THE NESTED DOLL TRILEMMA: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF QUALITY
IN NC PRE-K POLICY AND PRACTICE

A Dissertation
by
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Abstract

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IN NC PRE-K POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Using the theoretical framework of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966),

methodology of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2012), and method of concentrated

looking (Diem & Young, 2018), this dissertation is a critical discourse analysis of *quality* in NC

Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) policies and interviews. I analyzed quality in policy and practice

and used the metaphor of nesting matryoshka dolls combined with Bronfenbrenner's (1979b)

ecological systems theory. I used snowball sampling to analyze 170 NC Pre-K policies and

conducted a discourse analysis of 40 governing policies based on relevance to quality in NC Pre-

K. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 NC Pre-K stakeholders at each layer of

the nested ecosystem: macrosystem (NC legislators), exosystem (NC state NC Pre-K directors),

mesosystem (district administrators and NC Pre-K coordinators), microsystem (school

principals), and individual (NC Pre-K teachers). Based on the discourse analysis of policies,

literature review, and interviews, I argue that quality in NC Pre-K policy and practice align with

aspects of the early care and education (ECE) trilemma (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987). These

three aspects of the trilemma – availability, affordability, and quality of teacher and program –

represent the aspects of quality as defined in policies and the interviews. To improve the quality

of NC Pre-K through all aspects of the trilemma, I recommend improving principal training, increasing budgets, consolidating governing organizations into one, updating and improving the QRIS evaluation instrument, improving collaboration, and re-centering care and play.

Keywords: quality, trilemma, discourse, NC Pre-K, early care and education (ECE), ecological systems theory, social constructionism, principal training, evaluation

Last, thank you to my husband, Matt, and our two boys, James and Jacob. This doctorate has taken me much longer than anticipated, but I am thankful for the twists and turns in the journey because it brought us here with our beautiful family. James and Jacob: everything I do is for you. I want you to know how much your mother loves you, and I will always work to make the world a better place for you and children everywhere. I love you, and I am so thankful for you. Thank you, Jesus, for your blessings and giving me the gift of teaching and advocating for children. May my will to improve the lives of children align with your commission to love as you have loved me.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my children and all of the children in the world. I love you all. I hope to make you proud. I never want to stop opening doors for you. This little book won't change the world, but I promise it's a start. Together, we can change the world. I believe in you.

I also dedicate this to my ancestors, who worked so hard to make things better for other people. Under the worst of circumstances, you kept helping and serving others. I hope to continue your legacy of service.

Last, I dedicate this to all caring teachers who always supported me and believed in me. May we create a world where every child has a caring adult like you to believe in them.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all the

children of the community. Anything less is unlovely, and left unchecked,

destroys our democracy. (Dewey, 1907)

What would a quality early childhood education look like? Dewey's (1907) dream for

children is a dream of quality. As a parent of young children, career educator, and early care and

education advocate, I have been in pursuit of quality for many years. I see that teachers want to

provide a quality education for children, and parents want quality for their children. To

accomplish this, we must first ask: What does it mean to have a quality early care and education

program?

People have conflicting ideas about what quality looks like in early care and education

(ECE) in our country. During the last two years of the COVID-19 global pandemic, early care

and education have been significant issues for policymakers and parents alike. Parents need to

work, but many ECE centers and schools are closed or have long waiting lists due to staff

shortages. Due to the COVID 19 global pandemic, there are now 567,000 fewer public-school

teachers in America than before the pandemic started just two years ago. The Bureau of Labor

Statistics reports that 43% of public-school job posts are unfilled (Kamenetz, 2022a, p. 1). Due

to staff shortages, fewer children have the opportunity to experience the joy of preschool.

There is a common phrase, "it takes a village to raise a child." Stakeholders use this

phrase in educational circles for many reasons. Teachers use it to assert the importance of parents

and families in a child's academic and social success. Parents use it to emphasize the importance

of teachers, extended family, extracurricular activities, and friendships in a child's life. Religious

institutions use it to address the importance of a faith community in a child's upbringing.

Regardless of the speaker, the meaning of this phrase is essentially the same. Every guardian and stakeholder has various ideas about what's most important and best for children. Outside of a child's immediate family and friendship circle, one of the earliest additions to their "village" is the ECE teacher. The ECE teacher is often the first to offer caregiving, education, and emotional support and guidance for a child outside of the family. The importance of this initial addition to the village cannot be understated.

In our society, we call the ECE teacher many names: Teacher, babysitter, educator, daycare worker, or preschool teacher. We expect this additional village member to provide the highest-quality care, education, love, support, and respect for the children in their care. We demand quality in all that they do. We mandate quality through the policies handed to them by policymakers. If policymakers expect quality performance, what are their expectations? What support are we providing ECE teachers to provide quality in their classrooms?

Expectations for quality performance result in policies to describe quality performance. Policymakers expect teachers to uphold all policies and perform policy expectations consistently in practice – with *quality*. At the same time, we are living in very inconsistent times. Martin (2022) cites the Bureau of Labor Statistics with the alarming statistic that 100,000 child care industry workers have left the profession since before the COVID-19 pandemic. Policies are more attainable when the expectations are clearly defined and articulated, and teachers are physically available to be in the classroom to enact them. In this time of the global pandemic, just keeping child care centers adequately staffed and open is difficult. What is the role of educational policies in this challenging time?

Even those teachers who are still practicing are still subject to multiple and often conflicting policy expectations. When teachers get together to commiserate about their

experiences, they frequently lament that no one listens to them. "If only the powers that be knew what we were doing, then they wouldn't ask us to do this! Why doesn't anyone listen to us?" Many teachers complain. Success, accountability, structure, discipline, and curriculum all produce meaning about *quality*, and these meanings vary depending upon one's position in the educational hierarchy. Various stakeholders and policymakers have differing ideas regarding educational success. Should a pre-k program be more academic or play-based? How should teachers be evaluated, and what does quality look like in their classrooms?

Problem Statement

As an educator, parent of young children, and advocate for children, I believe it is essential to provide quality teaching and learning for all young children. The policies, procedures, curriculum, and practices in every early childhood classroom should be of quality and should articulate what quality looks like in policy and practice. However, every stakeholder views quality differently within policies and practices. When specific stakeholders, specifically NC Pre-K teachers, are evaluated based on social constructions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) of quality within the larger educational accountability system, it is essential to understand how each stakeholder considers quality in policy and practice. While quality is a social construct, evaluating quality in NC Pre-K teachers' practice has real and material consequences.

Analyzing quality within NC Pre-K policy helps us see how different stakeholders define quality. Each stakeholder in early care and education plays a role within the system. Various stakeholders view quality differently, and in their views, the discourses of quality are articulated. Examining quality from different perspectives is essential to understand better how quality is understood and evaluated in practice.

Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) ecological systems theory, I assert that the systems informing, evaluating, and implementing quality are nested, like nesting dolls. Each ecological system influences the next. The larger systems most heavily influence the smallest microsystem. The discourse of quality is created, spoken, written, and otherwise shared from the outer dolls inward, so how does each doll/ ecological system consider quality in policy and practice? In this dissertation, I discuss each of these "dolls" or ecological systems in the context of NC Pre-K policies, discourse analysis, and interview responses. I assert that this study will inform policymakers to generate sound practices that benefit children in NC Pre-K programs. The "village" charged with raising our children influences teachers and children. I will argue, through my analysis, that it is vital to ensure that each part of the village, or nesting doll, is aware of their influence, their assumptions, and how their discursive language and practices influence others within the ecosystem.

Research Questions

To investigate how quality is considered and articulated in NC Pre-K policy and practice, I examine the discourses of quality. I also explore how stakeholders' positions within the NC Pre-K nested ecosystem shape their perspectives of quality in NC Pre-K. Last, I study interview responses, policies, and literature to see how discourses of quality in NC Pre-K articulate within the early childhood trilemma (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987). To pursue these aims, I ask the following research questions:

1. What are the discourses of quality in NC Pre-K programs, policies, and practices?
2. How do stakeholders' positions within the nested ecosystem of NC Pre-K policy shape their perspectives of quality in NC Pre-K?

3.   How do the discourses of quality in NC Pre-K articulate within the early childhood

           trilemma (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987)?

Significance of Issue

Examining the discursive practices of NC Pre-K policy and the implementation of these policies in practice will help to shed light on the underlying and hidden assumptions present within policy discourse and the evaluation of discourses. Discourses are present in NC Pre-K policy via the language of the policy, as well as how the policy is interpreted and implemented in practice.

Going back to "the village" discussion, I argue that examining the discourse of quality informing NC Pre-K teachers' practice will shed light on society's priorities and the practices NC Pre-K teachers must implement in their classrooms. How can we evaluate quality in practice if we do not know what it means in policy and how others consider it? Examining the discursive practices of policy through critical discourse analysis helps to see what society prioritizes as quality in policy creation. If quality is assumed yet articulated within policy and the evaluation of policy, discourse analysis helps to reveal some of these assumptions. How do NC Pre-K stakeholders understand their role in the discourse of quality, and how do they participate in implementing and evaluating policies related to quality in practice?

Examining quality in policy and practice has many benefits. Considering the discourses of quality excavates the unexamined assumptions within early care and education. Analyzing the policies and interviewing stakeholders to see how quality is defined (or not) within policy and practice helps open up new understandings about how the layers of the NC Pre-K ecosystem interact to sustain broader social assumptions within discourse. Policymakers create policy documents based on their beliefs about what should happen at other levels of the ecological

system. Beneath them, everyone must interpret the policies and act based on their interpretations and understandings of their agency. Again, the assumptions of quality in policy lead to assumptions of quality in practice. These assumptions serve as the foundation of knowledge and practice. Our knowledge (and assumptions) form the policies that become the evaluation standards for teachers. We must examine the policies for what they say, what they assume, and what they exclude.

Personal Context

I had the great opportunity to work in education as a teacher and administrator for almost twenty years. I taught children from age one to age twenty-one. During my teaching and educational leadership years, I observed considerable variability in early care and education (ECE) programs, policies, and curricula. As a parent of two young children, I toured six different preschools to find the best fit for my children's preschool education. Some programs focus on academic preparation. For example, I observed very young children seated at tables, working silently on worksheets. Another program valued potty training, and children spent many hours each day practicing bathroom habits. Another program was play-based. I observed children engaging in dramatic, fine-motor, and gross-motor play. I observed vastly different approaches and curriculums in these private preschools within the same city in just two weeks.

As a public school employee, I wondered if there was a similar variation in NC Pre-K programs. NC Pre-K is the pre-kindergarten program housed in public schools for four-year-old children considered at-risk due to their family's low socioeconomic status. According to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS), Division of Child Development and Early Education:

The NC Pre-K Program is designed to provide high-quality educational experiences to

enhance school readiness for eligible four-year-old children…The NC Pre-K Program

Requirements are designed to ensure that a high-quality pre-kindergarten classroom

experience is provided for eligible four-year-old children in each local NC Pre-K

Program and that, to the extent possible, uniformity exists across the state. (NCDHHS,

2020, p. 1-1)

With so much variability in local preschool programs, the NC Pre-K program's assertion that

there will be high-quality experiences and uniformity across the state is an intriguing premise. I

wondered what these "high-quality" practices look like and how stakeholders consider quality in

practice.

Cottle and Alexander (2012) argue: "It is interesting to note the number of times 'quality'

is cited but rarely, if ever, defined, suggesting an assumption that there is an explicit and agreed

model of what constitutes quality childcare and quality practitioners" (p. 637). If this is true,

what is considered "explicit and agreed?" If educational researchers cannot agree on the meaning

of quality in ECE settings, how is quality defined and evaluated?

My experiences working in education and looking for the right early care and education

program for my children generated a question that I read and heard repeatedly at every level of

education: What is quality? I wanted to teach with quality, policies want to implement quality,

and evaluations want to measure quality. What does quality mean in practice? What do these

policies say about quality? How do NC Pre-K stakeholders define and implement the quality

policies disseminated to them?

Policy

To recognize quality in policy, I must understand what policy means. Policies are documents created to solve a problem. Stakeholders implement what the document says in practice. Policies are texts written to engage the reader to act in some way or stop acting in some way. Policies in this way are sets of directions. Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) assert that policies must be "translated from text to action – put 'into' practice… Practice is sophisticated, contingent, complex and unstable' so that 'policy will be open to erosion and undercutting by action" (p. 3). Thus, policies are subject to contextual interpretation. When I examine a policy component – namely, quality – I am also exploring the contexts and underlying assumptions present within any possible definition of quality within policy and practice. Policies are written by policymakers and implemented by stakeholders with differing levels of authority and understanding within the system. Policies are written in text form and enacted based on the interpretations of what stakeholders believe to be true based on what they read. The ideologies represented in this argument are the policies informing educational practice.

Policymakers' positioning as removed and separate from those tasked with implementing policies is problematic because assumptions written within policy documents are enacted in classrooms, far removed from policymakers' offices. To those in the trenches of implementing policy, the consequences of the assumptions in policies are very real. The discourse of policy generates actual practice that impacts the daily lives of teachers and children.

The words used in policies are part of social discourse about what can be said, how it can be said, and what can be done based on what is said. As it governs what can be said, discourse also constrains what can be said – that is, it both includes and excludes. We are living in discourse, and discourse lives within us. Fairclough (2012) argues that social groups make

meaning about and through social norms and values. Discourse analysis examines the social norms and the use of language by groups. The words we write in policies generate what is possible and expected. Though policies might be solely ideological and not practical, their presence ensures the expectation that policies are followed as thoroughly as possible. What does quality in policy become if discourse produces the policy?

Thus, it is not just a question of what the policy says about what can be done within the classroom. It is a question of how discourse informs what can be done. When I ask the question, what is quality in NC Pre-K? I am asking about more than just the word *quality*. I ask how the discourse of education, social expectations, and individual experiences view and consider quality. Allan, Iverson, & Ropers-Huilman (2010) share that "discourses both produce and circumscribe possible formations of the self in ways of which we are not always fully aware" (p. 18). Discourse enables us to write our assumptions in policies and implement assumptions in practice without thoroughly questioning or understanding the meaning of what we're doing. Discourse makes quality measurable and intangible simultaneously, depending on social assumptions and the construction of quality in policy and practice.

Discourse

What are we saying when we expect quality in NC Pre-K classrooms? What does this word, *quality,* mean? Quality is discourse. St. Pierre (2000) asserts that though discourse is: "Productive and works in a very material way through social institutions to construct realities that control both the actions and bodies of people, it can be contested … shifts in historical thought do occur when people think of different things to say" (p. 486). To understand quality in NC Pre-K, I must pay attention to "what people say" (St. Pierre, 2000) in policies and interviews. To pay attention to the words used, I use the method of critical discourse analysis. Montessori et

al. (2019) assert, "Discourse analysis is also sometimes defined as the study of language above the level of a sentence, of the ways sentences combine to create meaning, coherence, and accomplish purposes" (p. 1). Discourse analysis causes the analyst to examine the words used to reveal assumptions and contexts. Policies, therefore, must be analyzed based on context. Further, examining quality is examining not just the word but the social systems, discourse, power struggles, and actions of stakeholders as they interact with their constructions of quality. Quality is produced not only by policies but also by the educational discourse.

Examining educational policy discourse in this way opens up possibilities of critiquing quality within policies and how to challenge policies. While society generates many socially-constructed assumptions written as policies, policies are written by people based on discursive assumptions. Policies also impact people based on the consequences of implementing and evaluating policies. Policies aren't just done but *done to* teachers and produce their realities.

Going back to my discussion about one of the first extensions of a child's family village, the NC Pre-K teacher, I wonder how discourses impact how quality is understood through policy, practice, evaluation, and implementation. Stakeholders must inform NC Pre-K directors, administrators, policymakers, and legislators of the needs of children to serve them best. Every part of the system is an extension of the village. This village is nested together, much like a matryoshka doll. Every aspect of the policies generated on the outskirts of the village (society, the community, the state, the government) impacts the inner parts of the village (the school district, the school, the families, the teachers, and the children).

Because all parts of the early childhood system are nested together in this way, the authors of policy have the authority to implement their ideals within the classrooms, as long as those reading the policies understand what they are supposed to do. The entire system is nested

together, and the village members interpret quality as discourse. How does each level of the nested system understand its role in understanding and implementing quality?

Viewing quality as the product of the construct of discourse is helpful to see how quality is articulated in policy and practice. Using the metaphor of matryoshka (nested) dolls to represent Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) ecological systems theory, I illustrate how NC Pre-K policies focused on quality practice within discourse. Each outer layer of the nested doll ecosystem generates policies that impact the quality of actual teaching in the classroom. How does each layer of the nested ecosystem consider quality? To frame my investigation into quality, I first discuss the early care and education (ECE) trilemma.

The Early Childhood Trilemma

To provide a quality, consistent, and caring education for our children, we need to address the three aspects of the early childhood "trilemma" (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987). The trilemma includes availability, affordability, and quality. The trilemma represents the three aspects that challenge educational stakeholders in providing quality childcare. Families must be able to access ECE, it must be affordable, and it must be of a high program and teacher quality. Figure 1 represents the three categories overlapping to form the trilemma, as Lash and McMullen (2008) illustrated.

