

The Role of Family: Understanding the Childhood and Current Family Environment of Early Care and Education Teachers

Tracey M. Barnett¹ PhD, LMSW, Natasha Thorne² D. Crystal Coles³ PhD, LICSW & Taren Swindle⁴, PhD

Abstract

Through qualitative inquiry and application of family systems theoretical perspective, this study sought to explore the experiences of Early Care and Education Teachers (ECET) and what role their family environment (childhood and current family) had in them choosing their career and how communication and family connections during mealtimes made an impact. Three overarching themes and dimensions captured the experiences of Early Care and Education Teachers (ECETs) and what role their family environment (childhood and current family) had in their career choice, and how communication and family connections during mealtimes made an impact. While family environment is certainly not the only consideration when choosing a career or staying on a career path, it is arguably one of the biggest. Through critical analysis and application of theoretical perspectives, broader understanding was brought to the experiences and family environments of ECETs and the initial influence these factors played in their career selection.

Keywords: Early Care and Education Teachers, family, career, mealtimes, nutrition

Often, when adolescents and young adults are trying to decide on their future career paths, many will turn to their families (parents and siblings) for advice. However, when one is a nontraditional learner, their family (spouse and children) may indirectly impact their career choices. When exploring one's career planning, it is imperative to examine how one's family environment influences their career development process (Paniagua, 1996). Early care and education teachers (ECETs) are those who care for and teach children, primarily ages three to five. Daycare centers, head start, and Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) programs are among a few places that employ these teachers in the state of Arkansas. Systematic reviews and meta-analysis (Brunsek, Perlman, Falenchuk, McMullen, Fletcher & Shah, 2017; Perlman, Falenchuk, Fletcher, McMullen, Beyene & Shah, 2016) have examined the positive impact of early childhood education on children's cognitive and social development. However, there is a dearth of literature that explores the experiences of those who are teaching in the field of early childcare and their familial backgrounds. One potential contribution to the decision to pursue and maintain a career within this profession may be the undergirding of familial perspectives regarding the profession. Eleanor Roosevelt stated: "*Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people.*" It is no secret that families sit down for dinner each night of the week less often than they once did in the past (Cho & Allen, 2013). Paring a great dinner with thought provoking conversation is an act that is not always pursued. However, when done so, especially with young children, this can be the catalyst that prepares them for a successful career. Dinner conversations forge an opportunity to create transferrable skills (group dynamics, empathy, etc.) that will later be valuable for potential employers, college, and it also molds their minds for the world that awaits them.

¹ University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, School of Social Work

² Ronald E. McNair Scholar, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, School of Social Work

³ The University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare

⁴ University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Department of Family and Preventive Medicine, 4301 West Markham, Slot 530 Little Rock, Arkansas 72205, TSwindle@uams.edu

There are many benefits to working as an ECET, such as: working during school hours only 10 months out of the year, a two-month break during the summer, and a midwinter and spring break (BLS, 2016). While such benefits are very attractive, this leaves researchers to assume that these benefits alone are not what enticed these professionals to a career in early care and education. For this study, we sought to apply literature and the family systems theory to explore the career decisions of ECETs. Individual career development and advancement has been studied in relation to power, wealth, and success (Tomlinson, Baird, Berg, & Cooper, 2018); however, the role of an individual's family can also be argued as having levels of influence within an individual's career trajectory. Family can be described in a variety of different ways and have many different structures. Though, an individual's family of origin and current family structure may demonstrate a stronger influence on their career choices due to the relational components of those relationships within the life of that individual. To fill a gap in the literature, this study aimed to understand the childhood experiences and current family environments of ECETs.

