RESEARCH ARTICLE

"The Opportunity to Get Ready": Early Head Start Program Innovation

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This article describes a qualitative case study within an urban Early Head Start program in the Northeast. This one-year study explores the experiences of various stakeholders involved in the program designed to reach highly vulnerable families who were not eligible for Early Head Start due to complex life experiences. The goal of this research was to deepen the knowledge base regarding the benefits and challenges of this approach by learning from parents and the practicing professionals' perspectives. Findings are discussed in terms of literature relevant to ecological theory, family resilience, and coping with stressors with an emphasis on supporting staff who in turn support both young children's school readiness and families in a collaborative community process. This article also identifies next steps useful to professionals and scholars interested in initiating or studying this approach to expand Early Head Start to the most vulnerable infant, toddlers and their families within comprehensive early childhood education programs.

Keywords: vulnerable families, Early Head Start, ecological theory, spatialized critical theory, resilience

Early Head Start (EHS) was designed as a multi-generational program to improve children's developmental outcomes by providing high quality child and family development services that support and enhance family functioning. EHS was specifically created to improve the early developmental, social, emotional, physical health, and educational experiences of infants and toddlers in families who meet the federal poverty guidelines. Under the standard model of EHS, the program is provided for families whose parents are either working or enrolled in school, thereby providing the necessary child care and educational experiences for their children birth to age three. Consequently, many vulnerable families with infants and toddlers facing the greatest risks are not enrolled, and typically come to the attention of other service systems, such as homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, the courts, or child welfare offices (Knitzer & Lefkowitz, 2006). Although national guidelines exist for EHS programming, a discretionary level of decision-making exists at state and local levels to best serve specific community needs.

EHS models of delivery are typically center-based, home-based, or a combination of these two.

Early Head Start has been touted as having positive impact, including improvements in children's cognitive, social-emotional, and language development, as well as in parental self-sufficiency (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). As noted by Rafferty, Griffin, and Robokos (2010), Early Head Start is the only national program focused on improving multiple developmental domains of infants and toddlers in families in poverty. Studies indicate positive impacts on child development and parental behaviors from Head Start and Early Head Start (Barnett, 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Despite the strengths espoused in EHS research and evaluation, researchers have called for new or alternative strategies for serving families who have large numbers of demographic risk factors (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).

Many parents of vulnerable babies and toddlers are themselves in highly stressed economic and psychological circumstances that go beyond poverty and lower educational levels. For these parents, enrolling in school or maintaining employment may be a long-term goal, but not an immediate one. These families may be dealing with adverse life experiences such homelessness, mental health, substance abuse, other special needs of their children, or open cases through the Department of Health and Human Services. They may be negotiating drug court, participating in domestic shelter programs, and attempting to find alternative living arrangements. Mandated programs or basic survival become the priority, which can then move a family forward to the longer range goal of employment or education. Given these challenges, some families with young children are not ready for school or employment attendance, making them ineligible for Early Head Start under current guidelines. This leaves an unmet, yet critical, community need.

This ethnographic case study examines a response to this need through an innovative and integrative approach to supporting eight targeted high-need families served by an urban Head Start center in New England. The model, referred to pseudonymously in this paper as the Capture program, was established using federal money intended for vulnerable families from the region who qualify based on four key priorities: substance abuse, homelessness, special needs (of parents and/or children) including mental illness, and open cases through Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Under this funding that permits creative use of programming, parents do not need to meet the school or job requirement of the traditional EHS program. The design for this particular Early Head Start Capture program was developed by the regional HS staff to meet the contextualized needs of highly vulnerable families and children.

This study is a narrative portrayal of the Capture program in the first year of operation, and of the perceptions and lived experiences of various stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and administration participating in the model. This qualitative narrative assists in building an understanding of the program's successes and challenges in its first year of operation and lessons learned in moving forward toward sustainability.

This study is intended to assist Early Head Start personnel as well as local, state and national policy makers, within and beyond New England, in understanding the complex reality of implementation of this type of program for Early Head Start. This project has the potential to impact policy, reform, and continued support for some of our most fragile families.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ecological Systems Theory

The conceptual framework for our research is based primarily on Bronfenbrenner's (1974, 1994) seminal work in creating an ecological model of human development. This paradigm centers on a multifaceted systems-based understanding of "place" as a nuanced interconnection of contexts and cultural spaces. Later iterations of Bronfenbrenner's model, known as the Ecological Systems Theory (EST), incorporated the importance of reciprocal interactions, called proximal processes, between the individual child and the representatives from various external systems. Consequently, an EST perspective requires a complex consideration of "the person, the processes of interaction, the multiple contexts, and time" (Burns, Warmbold-Brann, & Zaslofsky, 2015, p. 250). It is particularly suited to understanding urban education and poverty. In addition, we consider the concept of family resilience in coping with stressors emerging from conditions that place families at risk of school and societal difficulty (Vandsburger, Harrigan, & Biggerstaff, 2008; Wadsworth et al., 2013).

