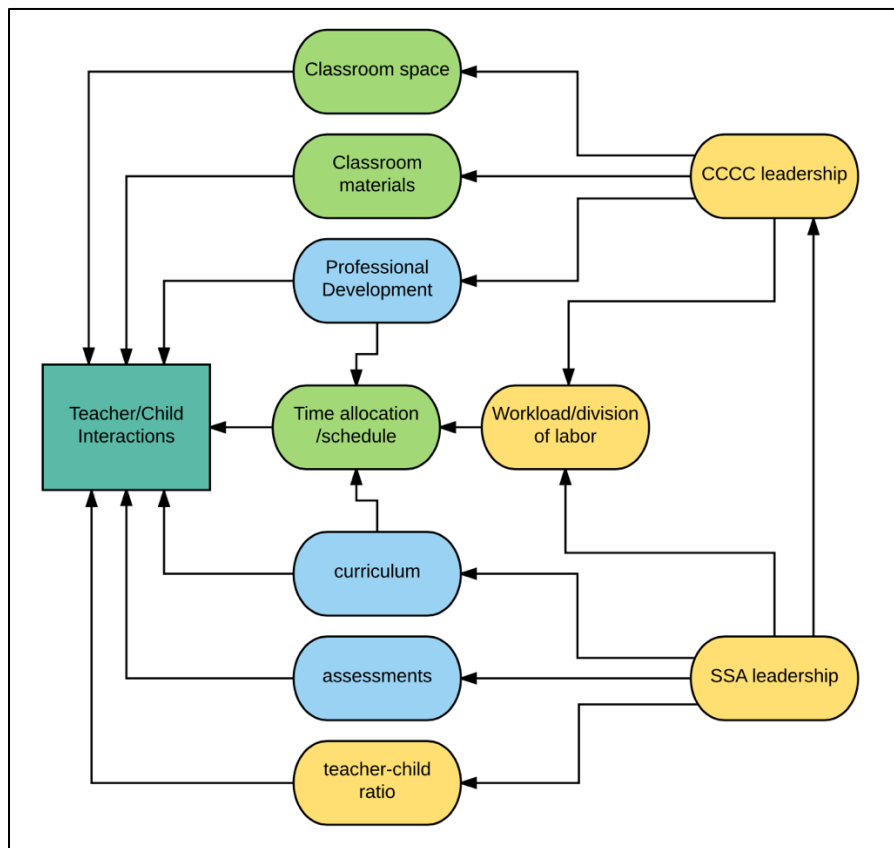
Person: Organizational Infrastructure

Organizational infrastructure includes, but is not limited to, SSA and CCCC administrator leadership, divisions of labor and/or workload allocations, and decisions about teacher transitions.

Although 'once removed' from the Triangle classroom events, these infrastructures reify the value of rich teacher-child interactions as evidenced by the investment in support staff whom 'lighten the load' of classroom teachers, allowing them to focus on teaching and learning. For example, it is commonplace for teachers to spend time on managerial tasks such as collecting field trip permission slips, replenishing classroom supplies, or contacting parents regarding student absences. In the Triangle classroom, data analyses indicate that off-loading of managerial or administrative tasks allowed teachers to focus on building interpersonal relationships focused on learning - spending free-play and open-center time child watching, creating opportunities for genuine, personalized, and scaffolded interactions between teachers and children.

   SSA leadership.   The SSA invests in its mission to "partner with children, youth, and families whose potential is at risk to create hope, opportunity, and bright futures" by investing in the quality of interactions children have with any adult on site – including teachers, support staff, volunteers, and interns. Specific to volunteers and interns working in SSA early childhood settings such as Triangle classroom is an additional handbook including an Appropriate Language Packet detailing scenarios observed in ECE spaces with suggested verbal responses to such conflicts. For example:

> Child who is feeling sad about parent leaving, lost chance at activity, having to wait for turn, being misunderstood, etc.:
>
> Toddler: "We know you are sad; mom will be back later."
> "This might be hard for you to do, but you can do that activity later. Let's do this now."
> Preschool: "What's the matter, why are you crying?" Reaffirm the child's feelings and then give the child some choices on ways to say good-bye or another activity to do to give child some power since loss of power may be felt for situation they are feeling sad about.