1. Family Systems Theory

Individuals and their emotional functioning can best be understood when considered, not individually, but rather as an integral part of the family emotional unit as a whole. Expectations of individual family members are predicated on implied or understood rules and roles that each member plays and adheres to (GenoPro, 2016; Papero, 1990). Theoretical perspectives are used extensively in the social sciences to help explain human behavior and phenomena. Developed during the 1950s by Murray Bowen, the Family Systems Theory suggests that a family is a group of interdependent and interconnected individuals functioning as one system. There are eight conceptual principles to Bowen's theory; however, this study is grounded within two of the principles: 1) Nuclear family emotional system-the four relationship patterns that define where problems may develop in a family (marital conflict, dysfunction in one spouse, impairment of one or more children, emotional distance) and 2) Societal emotional process-the emotional system governs behavior on a societal level, promoting both progressive and regressive periods in a society. (Dunst and Trivette, 2009). These theoretical principles undergird the implications of childhood experiences individuals have that may contribute to their career decisions. Despite the fact that familial systems may contain levels of complexity, it is important to understand that family systems theory provides a framework to contextualize the experience of an individual within a variety of familial systemic interactions. Bowen's theory demonstrates that the experiences that individuals have within their families contribute to their development as a human being, which in turn has impact on a variety of aspects of their lives, including their choice of profession. In this sense, ECETs choice of profession may be due to their familial environment and experiences within the family unit.

1.2 Family Life Cycle Perspective

In understanding the family unit as a whole and how the familial experience impacts the individual, it is also imperative to consider the events within life that may underwrite individual development and career decisions. The Family Life Cycle Perspective addresses the interconnectivity between, life events, individual behaviors, attitudes and values over the life span (Hutchinson, 2011). This perspective provides an opportunity to understand the interrelationship between social context and the processes associated with development (Bengtson & Allen, 2009). In other words, as individuals develop over the life course and engage in discourse through interpersonal relationships, these influences shift personal trajectories which are inclusive of career choices. Comprehension of life events and the experiences individuals have within the familial unit provides an ability to gain insight into how human beings choose their careers. The Family Life Cycle Perspective provides a framework to identify how experiences over the life span connect to individual development and transitions that occur in their careers. As a result, the perspective allows for the understanding of the multiple transitions that individuals may experience in the familial and career trajectories. Given that the limited benefits of a career as an ECET, another possibility for their choice in career may be due to their experiences over the lifespan, as well as their family background. Learning about the family structure of an individual, as well their personal experiences over the lifespan provides an in-depth perspective to the underlying reasons for career choices.

1.3 Influence of Family Environment Career Choices

Family of Origin. According to Brown (2004), one's family of origin can strongly affect an individual's career development. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the influence of families on career choices because individuals are more likely to seek career advice from family members. There are four developmental levels at which familial factors are significantly influenced.

Those levels are childhood, adolescence, college students/young adults, and adults. Additionally, variables such as parents' occupation, attachment style, and support levels were found to have significant influence on career decisions (Whiston and Keller, 2004). Some children grow up romanticizing the occupations of their parents. Parents may also deliberately or inadvertently steer a child to a specific career path, particularly in the cases of family-owned businesses, where parents expect their children to take over the company. Other parents strongly encourage their children to set high goals by applying pressure on their offspring to strive for particular high-profile careers. Likewise, negative parental influence can influence career choice just as positive parental influence (McQuerrey, 2014). This research seeks to determine if negative parental influences could have shaped the decisions for the featured ECETs when deciding to choose their profession.

