

# Promoting Reflective Leadership within Early Head Start: A Qualitative Study of a Professional Development Training for Administrators

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## ABSTRACT

Administrators and other professionals who support teachers in the early care and education setting are essential to the organization and climate of the center, the classroom environment, and the experiences of teachers, children, and families. The current qualitative study investigates the experiences of five Early Head Start administrators who participated in a 15-hour attachment- and relationship-based professional development training. Themes that emerged from analyses underscore the importance of the administrator's role in supporting teachers to integrate professional development content within their classrooms and highlight the powerful nature of participating in a training that is specifically designed and aimed at the complex role of the administrator. This study informs the field on the importance of providing professional development and support to early childhood education administrators and attending to all the complex and important relationships reflected within the early childhood setting.

## KEYWORDS

Administrators, Early Childhood Education, Early Head Start, Infants, Professional Development, Reflection, Teachers, Qualitative Study

**E**arly childhood education and care (ECEC) program administrators, classroom coaches, and teacher consultants play a key role in program quality and teacher well-being (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Jorde Bloom & Able, 2015), including their efforts to support, motivate, and empower their teaching staff (Coleman et al., 2015). While professional development (PD) interventions often focus on teacher well-being en route to improved classroom quality (Cumming, 2017), increasing teachers' coping strategies and stress management may not be sufficient to promote teachers' sustained well-being and high-quality classroom practices. Specifically, ECEC class-

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rooms do not exist on their own; they are embedded within multifaceted program contexts which contain complex sets of relationships and systems (e.g., Cumming & Wong, 2019) that can support, or undermine, teachers' well-being, classroom practices, and ability to apply what is learned through PD (Koplow et al., 2020; Kuh, 2012). Just as teachers set the emotional and relational tone of their classrooms, which affect children's behavior and development, so do administrators set the relational tone within ECEC programs, which may influence teachers' well-being and classroom practices. For example, Koplow and colleagues (2020) reported that supporting administrators and teachers in models of parallel process enabled administrators to be more supportive of teachers and, in turn, teachers to be more supportive of children. They explain "when teachers feel validated, seen, and heard, they are much more likely to be able to hear and see the children they work with" (Koplow et al., 2020, p. 90). Hence, ECEC administrators are critical to overall program quality (Talan et al., 2014). Yet there continues to be a lack of research aimed at understanding administrators' training needs and experiences within ECEC professional development programs (Shore et al., 2021) and examining the effective training of coaches and consultants who support teachers (Artman-Meeker, et al. 2015).

### **Professional Development for ECEC Administrators and Coaches/Consultants**

The scant existing research shows that ECEC administrators experience significant stress in their roles (Elomaa et al., 2020), largely driven by the demands of managing a multitude of administrative tasks, leading others, and a lack of social support (Kristiansen et al., 2021). A recent study of ECEC administrators in Norway found that administrators' work stress is negatively related to their work engagement vigor and perceptions of dedication to their work (Elomaa et al., 2020). Moreover, ECEC administrators have called for additional resources that will allow them to be effective leaders (Kristiansen et al., 2021). Perhaps not surprisingly, a recent study (Elomaa et al., 2020) reported that ECEC administrators with no training in leadership were less able to recover from work stressors as compared to their peers who had prior training

or who were receiving PD in leadership. Given the highly relational nature of ECEC, PD trainings that: (a) contribute to administrators' positive thinking, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal relational skills (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); (b) embed elements of emotional support; (c) and provide feedback (Elomaa et al., 2020), offer critical resources that can support administrators in their work. Subsequently, administrators may then be better able to support their teachers.

We conducted literature searches for PD specifically for administrators and/or including administrators and found relatively few examples. We used search terms such as "professional development", "administrators", "supervisors", and "directors". We found very few studies that addressed PD for ECEC administrators, much less described the content of PD programs. Among those studies, PD content varies and includes material that ranges from teaching administrators to apply a personalized Plan, Do, Study, Act model (PDSA; Shore et al., 2021) to their programs, to individual topic-based workshops (Burris, 2020), and leadership development (Douglas, 2018). Interestingly, although there seems to be agreement that ECEC leadership is interwoven with and characterized by interactions and the relationships in which they occur (Hujala, 2013), we found no examples of relationship-based PD programs for administrators.