The scenarios draw from a university research study cited in the handbook, and the Age-Appropriate Speech and Language Milestones information is referenced to Johns Hopkins. Providing volunteers with this level of research-based support, including an in-person orientation and resources such as the handbook to refer to later, influence the ways in which all adults entering the CCCC building interact with children. It is clear from the outset of one's involvement with this organization that language and relationships are key values, and how to achieve these values as a member of their team.

   CCCC leadership.   Administrators emphasizing compliance often implement a top-down decision-making model (Marzano et al., 2005). External compliance is achieved when teachers and support personnel comply with protocols developed and implemented by the administration, with little to no collaborative input. Instead, the CCCC site director (Ms. Cooper) manages the day-to-day operations for the building, with educational coordinators overseeing and supporting the Early Head Start and Head Start classrooms.

Ms. Cooper's leadership embraces SSA's vision by putting these policies into practice. She cited the strength of the agency's staff orientation program, but commented that the same does not exist

at the Center level. She planned to create a CCCC-specific handbook, outlining "what to expect the first week, the second week, to help them get that full orientation of what to expect when they come into the building." Ms. Cooper's approach serves a dual purpose – compliance with the required intake policy established by the SSA and through more personal and meaningful means by involving established staff, who themselves meet the requirements of an external protocol (continued credentialing) in the process. She upholds SSA's policies for interviewing and hiring quality candidates and sees value in retaining these candidates as employees. Ms. Cooper's investment in her staff is an outgrowth of the support she feels in her administrative role. Ms. Cooper's workplace satisfaction influences her ability to provide the same for her staff; the comradery and professionalism observed and described within the vertical organizational infrastructure are also evident horizontally, at the staff/peer level.

Workload & Division of Labor.   SSA and CCCC decisions around infrastructural leadership reflect a commitment to promoting students' success by protecting instructional time. Teacher workload is reduced when non-instructional tasks are offloaded to support staff, and division of labor decisions are made at the classroom level, developing organically and adjusting as needed.

The first priority is reflected in the SSA's decision to fund support staff who help teachers carry the burden of most health and safety compliance tasks, and in the Center's decisions in hiring people qualified to perform the duties of their position and simultaneously committed to the mission of the organization. Ms. Zachmann comments that Ms. Cooper "is very, very conscious of hiring people with a very positive attitude that are mission driven and believe that what we are doing is important." Examples include the janitorial and facilities staff, the numerous family support staff, and the division of clerical/maintenance responsibilities between the Triangle teachers.

At SSA, Family Support staff are numerous – six full time employees plus a director and an intern, serving just under 150 students – and work both alongside and independent of classroom teachers. Instead of being assigned to a specific classroom (and a different one each year), each member of the support team carries a caseload of families that remains consistent from year to year. Given this approach, parents have one steady 'point person' with whom they have developed a lasting relationship over time, and to whom they can turn if in need of bus fare or employment help, as Ms. Zachmann points out.

This relationship also relieves some of the often-stressful conversations about student truancy and tardiness, for example, that may otherwise take place between the classroom teacher and the parent. This is something that Family Support addresses "because they have a stronger relationship with the parents around those nitty gritty things." Ms. Zachmann distinguishes between the "bubbly" role of the child's teacher, in contrast to the Family Support staff who "understand what is going on financially with the parents, family wise. On a need to know basis they will tell us something, but we don't need to know everything that is going on, if that makes sense." Instead, the Triangle teachers can focus their energies on teaching and learning, knowing that the social needs of families are attended to by the Family Support staff. This model also preserves the privacy of the parents, allowing them to also maintain a focus on their child(ren).

Clerical/maintenance responsibilities also reveal the CCCC's commitment to protecting instructional time. Access to clean and well-stocked facilities is one provision of the HSPPS. Whereas updating student contact information, taking inventory of the first aid kit, and replacing worn toothbrushes are often the responsibility of classroom teachers, and often accomplished during centers or free play time when students are involved in learning, the CCCC protects such instructional time by employing a full-time staff member to complete safety checks and file appropriate paperwork for the 14 classrooms on-site, from restocking the first aid kit and replacing toothbrushes, to updating each classrooms' emergency contact binder.

Given the supportive climate and resources, only a fraction of teacher resources are expended on non-instructional duties. Teachers make divisions of labor decisions locally, with master and assistant teachers' voices equally heard. For Triangle teachers, defining instructional roles is intentional, responsive, and fluid. For three months prior to Ms. Zachmann's hire, Mr. Pearson and Ms. O'Neal ran the Triangle classroom as a pair. Ms. Zachmann describes the transition from two to three team members:

> I came into the room a couple of times just to observe, to see the summer before I started how the routine was, so I could just kind of 'fit in' because I didn't want to come in and jolt everything and be like 'this is how we do it.'