Figure 1

The ECE Trilemma

The three points to address are like three sides of a triangle: availability, affordability, and quality. The trilemma provides context for the quality debate in NC Pre-K. We want our children to attend quality programs, but can we afford to pay teachers enough to offer quality programs? If so, are there enough teachers available to meet this need? Lash and McMullen (2008) reflect this challenging debate:

> [B]oth the level and type of training caregivers and teachers receive in their pre- and in-service professional development is directly associated with quality early care and education (Barnett, 2003; Whitebook, 2003). What, then, are the moral implications of compelling or requiring early care and education professionals to achieve specialized and/or more advanced levels of education if we are only going to compensate our child care and preschool professionals at the level of unskilled parking lot attendants and taxi

drivers… if we decide we must provide better compensation to early care and education professionals, primarily paid by families, is it moral to ask families to pay more than they do already for child care (see Table I)? How can we ask this of families when child care already costs as much as college tuition at a public university? (p. 38)

Teacher compensation is an essential component of quality education. It is not a silver bullet, either. Teachers must be compensated on par with their K-12 peers, have education and training in early childhood development, and provide a safe, caring environment with collaborative relationships with families to ensure quality educational experiences.

Focusing on just one leg of this trilemma leads to disastrous results. A longitudinal study (Farran, Hofer, Lipsey & Bilbrey, 2014) in Tennessee demonstrated that students who attended state-funded Pre-K with teachers compensated on par with their K-12 peers performed much worse later in their school careers. When examining the factors involved in the state-funded Pre-K program, researchers discovered that 85% of pre-k classrooms scored lower than a good quality rating using the ECERS-R assessment (Farran et al., 2014). The four-year-old students in this study were treated similarly to elementary school students and were expected to participate in traditional academic activities. Students were expected to listen to teachers' lectures, sit quietly and listen, remain quiet in hallways, stand in line for bathroom breaks, and were not given enough free-play time. Compared to their higher-income counterparts who participated in private preschool programs, the Pre-K students performed significantly worse later in their school years. Thus, we must not ignore program quality in favor of simply improving teacher compensation. Teachers must have a robust knowledge base, a supportive, structured, high-quality, developmentally appropriate curriculum, collaborate with families, AND salaries on par with their peers.

Methodology

To provide quality in NC Pre-K, stakeholders must address every aspect of the trilemma. Considering quality as discourse helps open up new meanings and possibilities in NC Pre-K policy and implementation. Through analysis and interviews of how the policies are enacted, one can see how different meanings and interpretations are possible and how underlying assumptions ground particular policy decisions. Thus, my study seeks to open up new ideas, see what is both written and what is assumed (Diem & Young, 2018), and analyze both shared and conflicting meanings to create something new from a socially constructed, multi-level lens. In this way, I analyze discourse through the metaphor of nesting dolls as an extension of Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) ecological systems theory. NC Pre-K quality policies are created, implemented, lived, interpreted, and evaluated. They are both subjects and objects and are present in all levels of the NC Pre-K ecosystem.

My study has two parts. First, I reviewed the NC Pre-K policies to see how discourse (nested systems) informs, enables, and constrains written policy (Fairclough, 2014). Next, to see how written discourse is enacted, evaluated, and understood, I interviewed 30 NC Pre-K participants. All interview respondents were stakeholders in NC Pre-K from across North Carolina, and they reflect the different levels of the ecological/nested system.

The first research question is, What are the discourses of quality in NC Pre-K programs, policies, and practices? I examined NC Pre-K policies, literature, and interview responses to answer this question to see how the discourses of quality are present in these components of NC Pre-K. I conducted a keyword search for quality within each document and analyzed how different levels of the nested ecosystem inform quality as discourse. Policy implementation and understanding are contextual, and context is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

This examination led to my second question: How do stakeholders' positions within the nested ecosystem of NC Pre-K policy shape their perspectives of quality in NC Pre-K? Different levels of the ecosystem describe quality differently. Stakeholders consider quality based on their discursive position in relation to a policy's implementation. My study analyzed policies for their discursive role within the nested ecosystem. It included the voices of stakeholders to see how implementation and evaluation of quality expectations in policies differ based on nested positions. For example, legislators in the macrosystem viewed quality as discourse within NC Pre-K using financial indicators, and NC Pre-K teachers used more relationship-based indicators to define quality. I examined policies for their discursive and social positions in addition to the literature and interview responses.

After reviewing the policies and literature documents, I asked: How do the discourses of quality in NC Pre-K articulate within the early childhood trilemma (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987)? The early childhood trilemma includes availability, affordability, and program and teacher quality. I believe that discourses of quality are present within all of these elements. My research of the discourses of quality articulates within each element of the trilemma.

Definition of Terms

There are terms within the field of early care and education that are used commonly and within North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten policies. This section will outline some of the more commonly used terms and acronyms to help readers clarify throughout the rest of the dissertation.

1. ECE: Early care and education. This also represents the field of early care and education, which is sometimes referred to as early childhood education and care, or early childhood education. Some policy documents also refer to ECE using the term

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childcare. For simplicity, I simply refer to early care and education throughout this text as ECE.

2.   NC Pre-K: North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten, a statewide program for "at-risk" four-year-old students.

3.   DAP: Developmentally appropriate practice. This is a term used a lot in the early care and education world to mean what skills and methods are most appropriate for children to learn at each age and step of their developmental progression. It also refers to a social movement to ensure that academic curricula are not pushed down to younger-aged students. DAP proponents frequently discuss the merits of play and child-centered learning (see NAEYC, 2020).

4.   NCEES: North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) teacher evaluation system for all North Carolina teachers.

5.   NCDHHS is the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, the governing agency running NC Pre-K.

6.   NCDPI: The state governing agency for K-12 teachers. NCDPI includes the standards teachers must teach, their evaluation system, professional development, and enrollment and testing information.

7.   NCDCDEE is the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education, part of NCDHHS.

8.   NAEYC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

9.   NC Foundations: North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development

10. NCRLAP: North Carolina Rated Licensure Assessment Process. This organization conducts the ECERS-R classroom assessments required for all NC Pre-K classrooms.

11. ECERS-R: Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised, published by NCRLAP.

12. NIEER: National Institute for Early Education Research

13. QRIS: Quality Rating and Improvement System, used to assess and evaluate early care and education programs. North Carolina's QRIS for NC Pre-K is the star-rated license.

Organization of Study

I arranged this dissertation into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the study, which outlines the rationale, research questions, significance, and background of the study. Chapter two includes a literature review related to quality, early care and education, social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), discourse, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) ecological systems theory. Chapter three discusses the methodology used in this study, discourse analysis, paired with Diem and Young's (2018) method of concentrated looking. I also outline in chapter three how I conduct my policy analysis and 30 semi-structured interviews. Chapter four includes the results of my findings, with a discussion of how the interviews and policies fit within the nested matryoshka doll metaphor. I organize chapter four into subsections after the initial results section, where I outline the results of interviews and policy findings within each layer of the nested doll ecosystem. Chapter five includes my discussion of the results based on discourse analysis and ecological systems. Last, chapter six has my recommendations, implications for future research, limitations of this study, and how to apply the research in different ways, such as education reform.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Children need to have quality educational experiences. They need to be well-cared for to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. On a larger scale, parents need their children to have quality educational experiences to contribute to the workforce and balance their work and family responsibilities. Historically, preschool or pre-kindergarten (pre-k) has been where children receive their first educational experience. Teachers and administrators must participate in quality NC Pre-K and understand what quality means in each policy. This chapter presents a brief history of early care and education in the United States, outlines funding structures and challenges, current issues in early childhood, and North Carolina Pre-K. The rest of the chapter reviews the literature about quality in early care and education and discusses my theoretical framework, social constructionism. Last, I discuss discourse as an overarching theme within quality and policy analysis.

Historical Context

Early care and education (ECE) policy represents various beliefs about educating young children. ECE has had strong ties to the national economy for over two centuries in the United States. While the curriculum is an essential aspect of the conversation, preschools and ECE centers have strong ties to families' needs to participate in the workforce.

Since its inception, the purpose of ECE has been subject to controversy. Initially called "Infant schools" in the early 19th century, people considered early childhood programs as childcare sources so that poor parents could work outside the home (Kamerman, 2006). Children could also learn additional religious and moral education. In discussing the history of ECE in the United States, I use childcare and ECE interchangeably to reflect society's understanding of ECE during each period. Kamerman (2006) discusses the origins of kindergartens and nurseries,

which were "first established in the 19th century, often drawing on the same models: Froebel, Pestalozzi, Montessori, and the activities of missionaries. Early on, a distinction was made between 'kindergartens' for educational purposes and day nurseries to provide care" (Kamerman, 2006, p. 3). Most American programs were more centered around childcare (Kamerman, 2006).

In the 19th century, the childcare trend was short-lived and evolved into an era when society decided that children should be educated at home (Karch, 2013). In the early 20th century, the Industrial Revolution's rise saw an uptick in early childhood programs as both parents often needed to work outside of the home. Karch (2013) describes these new programs as day nurseries, viewed as "philanthropic work that would foster family preservation and absorb immigrant and poor families into the American mainstream by teaching values like cleanliness and patriotism" (p. 34). These day nurseries provided basic hygiene and minimal childcare, though they were a means for mothers to re-enter the workforce. Many day nurseries were open from early morning to later in the evening to support parents working longer shifts.

Day nurseries evolved into nursery schools around 1910. These nursery schools stressed educational development, and their organizers declared that "some definite educational plan is necessary before the age of five" (Karch, 2013, p. 35). These schools were the precursor to more modern preschools but differed because they emphasized families' importance first and foremost. The end of the First World War saw a shift in ECE again, where children from more affluent backgrounds typically attended preschool. However, the end of the Great Depression led to another uptick in preschool attendance as states created teaching jobs to rebuild the economy. Early childhood programs' growth continued through the Second World War, as many mothers had to re-enter the workforce to support the war effort. "When mothers entered the workforce,

most observers agreed that the government should provide adequate care for their children, and there was no debate about the need for federally aided daycare" (Karch, 2013, p. 38).

The need for childcare and ECE for working mothers was growing worldwide. In 1939, a UNESCO memorandum recognized the need for ECE for working mothers. It stressed the "value of preschool, which it stated, should be available to all children… programs should be voluntary, free, or with fees similar to those in primary school, cover the full work day, and provide better trained teachers" (Kamerman, 2006, p. 3-4). While UNESCO recommended this policy, the United States enacted it differently. When the second world war ended and the economy stabilized, many US children returned home, and the need for federally funded ECE decreased. Between the 1940s and 1960s, fewer children attended preschools.

With changing times often comes changing economies. By the 1960s, there was a growing awareness of poverty in the United States. The creation of Head Start in 1965 was intended to fight the "national war on poverty" (Karch, 2013, p. 44) by addressing the "long-term disadvantages that accompanied growing up in poverty and preparing disadvantaged children for elementary school. The launch of Head Start had much in common with the emergency nursery schools and Lanham Act centers. It was a targeted, temporary response to an emergency" (Karch, 2013, p. 44).

The United States came close to enacting federal funding for ECE in 1971 when Congress passed the Comprehensive Child Development Act. This legislation would have "put into place a national child care system much like that already in place in many industrialized nations...Although it enjoyed wide political and popular support, the bill was vetoed in a stinging message by President Nixon" (Zigler, Marsland & Lord, 2009, p. xi). The rationale for the veto was that parents, not daycares, should be responsible for raising children. While this might be a

noble principle, the reality of rising living costs and growing poverty rates make ECE a necessity many parents require and continue to struggle to afford.

Current Status of the Problem

In the 1980s, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) discussed an ECE trilemma: quality, availability, and affordability. Their position statement released in 1987 argued the importance of these three essential components for the success of ECE programs. NAEYC's (1987) position statement claimed, "the provision of high-quality early childhood programs depends upon three basic needs being met: high-quality programming for children, equitable compensation for staff, and affordable services for families or other consumers" (NAEYC, 1987, p. 1).

A growing awareness of ECE challenges and changing economic times spurred a follow-up article in which NAEYC (1995) asserted that these three components continued to hinder the success of early childhood programs nationwide. The need for universal child care that is either free or affordable continued to grow. The only respite was the income tax credit available for child and dependent care. The only national legislation available to help families pay for ECE was the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), passed with bipartisan support and signed into law in 1990 by George H.W. Bush (Zigler et al., 2009, p. xiii). Many conservative circles debated this bill because the national consensus among these circles was mothers should stay home with their children. However, growing economic constraints on families and rising percentages of single mothers made this legislation necessary, and even the conservative circles began to acknowledge this need.

In 2019, the Trump administration passed a bill allowing twelve weeks of paid leave for new parents (Barrett & Kaufman, 2019). This bill only applied to federal employees who were

new parents. Though the administration discussed improving child care during the campaign, they did not pass any child care legislation. The Biden administration is working on improving the national infrastructure (Mueller, 2021). Part of this plan is adding child care to the definition of infrastructure to rebuild the national economy. While supporters of this plan are encouraged that child care is being discussed and financed on a much larger scale, critics argue that the current infrastructure plan only allocates funding for building and improving child care facilities. With most child care and ECE workers living in poverty, the wage gap must be addressed and closed.

Part of President Biden's campaign promise (Democratic National Committee, 2021) was to "make child care more affordable and accessible for working families... And he is proposing to give caregiving workers and early childhood educators a raise and stronger benefits, treating them as the professionals they are" ("Caregiving," 2020). According to the White House (2021), the Build Back Better plan "Offers universal and free preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds, the largest expansion of universal and free education since states and communities across the country established public high school 100 years ago…. [and] makes the largest investment in child care in the nation's history, saving most American families more than half of their spending on child care" ("The Build Back Better Framework," 2021). In 2021, the Biden administration successfully funded the Child Tax Credit, which provided 39 million households up to $3,600 in tax cuts by extending the American Rescue Plan's Child Tax Credit.

Additionally, the Build Back Better Framework provided monthly payments of $300 per month per child under six and $250 per month per child between ages 6 and 17. These payments expired in January 2022 but were a valuable benefit for many working families in 2021. While the payments were helpful for families to offset ECE and childcare costs, the Build Back Better

Framework does not yet address the wage inequity for childcare workers and ECE teachers. The additional tax credits and funding have not been reapproved for families in 2022.

North Carolina Context

North Carolina's ECE teachers are essential for students' success and the health of a growing state economy. Providing high-quality ECE for North Carolina's children allows parents to contribute to the workforce. However, according to Austin et al. (2020) with the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment,

> North Carolina early educators with a bachelor's degree are paid 28.8 percent less than their colleagues in the K-8 system. The poverty rate for early educators in North Carolina is 17.6 percent, much higher than for North Carolina workers in general (10.6 percent) and 7.4 times as high as for K-8 teachers (2.4 percent). (p. 100)

We expect early childhood educators to set a strong foundation for children's lifetime success and provide ECE for parents so they can work. Their work is essential, yet early childhood educators are paid poverty-level wages for their enormous contributions to children and society.

Many people agree that ECE is essential and builds the foundational skills necessary for children to succeed. However, the research emphasizes the nature and challenges of funding ECE programs (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Barnett & Masse, 2007; Lynch & Vaghul, 2015). While policymakers typically do not directly experience teaching early childhood classes, some are interested in the financial benefits or setbacks of funding early childhood programs. Adamson and Brennan (2014) underscore this, saying, "Social investment strategies and policies focus on employment rather than welfare and promote public expenditure on skills and education throughout the life course, starting with early childhood education and care (ECEC)" (p. 47). ECE, therefore, is an investment in the future workforce, according to economists and

policymakers. Investing in ECE programs will eventually pay for themselves. According to

Lynch and Vaghul (2015), "Over time, the program would more than pay for itself: By 2050, a

universal prekindergarten program would yield $8.90 in benefits for every dollar invested and

$304.7 billion in total benefits" (p. 6). Some financial benefits include reduced costs allocated for

prisons, special education classes, and healthcare. Investing in ECE helps to support state

funding and short-term budgets (García et al., 2016).

State, local, and federal dollars typically finance public schools in North Carolina. The

majority of funds for K-12 public schools come from state dollars, followed by local funds and a

small percentage of federal funds. In ECE, however, federal funding is the most significant share

of the budget. The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (2020) states that federal dollars

are allotted to the state in two ways: "1. A designated state agency charged with administering an

early childhood program receives the federal funds (e.g., child care subsidy) or 2. Federal dollars

go directly to providers of early childhood services at the local level (e.g., Head Start)" (North

Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, 2020, p. 2). Of the two federal funding streams, the US

Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) and the North Carolina Department of

Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) filter through most funds. Several documents provide

specific rules and regulations for running an ECE program listed on the websites, but there is

very little information about funding programs.