In some ECEC programs mental health consultants, coaches, and education/curriculum specialists also support teacher learning. These professionals also play a role in creating warm and authentic relationships to support teacher learning. They provide individualized observations and feedback, model skills and interactions, prompt reflection, and help set goals (for review see Elek & Page, 2018). Early childhood teachers describe supportive and equitable coach-teacher relationships that provide opportunities for reflection and time to practice skills as essential to their practice (Brown et al., 2009; Jayaraman et al., 2015; Knoche et al., 2013). Despite knowing the qualities and strategies that make coaches effective, very little is known about training coaches, especially with regard to establishing trusting relationships and supporting reflection (Artman-Meeker, et al., 2015). For conciseness, we will use the term 'administrators' for the remainder of this paper to refer to the

program directors, center directors, mental health consultants, and education specialists/coaches who all were invited to participate in this research.

### Parallel Processes in ECEC Relational Work

Teachers strive to co-construct the warm and secure relationships that promote child development. In the infant and early childhood mental health field, “how” teachers and caregivers are with children (the relational nature of their interactions) has long been considered as important as what they “do” with children (the learning experiences offered to support learning; Pawl & St. John, 1993). In parallel, we posit that “how” administrators are with teachers is a vital element in what they “do” with teachers. It is not enough for administrators to “buy in” to training that supports teacher well-being and practices, they must work to create a climate that supports the administrator-teacher relationship and allows teachers to fully benefit from training and coaching. This professional climate includes developing warm and authentic teacher-administrator relationships, enabling access to trusted support staff who support teachers’ learning, and having opportunities to make mistakes without fear of discipline (Wanless & Winters, 2018). Aubrey and colleagues (2013) note that ECEC programs characterize complex systems that are both hierarchical and collaborative with “multiple and diverse relationships” (Colmer, 2015, p. 34), suggesting the importance of attention to relationships between administrators and teachers. Moreover, characteristics of “relational leadership,” that is leadership behaviors that recognize and promote relationships and collaboration, are recognized as central to ECEC administration (Douglass, 2018).

Models of parallel processes embrace relational leadership qualities and suggest the need to enhance administrators’ mindful and reflective practices that foster self-regulation and empathy so they can increase trust and belonging in their organization (Luther, 2020). This sense of trust and belonging fosters a climate of psychological safety that enables teachers to fully engage in relationally oriented PD, and to use relational practices in their work (Wanless & Winters, 2018). Despite the theoretical match between parallel processes and the relational nature of ECEC, there have been no studies that have examined ECEC administrators’ experiences in relationship-based PD programs.

Understanding their experiences in such programs will contribute novel information to ECEC PD literature.

### Hearts and Minds on Babies Training Program

Hearts & Minds on Babies (HMB) is an attachment and mindfulness-based training series (Stacks et al., 2023), tested in Early Head Start (EHS) programs. HMB was adapted from an evidence-based, multifamily parenting and mental health intervention, named Mom Power (Muzik et al., 2015; Rosenblum et al., 2017, 2018), and is part of a set of interventions/training curricula that fall under the umbrella Strong Roots Parenting Programs™ (see webpage [www.zerotothrive.org](http://www.zerotothrive.org) for details). All Strong Roots Programs™ are rooted in attachment theory, trauma-informed practice, self-compassion, and relational empathy (Bowlby, 1969; Cloitre et al., 2009; Herman, 1992), and rest on five core components paralleling the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s Strengthening Families/Protective Factors Framework (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2015): Caregiving Education; Self-Care; Guided Caregiver-Child Interactions; Social Support; and Connection to Resources. In contrast to all other Strong Roots Programs™ which are all clinically focused, HMB is a PD program and aims to improve responsive caregiving of teachers by increasing their reflective functioning.

Improvements in reflective functioning are believed to enable caregivers (teachers) to better understand and respond to the children’s developmental and emotional needs in their classrooms. HMB was initially developed as a teacher PD curriculum (named HMB+T; 20 hours training), and later advanced to also provide a teacher-guided parent curriculum (named HMB+P; 4.5 hours training). Both HMB+T and HMB+P are manualized, can be taught to teachers to fidelity, and can be delivered concurrently or sequential. For detailed description of curriculum development and implementation pilot see Stacks et al., 2023. Both HMB curricula also support teachers’ and parents’ emotion regulation by introducing mindfulness-based exercises and reflective practices (see Table 1 for a description of the HMB concepts and learning objectives; adapted from Stacks et al., 2023).