Current Family. Spouses can have a significant influence on career choices as well. While one spouse's job may require them to work eight to twelve hours per day or travel often, this may influence the other spouse's decision to select a job with fewer hours and with more flexibility. Other couples who have young children may need the flexibility of one who stays home or works from home, while the other pursues a full-time job to ensure financial stability of the home (McQuerrey, 2014). Having children plays a key role in influencing career choices. The career path a person established as a childless individual may change greatly after having children. Single-parents or sole supporters may need to have more than one job. Caring for elderly parents or other relatives also can significantly influence career choices as well (McQuerrey, 2014). Critical thinking provides a mechanism for deep understanding through a dialogic process that undergirds the inclusivity of alternative points of view (O'Connor & Netting, 2011). Understanding the underlying reasons for an ECET's career choice, as well as how familial perspectives impact their career paths, provides the ability to ascertain the complexity of their experiences. Using a critical social science framework offers an opportunity to understand ECETs practices and rhetoric while also providing context for the profession. This allows for the development of mechanisms to examine assumptions regarding the profession, while also utilizing reasoning needed for increasing empowerment of the individual (ECETs) and overcoming potential oppression that may be faced as a result of the career choice. Within this study, comprehension of the impact of social institutions (i.e. income, social class, family structure, and gender) on the career decisions of ECETs provides an understanding of elements that undergird social determinants of health. The decision to embark upon a career that increases the likelihood of living at or close to the poverty line contributes to the income inequality that can be considered a component of a determinant of health (Eckersley, 2015). Educational background and decisions are determinants of health due to its impacts on health risks/outcomes through access to care. Continuing to gain an understanding of the complexity regarding the interplay of aspects of social institutions on determinants of health is essential (Davis & Chapa, 2015) to gaining insight into the professional decisions of ECETs.

2. Purpose

The use of theories and evidence guides the approach to answering the research question. Theory and literature were used to guide the conceptual framework of this study. This study was guided by the following research question: What elements were present within the childhoods and current family environments of Early Care and Education Teachers and how did those elements impact their current career choice?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

Between February 2015 and May 2015, 28 in-person interviews were conducted with early care and education teachers (ECETs) in Arkansas. Adhering to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, all ECETs were given the opportunity to hear and ask questions pertaining to the study. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and withdrawal was permissible at any time. Following the semi-structured interview guide, participants were asked a series of questions including: (1). How did you begin your career as an early childhood educator? (2). Why did you choose this field? and (3). Talk about a few key events from your childhood that focused on family gatherings. This study was approved by the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences IRB. When interviews were completed, participants were asked for additional input on topics not mentioned during the conversation. Next, digital memos were created by the research assistant after each session. Lastly, interview summaries were provided to participants (member checking) to ensure accuracy of the interview process. These steps were taken to ensure validity of the data.

3.2 Participants and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to recruit ECETs from a list provided by the state Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE). Ethnicity, prevalence of adult obesity in the community, and role in classroom (i.e., lead or assistant teacher) were factors of interest in selecting the study's sample. We narrowed the list from DCCECE to head start and ABC stated-funded programs as they serve children who are at the 200% and 100% poverty line, respectively. Given our design to balance across childcare type, teacher role, ethnicity, and community characteristics, we expect that our sample is largely representative of the childcare workforce as a whole. In AR, a recent study of the early care and education workforce documented experiences of low education, low wages, poor benefits, economic insecurity (including food insecurity), and high rates of turnover. Specifically, only 31% held a Bachelor's degree related to education, and wages range between \$9.63 per hour (\$20,030 annually) for those without a Bachelor's or associates degree to \$19.33 per hour (\$40,206) for those with a Master's degree. For context, AR has one of the lowest college completion rates in the country (48th) at 39%, and most educators are working without a bachelor's degree (63%). Most (60%) reported not being offered a retirement plan; many (35%) reported having no paid holidays; very few reported access to paid maternity leave (8%). Finally, over half (58%) report difficulty in paying for their basic economic needs, and 40% report experience food insecurity in the previous year. Many educators indicate they intend to leave the workforce within one (10%) or five (25%) years.

Despite these challenges, educators report benefits or working in childcare to include access to meals (in some cases) and provision of free care for their own children. Further, only about 1 in 5 is worried about being laid off. The workforce study included an embedded rating of work conditions using the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey. This survey indicated that ECETs view working conditions as passable on the whole with room for improvement in key areas including reward systems (fairness and equity in the distribution of pay, fringe benefits, and opportunities for advancement) and decision-making power (autonomy given to staff and the extent to which they are involved in center wide decisions). These recent data provide additional data on the characteristics of the workforce more broadly. For recruitment into the study, ECETs received flyers when their respective employers indicated interest in the study. After receiving the flyers, if teachers were interested in learning more, they received instructions to contact the research assistant for additional information on the screening interview. Educators were invited to participate in the study on a first-come, first-serve basis, allowing only one teacher per site to participate. Those not selected to participate were placed on a waiting list for future research projects. As an incentive for completing the screening, educators received \$50 cash and a free 3-month access to an online continuing education platform.