We purposely focus on Bronfenbrenner's (1974) early work as pivotal in the field of early childhood education. He defined the "child's ecology" as multilayered contexts including the immediate contexts of home and school as well as the supporting layers of community, family, and social systems. Children grow and learn in multi-dimensional realities, and must therefore be understood within these authentic environments. Ecological variables within systems may include the parents' work, transportation, extended family dynamics, social supports, historical contexts, and more, some of which factors are modifiable through social policy (Bronfenbrenner 1974, 1994). This ecological model expands our view of children to allow for new understanding of how a child's actual and potential lives may be impacted. A key tenet of this theory is that all levels are interconnected and each subsystem influences all others (Weiss, Lopez, Kreider, & Chatman-Nelson, 2014).

Similarly, Gruenewald (2003), in a framework of spatialized critical theory, explained that geographical space intersects with politics and belief systems and "simultaneously reflects and reproduces social relationships of power and domination" (p. 628), and thereby reinforces cultural production, including the legitimization and reproduction of institutional authority. Gruenewald suggested that such a reality ignores the learning experiences in the places outside of school. We can apply a critical space-conscious lens to our own work by recognizing the overlapping intersections and realities of the lives of the families and children both within and outside the school setting, including a recognition of the dynamics of power structures embedded in various relationships.

Extending the ecological model to factors of resilience for families in poverty, Wadworth et al. (2013) longitudinally examined a poverty-related stress model to conclude that "multicomponent interventions" (p. 723) for families in poverty may include assisting parents in developing coping skills and reducing economic strain. They stated that parents' "use of efficacious coping is associated with better mental health, which is in turn associated with child outcomes via parent–child relationships" (p. 723). The researchers call for more research on family processes and suggest "family-based interventions" for these families (p. 723).

In another study, Vandsburger et al. (2008) drew data from 128 families whose children attended Head Start or similar programs to explore resilience in families dealing with economic hardship. Communication and connection with others, particularly family members, were self-

identified factors in dealing with stressors. These researchers conclude that a strengths-based perspective is "paramount" in intervention processes. If assessment tools rely on

> "deficit-focused data such as dependencies, disabilities, and dysfunctions associated with living in poverty, this focus inevitably influences assessment and treatment processes. A focus on deficits may lead to overlooking family and individual strengths and thus forego opportunities for practice interventions that facilitate autonomy and self-efficacy." (p. 30)

Their research strongly recommends strength-focused communication between social workers or home visitors and family members.

Ambivalence in Working with Families in Poverty

Ecological models can expand our understanding of working with families in poverty. Since poverty is aligned with multiple risk factors, it impacts developmental outcomes in young children (Rafferty et al., 2010; Wadsworth et al., 2013).   This theory suggests that "economic factors within the family (e.g., lower income, inadequate family resources) influence child development through their impact on parental mental health and parenting practices" (Rafferty et al., 2010, p. 547). The stresses caused by poverty are "arduous and dispiriting" (Wadsworth et al., 2013, p. 713).

Halpern (1993) emphasizes three key societal factors that create ambivalence in how people in support services and programs regard poor families. The first is the belief that poverty is due to individual -- not societal -- behaviors and choices, and thus a result of irresponsibility or of inadequate individual skills or traits. The second factor is that service workers expect poor parents to protect their children's well being, while simultaneously doubting that they actually have the capacity to do so.   And third, service workers tend to expect more from families than is reasonable, especially in regard to adequate housing, jobs, or economic opportunities.

Since the mid-1900s, the prevailing societal attitude has been that, while poor families deserved to parent their children, poverty was "a reason to intervene in their lives" (Halpern, 1993, p. 161). Insisting that poor families require expert intervention ironically disempowers those families and "undermined whatever confidence and abilities the families had in their child rearing" (p. 162). Consequently, services are often paradoxical in intent – to both enable and control recipients; to understand the families' lives and yet to interpret their lives from outside; to help link poor families to mainstream norms and opportunities, and simultaneously to note their deviation from these norms through categories of dysfunction. Furthermore, service providers often abandon, undermine, or underfund their own efforts to reach these families (Halpern, 1993).