**Table 1**

*Hearts and Minds on Babies Concepts and Learning Objectives*

Session	HMB Concepts	Overview of Learning Objectives
1	<del>Introduced</del> Social-Emotional Foundation of Learning	Begin to describe the HMB perspective related to professional development and training  Offer a welcoming environment to support the development of group cohesiveness and relationships  <del>Introduce the link between attachment and school readiness</del>
2	The Tree	Introduce the Tree as a metaphor for children's behavior being an expression of attachment needs (connection-roots; exploration-branches).  Identify activities to provide children with warmth within the early childhood education context (sunshine time)  Consider how race, culture, and values can impact understanding and acceptance of the Tree concept
3	The Tree	Identify building roots/connection and branching out/exploration moments in videos of classroom interactions  Strengthen observation skills by practicing identifying behavior without interpretation  <del>Identify and reflect upon one's own feelings in response to children's attachment needs</del>
4	Wondering & Response Wheel	Identify behavior as clues to a children's feelings and needs  Increase skills for responding to children's attachment needs, building on the Tree  Consider how race, culture, and values can impact understanding and acceptance of the "Wheel" concept
5	Restore Emotional Balance	Increase vocabulary around feeling words  Understand ways to help children and oneself regulate emotional responses  Consider how race, culture, and values can impact understanding and acceptance of this concept
6	Music in the Background & Co-Regulation	Understand how adults' and children's past experiences can impact perceptions and behaviors  Understand very young children need help/a partner to regulate their emotional response  Consider how race, culture, and values can impact our understanding and acceptance of 'Co-Regulation'
7	Balanced Care-giving	Understand the need to be both "in charge & strong" and "warm & kind"  Develop ideas for balancing one's own needs with the needs of children.  Consider how race, culture, and values can impact our understanding and acceptance of 'Balanced Caregiving'
8	Repair the Disruption & Circles of Holding	Utilize the Tree and Wondering & Response Wheel to think about and respond to the feelings and needs of parents  Understand how to Repair a Disruption within a relationship (parent, child, colleague)  Consider how race, culture, and values impact our response to and our understanding and acceptance of parents
9	Bringing it All Together	Practice applying HMB concepts to teachers' unique situations in the classroom with children  Practice applying HMB concepts to teachers' unique situations with parents  Discuss how HMB concepts fit or were challenging based upon their own beliefs, values, training, culture
10	Celebration/ Continued Growth	Reflect upon the group learning experience  Celebrate progress  Strategize about ongoing support to utilize HMB concepts

**Note.** Table adapted from Stacks et al. 2023.

Hearts and Minds on Babies for Administrators (HMB+A).

Based on feedback from the implementation pilot, the HMB curriculum was further advanced to target administrators (named HMB+A). As part of the implementation pilot a training aimed at administrators who support teachers in the classroom was developed and piloted alongside HMB+T and HMB+P. The HMB+A curriculum includes 15 hours of PD for administrators across four sessions to learn the core concepts of HMB Strong Roots concepts (Table 1) and put them into practice in their work with teachers and parents.

HMB+A provided an opportunity for administrators to experience the reflective and relationship-based nature of the HMB training groups and to feel supported in their capacity to support teachers. It also promoted a shared HMB language across all important relationships within the ECEC setting. HMB+A was designed with attention to relationships and a reflective stance to enhance administrators’ examination of their own work and how their relationships with staff in turn, support the staff’s wellbeing and the staff’s work with the children and families in the classrooms.

The Purpose of the Current Study

The current study aimed to understand the experience of EHS administrators who participated in HMB+A. The primary research questions were:

- 1. How do Early Head Start (EHS) administrators describe their experience participating in an attachment and mindfulness-based professional development training?
- 2. How can HMB concepts - which were developed to strengthen relationships between young children and their teachers/caregivers - be applied by administrators to strengthen relationships with teachers?

Methods

Research Design

The current study employed a qualitative, phenomenological methodology. Understanding the meaning of an experience from those who

have participated in it is a primary goal of phenomenological research (Bhattacharya, 2017). When a lived experience of a particular phenomenon (i.e., HMB+A) can be deeply understood from those who participate, new insights and new meanings can be identified and implemented in future iterations of the experience (Bhattacharya, 2017; Padgett, 2017). This study used in depth individual interviews to capture the experience and perspectives of five EHS administrators who participated in HMB+A.

Participants

Five EHS administrators participated in individual interviews. The interviews were completed in July 2020 and were conducted via telephone due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant demographics are listed in Table 2.

Table 2  
Participant Demographics

Participant	Years in the ECEC Field	Gender	Race	Level of Education
Participant A	25	Female	Black or African American	Masters
Participant B	9	Female	White	Associates
Participant C	40	Female	White	Masters
Participant D	10	Female	Preferred not to say	Associates
Participant E	*	Female	Black or African American	*

\*did not answer

Procedure

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Wayne State University. EHS administrators who participated in HMB+A were sent a recruitment email. Interested participants were then sent an email that included a study information sheet that explained the risks and benefits related to the study and set an interview date and time. Prior to the start of the interview, participants were informed that their data would be kept confidential, and they were free to refuse any question and stop the interview at any time. Interviews varied in length but averaged 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted over the



phone by two members of the university research team. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim by research assistants, and checked for accuracy against the audio prior to and throughout analysis. Identifiers such as names of teachers, administrators, children, and parents were removed from the transcripts. Participants were compensated for their time with a gift card to a local retailer.