3.3 Data collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each ECET. One research assistant who is trained and experienced in qualitative interviewing collected all data face-to-face to ensure consistency and validity across interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and were approximately 45–60 minutes long. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached.

3.4 Data collection tools

This qualitative study is a subsection of a larger study. The qualitative interview was based on ECET pedagogical literature and feedback from an expert reference group. The semi-structured questions explored the following: How did you begin your career as an early childhood educator? Why did you choose this field? Talk about a few key events from your childhood that focused on family gatherings. In addition to the semi-structured interview, participants completed a survey including demographic information. We also administered the two-item screen Household Food Security Surveillance Module (HSFFM) of the USDA and adapted it two items to inquire about childhood food insecurity experiences as well.

3.5 Data Analysis

The qualitative interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using thematic analysis by hand and analyzed for major themes using constant comparative methods. All researchers read transcripts and met 12 times to critically reflect on the transcripts and to determine when data saturation was reached. Two researchers independently read, re-read, coded the transcripts, and met to conduct an inter-rater reliability assessment. More than 90% agreement was reached for all items. Next all researchers met to identify themes and grouping of like codes.

4. Results

4.1 Demographics

The final sample included 75% Caucasian, 14.3% African American, 7.14% Hispanic, and 3.5% Other. Over half of the sample were lead teachers (67.9%). The educational status of participants shows a majority with college or beyond (60.7%), some college (32.1%), and 7.1% with a high school diploma or GED. Most educators (60.7%) completed a Child Development Associate’s (CDA) degree. The average age of participants was 40.7 with 10.8 years of teaching experience. The type of childcare sites included 53.6% head start and 39.3% ABC, and 7.1% had classrooms receiving both types of funding. ECETs reported FI at a rate of 38% in the present and 34% in their childhood based on the adapted HSSFM measure.

	N	%
Gender		
Female	28	100%
Ethnicity		
White	21	75%
African American	4	14.3%
Hispanic/Latino	2	7.14%
Other	1	3.5%
Educational Status		
High School Diploma or GED	2	7.1%
Some College	9	32.1%
College or Beyond	17	60.7%

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Analysis of the data identified three overarching themes that captured the experiences of Early Care and Education Teachers (ECETs) and what role their family environment (childhood and current family) had in their career choice, and how communication and family connections during mealtimes made an impact: (1). It’s a Family Affair, (2). Food Preparation, and (3). Mealtime is Family Connection time. Within the themes were dimensions and related categories for each dimension: (1) It’s a Family Affair: (a) it just happened, (b) it was planned, (c) they pointed out my gift; (2) Food Preparation: (a) a typical meal is dinner, (b) fried and processed foods, (c) gender roles; (3) Mealtime is Family Connection Time: (a) eating at the table with family, (b) extended family helped at mealtime. Examples of each theme, dimension, and category are presented in Table 2. Following Table 2 is an extensive presentation of each theme.