These roles are also fluid and intentional. Ms. O'Neal describes, "We kind of continually sit and assess the routines, like, 'Hey, I've got this going on and I need to take care of this at this time so, ok then will you handle this transition…'"

Teacher Transitions. HSPPS mandates no more than 20 children enrolled in any one class of 4- and 5-year-olds. Classes must be staffed by a teacher and an aide, or two teachers. The SSA caps preschool classroom enrollment at 17. The six preschool classrooms at the CCCC are each staffed by at least one certified ECE teacher (Birth-Grade 3) and two teachers with either the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or an ECE Associates' Degree. Positions are described and defined as Master Classroom Teacher and Classroom Teacher. The term 'aide' is intentionally avoided. Because adults work in partnership, they share an understanding of how to develop learning activities and how to support children; it is difficult to discern upon observation which adult in the room is the designated master teacher. They communicate about teaching in ways that make ongoing collaboration a reality (Baker and Manfredi-Petitt 2004; Casper and Theilheimer 2010).

With three classroom teachers, the required teacher/student ratios rarely require attention. If an adult needs to step out to talk to a parent, use the restroom, or take their lunch break, the remaining two teachers maintain classroom practices without loss of any instructional time. Classroom staffing is also intentional, with Ms. Zachmann opening the classroom at 7:00am and remaining until 3:30pm, Ms. O'Neal joining her at 8:00am and leaving at 4:30, and Mr. Pearson arriving at 9:00 and closing the classroom. This structure creates a manageable workday for teachers and provides consistency for children. No instructional time is compromised in transitions debriefing an additional adult on the day's happenings.

Context: Instructional Capacity

Center policies and protocols provide the resources necessary for teachers to advance their professional knowledge around developmentally appropriate, culturally sustaining practices. For example, the structured protocol for weekly team meetings normalized the practice of using classroom observational data to inform weekly pedagogical decisions. Similarly, Center culture purports a 'teacher-as-learner' mindset, supporting professional development opportunities for classroom teachers, assistant teachers, food preparation staff, and administrative personnel. The outcomes of such investment in adult learning are often evidenced in teacher-child interactions, as well as custodian-child, receptionist-child, and cook-child interactions. In essence, data captured the rich normality of the classroom and showcased how such small important moments were made possible through supports.

Professional Development.   Professional development is widely considered by both communities of scholarship and of practice to be the most effective means of improving classroom instruction (Buysse, et al., 2009). From single-day, decontextualized workshops to sustained partnerships between schools and content experts, the term "professional development" can imply a broad range of structures meant to improve teaching and learning in schools. Given this description, childcare centers with limited resources may choose to offer a one-size-fits-all workshop to meet their professional development requirements for staff as a way of 'checking the box.' However, effective professional development needs to be focused, systemic, and actively engaging, to building on pedagogical content knowledge (Raphael, et al., 2002). Translating policies into practice, the CCCC regularly seeks opportunities to collaborate with local ECE experts in sustained and sustainable ways.

For example, the Center participated in a grant-funded, multi-year collaborative coaching program supporting their implementation of reflective decision making. Mr. Pearson described participation as allowing them "to look at things from a different perspective," describing video reflection practices as the highlight of participation. The project involved monthly meetings in teaching teams and monthly meetings with coaches to review their classroom teaching videos. Mr. Pearson's and Ms. O'Neal's attitudes towards PD as meaningful and reflective practice is attributed in part to their participation in quality PD, but also in part to their own attitudes about teaching and learning. To return to the influence of the SSA and the CCCC on classroom instruction, it can be noted that this Center and the broader organization intentionally seeks out qualified employees who share a philosophy of life-long learning.

Curricular Decisions.   In the over 60 years that have passed since the inception of both Head Start itself and the High/Scope preschool curricular research (Schweinhart, et. al., 2005), the role of academics in preschool settings continues to be contested. However, there is consensus that a curriculum, as broadly defined by Head Start, is a necessary roadmap when planning and implementing classroom instruction. Head Start's Early Learning Outcomes Framework is a written plan that includes "(i) goals for children's development and learning," and compliance with this Framework is a Head Start mandate. However, grantees are provided some autonomy when making curricular decisions regarding "(ii) the experiences through which they will achieve these goals."