**Measures.** Qualitative data were gathered using a semi-structured interview process. The interview protocol was developed to prompt participants to think deeply about their experience participating in HMB+A, specifically to probe for their thoughts related to its relevance within the EHS setting and its impact on their work with their EHS staff. Interview questions related to: whether and how participating in HMB+A helped them to support their staff, *How did the HMB+A group help you support your staff?* (probe for a specific example); *which HMB concepts were not helpful or relevant in their role*, *What HMB concepts were not useful or relevant in your work with teachers* (probe for a specific example); and self-reflection, *What changes have you noticed in yourself as a result of attending HMB+A?* (probe for a specific example).

**Demographic information.** A demographic form was used to gather information related to each participant's race, ethnicity, gender identity, level of schooling, and years working in the ECEC field.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used to discern and capture the experiences of study participants. Thematic analysis is deemed appropriate when the research questions focus on the lived experiences and perspectives related to a particular phenomenon (Saldaña, 2021). Data analysis was completed by a two-person university-based coding team led by the [number] author. Initial coding was completed by assigning in vivo codes (e.g., using participants' words as initial codes) to extracts of data from each transcript. These codes were then collected,

combined, renamed as needed, and sorted into themes. Themes were then grouped by relationship to each other and collapsed when deemed similar. These final theme groupings were then sorted again into related categories based upon the study research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Considerations of trustworthiness

Strategies attending to rigor and trustworthiness were used throughout this study. While neither of the analysis team members facilitated study interviews, they did co-facilitate the HMB+A groups. Because of their involvement in the HMB+A implementation, it was important to employ bracketing throughout the analysis. Bracketing refers to intentional efforts by the researcher to identify potential biases and suspend any beliefs or expectations related to the experience being studied (Padgett, 2017). In this study, bracketing was put into practice in three ways. First, each team member used qualitative memos throughout coding and any thoughts, ideas, and potential biases were identified and discussed among the coding partners. Through these memos and ongoing discussion, the team paid attention to their positionality (e.g., work experience, cultural and racial identity, age). Positionality involves racial and cultural self-reflection to identify how these identities relate to the research, data analysis, and dissemination (Milner, 2007). Engaging in this self-reflection through discussion or reflective journaling can increase awareness of issues and perspectives that could affect the coding and interpretation of the data (Milner, 2007). Additionally, throughout the data analysis period, the coding team met weekly to discuss the analysis. Any disagreements related to codes and themes were resolved by returning to the data and engaging in discussion until coming to a consensus (Padgett, 2017).

### Findings

To maintain participant confidentiality, their roles in the program will not be specified; data will be presented using their Participant letter listed in Table 2 and using the identifier 'administrator.'

**Research Question 1: How do Early Head Start (EHS) administrators describe their experience participating in an attachment and mindfulness-based professional development training?**

EHS administrators identified two main themes related to their experiences participating in HMB+A. First, HMB+A was critical to the implementation of the HMB+T and HMB+P curricula in their programs. Administrators articulated that HMA+A helped them to support teachers' use of HMB concepts in the classroom, through promoting an understanding and shared language and supporting their capacity to take the teacher's perspective. Second, the administrators stressed how important it was to be part of a dedicated training group for administrators/coaches/consultants. Table 3 lists the final themes and their related codes.

**Table 3**

*Qualitative Themes Related to the Experiences of Administrators who Participated in HMB+A*

Theme 1: HMB+A is critical to supporting teachers to use	Theme 2: EHS administrators benefit from having their own dedicated
Importance of shared language	Administrators/leaders needs support
Support teachers' capacity to perspective take	Provides safe space to discuss their complex jobs and administrative
Important for administrators to focus on the teacher's needs in	Self-care for administrators/leaders is important, too
	Supports professional confidence and efficacy
	Allows opportunities to stop and reflect and perspective take

**Theme 1: HMB+A is Critical to Supporting Teachers to Use HMB Concepts**

Participants explained that HMB+A helped them focus on the teachers' needs, which in turn allowed them to support teachers' use of the concepts in their work with the children and families. HMB+A also helped them learn the concepts which promoted a shared language across the center.

**Importance of shared language.** Administrators noted that learning HMB concepts cultivated a shared language and supported the application of HMB concepts in the classroom setting and with parents. Participant B shares how hard it can be for her to use the concepts with teachers who have not

yet been trained in the HMB concepts and the interviewer notes how the shared language can support communication.