Table 2: Themes, Dimensions, and Example Quotes

Themes	Dimensions	Example Quotes
Theme 1: It’s a Family Affair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It Just Happened • It was Planned • They Pointed out my Gift 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So when I still wanted to work with kids, and everybody’s always said, “You would make a great teacher. You just seem to be a teacher.”
Theme 2: Food Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A typical meal is dinner • Fried and Process Foods • Gender Roles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • And, I mean, it might have been fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, or it might have been, um, steak and grilled chicken. I mean, she had, I mean, we didn’t just have one thing. You know, like, it was—you had sides to go with it. You had, I mean, a full home cooked meal—is what I was raised on. • “[Dad] was a country boy and we, he, anything that was fried, battered, potatoes, gravy, all that stuff, fried stuff...” but that they didn’t have it often because “...my mom didn’t cook much if it didn’t come out of a box.” • “I was the eldest female, so I had to help them get their food and then I sat down last.”
Theme 3: Mealtime is Family Connection Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating Together as a Family • Extended Family Helped Each Other at Mealtime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We sat down together ate supper. The TV turned off...Um, we turn the TV off and we sat down as a family of six and we said a prayer and then we shared our meal together... • I remember this because she worked day shift, and then she would come home and she would fix us...spend some time with us and fix us supper, and my aunt would come and stay with us, and she would go back to work.

4.2 Theme 1: It's a Family Affair

When participants were asked to discuss what led to their current careers, more than half described how their childhood rearing and their current families played a role. Because these women were so family focused, they had a strong desire to not only care for their own children, but to also have a hands-on approach in their children's educational endeavors. Their decision towards career choices being a family affair led to the emergence of three subthemes: it just happened, it was planned, and they pointed out my gift. The love that these women have for their children is reflected in the following interviewee's story: *Okay well, I have four children of my own and was ready to get into the workforce, but I didn't want to leave the kids at home, so I started with a daycare. That allowed me to take my children with me so I could be a part of their day as well. And so I started that years ago, and when they got up in school, I went off and I did some other things once the kids were gone. I feel like my passion was with children, I missed being around children, so I came back into childcare. And so now, and I love it. I love experiencing the world around them, it's just exciting for me to see and to be a part of it.*

Another commonality among all interviewees is that although the majority did not intentionally seek a career in early childhood education, their love for children and their own children lured them to the profession and ultimately that passion kept them in this field. This passion was echoed by many participants and is particularly present in the following interviewee's response: *Well I have two boys and they're pretty close in age, so when they come to the head start we decided that, you know, I would spend a lot of time here because I love my kids. And then I got here with the other children, I just I couldn't leave. It was always interesting waiting to see what was happening. So after they had been in school for a little while I decided that I would like to try teaching because I volunteered all the time anyway. So I went, did the interviews and got my job here teaching as a sub.*

Because these participants strongly believe in a family-centered model, a typical nine-to-five job would not allow the flexibility they so desired. Being an early childhood educator provided these women with the opportunity to have a work life balance. One lady shared: *My daughter, I was a stay at home mom and when my daughter turned three and could come up here, it was just somewhere to for her to go so I could work. And it really wasn't convenient for me to have like a nine-to-five or something like that because of childcare. So I started subbing and just fell in love with it.*

Although many did not discuss negative childhood experiences, this participant said that due to her unfortunate years as a child, she desired to help other children who may be in similar situations. She said: *When I was a child, I had a rough childhood, and as I was growing up and starting... and got married and started having children of my own, I wanted to help children like me in that situation when I got, you know, when I started my career and things like that. So that kind of played a part into my decision, was my past childhood. **It just happened.** In addition to family (children and spouses) playing a large role in their current careers, nine participants shared how they never planned to be early childhood educators. For most, they just so happened to be in the right place at the right time. This woman said: *Um, I was pregnant with my third child and subbing for the school.**

And I just happened to be here on a day when a teacher had said I just can't do this anymore and I just couldn't imagine why she couldn't take care of these sweet little babies [laughs] anymore, and they offered me the job and I was like, I think that's what I want to do.