A near majority (49.2% [Heller School for Social Policy and Management]) of grantees have adopted the Creative Curriculum for Preschool, the CCCC included. This curriculum features hands-on, project-based investigations to integrate learning naturally across the day. Because Creative Curriculum emphasizes student exploration and situated learning, daily plans include 45-60 minutes of free center play. Ms. O'Neal described this as the most fruitful time for student-initiated conversation, when she can elaborate on their interests to develop problem-solving skills and advanced vocabulary. Center input and agency ultimately selected and funded the adoption of the Creative Curriculum. But the teachers' instructional capacity in implementing the curriculum foster opportunities to engage students in meaningful ways. Teachers capitalize on these opportunities and reflect on ways to increase their effectiveness through assessments and documentation.

Assessment & Documentation.   Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG) is an assessment tool used in combination with Creative Curriculum to document and monitor student growth. Each of the Triangle teachers is responsible for maintaining current and accurate documentation for one third of the students. They have individual folders in the TSG documentation system, but pragmatically teachers can upload evidence for any of the students in the class. Mr. Pearson describes, Ms. O'Neal "might say, 'Mr. Pearson, I put some pictures up', or 'Ms. Zachmann I put some pictures up', and then I go on [TSG] and just see the pictures and then just type in the observation." Documentation accounts for student learning, and is in compliance with TSG. Center protocol requires current and accurate evidence for all learning standards addressed, and Center administration checks classroom and student files sporadically for completion. Mr. Pearson describes how the team maintains this accountability, and how it informs instructional planning, such as small group centers:

> Ms. Z.: Ok. That sounds good. Do you have anything in particular in mind?
> Mr. P.: Probably some numbers with the quantifying. Like if I have 10 bears, and if I spin and got 10, then how many bears do I have?... So they can identify the number and then know, 'Ok, so which one is bigger?'
> Ms. Z.: I am looking at the math data to see… with number [recognition] we are good, and connecting numerals to quantities we are pretty high. You know what we are lower in?
> Mr. P.: What?
> Ms. Z.: Comparing and measuring. That is where we are the lowest [on data].
> Ms. O.: Like with the scale?
> Ms. Z.: Yeah with the scale for comparing.
> Mr. P.: Oh, I got something good. I've got a measuring tape at home and we can use the scales…

Beyond documentation, observational data are used to inform classroom practice. Ms. Zachmann commented, "The lesson planning itself is almost less important than what is in the data, what are your kids able to do?" Focusing on student achievement and growth, the Triangle teachers plan classroom experiences to meet students' developmental needs. During one team meeting, the Triangle teachers collectively reflected on their observations of student Conner over the past week, and brainstormed instructional strategies to support the class's newest member in reaching two academic milestones:

Ms. Z: Ok, so he needs work on numeral recognition and letter recognition. So, for numeral recognition it will help him to be in [Mr. P's small group], and as far as letter recognition, I mean, we can continue to push it through all parts of the day. We are constantly referencing letters and letter sounds. Maybe I can grab him in the morning and do a puzzle.

Ms. O.: We can get them to sit on a letter again. Like, after they come in from the outside or something like that.

Ms. Z.: Oh yeah. Ok.

Ms. O.: They liked that. They had to call out what letter they were sitting on. So, if they didn't remember they could help a friend.

Ms. Z.: Ok that's great. We will utilize the letter... I'll just call them letter tiles [typing] for them to sit on after gross motor to promote letter name recognition. Sounds good.

The Triangle teachers comply with external requirements for data collection and documentation to authentically and meaningfully inform their practice. By integrating their PD knowledge with student data, and implementing reflective decision making, they create an environment fostering rich teacher-child interactions, grounded in evidence and research.

Person & Context: Evidenced in Team Meetings

In addition to staff meetings and weekly memos, Center communication compliance requires the Triangle team hold weekly meetings. Therefore, every Thursday the Triangle teachers have one hour of protected common plan time. Meetings are only held when all three teachers are in attendance. If someone is unavailable, the meeting is rescheduled when all can participate. As the Education Coordinator for the preschool classrooms, Ms. Stevenson attends these meetings once a month, to observe and answer questions or share information relevant to the preschool teams. Ms. Zachmann leads the meetings and completes a Weekly Team Meeting Protocol as the conversation progresses. This Protocol provides skeletal guidance for the topics to be discussed, and is shared electronically with Ms. Cooper (Center Director) and Ms. Stevenson (Education Coordinator) once complete. While each meeting follows this sequence, conversation unfolds organically. Ms. Zachmann will often pause the exchange to record the information being shared in the correct 'box'.