This ambivalence and contradiction create a "fragile foundation for helping relationships" (Halpern, 1993, p. 163). Consequently, service providers need guidance in building healthy relationships with vulnerable families (Wadsworth et al., 2013), and particularly in those families where the parent-child relationship is at risk. Providers also struggle with "day-in, day-out pressures related to working in contexts characterized by scarcity, social isolation, and depletion" (p. 164). These conditions leave the service providers themselves feeling vulnerable and often disempowered.   Research indicates that childhood teachers need better preparation in

understanding and dealing with both school- and society-related stressors in the lives of vulnerable children (Onchwari, 2010).

Early Childhood Education – Challenges and Strategies

Professionals within early childhood education settings, such as Head Start, that address highly vulnerable families must face a number of challenges that are not easily resolved. As Halpern (1991) reflects,

> "How can we reconcile providers' expertise and families' own intimate knowledge of their life situation? What are the moral dilemmas in service provision under conditions of poverty? What should and can providers do when confronted with such dilemmas in their work? What are the interests of different stakeholders in the service system, and how should these be negotiated?" (p. 362).

The families accessing the Capture EHS program are particularly vulnerable through an additional set of factors that place them at risk. These factors may include an overwhelmed caregiver, an unsupportive community context, and a constitutionally vulnerable child or children (Halpern, 1993). Thus, EHS program developers must decide to what extent they will work on parenting and to what extent the focus should be on extra-familial stressors, particularly in relation to a multi-tiered EST understanding of context. Professionals may confront negative responsiveness from families toward their efforts of building trust and mutuality, and these responses may lead to providers' feelings of anger and abandonment (Halpern, 1993). The complexity of this type of outreach to families requires "an effort to link different kinds of truth into a coherent helping strategy" (p. 166). In this relationship, the provider needs to gain "significance" for the parent as a person who might bring "new possibilities and room for change" (pp. 166-167). Providers themselves need to process feelings and challenges in similar ways that they help families to do.

It may also be useful for providers to consider a framework of resiliency. Families use resiliency resources to confront stressors. Vandsburger et al. (2008) identify resiliency factors, including: personal traits such as positive self-esteem and self-reliance; a shared belief system with expressions of optimism, spirituality, and heritage; a social support network of family and friends; and coping strategies to solve problems and maintain family integrity.   Wadsworth et al. (2013) suggest the need for a deeper understanding of parental coping skills. Tapping into these resiliency resources may enable service providers to enhance successes for children and parents.

Helping Relationships and Home Visits

Home visits, as part of a hybrid onsite and at-home support system, were built in as a component of the Capture program, conducted by the classroom teachers themselves. The intent was that the teachers would thereby have a strong ecological understanding of the child's and family's life, both in and out of school (Burns et al., 2015).

Home visits from service providers can build a relationship that enhances family participation and satisfaction (Korfmacher, Green, Spellmann, & Thornburg, 2007). These visits

send a message of care and concern and enable teachers to better understand the children's and parents' lives, and may also help parents become more engaged in their children's learning (Lin & Bates, 2010).

However, in light of the ecological systems theory, early intervention programs must be "sensitive and responsive to the cultural ecology of their participants" (Slaughter-Defoe, 1993, p. 173) and focus on a strength-based exploration of these families (Vandsburger et al., 2008). Without this contextual sensitivity, program providers' concerns may not match the concerns of the families being visited. As Slaughter-Defoe (1993) cautions, "Home visitors would do well to explore their own programmatic assumptions and to determine whether these assumptions are shared by the families with whom they are involved" (p. 178). There must be ongoing dialogue among program developers, providers, and participants about agreed-upon goals (Slaughter-Defoe, 1993), including opportunities for reflective supervision (Rafferty et al., 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Setting and Participants

We used an ethnographic case-study approach for our research. We completed two rounds of semi-structured interviews of six families (at least one parent or guardian from each family), for a total of twelve family interviews. One family left the program mid-year, and another family arrived; thus, those two families were only interviewed once. We also interviewed the six staff (teachers and administrators) twice. The two program teachers and four administrators were interviewed in late fall and again in the spring.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted interviews using a consistent, but flexible, set of questions from December 2013 to May 2014, each interview lasting 15-45 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were open-coded individually by both researchers and then compared to enhance reliability. We organized codes into repeating ideas and then grouped into themes which were examined in the context of our theoretical framework. The researchers met several times to resolve areas where coding or interpretations differed, and they also met with the program director to confirm and discuss all findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Parent Interviews

Parental supports and attitudes.   The Capture program had been recommended to parents as fitting the criteria based on life circumstances. In at least one case, the parent attended drug court. Most of the mothers had heard about it through a local shelter for victims of domestic violence. A father had been told of the program through Department of Health and Human Services because his baby had been born drug addicted.