Although this person began working in daycares, subbed, and volunteered a lot because her children were enrolled in head start, she heard there was an opening extemporaneously. She shares her story by stating: *And just what happened one day, um, one of my friends, uh, she's the supervisor now, she was a teacher and she, I was actually leading the kids over here to go to lunch and she asked me if I wanted a job.*

It was planned. While it may appear as if many women just fell into their careers, six discussed how they strategically planned to be where they are today. This woman said: *Right after I graduated high school. Started out in private daycare. And then I started, I saw an ad in the paper for a sub for head start and so I became a sub, and then... That was back in 2002, and then I became like a floater here at this center and then I, um I was almost finished with my AA degree and then I only lacked two classes, and I was able to finish the two classes while I was working and once I got that done, once I got that completed, then I became... there was an opening at Head Start and then I became a teacher there in the head start classroom and then I, from there I went to early head start and in the meantime, there became money available for us to get our bachelor's degree...*

Similarly, another shared: *Um, well, I have, I went to college at, I did all my four-year degree and I did the distance learning, I did all four years at [university]. It's affiliated through [university]. And um, after I graduated college, then that November I started working as an ABC teacher and then I worked there for several years and that's when I came here to now.*

They Pointed Out My Gift. As previously discussed, while some planned for their careers and others did not, some women were very fortunate to have people in their lives who could see their gifts when they could not. Three women shared how a classroom activity, family, and/or friends, noticed their gift for working with children and therefore encouraged them to seek a degree in education. This participant shares how she was encouraged to pursue a career in teaching: *So when I still wanted to work with kids, and everybody's always said, "You would make a great teacher. You just seem to be a teacher." And so pretty much that's how I got into teaching was just everyone encouraging me to be a teacher. And so I went to school and here I am.*

After a long career in the military, this interviewee shared how she wanted to be with her children and there were words of encouragement from her father that led to her current career. She shared: *Long story short [laugh], I was in the military and I got out with my two kids. I went back home to Arkansas and was kind of, I didn't know what to do with my life. I didn't know what to do and I was kind of leaning toward school because I could be with my kids and stuff, because being a part of their life was really important to me, and my dad says, "You're great with kids. Just try to go work, you know, somewhere with kids." And the Early Head Start had a position open for an aide position. And so I applied for that job and I got it, and then it motivated me to get my CDA, and I got the teaching position over there, when I was there for like the rest of my time was like a year left over there and became a teacher. And I said I want to do more, so I went back to school...*

4.3 Theme 2: Food Preparation As participants discussed childhood memories, they would always bring up the topic of meals. Family food preparation practices during their childhood led to the emergence of three subthemes: a typical meal is dinner, fried and processed foods, and gender roles. **A Typical Meal is Dinner.** All participants were asked to describe a typical meal in their home and what meal that would have been. Two participants described breakfast as the typical meal, with one stating: *In the mornings, mom would always make me breakfast. She would make me eggs, and sausage or some kind of meat, and toast and a glass of orange juice. Every morning. It was mostly always toast and eggs. That's why I like eggs now.*

However, 20 of the participants described or indicated dinner as being the typical meal in their home. One of the interviewees replied: *And, I mean, it might have been fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, or it might have been, um, steak and grilled chicken. I mean, she had, I mean, we didn't just have one thing. You know, like, it was—you had sides to go with it. You had, I mean, a full homecooked meal—is what I was raised on.*

Another participant shared that, *"A typical meal was greens, neck bones, cornbread, kool aid, soda."* One stated a typical meal would have been *"Pork chops, mac and cheese, veggies, corn,"* while another said: *Usual meal. We had spaghetti. I remember having spaghetti a lot. Spaghetti and we always had corn or corn and bread with spaghetti. And then, um, we had hamburgers a lot, we had casseroles. But we always had a home cooked meal every night.* Although a variety of meal combinations were described, the majority of responses from participants indicated that the typical meal was dinner. While some meals were balanced, others were not. **Fried and Processed Foods.** Although many participants indicated that while growing up they had home cooked meals most, if not all nights, the meals were seemingly unhealthy. In fact, only five participants indicated rarely or never having fried foods. Eleven participants reported having meals predominantly fried and/or processed.