Current Issues in NC Pre-K and Early Care and Education

Adequately funding ECE programs has long-term and short-term benefits for families,

children, and the states. To focus more on what states do with the federal and state funds allotted

to them, I focus on North Carolina's NC Pre-K program. As a resident of North Carolina and

mother of two young children, I am interested in studying both NC Pre-K policies and the

implementation of these policies. In this section, I describe the NC Pre-K program components and policies.

NC Pre-K

There are many different preschool and pre-kindergarten programs available in North Carolina. For this study, I examine the North Carolina Pre-K program because it is a statewide pre-kindergarten program, and there are NC Pre-K programs in every school district across the state. NC Pre-K is funded through federal, state, lottery, and local funds. NC Pre-K programs must earn "high-quality ratings" (NCDHHS, 2020, p. 7) to continue in the state's funding system. Therefore, to remain in the state funding system, quality must be demonstrated in ratings. Therefore, it is essential to understand how quality is actually rated in NC Pre-K.

Examining the documents describing NC Pre-K from both funding structures and program descriptions reveals a common word: *quality*. Quality is in the description of ratings, programs, and evaluations of NC Pre-K. According to Smith, Brewer, Heffner, and Algozzine (2003), "Quality preschool programs provide developmentally appropriate activities to facilitate the acquisition of important academic and social skills" (p. 39). Thus, for preschool and pre-k specifically, quality is both activity and skill acquisition. According to the NC Pre-K Program Requirements and Guidance (2020), "The NC Pre-K Program is administered by the Division of Child Development and Early Education in the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services" (NCDHHS, 2020, p. 1-1). The goal of NC Pre-K is to

> provide high-quality educational experiences to enhance school readiness for eligible four-year-old children...Research shows that children who experience high quality care and education, and who enter school well prepared, are more successful in school and later in their lives...The requirements are designed to ensure that a high-quality pre-

kindergarten classroom experience is provided for eligible four-year-old children in each

local NC Pre-K Program and that, to the extent possible, uniformity exists across the state

(NCDHHS, 2020, 1-1)

The assertion that "children who experience high quality care and education, and who enter

school well prepared, are more successful in school and later in their lives" (NCDHHS, 2020, 1-

1) is echoed in the literature regarding quality ECE programs as well.

Current Research on Quality Indicators of ECE

Children need high-quality ECE to have better success in school and life. There is

significant research support for high-quality early childhood programs (Barnett, 1995, 2007,

2011; Brennan & Adamson, 2014; Cottle & Alexander, 2012; Cryer, 1999; Dahlberg, Moss, &

Pence, 2007). Before launching into a discussion of these programs, defining what *quality* means

in early childhood is essential.

Many ECE practitioners' personal and professional experiences are not universal to all

ECE research. For example, Tobin (2005) argues that "attempts to come up with universal,

decontextualized, external standards of quality are conceptually flawed, politically dangerous,

and often counter-productive" (p. 425). Tobin (2005) argues that the attempt to define quality

through the concept is cultural relativism, which is an "epistemological rather than a moral

concept which argues that it is intellectually and methodologically unsound to attempt to

understand another people's cultural practices using the assumptions and categories of one's own

culture" (p. 425). Therefore, definitions of quality are not universal. To try to understand how

quality is defined in our culture, I begin with a dictionary definition. Merriam-Webster (2021)

defines quality as follows: "1: How good or bad something is … 2: A characteristic or feature

that someone or something has: something that can be noticed as a part of a person or thing …3:

A high level of value or excellence" (Merriam-Webster, 2021). In Merriam-Webster's definition, quality is the value of something, the essence or inherent feature of something, the character, or even the attribute. This definition is lengthy and multifaceted for something that is socially assumed to be clear to everyone. If quality is unclear in the dictionary, is it easier to define in the literature?

In a landmark study conducted by Mashburn et al. (2008), quality in Pre-K is defined through adherence to ten different standards shared by the NIEER. These standards include items such as teachers having a bachelor's degree, early care and education training and licensure, professional development, comprehensive curriculum, small class ratios (10:1), health and safety training, nutrition, communication with families, and monitoring program quality (Mashburn et al., 2008, p. 734). These standards could be quantified into quality scores depending on the assessment scale used. Different states use different quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS). The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (2018) explains that "All QRIS contain two or more levels of standards beyond licensing, with incremental progressions to the highest level of quality, as defined by the state. Systems vary in the number of levels and the number of standards identified in each level" (p. 2).

The QRIS used in North Carolina is the Star Rated license. The Star Rated license provides a score based on teacher qualifications, The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) by Harms et al. (1998), and one additional quality point. ECERS-R is the most commonly used quality assessment tool in North Carolina Pre-K. ECERS-R includes thirty-six elements that measure the classroom environment, such as space and furnishings, activities, routines, and language reasoning (Mashburn et al., 2008). Based on these three areas: teacher education, ECERS-R score, and quality point– a single overall measure of the quality of

an early childhood environment– is computed as the average of thirty-six items. Scores range from one to seven, with one indicating inadequate quality, three demonstrating minimal quality, five indicating good quality, and seven indicating excellent quality (Mashburn et al., 2008). In this quantifiable quality measure, the higher the score, the better. Is quality something that is so easily quantifiable?

Numerous studies (Barnett et al., 2007; Karoly, 2016; McMahon, 2015) assert that the quality of ECE programs is measured by academic gains later in life. Researchers examine various social, psychological, educational, and financial outcomes. McMahon (2015) argues that quality child care includes having consistent, qualified staff, low staff-to-student ratios, responsive interactions from staff members, and a positive environment (McMahon 2015, p. 88). Dennis and O'Connor (2013) also assert the importance of organizational climate on classroom quality. Other ECE researchers demonstrate that excellent ECE programs have long-term economic, social, and academic positive outcomes (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Gould, Blair, & The Economic Policy Institute, 2020; Lynch & Vaghul, 2015). However, there is a disconnect between quality in program policy assertions and how each policy defines and assesses quality in practice.

Tobin (2005), a cultural anthropologist and ECE researcher, argues that quality standards in ECE are "less a result of scientific progress than a reflection of contemporary concerns and values. The quality standards of earlier eras were not worse, just different" (p. 427). If quality education standards reflect contemporary culture, is it possible to find a universally accepted and understood definition of quality in ECE policy and practice?

The United States State Department of Education published an early childhood program quality indicator checklist in 2017. Among the quality indicators are warm, frequent, and

positive interactions among adults and children, teachers trained in early childhood and development, varied and age-appropriate materials, planned and appropriate learning activities for children's development, and ongoing and systemic evaluation of all personnel (US State Department, 2017, p. 4). I applaud the US State Department for attempting to define quality indicators in ECE programs. Many of these are actually very difficult to measure, however. For example, how can one measure with any quantifiable, objective measure indicators such as "warm interactions" or "enough adults?" Are these indicators measurable and, therefore, open to an evaluation in the first place? Conversely, do all quality indicators need to be measured using quantifiable measures?

Perhaps quality can be defined through rewards for exemplary performance. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (2012) awards board certification to early childhood educators if they demonstrate exemplary performance in ten standards. Examples of the standards include using knowledge of child development to foster learning, partnering with families and communities, and knowing subject matter (NBPTS, 2012). These ten standards are "designed so that teachers demonstrate their practice by providing evidence of what they know and do. The evidence-based assessment honors the complexities and demands of teaching" (NBPTS, 2012, p. 7). Teachers provide the documentation through three portfolio entries and a computer-based assessment. The assessors do not directly observe the ten standards, and no parents or children offer input into the supposed effectiveness of the teachers. Quality is measurable, in this situation, based on the portfolio entries and the standardized test. Does quality translate into actual practice in these teachers' classrooms? How would we know?

Quality can also be assessed in terms of teachers' interactions with students. Teachers should be consistent, supportive, and responsive to children's needs and interests. The NAEYC

Governing Board (2020) asserts:

> This emerging science emphasizes the critical importance of early childhood educators in providing consistent, responsive, sensitive care and education to promote children's development and learning across the full birth-through-8 age span. The negative impacts of chronic stress and other adverse experiences can be overcome. High-quality early childhood education contributes substantially to children's resilience and healthy development (p. 8).

Thus, it is not just test scores or environmental rating scales considering quality indicators. Caring adults who provide consistent support to young children, as an extension of the child's village, help children feel loved and nurtured.

Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2007) wrestle with the concept of quality and how it is defined and evaluated in ECE. In a neoliberal, capitalist society, even the immeasurable needs to be measured and assessed. Parents, policymakers, and the community demand results and want to ensure the biggest possible "bang for their buck." Dahlberg et al. (2007) argue that measuring quality involves "the decontextualized application of abstract criteria, reducing the complexity and concreteness of environment and practice to scores or boxes to tick. Above all, 'quality' offers consumers information about a product, for 'quality is a language of evaluation'" (p. 23). Quality as a market commodity that a checkbox evaluation system can easily measure appeals to policymakers and program administrators. In the busyness of life, it is appealing to think that quality can be easily identified, observed, and evaluated in this way. In practice, it is also happening in North Carolina Pre-K policy documents.

Quality is frequently used as a buzzword in education in North Carolina Pre-K policy documents. However, too often, it is not defined by specific indicators. I searched various policy

documents using a keyword search related to quality from the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten

(NC Pre-K) Program Requirements and Guidance Effective SFY 2020-21 policy document. The

reader is directed to the Teachers College Press Environmental Rating Scale based on this

search. This rating scale is a simple (yes or no) checklist that quantifies various aspects of an

early childhood program. Figure 2 shows the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-

Revised (ECERS-R) Profile, a summative rating score sheet of ECE program environment

quality, which is a component of the North Carolina Star Rated license QRIS.

Figure 2

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) Profile

ECERS-R Profile

Center/School: _____   Observation 1: __ __/__ __/__ __ (m m / d d / y y)   Observer(s): _____

Teacher(s)/Classroom: _____   Observation 2: __ __/__ __/__ __ (m m / d d / y y)   Observer(s): _____

I. Space & Furnishings (1–8)
Obs. 1   Obs. 2
average subscale score
1. Indoor space
2. Furn. for routine care, play & learning
3. Furn. for relaxation
4. Room arrangment for play
5. Space for privacy
6. Child-related display
7. Space for gross motor
8. Gross motor equipment

II. Personal Care Routines (9–14)
9. Greeting/departing
10. Meals/snacks
11. Nap/rest
12. Toileting/diapering
13. Health practices
14. Safety practices

III. Language-Reasoning (15–18)
15. Books and pictures
16. Encouraging children to communicate
17. Using language to develop reasoning skills
18. Informal use of language

IV. Activities (19–28)
19. Fine motor
20. Art
21. Music/movement
22. Blocks
23. Sand/water
24. Dramatic play
25. Nature/science
26. Math/number
27. Use of TV, video, and/or computers
28. Promoting acceptance of diversity

V. Interaction (29–33)
29. Supervision of gross motor activities
30. General supervision of children
31. Discipline
32. Staff-child interactions
33. Interactions among children

VI. Program Structure (34–37)
34. Schedule
35. Free play
36. Group time
37. Provisions for children with disabilities

VII. Parents and Staff (38–43)
38. Provisions for parents
39. Provisions for personal needs of staff
40. Provisions for professional needs of staff
41. Staff interaction and cooperation
42. Supervision and evaluation of staff
43. Opportunities for professional growth

Average Subscale Scores
SPACE & FURNISHINGS
PERSONAL CARE
LANGUAGE-REASONING
ACTIVITIES
INTERACTION
PROGRAM STRUCTURE
PARENTS & STAFF

Note: Reprinted from Harms, T, Clifford, R.M., & Cryer, D. (1998). ECERS-R Profile, p. 13. https://www.tcpress.com/filebin/PDFs/ecerss.pdf. Copyright 2006 Creative Commons.

A simple single scale to assess environmental quality doesn't capture the dynamic, multiple factors essential in ECE research, policy, and evaluation. It does conform to Moss and Dahlberg's (2008) argument about measuring quality as a market commodity. While these policy

documents list quality indicators, actual definitions of quality in practice are not clearly defined in policy or evaluation documents. When early childhood teachers are paid well below their peers in public education (The Center for Child Care Employment, 2020), and quality indicators are not clearly defined, what does that communicate about North Carolina policymakers' priorities regarding ECE? To assess and evaluate quality is to assume that a clear understanding of quality in NC Pre-K is well-articulated and agreed upon. However, I believe that reality is socially constructed, and people understand the world based on their experiences. If policymakers have different assumptions and experiences about quality, how are these assumptions shared with NC Pre-K teachers? Competing discourses intersect to produce conflicting messages (Jackson, personal communication, April 5, 2022) in policy and policy implementation. The intersections of discourse and assumptions regarding quality lead me to discuss my theoretical framework, social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Social Constructionism

As we seek out information to make sense of the world, we use different tools and have different theoretical perspectives informing our work. To better understand how quality is defined in the policy and enacted in practice, I use the qualitative theoretical framework of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social constructionism as a paradigm argues that reality is a social construct. Crotty (1998) argues that in the paradigm of social constructionism, there is no objective truth: "Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (p. 8-9). As a researcher using a social constructionist paradigm, I understand that truth is not universal to everyone but is co-constructed based on the lived experiences of all participants.

One cannot simply *know* without interacting with others. We know what we know because of our interactions with others and collectively create our version of truth and reality. Crotty (1998) argues that social constructionists "emphasize the idea that society is actively and creatively produced by human beings, social worlds being interpretive nets woven by individuals and groups" (p. 54). As individuals and groups, Karataş-Özkan & Murphy (2010) share that "human beings together create and then sustain all social phenomena through social practices. They proposed that, as individuals engage in the construction of their personal meaning, collectives engage in the construction of social reality" (p. 456). Thus, while participating in society, individuals construct their social realities in speech, writing, and interactions.

Ontological assumptions related to social constructionism involve the notion that reality is socially constructed and mirror Crotty's (1998) argument that "there is no meaning without a mind" (p. 9). Rather than searching for an objective, constant *truth*, social constructionists focus on how society influences a person's worldview and personal understanding of truth. Social constructionism examines how there are multiple realities constructed based on social and individual experiences. In qualitative inquiry, social constructionism enables researchers to make assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge. Weenink and Bridgman (2017) share that social constructionism is: "concerned with examining the processes by which people describe and explain their place in the world…constructionism challenges assumptions about truth, neutrality, and objectivity, as well as the primacy of the individual as the unit of analysis for generating knowledge" (p. 93). Researchers using a social constructionist paradigm will focus on these meaning-making processes.

The purposes of inquiry in social constructionist research are to understand how people make sense of their position within society, understand their relationship with reality and others,

and how their experiences with others impact their understanding of truth and reality. As we interact with one another, we create our version of reality and truth.

We are who we are because of our interactions with others and how we interpret these experiences. Social constructionists seek to understand these social interactions and their influence on individual and group constructions of reality. Rubin and Rubin (2011) share that reality "cannot be measured directly, only perceived by people, each of whom views it through the lens of his or her prior expectations. That lens affects what people see and how they interpret what they find" (p. 15). We cannot truly *know*, but we can *interpret* phenomena based on our experiences and interactions with others.

Discourse

To understand how NC Pre-K policies define quality, one must understand theories of discourse. Fairclough (2012) outlines three primary examples of discourse: "(a) meaning-making as an element of the social process; (b) the language associated with a particular social field or practice (e.g. 'political discourse'); (c) a way of construing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective" (p. 11). Discourse is not just what is said but what can and cannot be said based on social understanding and experience. Examining discourse related to language helps the reader understand the limits of speech and text.

Viewing quality as discourse is helpful in recognizing how society interprets and evaluates quality. Discourse is assumptions and practices that everyone seems to know without articulating how or why. Therefore, discourses are a bridge between words and actions, and social practice defines and expresses discourse. Policy housed within discourse helps to link subjects to their positions in society and constructs social identity within education. Thus, the

discourses of quality in educational policy are multiple, frequently difficult to articulate, and written into policies based on social assumptions.

Our language systems house discourse (Bové, 1990). It is written and is writing; it is spoken and is speaking. It is practice, and it is productive. Because we (as a society) are all embedded in discourse, specific ways of speaking and knowing are possible, and others are not. Therefore, the discourse system contains policies. Discourse produces policies. Policies are feasible based on our language understanding and structure, and they write what is possible based on our understanding of society. How does policy establish these networks within discourse? Therefore, we must examine the linkages between systems. To make sense of the connections and systems of discourse, I use Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) ecological systems theory.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1992) argues that reality is socially constructed. Therefore, educational policy is frequently context-driven and interpreted based on our experiences with others. This theory relates well to Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) ecological systems theory, particularly in early care and education. Bronfenbrenner (1979b) argues that the individual is the product of multiple interlocking systems. Outside the individual is the microsystem, which is the setting that the individual most frequently interacts with, such as home and school. The microsystem is in the center of the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem.