*Participant B: I honestly like would have loved for them to be able to attend Hearts and Minds on Babies so that they could understand the concepts more deeply and then be able to use them... and then when I come to them, they would understand where I'm coming from. But it was only offered for 9 of my [EHS] teachers.*

*Interviewer: Yeah, communication gets easier when we share the same language.*

*Participant B: Yes, exactly.*

**Support teachers' capacity to perspective take.**

Connected to their experience of the group and the cultivation of shared language, administrators noted that through their participation in HMB+A, they were better equipped to support the teachers' capacities to perspective-take; to stop and think about how they understand a situation and what would be the best way to respond. Participant C stated that when an administrator had experienced the HMB concepts, they would be able to support the teachers to use them in their work:

When an administrator or someone else would say, wait stop take a breath and think about it, then maybe they [teachers] could do that better; they [teachers] would be more equipped to do it.

**Important for administrators to focus on the teachers' needs in addition to the child's needs.**

HMB+A offered administrators an opportunity to think differently about their work and the needs of teachers. Learning the concepts within a dedicated group to reflect on their relationships with staff, administrators were able to focus on the teachers needs and behaviors; and think about how to best respond. Participant E helps us to understand the parallel process, and how the relationships administrators form with the teachers can be a model for how they hope teachers engage in relationships with the young children in their classrooms:

*You know, the way we expect for teachers to approach our children and families, we learned*

*that we need to approach them in that way. It's not just how teachers are reacting [to] children; [it's] how we're reacting to teachers.*

### ***"It's not just how teachers are reacting [to] children; [it's] how we're reacting to teachers."***

Participant D gives an example of when she was able to take time and listen to a staff person's experience and feelings, the teacher was able to feel heard and felt better able to handle a challenging situation in the classroom. In this way, she is acknowledging the teacher's emotional needs, with the hopes that the teacher would then be better able to respond to the children's emotional needs:

*I had a staff who came in [one] morning and was not the very best. And she at that time, well her situation, whatever it was going on at that time... She needed just...oh how can I describe this...she needed for me to just sit there—ok let me give this example. We watch the video [in the HMB+A group] where the teacher asked the kid what the kid needed, and the kid sat on her lap. She gives a child hug and when that kid was ready, he left. That was something I had to do when [this teacher] came in that morning. When I went to her class, she kind of stepped outside into the hall, and she, she got that nurturing [from me] that she needed. And when she felt comfortable, she was able to go back to her class, she saw that she was better emotionally to go back and handle her class.*

### **Theme 2: EHS Administrators Benefit from Having Their own Dedicated Group**

Administrators who participated in HMB+A highlighted the positive impact of having a group where they can connect with others who understand the complexity of their leadership role. HMB+A was important because it promoted leadership support and a safe space where administrators could present challenging staff circumstances, express vulnerability, take time to reflect, and receive feedback from their peers. The dedicated group helped them to learn and integrate HMB concepts into their work.

**Administrators/leaders need support.** Participants explained how important it was for them to be a part of a group that was made up of others in similar positions. This allowed them to receive support aimed at their leadership role. When asked about what was most helpful about HMB+A, Participant A stated that beyond the specific concepts they learned, the group itself was a helpful experience that gave her permission to feel overwhelmed, but also gave her permission to take time to care for herself and receive support to manage those feelings:

*Even the group itself was really...just being able to get be around other people that are in my position...and understanding that it was OK to feel overwhelmed. And then that's where the self-help part comes in. That it was – even though you know it was OK to feel overwhelmed, we sometimes we have to take a look – a step back and care for us, [for] ourselves, or else we can't care for other people.*

**Provides safe space to discuss their complex jobs and administrative challenges.** Results suggest that administrators benefited from having a protected group that allowed them to discuss the nature of their administrative position with other leaders. They offered anecdotes about how HMB+A supported their work, which often included challenges related to managing staff. Participant B described a particularly challenging situation with an infant teacher in her center and how HMB+A helped her approach the teacher in ways that appreciated the teacher's perspective.

*I would come in and try to explain like attachment, and you know [infant brain development] and trying to get her to understand all of that stuff, and she wasn't really grasping; and she would just tell me to get out of her classroom and that I wasn't helpful. So I actually brought her up a lot in the group and the facilitators were able to help me kind of figure out a new way of approaching her, and it really did help. Now I feel that the teacher and I have more of a connection, and she more so understands why; I guess I wasn't really explaining why I was just saying like do this, do that."*



**Self-care for administrators/leaders is important, too.** Results demonstrate the importance of self-care for ECEC administrators. Participant A was particularly struck by the focus on self-care in HMB+A and helps us to understand when administrators are encouraged to engage in self-care and to understand their emotions, they are more available, mindful, and responsive (an important part of the parallel process).