Meetings are both focused and productive, relaxed and casual. No one checks the time during the conversation, and when the team has covered all the necessary information, in just under, or just over, the full hour, they wrap up. These meetings are joyful. Teachers always lead with the positive, sometimes anecdotes about their experiences with children. Transcripts of five weekly meetings were qualitatively coded using constant comparative analysis (Saldana, 2012); the following characterizations reflect the collapsed codes from this analysis. Across the all topics discussed each week, the team engaged in collaborative problem solving and brainstorming. On the Triangle team, this included: soliciting feedback from a quiet team member, suggesting ideas rather than dictating solutions, reifying each other's ideas, asking for clarification towards

collaborative understanding, and validating each other's observations, actions, choices through indirect compliment.

Within this collaborative climate, the Triangle team created an instructional plan for the coming week based on their reflective conversations. For example, these conversations included reflecting on: the successes/challenges of their instructional approaches and the performance of, and uptake by, students based on student observations and documentation. Reflective conversations, a result of the collaborative climate, precede classroom decision making. The decision-making processes observed among the Triangle teachers through the weekly team meetings can be characterized as: connecting observations to the standards, drawing on research to justify decision making, setting attainable goals based on their reflection, creating unique solutions for individual students based on their individual circumstances, and verbalizing how they integrate their teaching philosophy in practice. These meetings are at the crux of influence in terms of teacher-child interaction. The priorities established by the SSA and the CCCC, coupled with the policies and protocols mandated from external sources, meld with teachers' curricular and pedagogical knowledge fostered by professional learning opportunities.

Classroom Space & Materials.   The Triangle teachers recognize that the physical classroom space impacts the ways children and adults perceive the practices taking place there, and are mindful of the environment they create. Conversations are ongoing, and decisions about materials available in each interest area are informed by student observations. Per the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale- Revised (ECERS-R) guidelines (Harmes et al., 1998) an assessment tool adopted by Head Start for classroom accountability, the Triangle classroom has nine identified interest areas open to students during center time: art, music, blocks, dramatic play, science and nature, math and numbers, computers, sand and water, and books. During planning meetings, the team discusses interest areas, gauging student interest and appropriate use of materials. For example:

> Ms. Z.: What about block area?
> Mr. P.: They are using the blocks more.
> Ms. Z.: I noticed that too
> Ms. O.: They took the flowers [from floral shop introduced to dramatic play during the plant unit] and put them on their building, and then they took the flowers and put them on the block, with the fabric, making it beautiful.
> Ms. Z.: Was Daniyah a part of that?
> Ms. O.: yes.
> Ms. Z.: Yeah, she is really into making things aesthetically pleasing. Ok great. Anything else in particular that needs to be changed and updated? How is the water table going?
> Mr. P.: We need more dirt.

Schedule and Time Allocation.   The Triangle teachers are mindful of the ways they use classroom time, from ordering the daily schedule in ways that makes sense, to minimizing the time spent in transitions. CCCC logistics dictate certain parts of the daily schedule – for example, the Triangle classroom is assigned a specific time in the gross motor room and a specific time on

the playground. Classroom teachers structure the rest of their routine around these reoccurring events.

When Ms. Zachmann joined the Triangle classroom, she was hard-pressed to find opportunities to document student learning. To meet CCCC policies regarding student documentation and to use documentation to inform instruction, Ms. Zachmann introduced small group work to the daily routine. For 8-10 minutes, students meet with one of the Triangle teachers to make targeted progress on a Head Start Pre-K Learning Standard. These quick interactions are designed to maintain student interest while also gathering important information about students' learning and growth. Ms. Zachmann describes:

> When I started, small groups were not a thing. So, we added that in and we kind of picked the time that made the most sense to fit it in. We thought it made sense right after morning meeting, right before centers then it is kind of like your exit ticket to go to centers. When you finish your small group then you can go pick your area.