The microsystem includes interpersonal interactions among individuals. Rosa and Tudge (2013) assert that the microsystem is "a pattern of interpersonal relations experienced face-to-face in a given environment 'containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief'" (p. 246). Multiple and competing

microsystems influence the individual, and multiple and competing microsystems are contained within the larger systems. What would multiple and competing stakeholders (microsystems) look like in a child's or teacher's life?

The mesosystem represents the second level, and Bronfenbrenner (1979b) defines it as: "The interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighborhood peer group)" (p. 25). The mesosystem relates to multiple microsystems and their interrelationships, such as the relationship between a child's family, neighborhood, and school. Essentially, a mesosystem is a "system of two or more microsystems" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007, p. 817).

The next level is the exosystem, which involves at least one setting that does not include the individual. Still, the events affect what happens to the individual and the individual's setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, p. 25). Bronfenbrenner (1993) argues that the exosystem "comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 24).

The most extensive and last level is the macrosystem, which Bronfenbrenner (1979b) defines as the "consistencies in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exists, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such inconsistencies" (p. 26). Thus, the macrosystem involves the society and the societal belief systems, ideologies, policies, and other factors that indirectly influence the child. Rosa and Tudge (2013) argue that the macrosystem includes "The

institutional systems of a culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, education, legal, and political systems" (p. 247). The macrosystem influences the other levels of the ecosystem in how they can function.

For this study, I examine all levels of the ecological system to see how stakeholders interpret and implement quality in NC Pre-K policy and practice. Figure 3 represents Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory using educational examples at each level of the ecological model.

Figure 3

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory with Educational Examples
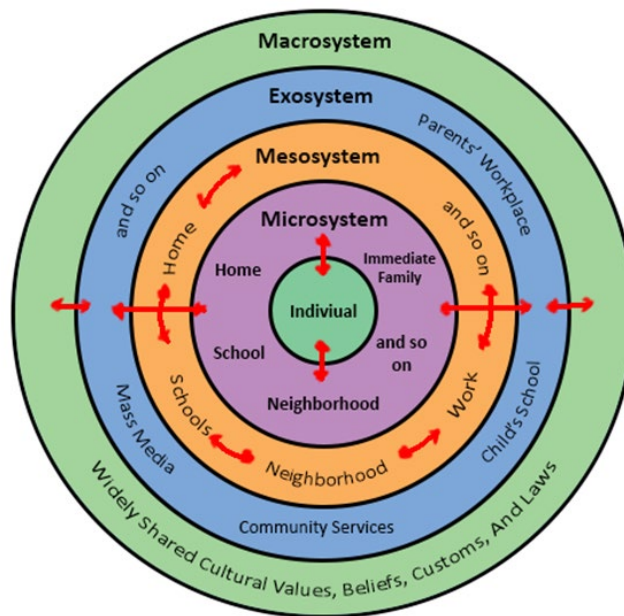
Note: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems with educational examples. Record, C. (2021). What is a simple explanation of the macro system theory of Bronfenbrenner's? https://qph.fs.quoracdn.net/main-qimg-60d0954987564d740b2f239354b8ea3a

Ecological systems theory argues that multiple systems overlap, which Karatas-Özkan and Murphy (2010) argue "emphasizes the situational, contingent and provisional nature of social reality, which calls for recognizing multiple and local realities and practices rather than

large-scale or universal ones" (p. 456). Examining the policies and the implementation of policies will help reveal the multiple understandings of these social realities and how context determines interpretations of NC Pre-K policies.

Within the structure of ecological systems theory, I assert that the educational structures within NC Pre-K are operating within the metaphor of matryoshka nesting dolls. Each nesting doll fits within Bronfenbrenner's ecological system. The most extensive system holds the rest of the systems. Though each system can operate without informing other systems, the smallest systems cannot function without the larger systems' influence. Pursuing a definition of quality in NC Pre-K involves a pursuit of understanding how each stakeholder in the ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b) understands, interprets, and evaluates quality.

Why nesting dolls? Matryoshka dolls, also called nesting dolls, symbolize the search for truth and meaning and represent the concept that truth is concealed within many layers of meaning (Nikitina, 2019, p. 1). Matryoshka is "the diminutive of the Russian name 'Matronya'; it means, roughly, 'Little Matron'" (Schultz, 2017, p. 1). The "little matron" holds within her all of the other dolls. Each smaller doll holds another doll. In this way, each doll is its own system. The smaller dolls fit within the larger doll in the same way that the microsystem fits within the mesosystem, then the exosystem, and the macrosystem. Imagine looking at nesting dolls all fitted together. The smallest doll is the center and fits within the microsystem, which is inside of the mesosystem, inside the exosystem, and all within the macrosystem.

If every part of the educational system fits within the nesting doll, what position would fit where? For my research on NC Pre-K, I combined the policies informing quality and the interview participants to create these five nesting dolls. The macrosystem is the outer doll. It consists of North Carolina state legislators and (in an even larger context, the state, and federal

government). They work with lobbying groups to create and generate policies interpreted and implemented by the smaller systems or nesting dolls. Next is the state director doll. These are people in state-level positions, such as the DCDEE director and the NC Child Care Commission member. They are highly educated in policies but argue that state political whims limit their influence on policy implementation. The next doll is district pre-k directors, coordinators, and superintendents. They interpret policies from the state level and attempt to inform principals and teachers about the policies. Typically, they do not recruit or evaluate teachers, so they have little influence, though they have the most information available on NC Pre-K policy. The next doll is the school principal. They are most likely to recruit, observe, and evaluate NC Pre-K teachers. The rest of the teachers in their buildings are held to NCEES standards and the NC Standard Course of Study. At the center is the teacher, so influenced by the other levels of the ecological system that they feel overwhelmed, overworked, and exhausted. They are at the mercy of the other systems, and their work is most evaluated.

The true center of the nesting dolls is missing from the discussion: the child. Because NC Pre-K serves four-year-old children, I did not interview any children. In the discussion of the center doll, I acknowledge that I do not include the children's voices, but I focus my attention on the teachers who have direct interaction with the children in the classroom. I chose this strategy deliberately because I believe that children do not have the agency necessary to advocate for their needs within the larger ecological structure. It is the teachers who serve the children who have the ability to (in limited ways) advocate for them. Figure 4 demonstrates how the system looks using the image of nesting dolls.

Figure 4

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model Compared With Nesting Dolls
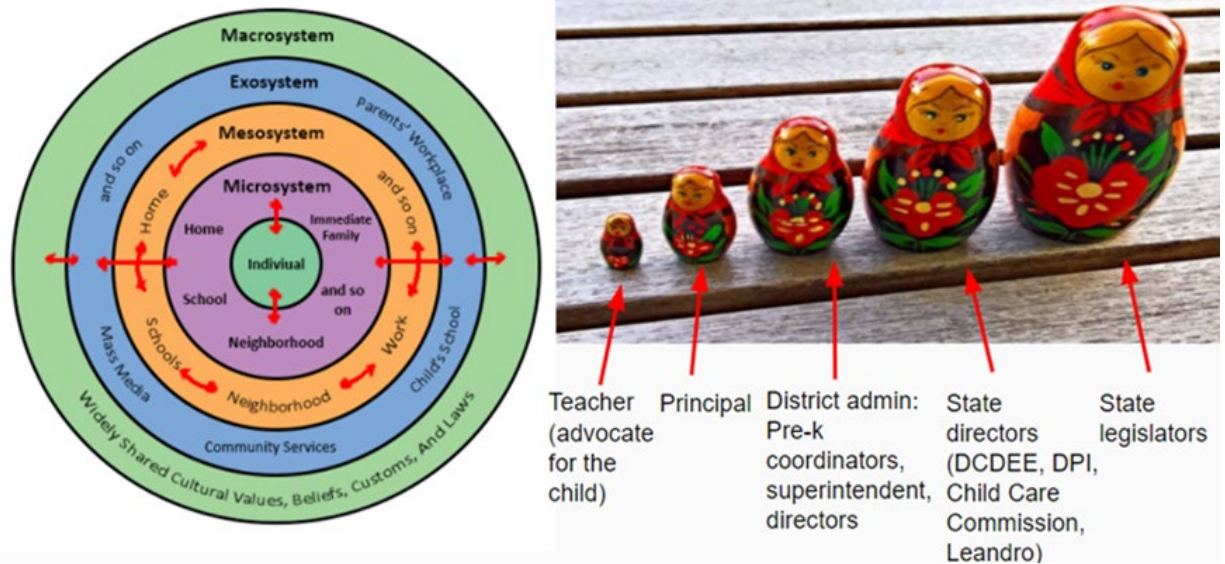
Note: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems in education and how each system fits within the nesting doll metaphor. Ecological model image retrieved from https://qph.fs.quoracdn.net/main-qimg-60d0954987564d740b2f239354b8ea3a. Nesting doll photos retrieved from https://pixabay.com/images/search/nesting%20dolls/.

Stacked vertically with the teacher (advocating for the child) in the center, we see an image of nesting dolls in Figure 5. Each system is held within the more extensive system, and the influence of each larger system impacts what happens in the smaller systems. In this way, what the most extensive system does (or does not do) influences what each smaller system can do.

Figure 5

Nesting Dolls Stacked Together as Ecological Systems

Note: The nesting dolls are stacked together as ecological systems. Photo retrieved from
https://pixabay.com/images/search/nesting%20dolls/

Matryoshka dolls are a good metaphor for systems informing NC Pre-K for several

reasons. First, the image of stacked dolls is playful, and play is central to the goals of

"developmentally appropriate practice" advocates who argue that children's play is central to

their development. Many children (my children included) love to stack and unstack nesting dolls

to see how each doll fits inside the next. Other larger systems hold and inform the possible

discourse of activity within each system.

Nesting dolls are also an excellent metaphor for education because so much of what

happens in pre-k is outside the teacher's and the child's control. The larger systems act as

governing bodies, much like parents govern their children's bodies. Though the largest systems

influence the smaller systems, they are also farther removed from the consequences of their

choices. Quality and policy in this way become educational buzzwords that have little bearing or

meaning on the day-to-day activities of the outermost system. To understand the discourse of

quality, one must also examine the discourse of policy within educational structures.

Having the metaphor of a matryoshka doll is not new in ecological systems discussion.

Rosa and Tudge (2013) argued that Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, as demonstrated through

the metaphor of nested dolls (as demonstrated by Bronfenbrenner in 1979b), "does not do adequate justice to Bronfenbrenner's position that each of the systems is interrelated" (p. 255). Critics argue that the matryoshka doll metaphor is over-simplified concerning the complex and changing nature of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems. I still see merit in this metaphor, as Bronfenbrenner did himself. However, I agree that change can and does occur within the ecosystem. People change positions within the ecological system, and multiple systems interact with other systems. My goal is to illuminate the different roles within the nested system to engage in cross-system dialogue and improve quality conditions for teachers and students in NC Pre-K.

A discussion of quality as discourse must fit within the more extensive discussion of policy as discourse. If discourse is a social construction, then quality within policy reflects policy as discourse. Gergen (1992), a social constructionist, asserts that "the rules for 'what counts as what' are inherently ambiguous, continuously evolving, and free to vary with the predilections of those who use them" (p. 268). Policymakers create policies to solve supposed problems in education. They decided "what counts as what" within NC Pre-K quality policies. Policies are drafted to make something better, easier, or more effective. Policymakers use words to create meanings. The words chosen are limited to discourses available to them. To better understand my original question, "How do policies define quality in NC Pre-K?" I needed to read the policies and then interview how stakeholders consider quality within these policies. The following section outlines how I completed this task.

Chapter 3: Methods

As an early childhood educator, parent of young children, and advocate for children, I wondered what quality means in policy and practice. Because I am immersed in the ECE field, I heard the word *quality* referred to frequently. My pursuit of this research began with a hunch or an inkling that quality might mean more than a surface-level definition. This hunch led me to ask my research questions about discourse, quality, and policies. I begin this chapter with an explanation of my policy analysis, design rationale, data sources, participant selection and interviews, and IRB procedure. I conclude by discussing how I coded and analyzed the data and how I established trustworthiness in this qualitative research study.

Policy Analysis

I asked how policies define quality in NC Pre-K because I was curious about the social implications of the word *quality.* As an educator, I hear the phrase *high-quality education* frequently mentioned in professional development training, texts, and from the podium in staff meetings. I believe that my understanding of reality is socially constructed, so I wondered how other people defined the word quality within policy texts. How do different policies describe quality if quality is expected in the classroom? My first task was to try to answer that question.

Design Rationale

My pursuit of quality in policy involved analyzing the discourses of quality within policy. I wanted to read every policy informing and governing NC Pre-K to understand better how policies consider and define quality. Thus, I pursued meaning by analyzing the discourses of quality across multiple NC Pre-K policies. The work of discourse analysis traces assumptions, omissions, and definitions through the discourse analysis method of concentrated looking (Diem & Young, 2018). Re-exploring and examining discourse through concentrated looking helps

reveal hidden meanings, biases, long-held assumptions, and understandings. This approach

differs from traditional policy analysis, which is generally positivist and focuses on a particular

problem.

Diem et al. (2018) assert that "the traditional approach to policy studies is typically

viewed as a neutral scientific approach, carried out by rational and expert researchers who use

theory-supported models that facilitate responsive and effective change" (p. 1071). This

supposed neutral approach assumes that change is a process that can be planned and managed. It

also presumes that goal-driven behavior is rational and drives change, that knowledge is

obtainable and capable of being expressed to others, and that policies and practices can be

adequately evaluated and improved (Diem et al., 2014, p. 1071). While these assumptions are

found frequently in policy and practice, it is also understood from a social constructionist

(Berger & Luckmann, 1966) epistemology that reality is socially constructed, contextual, and

open to interpretation.

Concentrated Looking

I use a CDA method of "concentrated looking" (Diem and Young, 2018, p. 8) to examine

state policy regarding NC Pre-K and its definition of quality in NC Pre-K. Diem and Young

(2015) argue that concentrated looking involves collecting and reviewing, "contextualizing

information, policy texts, observations and interviews" (p. 845). Researchers elicit meaning from

what isn't said or done, what some have referred to as the blank spots, how messages are

conveyed, by whom, and in what contexts (Young, 2003). Critically examining NC Pre-K

policies using the method of concentrated looking allows me to gather insight into what is

written and what is assumed by the authors and the readers of the policies. This strategy also

allows me to examine the contexts surrounding the policies and analyze the outcomes of specific quality indicators and evaluative tools.

Critical Discourse Analysis

To understand how social actors *do* discourse, researchers developed the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2012). Critical discourse analysis studies language, the meanings we give to language, and our actions when we use language in specific contexts. The identification of these discursive processes can result in social change. To *do* discourse analysis, one engages in conversation with the text and about the text. The reader asks questions about intentions, assumptions, contexts, and other social factors that influence the text's words and how the text is implemented in practice.

In critical discourse analysis, Diem et al. (2018) argue that researchers are more concerned with social factors influencing policy development and implementation. Researchers are interested in understanding how policies are created to solve specific problems, how problems emerge, and how policies "changed and developed over time and its role in reinforcing the dominant culture… Scholars are also interested in understanding the policy tools and processes that facilitated policy institutionalization and/or internalization" (Diem et al., 2014, p. 1072). Using a CDA methodology combined with a social constructionist epistemology will help to reveal what social assumptions are present in NC Pre-K policies related to quality. How is quality internalized, assumed, and evaluated if it is not explicitly defined in the written NC Pre-K policy? What assumptions are present in the practice of assessing and implementing quality?

After engaging in Diem and Young's (2018) method of concentrated looking, I frame the results using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979b), combined with the metaphor of matryoshka dolls to organize these assumptions and contexts. Throughout this dissertation, I

refer to this metaphor consistently using the terms nested position, nested system, or nested ecosystem to refer to the nested doll level and its relationship within the ecological model.

Data Sources: Policies

I started with a Google search of NC Pre-K policies. I searched the North Carolina state policy manuals for ECE, the state board of education policy, ECE policy recommendations, and other available policy and budgetary resources. I wanted to get a broad and specific understanding of what is written and what is intended with each NC Pre-K policy. I could not simply examine one policy document because my initial search of NC Pre-K policy led me to multiple sources. Within every search, I focused specifically on the word *quality*. I searched for *quality* in every policy document to see how it is defined and assumed if it is not defined. Many policy documents refer to other policy documents. Therefore, through snowball sampling and the suggestions of interview participants, I ended up with 170 policy documents for my initial policy analysis. Every policy that I read and analyzed was added to a spreadsheet that I kept notes on, such as the number of quality mentions, links to other documents, and initial quality definitions.