Parental positive beliefs and attitudes toward the Capture program remained consistent throughout the entire year. During the early winter interviews, when asked about their overall perceptions of the teachers and program, parents stated that the teachers are "happy and friendly" and "nice." One mother said her son "loves it here," and another said that her daughter "gets up in the morning saying I want to go to school." The parents repeatedly heard the message from the teachers that they cared and wanted to work collaboratively with the family. One mother stated, "They're really good at asking you if there's anything they can do," and several others verified this same support.

In the springtime, they echoed similar sentiments, unequivocally praising the program and the teachers. They continued to speak highly of the teachers, with comments that "they care," "they're awesome," and "they talk to me," with personal illustrative anecdotes. In one case, a mother was allowed to come in whenever she wanted to breastfeed her baby, and she was provided with a private area in which to do so. One mother appreciated that the teacher asked, "How've you been since you've done drug court, or how's your GED going?"

These positive comments support the importance of communication and trusted connections as factors of resilience (Vandsburger et al., 2008), as this support assisted families in meeting attendance requirements of the EHS program and their outside obligations.

Parents appreciated a number of benefits of the Capture program. They recognized the access to resources, the ability to "get stuff done" in a day, and the benefits to their children. The families were deeply grateful for the Christmas gifts provided to their children, and also for day-to-day needs such as a crib, extra formula, or diapers, validating the critical importance of helping to alleviate economic strain when possible (Wadsworth et al., 2013). Parents spent their freed-up time going to appointments, such as drug court and DHHS meetings, and even just finding some rare "me time."   In both winter and spring, parents recognized a number of developmental skills that their children were learning, including toilet training, colors, social skills, routines, songs, and simple sign language.

They did not feel judged based on their life circumstances. For example, one mother said, "They're very friendly people, as opposed to being very businesslike and very much like oh well you don't have this, we're going to call the state on you." Another said, "They don't do [home visits] to hop into your business like you're nasty. They do it to be supportive which is great." The message sent to the parents was a positive one of support to build on their strengths (Vandsburger et al., 2008).

"System" realities.   These parents had strong goals for themselves and the belief that they could achieve them, but recognized that they were entrenched in a larger context that held a strong grip on them. One mother spoke of moving to get a "fresh start."   Another said, "I've worked really hard to get my kids back. I'm going to work the hardest I can." Some had goals for GED and then college, and were in a transition program to make this happen. Others had career goals and were applying for jobs.   Sometimes the focus was more immediate: safe housing, better mental health, and staying clean and sober.

But these parents also had a poignant understanding of being individuals within sociocultural and historical ecologies. For example, one mother, after stating her hopes for a viable future, said quietly, "It's hard to get out [of the system] once you get in. No matter how hard you want to work for anything." And another stated, "I didn't picture myself here a year ago. I really thought I wouldn't make it. Nobody gets out."

This layered contextual understanding on the part of parents confirms Burns et al.'s (2015) contention that a fully-realized EST model must include processes of interaction, context, and time.

Challenges.   The families noted several challenges they faced throughout the year. The parents expressed anxiety and frustration around the lack of transportation in order to access the program. Most either walked or took the local buses, but even when parents had a car, they worried about the costs and maintenance of having it.

There was also ambivalence around leaving a young baby in someone else's care during the day. Two of the mothers felt that their babies were too young to be away from them for that amount of time, but didn't want to lose their spot in the program.

Teacher Interviews

Teacher perceptions and feelings, winter.   The teachers provided the most complex aspect of the study, often wavering among contradictory feelings: sympathy for families, and a collaborative sense of respect and communication, but also feeling worn down, burnt out, or frustrated with the parents. They both expressed a sense of "culture shock" in working in Capture. (Pseudonyms are used throughout for all teachers and administrators.)

The two teachers selected for the classroom each brought a level of experience in providing child care to infants and toddlers. For one the position was a promotion from the role of assistant teacher in another EHS classroom to head teacher. She was pregnant, went on maternity leave, and returned during the year of operation. These transitions impacted not only the teacher, but the co-teacher, parents, and children. For the second teacher, the position was her entry into Head Start as an agency, including extensive learning of federal guidelines, paperwork, data collection, and the family support model indicative of all Head Start positions. Both teachers shared in the interviews personal histories of resilience that made them attuned to the complex needs of the families served in Capture.