*It's OK to – I don't want to say dwell in the emotion, but I guess that's part of understanding the emotion, and then to do something that's only for...pretty much only for you. Where it may be riding a bike, a journal, taking a hot bath with music. Music was...is always my go to. And just learning how to be OK...to be OK with putting you first, and not everybody else first all the time. [HMB+A] more or less...made me more mindful of...there's other opinions out here, there's other connections that can be made. Um, and learning how to listen; to actually respond to their concerns versus listening just to respond [in whatever way I want to respond].*

**Supports professional confidence and efficacy.** Administrators identified how HMB+A supported their professional self and efficacy. Participant E was starting a new leadership position when she was a participant in HMB+A and credits the group with helping her develop confidence and collaborate with others in her new role:

*Wow, it made me feel a lot more confident in myself. Be at a level where I can communicate with people and they can, you know, you know, effectively communicate with me and we understand each other, and we listen, and then are both willing to try [new] things.*

Participant A agreed and stated that HMB+A made her a better leader:

*I just think the overall program. It's not one particular concept. It's probably all of them together. That has made me a better leader versus just being a manager.*

**Allows opportunities to stop and reflect and perspective take.** Each of the administrators in this

study identified how HMB+A strengthened their capacity to reflect upon situations before reacting. They related this to their work with staff, parents, and children, as well as in their personal lives.

*When I see frustration and I want to, ah you know, jump in...now I stop a minute, think about it, and look at both sides of the coin before I, you know. say too much. (Participant C)*

*I really learned right out the gate, and I'm still learning, you know, how to think about the people and situation before I react to things...purposefully stopping and thinking and observing. (Participant E)*

**Research Question 2: How can HMB concepts - which were developed to strengthen relationships between young children and their teachers/caregivers - be applied by administrators to strengthen relationships with teachers?**

Administrators identified core HMB concepts that crossed over and were applicable in their leadership roles, helping them to better understand and support their staff. Table 4 lists the HMB core concept (see Table 1 for more information) and illustrates how that particular concept helped them in their work with teachers, parents, and children.

### Additional Findings

Two additional themes emerged that are important to consider when providing PD:

**Cultural and racial experiences will impact how the concepts are perceived.** Participant D, who preferred not to identify her race, observed a racial difference in how the HMB concepts were accepted and integrated by the teachers and families in her center:

*[I found that] African American teachers were initially more resistant to HMB concepts. The older generation may be resistant but will try it if you are persistent. Immigrant families may not be initially open to using concepts if they are different from their own beliefs.*

## PROMOTING REFLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

**Table 4**

*Theme 3: Participant Quotes Identifying HMB Concepts that Supported Professional Growth and Helped with Staff Interactions*

HMB concepts:	Skills gained:	Participant quote:
The Tree	Trauma informed – considering history	B: “I go back to the tree a lot as much as I go to the wheel just because I’m thinking about what are their roots, what is their background?”
Balanced caregiving	Self-reflection	C: “I try to balance [being strong & in charge] with being the more warm person because I mean that’s the right way to be; but I find myself always being in charge so you’re
Background music	Perspective taking	A: “We have to, ya know, appreciate what their music was that morning, and not so much jump to a conclusion that they’re, you know, they’re being mean to you. They may
Wondering & Response wheel	Stop and think before reacting	B: “[HMB+A] helped me to kind of grasp like instead of like just automatically getting upset, I was understanding more like OK where did they come from, why do they feel that
Self-care skills	Patience Calm self down	C: “I think I have a lot more patience and I think that I do look and say what is the other person feeling whether it’s a parent whether it’s a child you know so I’m not as quick to
Restore your emotional balance	Stop and think before reacting	E: “Showing them that you know, we hear you and we want to make it better for you because you are the one carrying this load...that’s important.”

Additionally, Participant A, who identified as African American, expressed thoughts about families of different races and cultures and her experiences sharing HMB concepts:

*African Americans, we’re usually more that stricter side -no choices. Centers that are in [location] or have a larger population of Arabic or Muslims, um families, tend to accept these, um, [HMB] concepts a little bit better versus I’ve noticed with my African American families they tend to be more standoff -standoffish towards some of these concepts.*

These statements and perspectives are important to consider because they remind us to be thoughtful about how the HMB concepts may be perceived and embraced by racially and culturally diverse administrators, staff, and families. While these statements demonstrate the potential bias in these participants, they help to underscore the critical nature of having conversations about bias, values, and beliefs that are related to how we engage in relationships and demonstrate emotional need.