Because each teacher works with a small number of students, and because students are well-versed in center time expectations, students are free to leave small group once they have engaged with the activity. In some instances, students complete the task (e.g., reordering the letters in their name, classifying a group of plastic animal toys, or sequencing a series of story cards) in just a few minutes. In other cases, students may remain engaged for up to 20 minutes, choosing to spend some of their center time remaining in small group. This intentional ordering of the daily events, with small group leading into centers, allows for students' individual needs and interests to be attended to, without compromising the time requirements imposed on the daily schedule by outside entities. Given their creative scheduling, the Triangle teachers can accomplish the required curricular activities alongside additional practices they value. Small groups are used to transition students into center time, while Writer's Workshop is a vehicle to transition students out of centers.

Triangle teachers use a chime to ask students to clean up their centers in a staggered fashion – Blocks and Dramatic Play which require more time to reassemble are called first, while Puzzles and the Reading Corner are called last. Staggering eliminates bottlenecks in the bathroom and at the sink (students must wash their hands and are offered a water drink before getting their writing materials), and allows one classroom teacher to supervise center clean up, while one teacher attends to students washing up, and the third is ready to work with the first students ready to write.

Timely and purposeful transitions are vital in ECE spaces, as they occur frequently during the day. Students do not remain in one place on one task for very long, and time spent on compliance with handwashing and water drinks can add up. Teachers also use the weekly meeting to self-evaluate these transitions, modifying classroom practice to increase efficiency and meet student needs.

> Ms. Z.: I have one we can work on, I wanted to mention, I guess productivity slash positive climate. It has been great that the weather has been warm and we have been able to go outside again, but I feel like the transition to go outside has been pretty hectic the last couple days.
> Ms. O: Oh yeah.
> Ms. Z.: Part of it has been because we have only had two people in the room, but even when we only have two people in the room we should be able to execute a

> good transition to get outside. So, what are the things… I guess one loose end is David. One of us has to make sure he is getting his coat on, so maybe during writing time one of us can make sure like, I'll give the heads up that we are about to get in line, but we will make sure, or keep each other accountable to make sure that he has shoes on, and that we are getting him together.
>
> Mr. P.: Yeah today it was those shoes.

Intentional plans that guide the daily routine, and thoughtful decisions about how to make transitions within that routine less cumbersome, reclaim lost time and increase the opportunity for rich teacher-child interactions in small moments. Given the supports provided by organizational infrastructure, and the investment in instructional capacity, the Triangle teachers are in a unique position to both recognize the value of these moments, and to make the most of them.

In the present study, local policies and protocols were enacted in such a way that teachers in the Triangle classroom felt supported by their administration and grateful to be part of a like-minded team in a positive climate. This is not to say that the community, the CCCC, or the teachers, students, and families of the Triangle classroom did not face challenges. Many external factors weighing on this classroom community could have compromised teacher-child interactions and instructional quality. Despite these barriers, Ms. Zachmann, Mr. Pearson, and Ms. O'Neal remained focused and dedicated. Triangle teachers could offload many non-instructional tasks, making them more available to students pragmatically, but even more importantly the Triangle teachers engaged each other in emotional offloading, making them more available to students emotionally. Triangle classroom didn't 'lose their cool.' During 128 hours of classroom observation over eight weeks (at the end of the school year, no less!), we noted that one teacher was short with one student one time. That is no small feat. Taken together, the impactful ways broader policies and local protocols are enacted to build organizational infrastructures and increase instructional capacity in big ways, but also in the small, rich normality moments that add up to equal importance.

Permeating Themes Across Person and Context

The influences defined and described here are not exhaustive of all factors at play considering teacher-child interactions. However, they are the most common and most influential observed in the Triangle classroom. Successfully navigating compliance with external mandates and accounting for other factors of influence comes with practice, and is supported by the following four values observed in action at the Center.

Community of Individuals.   Members of the CCCC feel valued for their individual contributions to a shared mission. The common values held by employees include a respect for diverse opinions, different approaches, and lots of personalities. Mrs. O'Neal describes this call to "be present in the classroom. Be present for your staff, your coworkers, the children, you don't know what they are going through in their day, and then we have to be present for each other." The SSA and CCCC leadership hire and work for people whom they respect, and this climate permeates the building. Ms. Stevenson, the Education Coordinator for the preschool classrooms agrees, saying:

> There is no *I* in it. It is about *we*, supporting each other and helping each other and finding out what works best. We monitor what we do, and I like knowing 'this is what we are about,' and we check ourselves. I like that they do all that. I like the whole business of it. We aren't just out there, trial and error, but we have a plan. We have a mission and we have specific procedures and guidelines to follow. A lot of places don't have that.