In the fall, the two teachers expressed great compassion and eagerness to help the families succeed. One teacher, Marie, recognized that "the families are struggling to survive every day." Similarly, the other teacher, Teresa, said, "Capture is filled with a lot of survivors."

However, even in the early interviews, the teachers expressed ambivalence about their relationships with parents. Marie was yelled at by a parent, and revealed her internal tension in reflecting on the incident:

> I was crying when she left, it was horrible. I had never had anybody treat me as awful as she did, just yelling cause she's got anxiety, and she's got some mental issues with memory… She has been through the ringer. And I feel for her 'cause I know where she's at… She was hostile to everybody… She's a manipulator.

Marie was hurt, angry, and sympathetic, all at the same time.

During her first interview, Marie expressed other contradictory feelings toward families. For example, she made the statement that babies don't always come in "clean" so the classroom water activities help "get them a little cleaner." But this comment was immediately followed by, "But they get up every day, they walk to the bus station and take the bus here every day." Her

implied judgment of a lack of cleanliness is contradicted by the recognition of the difficulty in arriving at all.

Similarly, Marie stated, "The kids need to have normalcy in their life, and this is the one consistency that they have. I want to save and help everybody."   Clearly, the implication is that these children do not otherwise have a normal or consistent life, and that they need "saving," though it is unclear from what.

In one instance, Marie said she used a "calm voice" with parents, at least one of whom asked her not to speak to her "like a child." The teacher then defended her voice tone: "[The parent] needs to have somebody that is going to tell her what she needs to do…. She needs to rise up too."   The indication here is that the parent needs to step up to her responsibility, and that the teacher is justified in speaking to her in an authoritative voice.

In similar fashion, the other teacher, Teresa, made remarks that vacillated between care and frustration, compassion and judgment. Teresa expressed genuine concern for families, and yet indicated the desire to fix "everybody" and "everything," when she stated:

> No matter how hard you try to come across as positive, they're going to hear that they're not good enough, because they're going through so many different things in their lives… Sometimes you want to fix everybody and help everybody, and you just can't. You have to meet them where they're at. And remember that they are doing the best that they can and you're making a difference in the six hours that you have with these kids…. They're at the end of the rope and don't know what else to do. Look at it in their perspective. It makes things a little clearer. You want to fix everything and you can't.

Her confusion around who or what to fix comes through. Does she want to fix the parents themselves, or the circumstances and "systems" they are inextricably caught up in? Interestingly, Teresa recognized this tension in herself, stating, "We need to put ourselves in these parents' shoes, or try to anyways. But we don't always, sometimes you forget."

In the winter, the teachers both expressed satisfaction with their job. Marie said she felt "lucky" and Teresa said she loved working with the families. They also praised the program itself, recognizing its ability to make a difference in the lives of these families.

Teacher perceptions and feelings, spring. In a few short months, the teachers' perceptions and feelings would undergo a dramatic shift. As noted in a previous section, the parents themselves were highly satisfied with the quality of the program throughout the year. But the teachers had become more overwhelmed, cynical, and burnt out.

The contradictory feelings emerged more directly in the spring. For example, Marie made the following comments:

> [The parents are] pushing the boundaries with us just like any normal child would do. They're not on their best behavior, they're not supposed to be. So it's wonderful that they have the comfort level with us to do that. We want to pull our hair out, but it's ok… It's not easy for some of them to have to depend on resources. Then you have some of the families that take advantage of having those resources.

Here she explicitly and unapologetically refers to parents as being like a "child," while believing that such a comfort level for this behavior is "wonderful." This comment is in stark contrast to

her early defense of using a "calm" voice that one parent interpreted as being treated "like a child."   Furthermore, in this passage, Marie sympathizes that it's difficult to depend on resources, yet simultaneously critiques those who "take advantage" of those resources.

> Teresa's impatience of families by springtime is striking. She stated,
> We have families that it's hard for them to follow through. This is a free program, and they think they can just drop off their child and pick them up, and a lot of them don't want to be bothered with anything else… It's hard to look at [the children] and see the neglect sometimes that they're being given and you can't imagine treating your child that way, and you want to scoop up all the babies and bring them home. And you can't.

Like Marie, Teresa appears to critique the parental follow-through, to suggest that they don't want to be "bothered," and to want to rescue these babies by bringing them home.

The teachers seemed surprised and overwhelmed, even in the spring, by the needs of the families.