***An open-minded stance is important to embrace the concepts***

Administrators talked about attitudes and experiences as being central to how the HMB concepts may be perceived and utilized. Specifically, they spoke about openness to the concepts and prior experiences, particularly around race and culture, that are important to consider in how administrators and teachers perceive the HMB curriculum. Participant A, who identifies as African American; and Participant C, who identifies as white, offer their thoughts about the importance of an open-minded stance:

*I personally think all the ideas can fit across cultures, just because if you’re – if you have more open-mindedness? But, I could see where some things will be closed off to different cultures. (Participant A)*

*If they are open to [HMB]...but a lot of people, depending upon how they were raised, may not be open to it...it’s a very different concept for them and so that might be an issue. (Participant C)*

## Discussion

Three overarching themes emerged relative to EHS administrators’ participation in HMB+A, an attachment and mindfulness based PD curriculum for EHS

administrators: 1) Benefits of understanding HMB concepts in order to support teachers' implementation of the concepts in their practices; 2) Benefits of a group specifically for administrators and coaches/consultants; 3) Application of HMB concepts to administrators' work with teachers. Additional themes important to the implementation of PD included the importance of considering racial and cultural experiences and levels of open-mindedness.

### **Administrators' Familiarity with Curriculum as a Form of Teacher Support**

From educators' perspectives, a major source of disconnect may be administrators' lack of understanding of or agreement with educators' classroom practices. For example, when administrators and teachers differ in their beliefs about theoretical foundations and curriculum, both administrators and teachers may be negatively impacted (Zinsser et al., 2016). A shared vision for theoretical foundations of curriculum and classroom practices may promote a more supportive and harmonious work climate. In this study, administrators believed familiarity with the HMB curriculum, including the use of shared language for HMB concepts, better enabled them to support teachers' work with children and families. Administrators felt like they had a good sense of what teachers were doing in the classroom and they could more easily recognize teachers' efforts in implementing HMB concepts. Importantly, noticing and validating teachers' efforts in the classroom are key elements in teachers' perceptions of administrator support and a supportive administrative climate (Zinsser et al., 2016). In turn, feeling supported buffers the effects of stress on early childhood teachers (Berlin et al., 2020) and provides a climate where teachers can use the concepts in their work with children and families (Wanless & Winters, 2018).

### **Supports for Administrators**

ECEC administrators are tasked with managing a multitude of responsibilities including managing program quality, enrollment, day to day implementation of programming and communication with families, program and educator

evaluation, program licensing and accreditation, hiring and staffing, and educators' professional development. These responsibilities are embedded in a complex relational system (Huajala, 2013). Interestingly, most ECEC administrators are not formally prepared for leadership positions (Elooma et al., 2020). Many moved from teaching to administrative positions, often without the necessary support for administrative roles (Bloom et al., 2013; Talan et al., 2014). In addition to more formal training on leadership, administrators may especially benefit from emotional support and feedback from their peers. In fact, in their work with ECEC administrators, Shore and colleagues (2021) reported that administrators who attended their leadership institute requested opportunities to gather again with their peers to talk about their work. The administrators in this study were clear that a dedicated PD group that focused on their unique role provided them with opportunities to gain confidence, support, and time to reflect upon relationships with their staff. HMB+A offers a PD model that can provide support for administrators and leadership development (Goffin, 2013). Supporting the workforce, including administrators, is essential to promoting and sustaining ECED program quality (Douglass, 2018).

### **Administrators' Relational Work via the Application of HMB Concepts**

Zinsser and colleagues (2016) suggested a model of positive emotional leadership that is characterized by dimensions such as administrators' modeling of emotionally regulated interactions with teachers and attention to teachers' emotions, emotionally competent responses to challenges, and sensitive support of teachers' professional development. Such competencies are closely aligned with the foundational constructs in the HMB intervention. For example, administrators reported that learning about the HMB curriculum allowed them to apply HMB strategies, such as becoming more self-reflective and managing their own emotions in their administrative roles (including interactions with teachers), taking teachers' perspectives and considering teachers' needs in their administrative roles with teachers.