The first NC Pre-K policy I read was North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program Requirements and Guidance (2021), produced by the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (NCDCDEE). Each policy document that I read referred to other policy documents and governing documents, so I used snowball sampling from each document to find the next policy. After reading approximately 160 policy documents, I began the interviews based on the participants' availability. Some discussions referred to policy documents that I didn't read initially, so I did a second round of policy analysis and dialogue based on responses and relevance to my research. Overall, I read 170 NC Pre-K policies. Based on relevance to NC Pre-K, quality, and participants' responses, I narrowed my analysis to 40

documents. I chose the 40 documents because I decided they had the most relevance to my research focus on quality in NC Pre-K. Specifically, I chose these 40 policies because they are governing documents for NC Pre-K, articulate quality indicators in NC Pre-K, or describe the NC Pre-K site or teacher evaluation process. Some were mentioned as critical guiding documents by interview participants. I read each of these documents at least twice. In the first reading, I selected quotes that "jumped out" at me during the reading, and then I made comments based on my reaction to the selection. In this way, I created and maintained a running dialogue with each document. I added every policy document to the main spreadsheet, and I included my initial comments in the spreadsheet for further analysis. Appendix A includes the whole list of policy documents, and Appendix B contains the 40 policy documents analyzed for my critical discourse analysis. I include some documents in Appendix A as governing documents. I include some as references for the literature review on early care and education history and the state, local, and national context.

I re-read each of the 40 policy documents using the method of concentrated looking (Diem & Young, 2018) to engage in dialogue with each document. This strategy reflects Diem and Young's (2018) method of concentrated looking because I read with an open mind. I spoke back to the policy documents, asking questions along the way. For example, in the document "The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects" (Pre-Kindergarten Task Force, 2017), I highlighted the following quote: "Unfortunately, in many neighborhoods, violence, lack of services, and the stresses of poverty combine to make it difficult for a family to provide optimal stimulation and stability during a child's early years" (p. 4). Instead of taking this quote at face value, I asked questions along the way. My initial question here was: Agreed. How do they define "optimal stimulation" (Pre-Kindergarten Task Force, 2017)? Concentrated

looking involves examining the text for what is written, what is assumed, and what might be missing. I will not include my dialogue from all 40 policy documents, but this small example demonstrates how I began to question the policies within the method of concentrated looking (Diem & Young, 2018). After my initial reading of the 170 policy documents, I reflected on general themes that I began to generate through dialogue with each.

I created a table of each quote that I found relevant with my dialogue, questions, and thoughts related to the quotes. Some policy documents were more relevant to my pursuit of understanding various components of NC Pre-K, and I took more notes on these documents. For example, the NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development (North Carolina Foundations Task Force, 2013) is a policy that outlines children's development in early childhood and is a resource for all NC ECE teachers. I took 35 pages of notes during my concentrated looking CDA of this document. Other documents were relevant to my research but didn't include as much information or were shorter in length, so I took fewer notes. After re-reading the tables, I used my ideas and dialogue to generate initial quality definitions and observations. I frequently referred back to the dialogue documents as I conducted the second step of my research: semi-structured interviews.

Data Sources: Participants

The second part of my research project included interviewing district leaders across the three main geographic regions of North Carolina to see how the NC Pre-K policies are interpreted and enacted. I am an educator, parent, and advocate for young children, so I believed that it was not enough for me to analyze the policies. I wanted to see how quality policies are enacted and evaluated in practice. Therefore, I began by interviewing a cross-section of district leaders and NC Pre-K directors across the state. I used a voluntary sample from each geographic

region of North Carolina: Mountains, Piedmont, and Coastal. My goal was to understand better how district leaders consider these governing policies and how they choose to implement them and evaluate their progress in each district. To generate the samples, I first used an online address generator, which spawned fake addresses in different regions of North Carolina. I input the addresses into Google maps to locate each county each address generated. I then searched online for the school district for each county.

I selected participants in this study from the three North Carolina geographic regions: Mountains, Piedmont, and Coastal, and then sent email recruitment letters to district leaders, NC Pre-K directors, and NC Pre-K teachers from the districts. I also emailed preschool and pre-k coordinators from a state listserv. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to repeat this process multiple times to get enough participants for my study. My initial goal was to interview stakeholders from at least two districts for each of the three North Carolina geographic regions. Many email responses to my invitation stated that they were too busy to participate.

Participant Selection

I selected the participants for this study based on their affiliation with NC Pre-K programs. Every participant had a relationship with NC Pre-K as a director, district leader, or NC Pre-K teacher. This relationship is essential to my study because I was looking for how participants understand quality in NC Pre-K and how they interpret and apply NC Pre-K policies. Within each school district website, I searched for the email addresses of the superintendent, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, preschool or NC Pre-K coordinator, and elementary education director. I also found a listserv online of state pre-k coordinators, and I emailed the entire list. If the directory did not identify an NC Pre-K director, I searched in the staff directory for the director of ECE or director of preschool because some districts label NC

Pre-K directors with these alternate titles. After emailing these representatives from each district, I waited 1-2 weeks for them to respond. After waiting, I sent a follow-up invitation email. If I did not get responses after the follow-up email, I randomly selected two other districts from that geographic region. I repeated the process until I decided that I had enough volunteer participants for my interviews from each of the three geographic areas of the state: Mountains, Piedmont, and Coastal.

Using the same districts from the three geographic regions, I invited NC Pre-K teachers to participate in the interviews via email. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, NC Pre-K teachers were the most challenging group to get a representative sample. Of the 30 completed interviews, only seven were NC Pre-K teachers. Many Pre-K teachers shared via email that they felt overwhelmed due to work responsibilities because of COVID-19, and they didn't have time to participate in my interview.

Based on the initial interviews, I realized that I also needed to include school administrators, state-level directors, and ultimately state legislators in my interview sample. It was clear that if I wanted to get a sense of how stakeholders understand quality in practice, I needed to see how *every* level of stakeholder understands quality. The school administrators, state-level directors, and state legislators were recommended to me based on responses from interview participants. Therefore, I used snowball sampling to locate these participants.

Regarding the geographic locations of respondents, five identified as living in North Carolina's Coastal regions. Eight respondents indicated that they live in the state's Piedmont (central) region, and seventeen respondents indicated that they live in North Carolina's Mountain region. I had the most significant percentage of participants from the Mountain region. I attribute this to the fact that I am a doctoral candidate at Appalachian State University, located in the

Mountain region of North Carolina. I also had a larger number of administrative positions complete the interviews and a much smaller sample size of teachers, state directors, state legislators, and school administrators. I attribute this to the idea that many district-level administrators are tasked with interpreting state policy, and they often get research requests from university students. They are not always "in the trenches" of working directly in schools with children, so their time may be more flexible in responding to an interview request. Appendix C represents the 30 interview respondents based on geographic region, position, and position within the ecological system.

To transcribe the Zoom interview responses, I used an automatic transcription of the Zoom interviews built into the Zoom software so that I had a document of the interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I included the option for participants to complete their interviews on a Google Form or via Zoom. I edited transcriptions for clarity and emailed participants the transcriptions so they could edit or change their responses as they saw fit. Though the Google form did not allow me to ask any follow-up questions, I did leave space for comments. The Google forms were emailed to participants so they could change their answers as well.

I began interviewing in July and finished in November. Of the 30 completed interviews, I interviewed 11 participants via Zoom, one interviewed via an email conversation, and 18 interviewed through Google form. Regardless of the interview format, all participants signed consent to share their information via consent form. I informed all participants that their names, personally-identifying information, and geographic regions would be anonymized in the results section.

What began as a simple policy analysis with follow-up interviews ended up being a multi-system, multi-level search for meaning. This is because of the ecological structure of the

policies that inform NC Pre-K practices. Numerous interview respondents shared their feedback regarding governance structures and the frequent political nature of NC Pre-K policy creation. Therefore, I invited state-level directors responsible for NC Pre-K governance, school administrators, and state legislators. This expanded focus better reflects the nested structure of NC Pre-K policies.

Interview Protocol

Initial interviews were conducted via Zoom at a convenient time for the participants. Each participant had the opportunity to turn their camera off during the interview if they did not wish for their face to be recorded. Because I recorded the interview to transcribe responses, I made sure participants had signed consent for the interview recording. I also ensured that participants knew how I kept their information secure and confidential and names and locations anonymous. Participants also had the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure that their words "ring true" for what they were trying to convey.

Interviews were semi-structured, and all questions focused on NC Pre-K and how quality is written, implemented, and assumed. I include a list of questions in Appendix I of this dissertation. Interviews began with a few questions about the participant's position within the district, then asked participants a few questions about their experience with NC Pre-K to set the context for the rest of the interview. I then focused the rest of the questions on policy and participants' understanding of quality, both as it is written and implemented.

Participants also had the opportunity to answer interview questions via Google form if they didn't have time to participate in a 20-minute Zoom interview. After reading many email responses of potential participants feeling overworked and overwhelmed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I added this option. All participants submitted their signed consent forms regardless of

the interview structure. All participants had the opportunity to read the transcript of their responses and revise, delete, or edit anything they wrote or said to establish trustworthiness. Last, I informed all participants that their names, geographic regions, and other personally identifying information would be anonymized.

IRB Procedure

To gain permission to conduct the research for this study, I first completed the Institutional Research Board (IRB) ethics tutorial on the Appalachian State University Graduate School's website. After completing the required training, I completed the IRB application, encompassing all potential research issues related to human subjects. Because my research involved recorded Zoom interviews, I had to explain how I would protect participants' data and identities. I allowed participants to leave their video cameras off during the recorded interview. I also allowed participants to review the interview transcript to contribute to trustworthiness (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Last, recordings and interview transcripts are stored in a password-protected, secure drive to protect the data. I use pseudonyms for district and school names and the name of the participants.

I submitted the IRB application initially on May 27, 2021, and my IRB application was officially exempted on June 9, 2021. I include recruitment materials, IRB number, interview questions, and the consent form in the appendices of this dissertation. I did not begin my research or data collection until I had IRB exemption status.

Data Coding

After the interview participants reviewed, clarified, or edited their transcripts, I engaged in the same concentrated looking (Diem & Young, 2018) activity to generate general themes and initial quality definitions. Because the responses are situated within the discourse of quality, I did

not believe that specific codes would enhance the data analysis (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014; Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2018). Instead, after reviewing my dialogue with the policies and themes generated by participants, I again used the strategy of concentrated looking to build ideas based on assumptions and discussion. I compared NC Pre-K policy themes related to quality in both interviews and policy analysis to see what meanings are similar, what is unclear in implementation, and what potential disconnects exist between written policy and actual practice. I document my findings in the last sections of my dissertation and then reflect on these findings within the lens of social constructionism and discourse.

Data Analysis

My dissertation had multiple steps. Each step determined what needed to occur in the next step. First, I read through as many state policies related to NC Pre-K as I could find using the word *quality* in keyword searches. I generated initial themes based on the function of each policy and made notes on how frequently each policy mentions quality, what policies refer to each other, who authored the policy, and who the audience is for each one. After completing this initial spreadsheet of information, I reviewed the policies again by "concentrated looking" (Diem & Young, 2018, p. 8). I observed what is written, what is not written, who wrote what, and any "blank spots" in the policies, where quality is implied or assumed but not explicitly written or defined. For each policy that I felt warranted this additional analysis, I created a document with tables containing relevant quotes, my dialogue or questions related to the quotes, and other comments and critiques. Throughout the policy analysis phase, I read, re-read, asked questions, and wrote about the policy, the discourse of quality and policy in NC Pre-K, and the social contexts surrounding each policy.

After the interview participants clarified or edited their transcripts, I engaged in the same "concentrated looking" activity to see what meanings and themes emerged. I compared the NC Pre-K policy themes related to quality to see what meanings are similar, what is unclear in implementation, and what potential disconnects exist between written policy and actual practice. Many interview participants referred to specific NC Pre-K policies, and some even suggested that I review particular policies. Therefore, true to the work of a qualitative researcher, I engaged in more than one round of policy search, dialogue, and concentrated looking dialogue. Policies sometimes sparked questions that I would ask in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews sometimes sparked additional policy or literature searches and analyses. I allowed the research findings to lead me to the next steps of inquiry. I engaged in this back-and-forth policy dialogue, reading, and literature review multiple times while also conducting interviews.

To map the policies within the nested ecosystem, I generated a color-coded map of all policies and what level of the nested ecosystem each policy applies. Further, interview respondents shared the policies they used in each interview. Policies are authored for specific audiences. To connect the two parts of this study, I created a visual of each policy that impacts each level of the nested ecosystem. Some policies are intended for multiple stakeholders within the NC Pre-K system, so they are listed more than once. Appendix H displays the NC Pre-K ecosystem next to the governing policies for each level based on the policy document's intended audience.

Trustworthiness

I include a list of all state policies referenced in my paper to establish trustworthiness. I also allowed all participants access to the recorded Zoom interview transcripts to clarify or provide follow-up comments. Once I had the permission of the participants and had written a

draft of my findings, I compared the responses of interview participants to the NC Pre-K policies and the literature review. Comparing responses to the policies and literature supported my task of triangulation (Foreman, 1948; Denzin, 1970; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Additionally, comparing responses to the policies and literature helps establish internal validity (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Last, because I experience immersion in the ECE field, my experience adds to the internal validity of my findings because I am familiar with many of the concepts shared in policies, literature, and interviews.

Because my framework is social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and my methodology is discourse analysis, my findings are not necessarily universal to all participants' and NC Pre-K teachers' understanding of the data. My results are contextual and situated based on nested positions within the ecosystem and social experience. Allowing participant review of transcripts and data triangulation helps ensure that my findings are more socially understood and applicable on a broader scale. This analysis allows for a greater understanding of the contexts surrounding quality in NC Pre-K policy, interviews, literature, and social discourse. The results of my study are included in the following chapters.

Chapter 4: Results

This research study included multiple components to see how quality in policy is considered in NC Pre-K. After a review of NC Pre-K policies, I conducted 30 interviews with NC Pre-K stakeholders across North Carolina. I interviewed stakeholders at many different levels. As Early et al. (2007) assert, "Teachers do not work in a vacuum but instead are part of a larger educational system. Classroom quality and positive child outcomes are influenced by a host of other system components" (p. 577). Multiple components must be analyzed to understand how quality is interpreted in policy and practice.

This chapter includes a brief discussion of the NC Pre-K policy search, my method of concentrated looking, and an overarching discussion of interview results. To demonstrate how each level of the nested ecosystem understands and considers quality in NC Pre-K, I organize the rest of the chapter into five subsections. I discuss each layer of the ecosystem separately, starting with legislators and moving inward to NC Pre-K teachers. I include interview results, connections to NC Pre-K policies, and a discussion of how each layer connects to Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) ecological system.

NC Pre-K Policy Search

Initial results from my policy analysis reveal that NC Pre-K governing documents rarely define quality. Quality is more likely to be identified through a list of effectiveness indicators. Usually, those indicators are included in policy documents intended for teachers of children with learning exceptionalities. The number of times that quality is mentioned in these documents is 1,045. The document with the most quality mentions is the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Plan for North Carolina FFY 2019, with 261 uses of the word *quality*. This policy document includes guidance and information related to the child care and development fund. It

refers to the NC Foundations of Early Learning and Development (NC FELDS) multiple times, and page 363 lists information provided by focus groups related to improving quality. The document with the second-most amount of quality statements is *The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects* (Pre-Kindergarten Task Force, 2017), with 199 uses of the word *quality*. Even within this document written by numerous experts in early care and education, quality is not clearly defined. When mentioned, quality is typically related to financial measures, such as program cost. The Pre-Kindergarten Task Force defined a high-quality program through indicators such as a lead teacher with a bachelor's degree and paid at parity with their K-12 peers and ratios of one adult for every ten children. Costs associated with this high-quality program are "from $4,700 per child for a part-day (three hour) program to $8,600 per child for a school-day (six hour) program" (Pre-Kindergarten Task Force, 2017, p. 58). The Task Force also reports that "children from low and middle-income families experience lower quality care across multiple dimensions of measured quality, including the qualifications and training of teachers and lesser levels of teacher-child interactions that support learning" (Pre-Kindergarten Task Force, 2017, p. 80). This is an important point because NC Pre-K serves students who are considered at-risk due to their family's low-income status. It is also noteworthy that the two documents with the greatest number of quality mentions focus on financial indicators.

I believe that focusing on just the NC Pre-K policy documents is not enough to paint a picture of how quality is defined in actual practice. My 170 policy documents and 40 policies analyzed gave a brief introduction to how policy texts articulate quality. I wanted to see how it is understood, evaluated, and implemented in actual practice. Thus, my next step was to interview NC Pre-K stakeholders at different levels of the ecological system.

NC Pre-K Policy Interviews

I interviewed 30 total respondents for my research. Of the 30 respondents, fifteen participants identified themselves as a district administrator (superintendent, assistant superintendent, director of elementary education, director of NC Pre-K, preschool director, etc.). Seven respondents identified as NC Pre-K or preschool exceptional children (EC) teachers. Four respondents identified as school administrators. Two respondents are current or former directors of NC Pre-K state agencies, and two respondents are current or recently-retired members of the North Carolina General Assembly.