Consistent Flexibility.   Policies and protocols are in place to demonstrate consistency and fairness, and yet they are written widely enough that pragmatic change is welcome when necessary. Always open to improvement, the Center and the SSA welcome change when change makes sense; Ms. Cooper looks for ways to meet the changing needs of the community and her students, while remaining consistent in the overall message. She says, "My biggest thing is really just working with my team to know the importance of their role here. When you show up, we win."

Growth Mindset.   There is a consistent discourse among teachers, staff, and administrators to strive to do better. The Center community celebrates successes and acknowledgements accomplishments but is tireless in its efforts to continue to raise the bar of achievement – for themselves and for their students. Ms. Stevenson mentioned their interest in developing more reflective practice groups among teachers, saying, "…you want teachers to talk about their practice, you have a topic, or everyone brings a topic, and you want them to be able to talk and reflect about that."

Prioritizes Academic Achievement While Developing the Whole Child.   These shared discourses about the Center and its purpose result in a teaching climate that prioritizes academic achievement while developing the whole child. Much like their ability to comply with regulations and mandates in purposeful ways that do not compromise instructional quality, the SSA, the CCCC, and the employees thoughtfully hired to uphold this mission, believe that a strong educational foundation is one piece of student success. When asked what the single most important skill they each wanted their students to leave their classroom having mastered, Mr. Pearson responded:

> How to self-regulate when something doesn't go their way. Instead of just blowing a gasket or blowing their top, to be able to calm themselves and come to approach someone in a manner that they can be understood, or an understanding manner.

Self-regulation was also a theme for Ms. Zachmann, who said, "I want them to be able to continue to take a deep breath and think, 'Is this a big deal or a small deal?', and really be able to regulate their emotions." When students are able to regulate their own emotions, they can tend to those of their classmates. Ms. O'Neal states:

> I think they are really learning to respect each other. To care about each other. And to just learn and enjoy learning. Learning is fun. Socially I really, really want them to be able to communicate their needs, wants, and express themselves verbally.

Ms. Cooper's hope is "that they are inquisitive and they are asking questions and just curious about life. All the things that kids already are, but it is up to the teachers to be able to keep that."

DISCUSSION

Within a government-supported ECE climate, adherence to policies and protocols ensure continued financial support. In some cases, increasing external mandates create a climate where compliance is emphasized as the primary measure of success. Overwhelmed by compliance with external requirements, limited resources are sometimes readily allocated in ways that compromise instructional quality. Fortunately, some ECE settings have implemented policies and protocols to ensure both compliance with external regulation and continued student academic success. Using a bioecological model to investigate the features of person and context of such both/and implementation provides opportunities to support other sites that struggle to find such balance on the tightrope. Therefore, "collaborative participatory research and ethnographic studies of teachers who accomplish innovative and inclusive ECE in culturally diverse high poverty communities is urgent for the profession" (Comber, 2011, p. 135).

With young children on the leading edge of a steady demographic change, classroom instruction, including preschool interactions, must reflects the rich cultural experiences of all children. What was historically deemed 'high-quality' preschool instruction must now also incorporate the flexibility and sensitivity necessary to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. And yet, in an era of normative standardized literacy curriculum, many ECE educators are not receiving the support necessary to enact practices in their preschool classrooms that fits the developmental needs and cultural identities of all students. Federal funding avenues, state grant incentives, district curriculum adoptions, local allocation of materials, professional development, and building leadership are but a few of the external factors influencing classroom instructional quality. These influences are not unilateral, nor are they easily defined. For this reason, it is not enough to simply investigate the developmentally-grounded and individually-responsive nature of teacher-child interactions without also investigating the policies and protocols that support these instructional practices.

Future Directions

Observing the practices of the Triangle classroom gives substance to the generalities we believe to be true about the purposeful balancing act when navigating requirements imposed globally while teaching young children locally. As the political, economic, and social climate of the United States changes, so will the role and process of external compliance in ECE. Amidst fluid and often competing discourses of influence, the Triangle teachers, and their peers nationwide, must remain steadfast in their vision of school readiness for the preschool child, considering both what young students need to be prepared for school, and what schools need to be prepared for the diverse needs of their students. For the CCCC described here, these values have provided a successful backdrop against which to do just that.

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