Better support for teachers.   Teresa recognized her own need for more training on "how to approach families that have a wall up, and you just can't get through, and you have a job to do, and you know that the child has needs that need to be met, and how you can handle that, how you can reach out better to those families." Teresa reflected, "It's definitely been quite the journey, of a rocky road and smooth surfaces. We're still learning on what works for the families and what works for us and reaching out to resources that we have, and just asking hey we really need this to do our jobs so we're not burnt out."

Marie said, "I wish we had known the difficultness with the families before we started. Not that it would change anything but it would give a nice little heads up."

Staff/Administrative Interviews

The support structure for Capture involved many individuals (pseudonyms given). The family services manager (Angela) coordinated many of the social service activities including referrals to community resources, and supported families in transitions in and out of services. The education and special services manager (Amanda) was responsible for supervision of the educational services; guiding curriculum and program planning, development, and training. She served as resource for teachers and managed the children's special education provisions, developed individual education or family service plans, and worked closely with teachers, parents, and referral agencies. The site supervisor (Carla) was a social worker by training and provided support to classroom teachers and staff throughout the agency. The director of the agency (Meg) was responsible for program requirements at the state and federal level, fiscal operations and overall leadership.

Program details, reflections on beliefs about the program.   The Capture program was uniquely developed in response to an unmet need in the community. The family service manager, Angela, explained that this particular program has the intent to "envelop [families] with child development, good family support, lots of resources, building of community." She believed that the Capture program is more "focused" than other EHS programs and builds in

more support. The education manager, Amanda, explained further: "This model allowed us for the first time to target a population that we were unable to serve in the past." Likewise, the director, Meg, described Capture as a way to "get our feet wet" in working toward a combination model of home and school support.

Amanda described how families were located: "We went to [the local domestic violence shelter]… They sent us 4 out of our 8. We contacted DHS. We got two from them. And two from our waitlist receiving services through Child Development Services or an identified need, whether it was drug addiction or mental health."

Several of the staff referred to Capture as providing a "safe place" for children to be. However, the notion of "safe place" embeds some ambivalence, as staff referred to this safety both from the perspective of parents who feel secure in where they leave their children during the day ("safe place to bring your baby"), and from the perspective of staff in helping children have a more stable environment than they might otherwise have ("I'm worrying about child safety and nutrition"). Amanda explained:

> This clearly is a program that we feel works and is doing what we feel is our mission. It allows us to reach that population of families who fall between those cracks but clearly need an opportunity to send their children somewhere safe so they can do the things they need to do to get their lives back together…. If you want to go to our [other] early classrooms, you have to be working or go to school more than 75% of the time. These folks aren't there yet, they're not ready for that. They need the opportunity to get ready.

Complex "systems" understanding.   The administrative staff had a strong understanding of the complex "systems" framework happening in these families' lives, and of the interconnectedness of factors. For example, Amanda stated, "If you don't have a safe place to bring your baby, you can't go get your counseling, you can't go for your drug test… Somebody is working on their GED." Others echoed these sentiments, including the director Meg who said, "They have some time to address the needs they have as individuals, whether it's their housing issue, their mental health issue, whatever it may be." The site supervisor, Carla, noted, "I believe that there are a lot of people who want to end the cycle, to change where they are in life. We are instilling the fact that parents are capable. They have worth and that it can be done in small steps… They believe that they are able to do more with the support of this program." She continued:

> All of our parents' plates seem very full and their situations aren't just frustrating. There are mental health issues, there's substance abuse, there are court ordered families. We have families under protective custody who DHHS feels that while their children are in our care we can help parents see and learn what it is they need to do or keep them on track and let them know that somebody is willing to help support them to meet those plans and goals they make with other agencies so they can have their children living in their home.

Recognition of, and respect for, needs and strengths of families.   Throughout the year, the staff expressed unambiguous compassion and respect for the families, recognizing their need for support as well as their strengths. In the winter, the site supervisor Carla reflected, "[The parents] are looking for our support and they are also taking away a lot of the modeling

that the teachers do with their children. They are forming realistic limits and setting boundaries with their children."