The number of interview respondents is enough to tell a compelling story about how stakeholders interpret, evaluate, and implement policy in practice. To understand the different levels of the nesting doll, I had to interview people at every level, except for pre-k students, who I excluded from interview sampling. Pre-K students are typically only four-years-old, and since my study involved the implementation of state policy, I believe that their teachers and those charged with supervising their teachers would understand the guidelines in greater detail than the children themselves. I do not exclude the importance of children from the research.

To tell the story of how each level of the ecological system understands quality in policy, I have arranged the rest of this chapter into five additional subsections. I label each subsection as a nesting doll. Nesting dolls, or matryoshka dolls, are a good metaphor for the multiple systems interacting to influence what happens in an NC Pre-K classroom regarding policy interpretation and implementation. The NC Pre-K matryoshka holds five dolls. The outermost doll is state legislators, charged with representing the needs and interests of all of their constituencies. Stakeholders frequently bemoan the politicized nature of policy making, so in essence, the

legislators, though farthest removed from the actual NC Pre-K classroom, hold the entire system in place.

The nested ecosystem represents how policies are interpreted and enacted in context. Gee and Handford (2012) assert: "We cannot really argue that an analysis is valid unless we keep widening the context in which we consider a piece of language until the widening appears to make no difference to our interpretation. At that point, we can stop and make our claims" (p. 5). Examining how each layer of the nested ecosystem interprets quality in NC Pre-K policy and practice allows the reader and the researcher to zoom in and zoom out within the same data set to see the context. We can see how each stakeholder represents the same ideas about quality. We widen the discursive lens to examine NC Pre-K as a system and zoom in to see each layer of the nested ecosystem. In the following subsections, I map the discourses of quality as context to see how quality interpretations are sometimes clearly articulated, sometimes deferred, and sometimes omitted.

The Outer Doll: North Carolina State Legislators

The outermost doll in the ecological system of NC Pre-K matryoshka dolls is the state legislator doll. This outer doll holds within it all other layers of the ecosystem and, therefore, all of the smaller nested systems. It is fitting that lawmakers would belong in the outer doll. Constituents elect them to represent the rest of us. They hold our needs and interests within their power.

This section includes interview responses from two North Carolina state legislators. One served in the general assembly for over ten years, and one is a current state senator. I did not select the state legislators randomly because I wanted to get the perspective of legislators with knowledge of early childhood policy. At the suggestion of some state directors, I contacted these

legislators specifically. They have served on early childhood committees in the past, and their insight was helpful for me to understand what legislators work on when focused on early care and education policy. I will refer to the two legislators as L1 and L2 (Legislator 1 and Legislator 2) for the rest of this section. I include some parts of the interview responses in this chapter, but I do not incorporate any personally identifiable information.

State Legislator 1

The first legislator, L1, was selected based on a suggestion from a state director. He has a history of serving on early care and education committees in the North Carolina legislature. Some of the policy documents reviewed included him as a policy committee member. He served specifically on the B-3 Interagency Council and helped bring the Dolly Parton Imagination Library to the state of North Carolina. Though state directors frequently mentioned legislators as being more in charge of funds, when I asked him about funding NC Pre-K, he shared that both DPI and NCDHHS have some responsibility and that the two are "having a power struggle" (L1, personal communication, October 1, 2021). This legislator shared that even within the power struggles and political disagreement, "At least we agree on working for children" (L1, personal communication, October 1, 2021). According to L1, due to the political nature of financial decisions, having early childhood-friendly legislators is good but not good enough unless they serve on finance committees. He mentioned a few other North Carolina legislators who serve on finance committees, asserting their power in the legislature due to their finance committee membership.

The elements included in L1's definition of quality in NC Pre-K are preparing for school: "Your numbers, your alphabet. Sound basic education. Beyond instruction, self-awareness. Sanitary knowledge and application to take care of yourself. Helping kids. Family engagement"

(L1, personal communication, October 1, 2021). These mentions allude to some of the policy documents included in my policy analysis, such as the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Play FFY 2019-2021, and The Pre-Kindergarten Task Force (2017) related to quality indicators.

Policy Document Connection to State Legislator L1. This legislator mentioned the B-3 Interagency Council, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, early education legislation, Smart Start, More at Four, and Reach out and Read as projects he has been involved in previously. In my policy analysis, I reviewed the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Plan FFY 2019-2021, which outlines who is responsible for administering the funds allocated to NC Pre-K. According to this plan, NCDHHS is in charge of the funds. It is telling that L1 said that both NCDHHS and DPI are in charge of NC Pre-K.

This legislator mentioned the B-3 Interagency council multiple times. The policy documents I reviewed for B-3 include the Birth- Third Grade Interagency Council Progress Report, The Birth - 3rd Grade Interagency Council Quarterly Progress Report, and the B-3 Interagency Council. Of the three documents, quality is only mentioned five times. NC Pre-K is discussed within the three documents concerning transition planning to kindergarten and developing readiness plans for kindergarten. This report helps explain why the readiness factors L1 discussed, such as the alphabet and number knowledge, were priorities to him.

Another policy L1 referred to is Session Law 2013-360 Section 12 B.1. (a), and Session Law 2017-57 Section 11 B.1. (a) & (f) regarding the NC Pre-Kindergarten Program by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE). The legislator's comments about "knowing your alphabet, knowing your numbers" reflect the legislation's program objectives:

The objective of the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program is to develop and

implement a voluntary pre-kindergarten program that provides high quality pre-

kindergarten services in order to enhance kindergarten readiness for the at-risk four-year-

old. State legislation (Session Law 2013-360 Section 12. B.1. (a) and (Session Law 2015-

241 Section 12.B.6) authorizes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to

continue the NC Pre-K Program for four-year-old children in North Carolina to ensure

that eligible children have the opportunity to succeed in kindergarten and throughout

school (C-4, p. 1)

This piece of legislation focuses on multiple elements that are noteworthy, including

requirements for NC Pre-K, explicitly focusing on finance, compliance, monitoring, staff-to-

child ratios, and class sizes. The document asserts the importance of NC Pre-K "to enhance

kindergarten readiness" (C-4, p. 1), alluding to a societal focus on kindergarten readiness through

academic preparation. I discuss these implications further in Chapter Five and in the conclusion

of this dissertation.

Also significant is L1's mention of "sanitary knowledge and application to take care of

yourself" (L1, personal communication, October 1, 2021). This mention reflects the legislation's

requirement for children to have a health and developmental screening and the legislative

priority of giving eligibility priority to children experiencing homelessness, children with

disabilities, and children with chronic health conditions. I assume that L1 served on the

committee that authored this legislation because his mentions of specific quality indicators are

directly related to pieces of this document.

State Legislator 2

The second state legislator interviewed, L2, was recommended to me by L1 because he is also involved in early care and education legislation. According to L1, L2 doesn't have as much power as he should because he's not on the finance committee. According to L1, power in the NC Legislation is closely tied to finance. What L2 has is a great deal of background knowledge about science, children of his own, and some good connections to state leaders in the early childhood sector.

L2 discussed the constitutional crisis in the North Carolina state government about funding schools. The Leandro court case (Leandro v. State, 346 N.C. 336, 354, 488 S.E. 2nd 249, 259 1997) weighs heavily on state legislators, who are tasked with fully funding schools based on the court mandate. State funding might not be this legislator's power source, but it's certainly on his radar. He discussed how the enhanced early childhood workforce bill passed the house but not the senate. This bill would have required educational certificates for early childhood teachers, putting them on the salary scale, and hiring teachers with at least an associate degree in early child development.

This legislator discussed the Leandro funding decision as being something that will influence NC Pre-K in the next few years, with "around half a billion dollars a year commitment which includes early childhood education" (L2, personal communication, October 21, 2021). He discussed increasing attention to reducing waitlist sizes for entry to Pre-K programs. Regarding his role in policy creation, he discussed working on reducing waitlist sizes, budget negotiations, and pushing the enhanced early childhood workforce bill. Though this bill failed in the senate, it is a high priority for him. Although he doesn't serve on the finance committee, finance is a priority for legislators looking to enhance early care and education in North Carolina.

This legislator had insight into recruiting, retaining, and evaluating NC Pre-K teachers, contrasting with the L1 interview. He shared that we must: "take into consideration what we're paying for teachers to enter into the workforce but also looking at the proper educational backgrounds and credentials for those individuals" (L2, personal communication, October 21, 2021). This legislator had a different perspective on the essential quality components in an NC Pre-K classroom. He responded that highly qualified teachers, affordable childcare, a nurturing environment, and scientifically based practices were paramount to quality. The policy documents he uses most are those that advocacy groups share with him. He said he knows that NCDHHS has a good collection of documents on the NC Early Childhood Foundation website. This assertion contrasts with L1, who had more knowledge of the policies he helped author and potentially limited understanding of other policy document locations and sources.

When asked to define quality in NC Pre-K, L2 stated,

I would define quality as having a highly qualified and experienced teacher. That is carrying out scientifically-based practices that focus on growing—a child's social, emotional, and intellectual needs. Well, I would say that that would be part one. I think part two would be making sure that such high-quality childcare is affordable, particularly for the middle class and lower working-class parents, and that the children are placed into an environment that nurtures and accomplishes those goals (L2, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

Again, these responses allude to a knowledge of other NC policies. L2 also addresses numerous elements of the ECE trilemma, such as affordability and availability. I am curious what he means by "scientifically-based practices." Are these academic or developmental? When asked what he could change about NC Pre-K, he mentioned affordability again:

Affordable, high-quality childcare. Early childhood teachers are paid an average of ten

and a half dollars an hour, the highest fifteen an hour, and evidently, you know, forty

percent of early childhood workers received some kind of public assistance. We're not

investing in trying to attract the workforce. It really just begins with increasing salaries

and educational attainment. (L2, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

According to L2, quality means financial improvement and scientifically-based practices.

      Policy Document Connection to State Legislator L2. Legislator L2 had a more general

knowledge of the NCDHHS website and early childhood teacher salary information. He

discussed failed legislation and not current legislative documents. He referenced financial

policies and legislation, which connects to NCDCDEE's (2017) NC Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-

K) Program Fiscal and Contract Manual. This manual mentions the word quality fifteen times.

One of the first quality instances is, "The NC Pre-K Program is designed to provide high-quality

educational experiences to enhance school readiness for eligible at-risk four-year-old's"

(NCDCDEE 2017, p. 1-1). This sentence is used frequently throughout other NC Pre-K policy

documents, but the source of the sentence is unknown. Quality within the document is most

commonly mentioned concerning the 2% additional monies provided for quality funds, which

are highly monitored.

      The list of possible uses of these "quality funds" is quite extensive, and includes things

like supporting children's health care plans, providing classroom specialists, wraparound care,

professional development, and mentoring and evaluation of NC Pre-K teachers. The appendix of

this document shares that direct services funds might cover some of the costs of these expenses.

"Since the NC Pre-K Program does not pay the full cost of a quality Pre-K program, the funds

are generally used to offset part of the cost of providing the NC Pre-K program" (NCDCDEE

2017, p. 2). So, within one financial document, we see the mountainous task of funding NC Pre-K without sufficient funding from any one source. It is no wonder that NC Pre-K stakeholders such as state legislators include funding as one of the main issues in policy. According to the legislators, it is essential to have power in serving on financial committees to advocate for additional NC Pre-K policy funding. The plurality of ways of interpreting something as simple as funding streams reflects the outer layer of Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) ecological model: the macrosystem. Both legislators' responses, but particularly L2's responses, reflect society's (macrosystem) attention to wage inequity.

How L1 and L2 Fit in the Nested Doll/Macrosystem

The macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b) includes widely-shared values, cultural values, beliefs, customs, and laws. Then, it makes sense that legislators would fit within this outer layer/nested doll. If they represent the culture and therefore make the laws that govern the rest of us, then the priorities and perspectives of legislators embody the macrosystem. It isn't as simple as that, though. Cultural values and beliefs reflect the population at large. The macrosystem represents all of us, in a sense. We (the collective we) elect representatives based on our beliefs. If the legislators are most focused on funding as NC Pre-K quality indicators, is this focus shared with other levels of stakeholders? These questions lead me to the next layer of the matryoshka doll: North Carolina state directors.

The Second Doll: North Carolina State Directors

I include two interviews in this section. The state directors are included in the interviews because I realized that I was not telling the whole story of how quality is interpreted in policy implementation by simply interviewing district leaders and teachers. I wanted to understand how quality is authored in policies written by state agencies. The state directors represent the two

leading agencies governing NC Pre-K: NCDHHS and The NC Child Care Commission. These agencies have different responsibilities for the same program.

Interviewing the state directors provided a great deal of insight into how the program runs statewide. Their responses helped me locate some policies I was unaware of even after months of searching. They also recommended that I interview state legislators because, in the words of one respondent, "there's too much skin in the game" (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021). If people get funds to do something, she argued that even if they are not qualified to do the job, they will fight to continue to do the job because the money keeps flowing to them. Receiving grants and funds for early childhood education is political. The words of the state directors inspired me to see just how political the whole nested system is.

For this dissertation, I use the pseudonyms S1 and S2 for the state directors (State 1 and State 2). A review of the interview with S1 is first, followed by the policies she mentions or has a shared responsibility. The interview summary of S2 is next, followed by the policies she references. The last section of this chapter includes how the state-level directors fit within the ecological system/nested dolls metaphor.

State Director 1

The first state director has experience with the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (NCDCDEE), part of North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS). NCDHHS governs North Carolina Pre-K, specifically the NCDCDEE division, unlike other states. K-12 public schools, on the other hand, are governed by North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). NC Pre-K is unique because many NC Pre-K classes are housed within public elementary schools. This is the case for most of the

districts I interviewed for this research. The function of NCDCDEE (written as DCDEE for the rest of this section because North Carolina is assumed) is, according to S1, to

> get funds from the state and filter them through to pre-k sites. DCDEE is a pass-through organization. They get funds from the federal government, and people apply for it, and they must meet the requirements. It's wonky who is responsible for what, especially if a pre-k is housed in a school district because the district responds more to DPI. The Child Care commission makes the rules. Legislators make the policies. DCDEE figures out how to implement everything but has to go back to the child care commission for permission. (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021)

This small excerpt explains the conflict between the two agencies. Though DCDEE gets the funds, the NC Child Care Commission makes the rules. The two organizations must constantly bounce back and forth to implement any actual policy. This conflict does not include DPI, which governs K-12 public schools. DPI is a (sometimes) silent third ruling party in NC Pre-K policy governance because NC Pre-K classrooms are housed primarily in DPI-governed public schools and run by principals more familiar with DPI policies than DCDEE policies. DPI also governs NCEES, which is the North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System, and the North Carolina Teacher evaluation process, which NC Pre-K teachers are required to follow.

Also muddying the waters is funding. Though DCDEE is the central governing agency for NC Pre-K, DPI funds an early literacy program. According to S1, "The DCDEE budget for the state was 703 million dollars. The DPI early literacy program was 66 million dollars" (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021). For budgetary reasons alone, one can see from this interview response the power DCDEE wields over NC Pre-K compared to DPI. Combining

federal funds, state funds, NC Pre-K, and lottery funds generates this 703-million-dollar amount. Again, finance is one of the top issues.

When asked about the most important components of a quality NC Pre-K program, S1 stated that it should be comprehensive, a knowledge of child development, and high-quality teachers. NCDCDEE's role in policy documents, according to S1, is the development of the implementation of policies handed down from the NC Child Care Commission. Though NCDCDEE technically governs NC Pre-K, they must take what the NC Child Care Commission gives to them and develop policies based on this information. Other specific policy documents discussed were the NC Foundations for Early Learning document. S1 shared that the document talked about child development and developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). The second version of the Foundations document, according to S1, "is better, first was real fluff. I reviewed some of it at one point. It's a good document, and I do think we probably need to use it. We need to have teachers use it as a resource. Teachers can see the development that a child should be moving towards" (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021).

Another noteworthy point of discussion was S1's admission that principals are charged with recruiting, retaining, and evaluating NC Pre-K teachers. Still, they are "not trained to do this in Pre-K" (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021). She continued, asserting that regarding NC Pre-K, principals:

Know hardly anything, and nobody teaches them—NC Pre-K answers to [NC]DCDEE, but that principals answer to DPI. There are trainings but much more for private providers because [NC]DCDEE says, 'well, they're your principals [DPI], not ours.' [A] Clear conflict between the two agencies. Superintendents are pushing only following DPI. (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021)

The conflict between DPI policies and regulations and NCDCDEE regulations seems most prevalent in how NC Pre-K teachers are evaluated in public schools. This is one of the biggest problems facing NC Pre-K teachers, according to S1: "I wish NC Pre-K were sitting at DPI because DPI would take ownership for it, teachers and principals would get trained, and everyone knows all the pieces and look at what's working and not working. (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021). The conflict of responsibilities between DPI and DCDEE, according to S1, "It just gets so wonky…It's just not fair because the people that are impacted are the directors, principals, teachers, and the children indirectly" (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021). As a result of this conflict, she recommended that I speak to legislators about policy creation.