As one participant stated: *When I lived with my mother we had a lot of fried foods, with fried potatoes and beans and that was our main, for a while that was our main meal. Just about every night we had some kind of fried food, usually with potatoes and pinto beans.* When referring to her mother, this participant shared: *"She used to always fry [chicken] 'cause she fried a lot of stuff. I remember that. Like how we bake now, I can never hardly remember meats being baked."* Another participant recounted memories from her parents. She said: *"[Dad] was a country boy and we, he, anything that was fried, battered, potatoes, gravy, all that stuff, fried stuff..."* but that they didn't have it often because *"...my mom didn't cook much if it didn't come out of a box."* Alternatively, only five participants indicated that they had fried foods occasionally, but that other preparation methods were used as well. This respondent shares a memory of her grandmother: *My grandmother would have fried chicken, you know, we might have, we might have had broccoli, or you know, some type of casserole and maybe cornbread and, you know, that was part of our meal...And the next day we come home it might have been, you know, baked chicken with rice, and you know rolls and vegetables.* One interviewee stated: *Mom didn't like to fry a lot, so she steamed a lot of her food. And so we had hamburger patties and she had a steamer, she had several steamers, and she put that meat in there, and she would season it, and it was steamed.*

And that grease that came from the hamburger patties went in the bottom...She was real, she watched what she cooked, because my dad has, well he's borderline sugar diabetes...She would really cook a lot of the food, steam it, steam the grease out of the food. While most participants recalled their meals being fried or processed, all except one of them recalled their mothers or grandmothers being the one who prepared the meals.

Gender Roles. When participants were asked who prepared and served the meals in their homes, each responded that it was her mother or grandmother. Only one respondent shared that mom and dad prepared meals in the home. In some cases, the respondent herself shared these responsibilities. One participant explained that at seven years old, “*I was the eldest female, so I had to help them get their food and then I sat down last.*” When another participant was asked what her brother would have been doing she stated, “*I can remember him, he was doing homework.*” None of the participants remembered their brothers helping cook, prepare, or serve meals while they were growing up. One stated emphatically, “*The girls had to help!*”

4.4 Theme 3: Mealtime is Family Connection Time

The most recurrent theme throughout was family, and two subthemes emerged: eating together as a family and extended family helped at mealtime.

Eating Together as a Family. Fifteen of 28 respondents said they always sat down at the table to eat dinner as a family, four said they may have eaten somewhere else in the home, but still together as a family, and an additional four stated they ate together as a family some of the time. Each participant who responded they ate together as a family at least sometimes, indicated that it was a time for the family to communicate and connect with each other. It is also worth mentioning that 19 of the 28 respondents grew up in two-parent households. When asked about family and mealtime, there were such responses as “*We sat down together ate supper. The TV turned off...Um, we turn the TV off and we sat down as a family of six and we said a prayer and then we shared our meal together...*” And “*We always ate at the table...We were all sitting at the table...We would talk about you know, our day, what went on.*” Or “*At the dinner table, we would all wait for my father to come in, and we would all sit down and eat...[we would talk about] how we behaved at school.*”

Extended Family Helped at Mealtime. Whether it was going to grandma’s house to eat or aunts and cousins staying with her family for a while, 11 respondents reported either helping or being helped by extended family. One participant recalled that her single mother worked two jobs. As she stated: *I remember this because she worked day shift, and then she would come home and she would fix us...spend some time with us and fix us supper, and my aunt would come and stay with us, and she would go back to work.* And still another respondent remembered, “*My mother was not a cook. My grandmother cooked all the time...We would go to grandma’s house, yes. I would go to grandma’s house and she would feed me.*” Whether it was to feed or be fed, extended family played an important role in helping at mealtime for many of these respondents.

5. Discussion

ECETs may have many motivations for choosing their career path. However in our sample, salary was not a factor mentioned by any of the participants in this study. It was, in fact, more frequently stated to be a concern. More research could be conducted in this area to ascertain if minimal salary levels within this profession help to perpetuate the cycle of poverty for this demographic. Could struggling income gaps contribute to the decreased prevalence of this group’s future offspring’s propensity to pursue higher educational pursuits as well?