Carla went on to say, "We are really getting some truth that has to do with daily life. For some people when it rains it pours. I believe that a secure person has compassion to listen and see where people are coming from…. Being part of that journey with them. Not just 'I'm the professional, you're the parent. Let me give you the information and do as I say.'" Here, Carla, unlike the novice teachers, was able to recognize the deeper importance of a respectful relationship with parents. In the spring, she reiterated this point saying, "[The parents] are very very comfortable with coming forward and know that they're not being judged as a bad parent but needing a resource." She talked about the value of open and collaborative conversations with parents.   Amanda, the education manager, also spoke respectfully of the parents:

> Even if they for whatever reason are not in the home for that moment, that week, that whatever, they're still finding ways to get their children here whether its neighbors or others or whatever, these kids are still coming. And they are happy about being here… I said to [one parent] you are so patient, you have things to do but he knows you care, that's a really wonderful skill to have and not everybody has that, and she was like, thanks,… and I said, you should be recognized. What you do is supporting his success every day.

Teachers needing more support. Without a doubt, the most urgent need for the program was recognized across both staff and teachers as the necessity for more emotional and educational support for teachers than they received, reflecting research conclusions (Weiss et al., 2014; Onchwari, 2009) of a lack of teacher preparedness to handle the stresses of the population they serve.

In the early part of the school year, the family services manager, Angela, reflected, "All of the families in this classroom have issues that are going to cause stress. It's every day and it's every family, and I think for staff that can be challenging. It's also helping staff see families in a bigger context. That will be my role."   The head administrator reiterated, "These families all have intense needs… being new to those [teacher] roles means that there is a need for more support, a need for more ongoing regular supervision, all of those things to help make that happen so that the staff don't burn out. It's very easy for [teachers] to burn out. And finding qualified [teachers] is not easy." The site supervisor echoed this sentiment: "It's difficult to teach [the teachers] how to leave work here when they go home."

By spring, the staff acknowledged that they had not done enough work in this area to help sustain and retain the teachers. The family service manager said, "I was providing crisis intervention, that's what I was doing, and they needed more clinical [emotional support]. They probably needed both." Several others recognized their error in hiring two new staff for a program with sometimes-overwhelming needs.

The administrators recognized that there were often competing value-systems at work between the teachers and the parents. For example, the family service manager, Angela, stated, "You may have families that may not want the things that you want for them, and it's kinda balancing that out… You can't fix somebody's life, you can only support as they look at their options they have available to them.   If parents are not doing the things that staff believe would be best for the children, it sometimes can get in the way of the relationship." Angela understood

that the parents were not "attacking" the teachers, but were coping with enormous stressors. The director Meg similarly stated,

> I know that staff clearly had lots of concerns about the needs of their children based on the situations they were in. … Particularly for the staff, brand new, it can come across as, this is just wrong. It's not what you might want, but it doesn't make it wrong. It's helping them understand the value piece, beliefs and values of ourselves and how do you set that aside sometimes. We probably need to do more training around that area, agency wide, around our values and beliefs.

Similarly, the education manager reflected, "We've had a few missteps where teachers are really wanting families to have the best, and in doing so, they sometimes jump the gun about when they address an issue or how they address an issue… We are fixers, so when they share something we want to fix it. Sometimes we speak too soon or we speak a little strong. That piece has been tough. I didn't anticipate it."

Two examples.   Two examples in particular wove their way through the interviews, building a narrative that illustrated the ambiguities and complexities in working through systemic realities and conflicting values (Halpern, 1993).

The first was a case of the only father in the study, a young man with the sole care of three children including his daughter who had been born drug-addicted. The home sleeping arrangement seemed reasonable and safe – he and the two boys slept on the bed, while the baby slept on a trundle next to the boys' bed. The Early Head Start teachers and staff felt that he needed a separate crib for the baby, but he liked the proximity of the kids and knew they were safe. The father felt that the teachers were judging his ability to parent, and the teachers felt that he was resisting a necessary piece of equipment for the baby. In the end, he begrudgingly accepted the crib. When asked what made him change his mind, he stated that he had talked with his mother who convinced him it was better to agree and accept than to pull the baby from the program.

The second example was the situation of a breast-feeding mother. The baby was the youngest of five children and the only girl. The mother was extremely conflicted about being away from her baby, and the EHS providers had set up a private area for the mother to come in at any time to nurse the baby. The mother, who was working with DHHS on having all of her children back in her home, needed to have the baby in EHS in order to achieve her goals for schooling and to be able to attend AA meetings, but also knew that the time with her baby was precious and fleeting. The teachers and administrators recognized her conflicted feelings. The education manager reflected, "This mom was… close to taking her away. We worked on finding new bottles. We set up a breast-feeding station for her so that she could come back every day if she wanted to feed the baby. She could just bring her for two hours after she had been fed so that she could at least have the experience and mom could go do something, and we were so flexible and supportive that the baby is now here all the time and she's feeding from a bottle." The site supervisor also reflected on this particular situation, saying, "She said she would not leave her child with anybody else. She has faith in us. And we started very slowly with her, we all love to keep our children home with us and be their caregiver. Life doesn't always allow that."