As a state-level director, I was curious about her perspective on what she would like to see when observing an NC Pre-K classroom. She shared that she would like to see something comprehensive, with student engagement, teachers facilitating instruction, and some direct teaching of academic skills. "I'll tell you what's not developmentally appropriate. When you have a second and third grader who can't read, and nobody's helping them. And then they're in third grade, and you want to talk about social and emotional skills when they feel like they are stupid. That's not developmentally appropriate" (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021). Her definition of quality is:

> Not quality, high-quality. Caregivers, [and] teachers that truly understand child
> development and the skills children need to develop. Create a learning environment to
> build those skills. High-quality teacher, not curriculum. SEL, physical, cognitive
> development, literacy development. Build capacity. Fill in the gaps. Comprehensive
> understanding of child development, teachers [are] able to assess where the child's at and

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where they need to be. Engaged, [teachers] facilitate, sometimes direct instruction. Not

just free play centers. (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021)

S1 emphasizes the difference between quality and high-quality, which assumes that the

difference between these concepts is well-known. S1 articulates the importance of teachers first

and foremost in her definition of high-quality.

S1's quality components also reflect the conflict between school readiness and

developmentally appropriate practices nationwide in the early care and education dilemma.

Children need to play, but they also need to be academically prepared for the increasing

academic rigor of kindergarten. S1 shared that regarding NC Pre-K, "too many people have their

hands in the pot. [We] Need to talk to legislators about a compromise, something everyone can

agree upon" (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021). These words are fitting because

L1 stated that at least everyone can agree on early childhood! At different ecosystem levels, what

is "agreed upon" looks different. S1's statement about working with legislators to find something

everyone can agree upon contrasts with L1's argument that at least everyone can agree on early

care and education. Examining words within different levels of the ecosystem helps to paint a

picture of how discourse informs practice.

Policy Document Connection to State Director S1. Quality in NC Pre-K can be found

in the policy document that S1 referred to multiple times in her interview, North Carolina

Foundations for Early Learning and Development (NC Foundations Task Force, 2013). The

North Carolina Foundations Task Force created this document in 2011 and updated it in 2013.

According to the task force, the purpose of the document is to be a "shared vision for what we

want for our state's children and answers the question 'What should we be helping children learn

before kindergarten?'" (p. 1). The document frequently addresses developmental indicators as a

guide for early childhood educators to reference to see what is "typical" for each age group. This guide is also referenced as a resource in teaching based on developmentally appropriate practice. S1 shared that she reviewed it "at some point" (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021). Her view of developmentally appropriate practice is more academic than what the NC Foundations document presents. She shared that she wished that DPI would "take over" NC Pre-K. Would this takeover better reflect her vision of more academic preparation in NC Pre-K?

The NC foundations document states that their goals and developmental indicators are divided into five domains: Approaches to Play and Learning (APL), Emotional and Social Development (ESD), Health and Physical Development (HPD), Language Development and Communication (LDC), and Cognitive Development (CD) (NC Foundations Task Force, 2013). These five domains are also included in one of the other primary policy documents in NC Pre-K, North Carolina Pre-K Program Requirements and Guidance. NCDCDEE published this document in 2021. Multiple other policy documents refer to this document. Quality is not explicitly defined anywhere in this 103-page document, but it has numerous hyperlinks to other documents. I did not find a definition of quality within the document. However, the hyperlinked documents have quality information, such as the document, "What to Look for in a High-Quality, Literacy-Rich, Inclusive Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten Learning Environment" (Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.). The NC Pre-K Fiscal and Contract Manual (2017) references this document multiple times. In this way, policies refer to and communicate with each other. Though S1 served with DCDEE, she spoke more about The NC Foundations document and DPI regulations than the NC Pre-K Program Requirements and Guidance document that her organization published. The priorities of one representative of an organization are nested within the larger context of multiple competing organizations and structures.

DCDEE articulates that NC Pre-K is located within other systems: "The NC Pre-K Program is built upon a system of existing local Smart Start partnerships, public school systems, Head Start agencies, and other entities that demonstrate the ability to provide high-quality pre-kindergarten services for eligible four-year-old children" (p. 2-1). This program is housed within multiple programs and structures. It is the product of numerous competing discourses. Different stakeholder groups author and implement NC Pre-K policies at varying levels of the ecological system. The policies refer to each other but do not necessarily influence society. Their influence is located within the discourse of policy in this educational sphere. The conflict is within other members of the same ecological system, reflecting S1's argument that "too many people have their hands in the pot" (S1, personal communication, September 29, 2021). The pot is funds that members in the same ecological system compete for. Based on these responses, we see that it is finance, yet again, that dictates many of the arguments regarding quality in both policy and practice.

State Director 2

State director 2 (S2) represents the other top agency that governs NC Pre-K in the state of North Carolina, The North Carolina Child Care Commission. She also serves on the NC Pre-K Governance Committee, so she has a great deal of knowledge regarding NC Pre-K policy. Regarding her role in the NC Child Care Commission, S2 shared that

> Our job really is just to make sure that the legislation has sort of talked about the governance of early childhood writ large, including NC Pre-K, that we do that and obviously, hear from the community if there are issues with the rules and guidance, and sort of make amendments wherever we have the ability as commissioners or members of the charter commission to do." (S2, personal communication, November 10, 2021)

This role includes listening to "the community" related to issues with rules and guidelines. Therefore, this position is unique because outside stakeholders can influence the decision-making of the NC Child Care Commission. Though the commission can listen to external stakeholders, S2 shared an important piece of information when asked about funding: "We just ensure that programs are meeting quality as articulated by legislation and meeting the mandates of the DCDEE, but we're really just guided by the General Assembly and the policies that exist" (S2, personal communication, November 10, 2021). This organization is charged with "meeting quality as articulated by legislation." Still, they don't have agency in funding. Legislators discuss funding as paramount in quality discussions. However, the NC Childcare Commission must meet quality but can't make funding decisions.

S2 has a different perspective on the most important components of a quality NC Pre-K program. She discussed the workforce component with actual programs happening in schools and classrooms being high-quality. Quality is attention to programs with total funding equity, a healthy physical structure, and a healthy physical environment. Quality, to S2, includes a culturally and linguistically diverse workforce and matches the children they serve. Quality is language-rich with enriching instructions and is a culturally grounded, inclusive environment. Quality includes families as central. "Quality is probably a lot of what Head start indicates is quality, which is much more generational, whole child whole community kind of approach that says that children's needs are only met if we make sure that we think of them holistically as part of a community and part of a family" (S2, personal communication, November 10, 2021). This holistic definition of quality represents a different viewpoint of quality than other respondents. It nods to the whole-child perspective of early care and education mentioned in the North Carolina

Foundations document. It also represents a focus on equity and the importance of culture and community in early care and education.

Therefore, it is fitting that S2 uses the NC Foundations document when reviewing curricula used in NC Pre-K to see how NC Foundations matches up with the curriculum suggested. In response to how S2 uses the NC Foundations document, she stated that it attends to different domains of children's development, "from language to how social-emotional [skills] can be met, how do we make sure that children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds are really attended to and how a family's being engaged… that's why it's called Foundations" (S2, personal communication, November 10, 2021). In S2's view, the Foundations document views early childhood holistically. This usage of the Foundations document contrasts with S1's suggestion regarding NC Pre-K being more academically focused.

Conversely, part of S2's discussion centered on equity, which relates to S1's plea for all children to succeed academically. S2 discussed the history of early care and education in America, particularly the purpose of Head Start in 1965 being "an opportunity for Black children to thrive prior to school entry…[and] to address inequities and racism" (S2, personal communication, November 10, 2021). Addressing iniquity must be an essential component of quality, according to S2: "If we think about that history, we should understand that part of quality will always be about equity" (S2, personal communication, November 10, 2021). Policies within the discourses of quality must include a focus on equity.

We also discussed the deficiencies in principals' training, which leads to the inequitable evaluations of NC Pre-K teachers. I asked S2 how principals are trained to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers, and she shared that:

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I feel like this is where we've always been challenged, right…a lot of them [NC Pre-K classrooms] are in school buildings. The problem is that the majority of classrooms in those buildings are led by principals in those buildings [who] are usually not early childhood experts. They've never really thought about it. And so oftentimes, they sort of relegate the pre-k's, like, well, y'all just do whatever you're doing, I'll just come and get paperwork whenever I need. And so I would say that what we have to begin to sort of asking for is, you know, Principal certificates or something that says, you know, for any principal in our system, I think even if you don't have a pre-K yet in your building, the chance that you will, one day is actually very high, with all the federal dollars coming in around universal pre-K. And so I will say that part of it is that we have to demand that part of you know, the competencies needed to be a principal or school leader is that they have early childhood experience… I would say part of it is that principals should have some understanding about the value of early childhood, but also, you know, pre-K specifically, but I will say just back to the principals with also the school board, right, and the leadership team. So to me, principals are one critically important leader in the school, but so is the school board and so is also the school leadership assistant principals. I think we have to have some expectations, the principal and the leadership, either or get you certified early childhood, part of the one-on-one training includes, here's what early childhood is, and here's what pre-K specifically is at least pre-K, you know, NC pre-K, here's what children are to experience. And here's who their educators are. And here's the value of it. So I think they need to just get a little bit of that. Because then I think, then what we see oftentimes in the field is that the teachers or whoever is overseeing the pre-K feel like I'm not even valuable to this school, right. I'm just an add-on, and I'm just

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separate in a separate building or separate, you know, track, and nobody cares about what

I do. That's actually important. (S2, personal communication, November 10, 2021)

The lack of principal training in one nested system (in this case, the district system) added to

principals' lack of training in the university preparation system leads NC Pre-K teachers, in S2's

view, to feel that "nobody cares about what I do." When teachers are not paid at parity with their

K-12 peers, and even the state directors understand that Pre-K teachers feel that nobody cares

about what they do, how can we maintain a system with a focus on quality?

With these issues in mind, S2 includes the following items in her definition of quality in

NC Pre-K: equity, workforce, environment health, oral language, diversity, SEL, and leveraging

children's assets. Focusing on improving the workforce is something that S2 hopes will change in

the future of NC Pre-K: "as not just a child-centered program, but also centered on communities.

Because if you have pre–K in your community, it may mean that maybe teachers get paid more,

the program operators get paid more" (S2, personal communication, November 10, 2021).

S2 acknowledges that the cultural conversation is changing, and pre-k is finally being included.

When asked where she sees NC Pre-K headed, she said, "I hope there's not this sort of Silver

Bullet mentality. What I hope it does do is that hopefully, the workforce creates a sort of a higher

wage, or higher salary and benefits for the workforce" (S2, personal communication, November

10, 2021). This quote is indicative of how trying to run two competing governance systems sets

teachers up to fail. Even though S2 is a highly-esteemed and high-ranking state director, she sees

the political challenges behind a poorly-conceived pre-k expansion plan.

Policy Document Connection to State Director S2. S2 discussed the North Carolina

Foundations document components, particularly regarding the whole-child development

component and the family inclusion component. The North Carolina Foundations document

states that "By reviewing Foundations with family members, educators can help them understand how children develop and provide them with specific strategies and activities that they can use at home" (NC Foundations Task Force, 2013, p. 20). Foundations includes family involvement as central to the child's development, which is a topic discussed by S2. Also included in Foundations is the last topic discussed by S2: transitions. The document states that "It is important for public school teachers and administrators to know and understand what has been expected of children when they enter formal school. This allows them to build on previous learning and create opportunities that are stimulating and appropriate" (NC Foundations Task Force, 2013, p. 21). Using Foundations as a resource for families is an excellent strategy to support the child at home and school.

S2 discussed wages and finance, similar to S1 and the state legislators. Her lens focused more on the equity and sustainability of funds and less on how programs are funded. This discussion relates to the NCDHHS (2019) Quality Progress Report (QPR) for North Carolina FFY 2019 policy document. Many of the quality indicators discussed by S2 are included in this document, including information shared from the Statewide Birth-5 Needs assessment: "which identified North Carolina's strengths and weaknesses in four areas of providing high quality early childhood care and education services ensuring that children are on track for school success, fostering social and emotional health and resilience, and creating the conditions for supportive and supported families" (pp. 4-5). Also included in this document is information related to a transition template to help NC Pre-K students transition to kindergarten, which S2 discussed.

S2 shared that her definition of quality includes what Head Start defines as quality. Head Start (2014) shared its components of quality, which describe high-quality programs as ones that

Employ well-educated staff who…

- Learn about individual children and families, and plan environments, experiences and services that build on their strengths and meet their needs.

- Engage in partnerships with families, including expectant families.

- Connect children and families to a range of community services.

- Understand the needs of infants, toddlers and their families and use what they know to offer children individualized care and routines.

- Are supported by state and federal regulations that put health and safety first. (Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, 2014, p. 1)

These quality components are specific to Head Start programs, but they are similar to the NC Foundations domains.

Last, in her discussion about quality, S2 mentioned indicators such as environmental health, diversity, social-emotional learning (SEL), and workforce. The QPR document shares two different quality measurement tools: the ECERS-R and the CLASS. ECERS-R is part of North Carolina's QRIS, the star-rated license system, and assesses more of the environmental indicators S2 discussed. CLASS assesses teacher-student interactions. Neither assessment tool measures equity, workforce, or diversity. The QPR suggests a third assessment tool for some of these items, which is the Program Administrator Scale (PAS) (QPR, 2019). The PAS measures leadership and management functions of ECE programs. This third assessment might cover workforce quality, but it is unclear if any assessment really measures the equity and diversity requirements necessary within S2's quality definition.

How S1 and S2 Fit in the Nested Doll/Exosystem

How do the state directors fit into the nested doll/ ecological model? I argue that they belong in the second layer (from the outside in), the exosystem. Rosa and Tudge (2013) assert

that the exosystem is "an ecological setting in which the developing person of interest is not situated, and thus does not participate actively within it, but nonetheless experiences its influence and at times can also influence it, whether formally or informally" (pp. 246- 247). The exosystem is outside of the inner, nested system. It influences the inner system (microsystem) and can sometimes be affected by the microsystem.

The state directors work outside of the classroom setting. Most of the classrooms influenced by the decisions of the state directors will never be observed directly by the directors. Policies live in the exosystem. Rosa and Tudge (2013) give the example of developing social policies within the exosystem and policy decisions regarding children's education happening there (p. 247). The state directors fit within this nested system. They are influenced by the macrosystem's cultural and political systems. People outside the exosystem might not see what S2 sees, particularly regarding her fears about Pre-K expansion being a silver bullet set up to fail, but they need to. The exosystem has information but little interaction with those in the outer and inner systems. The people who see classrooms (from time to time) are nested within the mesosystem. We move further inward in the matryoshka to the district administrator and NC Pre-K coordinator mesosystem to understand how quality is understood both in state and local policies.

The Third Doll: District Administrators and Pre-K Coordinators

The third doll contains all of the district administrators and NC Pre-K coordinators. This would be the largest doll if the dolls were arranged by the number of participants I interviewed instead of the ecological location. I had 15 district administrators and NC Pre-K coordinators complete either the Zoom interview or the Google Form. This group includes a wide range of job titles, such as preschool coordinator, director of pre-k programs, preschool specialist, pre-k and

elementary education director, executive director, and assistant superintendent. All 15 administrators had specific responsibility for NC Pre-K in their geographic region. Most were employed by a North Carolina school district, though a few were employed by Smart Start or the North Carolina Partnership for Children. Because this is the largest group, I will provide highlights from each of the questions with a few quotations added for emphasis instead of listing each respondent's answers to each question. To protect the privacy of all respondents, I use pseudonyms A1, A2, A3, and so on to stand for administrators and the date they responded. The earlier respondents have lower numbers, and the later respondents have higher numbers.

Respondents at the administrator/ pre-k director level shared different responsibilities. Some of these responsibilities include developing local policies to implement state systems, supervising the implementation of policies, ensuring compliance with state policies, and ensuring that all classrooms have procedures to uphold state policy. Respondents also shared that their role is to be the "in-between person between Smart Start/ the district and the schools" (personal communication, A1, July 27, 2021). Many respondents shared that their responsibility was to be somewhat of a go-between to implement state policy within schools in their district. Does this mean they have a greater understanding of state and local policy quality? This responsibility requires a great deal of policy knowledge. I am curious, therefore, about their most frequently used policy documents.

When asked about what policy documents they use most frequently, I heard many responses, ranging from nothing to the attendance form to the childcare toolkit, finance documents, and NC Pre-K Kids. Respondents' policies reviewed for this dissertation are the NC Foundations document, NC Pre-K Program Requirements and Guidance, the eligibility scorecard, and Teaching Strategies GOLD. A few respondents described the policy documents

but didn't use the correct name, such as "the NC Pre-K policy document" or, to quote a respondent, "I frequently refer to the policy book provided by NCPK [NC Pre-K]. I use documents to support the completion of the NCPK applications. We frequently refer to the documents that indicate what qualifies staff to work in the NCPK classrooms" (A3, personal communication, August 24, 2021). The people who self-identify as responsible for implementing state policy had a variety of responses regarding what policies they use.