Administrators' efforts to understand teach-

-ers' viewpoints and experiences likely promotes more positive administrator-teacher relationships. In turn, workplace relationship quality impacts both classroom quality (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013) and teachers' intention to leave the profession (Grant et al., 2019), underscoring the need for relational practices in administration (Hazegh, 2020). Relational leadership, the ability to nurture positive, empowered relationships, is a key characteristic of effective ECEC leadership (Hazegh, 2020). In the social work literature, the term parallel process is described as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto others" (Pawl & St. John, 1998, p. 7). Administrators' use of the HMB concepts, particularly around relationship-based work, self-reflection and perspective taking, self-regulation, awareness of others' needs as underlying behavior, and responding rather than reacting to others, creates positive administrator-teacher relationships and psychological safety (Wanless & Winters, 2018). As Blöchliger and Bauer (2018) note, the pedagogical foundations of an early childhood program essentially reflect the values of the program. Programs such as HMB communicate relationships as the foundational frame for high quality practices, including interactions between administrators and teachers and teachers and children/families.

### **The Lens of Culture and Race in Professional Development Interventions**

Administrators in the current study noted that their own and teachers' unique experiences within racial and cultural groups could play a role in whether HMB content is viewed as racially and culturally relevant. While relationships are central to human experiences, the ways in which relationships are developed and maintained certainly vary across cultures. Among adults and children, for example, practices that are core to HMB, such as perspective taking (Chopik et al., 2017; Wu & Keysar, 2007), self-regulation (Trommsdorff & Cole, 2011), and self-reflection (Ma et al., 2014), may differ between cultures. Relationship development and expression of emotional needs are linked with unique cultural experiences and expectations (Bush & Peterson, 2013; Mesquita, 2003); therefore it is critical to allow time for the development of trust

within these trainings to engage in courageous conversations where our biases can be identified and challenged if necessary. It is important for HMB developers, and indeed any training curriculum developer, to consider the extent to which the concepts taught are relevant and appropriate for professionals across racial groups.

HMB was developed through a university-community partnership by a racially and ethnically diverse team of infant and early childhood professionals. The partnership and the diversity of the team was important to discuss and consider how the concepts could be presented, taught, and discussed in the curriculum and training. Culturally relevant teaching is defined as 'using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively' (Gay, 2002). Culturally relevant teaching (i.e. teaching material in ways that align with the cultural values, language, and beliefs of participants) combined with the HMB model of promoting reflection and emotion regulation, will enhance engagement, learning, and use of the concepts within classrooms.

In addition, thematic results stressed the importance of open mindedness when considering the HMB concepts and applying them to the work of an ECEC professional - teacher and administrator - and parent. When teaching and learning HMB concepts, participants stressed the importance of a willingness to consider different perspectives and to think about and challenge their own values and beliefs related to children's social emotional development and relationship needs. Open mindedness is an attribute involved in the capacity to engage in critical reflection and has been found to be a characteristic in education leadership that supported staff commitment and leadership development (Densten et al., 2001; Stewart-Banks et al., 2015).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The focus on post-intervention narratives from EHS administrators, often an underrepresented group in this line of research, showcases a major strength of this study. Voices of administrators offer a perspective of a minimally studied group within the ECEC literature. Moreover, HMB-A is a newly developed curriculum, and thus qualitative



methods are important to understand each administrator's experiences and interpretations of how the HMB concepts could be applied more universally in their work. Moreover, research study staff who facilitated the interviews and completed the data analysis were familiar with the HMB content and its approach to training. This knowledge and experience allowed for rich discussion within the interviews and probing questions that provided in-depth reflections about the HMB+A training.

The limited sample size is a limitation. Phenomenological methodology aims for in-depth analysis of the participants' experience with the identified phenomenon, i.e., HMB+A, and a study sample of between 1-15 is recommended (Bhattacharya, 2017). However, the current sample size was smaller than expected due to the COVID-19 pandemic and difficulties encountered when contacting potential study participants. Nevertheless, we believe that the richness and quality of the provided data, even if only on a smaller set of recruits, did offset by far any of the quantitative limitations.

### Future Directions

Importantly, future HMB work must address issues of cultural relevance and a deeper understanding of the extent to which the HMB concepts are or are not relevant for teachers who identify as people of color. HMB centers self-reflection as part of the curriculum, but future work needs to attend more specifically to experiences of race and culture relative to HMB concepts.

In addition, future implementation of the HMB training model would benefit from further investigation of the connection between HMB+A and the HMB training for teachers. It is important to have evidence as to whether teachers are more invested and able to integrate the HMB model into their classroom practices if their administrators participate in the HMB+A training.

### Conclusion

Offering professional development to ECEC leadership, teachers, and parents is not new; however, the HMB+A model of training for administrators is unique. Providing administrators with a dedicated four-session group within which

they can learn attachment-based and relationship-based concepts, receive emotional support from colleagues, and learn mindfulness strategies may support their roles as leaders, strengthen relationships with staff, and promote reflection, perspective-taking, and self-care skills. Each of these dispositions and skills are critical to ECEC leaders and underscore the relationship-based model advanced by the ECEC field.

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