Attendance issue.   Another issue that wove its way through the interviews was that of attendance. EHS has a policy that requires 85% attendance to keep a place for the child. While the policy makes sense in terms of holding families accountable and being able to provide consistent programming for the children, it also doesn't always rise to the top as a priority for families, especially given the difficulties with transportation. Although the reality didn't always hit the 85% expectation, the families committed to getting their children to Capture despite the challenges. As the education manager said, "The 85% is my issue, it's not their issue. Living it has made it real." The family service manager echoed these thoughts, reflecting, "If you look at their attendance, for the most part, it was pretty strong. I think there might have been one month and it was December. What happened? Something happened. And then you realize that it's December and there's snow everywhere and people are trying to transport." The director, Meg, echoed these thoughts, stating, "Parents are getting their children here, day in and day out. I will say, on really snowy weather, that day, they're not coming and I get it. Walking in the snowstorm is not fun. But other than that, they're here… They're consistent. … It's huge that they're following through."

Home visits. A last concern mentioned across all participants was the lack of consistent home visits. The intent of Capture was to have the teachers conduct visits on Fridays, a non-school day for children. However, within a couple of months, it was clear to all that this expectation could not be adequately met. Several factors contributed to this challenge. First, the teachers often needed to use Fridays to complete cumbersome but necessary paperwork, to meet with other staff, and to plan and organize curriculum materials. Second, it was challenging to set up home visits with families, both in finding time to organize the visits, but also in establishing consistent and reliable time frames with families. Most parents had sporadic phone service, and, while the teachers checked in with every parent every day at drop-off and pick-up, these periods were not well-suited to setting up home visits. Furthermore, the families living in the domestic violence shelter were not yet in stable home environments.

Given these circumstances, while home studies were conducted by teachers and appreciated by the families as a positive occurrence, including one observed by a researcher, we do not delve into the details of those visits as not being relevant to the intent and focus of this paper.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is great promise in the Capture program to consider the implications of programs targeting families in highest need, as well as the potential for creating a replicable model. Results from this study show that Early Head Start can reach out to previously ineligible, yet extremely vulnerable, families and provide services that create opportunities to become eligible for the regular programming. Results from the first year of operation indicate that an increased level of emotional and educational support is necessary for the teachers. Consistent and frequent clinical reflective supervision from a mental health professional will better position teachers when faced with complex family situations.

The need for professional development training was also identified, specifically around building relationships with parents and deeper understanding of issues of trauma, mental health, impact of cumulative risk factors on families and children, and resiliency. As articulated by Meg,

the director, "A lot of our staff [teachers] in early childhood don't necessarily receive a lot of training or education in engaging with adults. They're clearly taught to engage, educate and nurture children, but adults are different. I think we can always get better at that."

The administrative staff also felt that, as the program grows, attention to parent education will be warranted. Working closely with community agencies that already offer parent education was discussed as the administrative staff saw Capture as a vehicle that had inherently enhanced strong partnerships, with potential to better integrate services. The education manager stated, "One of the things that we've noticed is that we've enhanced our relationships with some community partners. The local domestic violence shelter and the Department of Health and Human Services are some of our biggest conveyers of information and referrals sources."

Implications of the struggle with transportation and an inadequate busing system were community issues that impacted attendance. Conversations about innovative ways to address transportation issues were emerging based on this study.

CONCLUSION

Difficult life experiences, especially when they accumulate or are numerous, present real challenges. Highly vulnerable families may not be able to meet basic program expectations for Early Head Start, necessitating alternative program models. Through the ecological theory lens, programs must focus on small but important daily growth and place emphasis on supporting staff who in turn support young children's school readiness and families in a collaborative community process that recognizes strengths of the family as well as stressors across multiple contexts. Addressing the multiple challenges families face is difficult, and family change is a slow and often discouraging endeavor. Supporting program staff, engaging in relationships with parents and community partners, and focusing on infant and parent mental health (Anakwenze, 2013; McAllister, 2007) all provide opportunities to reach a previously-unmet population in the field of early childhood. Organizational readiness, including a solid infrastructure that commits to financial resources, mental health supervision for teachers, and expansion of professional development offerings, aligns with the mission, goals and resource allocation of Early Head Start. The most vulnerable infants and toddlers and their families can and should be reached within comprehensive early childhood education programs that give them the opportunity to get ready for the next steps in their lives.

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