Quite possibly, could the low-income levels experienced by this group make them more prone to identify with other parents whose children are participants in such head start programs due to the numerous socioeconomic factors that they share? How can these commonalities best be utilized to shape positive changes for the future? According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016), the median salary for a preschool teacher is \$28,790 per year which equates to approximately \$13.84 an hour. While the projected pay increases industries (BLS, 2016), depending on one’s family size, these salaries may still leave some professionals at or below the poverty line. The Department of Human Services establishes yearly federal poverty levels based on an individual’s income to determine one’s eligibility for federal benefits and programs (U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2017). Sadly enough, these working individuals qualify for such benefits even though they are helping to shape the future leaders of tomorrow.

By applying Dr. Murray Bowen’s theoretical perspective Family Systems Theory to the family environments of ECETs, researchers were able to provide crucial information and further understanding about the experiences of ECETs and the ways in which family influenced their career decisions. Three overarching themes emerged which provide phenomenal insight for social work practice.

Researchers observed that most of the participants viewed meals as family affairs. This is critically important to note as ECETs shape young lives each day. They can use the familial backgrounds that they experienced as youngsters to positively shape the impressionable children under their care each day.

For instance, role play in which young children can see the importance of families working together, particularly in meal preparations, could be emulated on a daily basis to establish a positive routine for planning well-balanced meals while also showing the strong ties that mealtime traditions can provide. Additionally, usually strategic and intentional meal preparations will help the children to realize the significance of preparing healthy meals for their future children one day in order to plan positive seeds for effective change. Another area quite worthy of reflection that was uncovered from the featured research centers upon the mere act of meal preparation itself. The ECETs can take advantage of their past exposure to highly-processed, calorie laden food and turn over a new leaf by teaching the children healthier eating habits. As previously shared, most participants shared that a typical meal was served during family dinners, and this tradition can be embraced but improved by integrating new knowledge about fresh fruits, vegetables, and lean meats. The ECETs can help all children to see the critical roles that all family members can play in the preparation of daily family meals and the importance of each family member learning to make healthy food choices on a regular basis. Gender roles no longer have to define who is typically the one to prepare food for the family. The ECET can show children how meal prep can truly become a “family affair” and enjoyed by all stakeholders.

Finally, the last theme that emerged which warrants much more exploration is the connections that can be forged by embracing family mealtime each day. Many of the participants mentioned that some of their family members worked multiple jobs, particularly single moms, to provide for the needs of the family. Keeping this critical fact in mind, it is imperative that intentional connections are made as much as possible to keep the entire family connected. Current ECETs can pass along previous traditions of unplugging during dinner time so that all family members can reconnect on a daily basis. Family experiences can be more valuable than material substances. By showing the children that health relates to one’s wealth, the tendencies for poverty, obesity, and lack can begin to shift in a positive direction. To reiterate, further research of a larger sample from different areas and critical analysis of other theoretical approaches can further improve this understanding. The foundation has been established to identify elements of paramount importance which directly impact ECETs and their influence in this profession. It is now imperative to take the knowledge uncovered and seek to use it in a proactive fashion.

6. Conclusion

The positive impact of early childhood education on children is undeniable. The critical role of early care and education teachers is indisputable. While family environment is certainly not the only consideration when choosing a career or staying on a career path, it is arguably one of the biggest. The featured study has systematically identified the roles, both large and small, that the initial family unit can have on this demographic. Communicating and connecting with family, or not—thus positively or negatively impacting the influence the family has—is achieved in a myriad of ways. As evidenced through this study, mealtime is one of the most memorable and significant ways. Through critical analysis and application of theoretical perspectives, broader understanding was brought to the experiences and family environments of ECETs and the initial influence these factors played in their career selection. Furthermore, new ideas to enhance the identified elements have been unearthed. There is a dearth of knowledge in this specific area, and more research will further increase awareness efforts so that new strides can be embraced to effect positive change.

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