Of the fifteen administrators and NC Pre-K coordinators interviewed, their top response was teachers when asked about the most important components of a quality NC Pre-K program. Some of the specific features mentioned regarding teachers were quality instruction, highly qualified teachers (bachelor's degree, licensed, professional development in early care and education), and teachers paid with parity to K-12 teachers. One respondent shared, "You can't give out what you don't have yourself" regarding teacher pay and support (A5, personal communication, August 27, 2021). According to these administrators, teachers make the difference between a high-quality and a lower-quality Pre-K classroom.

The other components of a quality NC Pre-K mentioned by participants were positive relationships, a developmentally appropriate classroom, a safe and caring environment, whole-child and whole-family relationships, an engaging classroom, happy, calm, available resources, quality materials, and relevant content. A few also mentioned "fidelity" to curriculum or compliance with lesson plans, reflecting the increasing academic demands of Pre-K to ensure kindergarten "readiness." Last, a few mentioned social and emotional support and compassion for children. These represent an increased focus on social and emotional health, which can be seen in K-12 and university settings. Last, of the 15 respondents, only three included play as an essential component of a quality Pre-K. Many developmentally appropriate practice advocates

recommend a play-based program and frequently share the importance of play. Most of the features shared by administrators and Pre-K coordinators could be said about any age or grade level. What sets NC Pre-K (and all preschools) apart is a focus on play. Indeed, the NC Foundations document includes play as one of its domains, "Approaches to play and learning" (NC Foundations Task Force, 2013). The Foundations document states explicitly: "Goals and Developmental Indicators SHOULD Be Used To…Emphasize the importance of play as an instructional strategy that promotes learning in early childhood programs" (NC Foundations Task Force, 2013, p. 7).

I asked respondents a similar question to the quality components question to see if I would get different responses. One of my follow-up questions was, "how do you define quality in NC Pre-K"? Answers to this question were just as varied as the question about policy documents. I had some respondents share specific policy documents, such as "using the NCRLAP standards, all using Foundations throughout the day" (A9, personal communication, September 9, 2021). Another shared, "5 stars on ECERS. Sanitation and licensing. Happy, healthy students and teachers. Systems working together" (A2, personal communication, August 17, 2021). Other responses emphasized positive relationships, child development and developmentally appropriate practice, kindergarten readiness, and environment. An answer that includes many quality factors mentioned is this: "A safe and nurturing environment that educates age/development appropriately—having great communication between teachers and parents. Students have the encouragement of their unique learning abilities and needs—attentive and caring staff" (A3, personal communication, August 30, 2021). Interestingly, only three respondents included play in their personal definition of quality in NC Pre-K, the same as the systemic definition of quality in NC Pre-K. Since play is considered an essential component of

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DAP, it is noteworthy that only a small percentage of respondents listed play in their quality definitions.

Most respondents shared that NC Pre-K is funded through state, federal, Smart Start, and lottery funds when asked about funding. Some programs also include some funds from private pay. They expressed a need to expand NC Pre-K to include more families, increase funding for the program, and make spending more flexible. Multiple respondents expressed a desire for universal Pre-K and to make Pre-K less political. Respondents at this level understand that NC Pre-K is at the mercy of political legislation and available funding streams, which reflects the nested nature of NC Pre-K within the ecosystem.

This group's last set of noteworthy responses addresses principal training to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers. Though district administrators and NC Pre-K coordinators identify as being tasked with developing local policies to implement state policies, they also acknowledge that they are not responsible for evaluating NC Pre-K teachers. School principals evaluate NC Pre-K teachers. According to the district administrators and Pre-K coordinators, principals' level of training to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers is quite varied. Responses for principal training included going through the NCEES training, using the standard DPI instrument, sitting through training from a DPI training document, and sitting through two days of NC Pre-K specific training. One district shares a Google folder of resources with their teachers, and another district breaks from the norm and bypasses principals for teacher evaluation. The respondent shared, "In our system, the principal support[s] our teachers, but the Preschool Office evaluates them. The principals and preschool office staff have been trained in the NC Evaluation System for the Early Learning Programs. This allows principals to be aware of expectations but yet they do not hold responsibilities to evaluate rather give feedback and support for the evaluation system" (A12,

personal communication, September 24, 2021). This district has a reputation statewide for doing things differently. Other district leaders referred to this district as having a different organizational structure regarding NC Pre-K governance. It is important to know that not all districts do the same regarding teacher evaluations. Still, it is also important to understand that the district representative's response is unusual for how most districts in North Carolina run their NC Pre-K teacher evaluations. On the other end of the spectrum, a different district administrator shared this regarding how principals are trained to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers:

> One of the big things in terms of quality in the early grades is principals having training in child development. They supervise young, inexperienced teachers that are just learning how to negotiate the bureaucracy of the school. It's a real disconnect, and it's a really challenging thing for K-3 teachers to do what they think is quality because they often don't get the level of support. There's pushback, especially if you don't have a principal who wants to be a principal in the elementary school. Their real goal is to get to high school, where they make much more money than they do in elementary school because you get paid as a principal based on the number of students in the school, which is silly, but that's how it is, you know, that's all-other policy business. (A6, personal communication, August 27, 2021)

Thus, none of the respondents had consistent answers about how principals are trained to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers, which was one of my biggest concerns before the interviews. If no one can agree on how principals are trained and principals are most frequently tasked with evaluating NC Pre-K, how do principals understand both quality and evaluation of quality in NC Pre-K?

Policy Document Connection to District Administrators and NC Pre-K Coordinators

The district administrators and NC Pre-K coordinators referred to a few different policies in their interviews. The primary policy was the NC Pre-K Program Support and Guidance (NCDCDEE, 2021). This regulatory document is referred to by many other policy documents and is the guiding document for many NC Pre-K policy discussions. Within this document, other policies are linked, such as the North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development domains, the North Carolina Child Care Rules, The NC Pre-K Program Rules in G. S. 110, Article 7, and Chapter 9 Section .3000, and the NC Pre-K Program Fiscal and Contracts Manual. All of these documents are linked on the NCDCDEE website. Therefore, this one document should serve as a one-stop-shop when NC Pre-K administrators and coordinators have a policy question. If this is the main governing document that is most referred to, how does this document define quality?

The NC Pre-K Program Requirements and Guidance document (NCDCDEE, 2021) uses the word quality 25 times. It includes sentences that hint at quality: "The requirements are designed to ensure that a high-quality pre-kindergarten classroom experience is provided for eligible four-year-old children in each local NC Pre-K Program" (p. 1-1). This policy document includes requirements for different elements of NC Pre-K, such as teacher-to-student ratios, roles and responsibilities of the NC Pre-K Committee in each region, and NC Pre-K enrollment eligibility. There are mentions of quality throughout the document, such as classroom environment and classroom experience, and there are links to other documents that should help define quality in NC Pre-K. A clear definition of quality is missing within the governing document that most district administrators and Pre-K coordinators referenced.

This document and the district administrators referred to other policy documents, including Chapter 9 Section .3000 of the North Carolina Child Care Rules (NCDHHS, 2020). Section .3000 outlines the rules regarding NC Pre-Kindergarten services. The third sentence in this section is familiar: "The NC Pre-K Program is intended to provide high-quality educational experiences to enhance school readiness for at-risk-four-year-olds" (NCDHHS, 2020, p. 179). This sentence is used in many other NC Pre-K policy documents, but the source of who wrote it is unclear. It is unclear how NC Pre-K policy defines educational experiences. This one sentence, shared throughout policy texts, serves as a guiding mission for the NC Pre-K program and provides a guideline for how NC Pre-K programs should run.

The following section in this document discusses the license requirements for NC Pre-K programs. NC Pre-K programs must maintain a four or five-Star Rated license by having an assessment conducted every three years using the ECERS-R, evaluating teacher education, and adding an extra "quality point" (NCDHHS, 2020). If a classroom scores below a 5, it must be reassessed the following year and must score a minimum of 5 to continue as an NC Pre-K site. Every ECERS-R evaluation must include at least one NC Pre-K classroom (NCDHHS, 10A NCAC 09 .3002, p. 179). Thus, NC Pre-K centers must have four or five stars through the star-rated license assessment to maintain a license. This requirement focuses on the standards for quality listed within the ECERS-R assessment. And what are the criteria for quality?

Searching the documents released by NCRLAP to prepare educational stakeholders for the ECERS-R environmental quality assessment leads to some interesting observations. For example, the NCRLAP Quick Reference Guide (2020) includes the first heading: "How Quality is Assessed" (p. 1). Underneath the heading, NCRLAP (2020) states, "Highly trained assessors will assess the quality of children's care and education using these scales… Early Childhood

Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R)—31 months through 5 years" (p. 1). How do they assess quality? On page two, there are boxes of text under the heading "How to Prepare for Assessments" (p. 2). Box number four recommends that providers "Prepare your facility's space, equipment, and environment(s) through quality enhancements to meet requirements. Any changes should reflect best practices for young children and improve the quality of the program on an ongoing basis" (p. 2). Quality enhancements and best practices for young children answer how quality is assessed. What are these quality enhancements? How do they define best practices for children? NCRLAP (2020) directs readers to get more information regarding the star-rated license to the ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov website to answer these questions. Following this trail, I searched for a definition of quality or at least quality enhancements or indicators on the website. The only information I could find using the website's search function is how the number of stars is determined. It combines program standards, education standards (teacher's education level), and a quality point. According to the website,

> North Carolina's earliest licensing system didn't offer enough information to parents about the quality of care their program was providing so North Carolina moved to the Star Rated license system. For example, under the previous system, a center that received an A license was meeting only minimum requirements but parents may have thought this was the highest rating. To minimize confusion and to maximize understanding, a five star licensing system was developed because this type of rating system is typical for many products and services. (NCDHHS, "North Carolina Star Rated License System, 2020, p. 1)

Figure 7 is a sample of the NCRLAP star-rated license that NC Pre-K centers must display.

Though the license is posted at each site, the policy search and information provided on the

license is unclear on how NCRLAP understands and assesses quality.

Figure 7

Sample Star Rated License
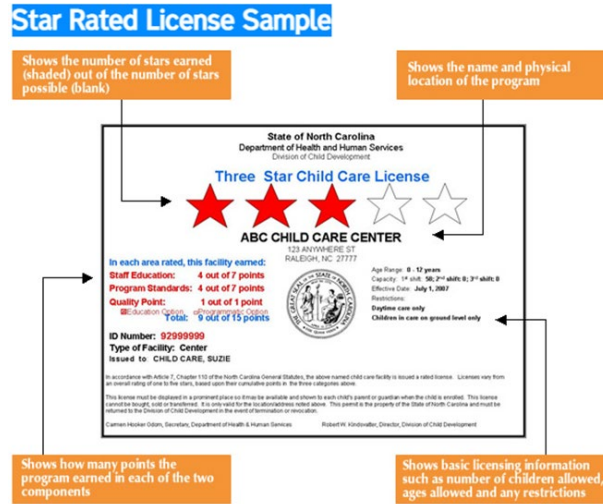
Note: NCDHHS. (2020). Star-rated license. North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Services/Licensing/Star-Rated-License

How District Administrators and Pre-K Coordinators Fit in the Nested Doll/ Mesosystem

The district administrators included in the nested mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b)

are stuck in-between larger political and cultural discourse and smaller classroom instruction.

They must interpret policies and create local procedures to implement these policies. However,

they do not see how the policies are enacted in the classrooms. They are nested in the system.

They are supposed to make meaning of the policies handed down to them. However, their

meaning isn't clear because they are removed from the daily activity of actually teaching and

learning that encompasses the world of NC Pre-K.

In the nested version of the mesosystem, district administrators and NC Pre-K coordinators are at the mercy of individual schools, classrooms, families, district requirements, and more comprehensive state policies. They are the go-betweens and sense-makers. It is unclear where their responsibilities start and end. Their influence is limited because they are not frequently "in the trenches" like school administrators and NC Pre-K teachers. This is a unique part of the nested matryoshka/ ecosystem. The outer layers hold them, and they hold the inner layers, but their power is limited due to being too far removed from the largest and the smallest layers. They are the symbolic middle child of the nested doll system. Though they had the most responses, I believe that they have the least amount of actual influence regarding defining, articulating, or evaluating quality in NC Pre-K. The subsequent section discusses interview responses from school principals and assistant principals.

The Fourth Doll: School Administrators

As we continue to move inward in the nested dolls, we encounter the fourth doll/layer of the ecosystem. This doll contains school-level administrators, including principals and assistant principals. I heard from other levels of the ecosystem that principals are tasked with evaluating NC Pre-K teachers. Yet, we also heard that principals encounter a wide variety of training. According to respondents from some of the outer layers of the ecosystem, some do not receive any training at all. I interviewed four principals for my dissertation research. Three respondents were elementary school principals, and one was an assistant principal. One respondent identified as living in the Coastal region of North Carolina, one lives in the Piedmont region, and two live in the Mountain region of North Carolina. Respondents at this level of the nested doll ecosystem are referred to by P and the order they completed the interview. For example, in the morning, the first principal respondent answered the questions on September 24, 2021, so they are P1.

When asked about their role regarding NC Pre-K policy implementation, principals shared that their job is to ensure rules are being followed and supervise the children and staff. One principal answered that "there are some rules governing the budget that I'm not in control over" (P2, personal communication, September 24, 2021). The principals also had varied responses to how the NC Pre-K programs in their schools were funded. One responded that it is entirely state-funded, one said: "district funds and federal funds" (P3, personal communication, September 24, 2021), one shared that it is funded through grants, the state, and funding by the NC Pre-K department, and one said, "it is state-funded but doesn't cover enough, so I removed budget partitions from the school's general fund to cover the extras and don't keep it detailed" (P2, personal communication, September 24, 2021). This variety of funding information reflects the varied nature of funding streams in NC Pre-K and the varied understanding of how NC Pre-K runs statewide. Principal P2 understands that the state doesn't provide enough funds for the NC Pre-K program in his school, so he uses his general funds in vague and creative ways to cover the difference.

When asked what NC Pre-K policy documents the school principals use most frequently, the respondents said inspections, sanitization, fire drills, Teaching Strategies GOLD, fire and lockdown drill forms, monthly attendance documents, and "annual document that the Pre-K teacher has to do. Don't remember what it's called. The Pre-K teacher takes the lead on evaluation documentation" (P2, personal communication, September 24, 2021). When asked specifically about the ECERS-R assessment, one principal shared that it sets the "foundation and guidelines for classrooms and guides us to the whole classroom and activities" (P3, personal communication, September 24, 2021). This answer differed from P4's response: "To review and improve our processes for serving children" (P4, personal communication, October 9, 2021).

There is also a great deal of variation in how principals reported using the NC Foundations document. One shared that they don't use it; one said it is a guide for lesson planning and is more detailed than Teaching Strategies GOLD, and one said it is used to best serve students. One said, "I don't know. Trust an experienced teacher to help with monitoring and observations. Help them with IEP paperwork" (P2, personal communication, September 24, 2021).

How do principals define quality in NC Pre-K, both systemically and personally? When asked about the most important components of a quality NC Pre-K program, they said it's essential to have highly-qualified educators, a structured program, communication, relationships with family, and an understanding of child development. Another shared, "Making sure a safe and caring environment that is positive and developmentally appropriate for students while following NC PreK compliance guidelines is in place for all children " (P4, personal communication, October 9, 2021). The last principal discussed being a good teacher, having teacher assistant (TA) support, collaboration, and common planning time with kindergarten and first-grade teachers to include NC Pre-K teachers and see vertical alignment. The principals' personal definitions of quality in NC Pre-K included the teacher, students successful and prepared for kindergarten socially, emotionally, and academically.

Before interviewing principals, the biggest question I had was how they were trained to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers. Other respondents shared that they did not believe that principals were adequately trained to do so. When I asked the principals this question, I had many answers. One was not trained, one said that the district has an excellent Pre-K director who shares information regularly, and one principal referred to I Point crosswalk training. One principal admitted, "I was trained by the teachers. No structure from the district for support. The teacher was an expert, so I just leaned on the teacher and the director" (P2, personal communication,

September 24, 2021). When I told the principal about the Resource Manual for Administrators and Principals Supervising and Evaluating Teachers of Young Children (de Kort-Young et al., 2016), they had never heard of it. This variety of answers regarding principal training to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers reflects the responses shared by other participants throughout the state.

Policy Document Connection to School Principals

It struck me as interesting that the principals referred first and foremost to facility inspection documents such as the fire report when asked about NC Pre-K policies. I believe that this is because many principals house NC Pre-K in their physical buildings but feel that the program is governed outside of their control. One principal shared, "NC pre-k is an add-on. The school houses the program. It's a weird cousin of the school" (P2, personal communication, September 24, 2021). Caring for the weird cousin might have to happen from an emotional distance to keep the rest of the school running under the accountability control of DPI. It is also noteworthy that the principals referred to the NCEES training documents for teacher evaluations. These documents are from the department of public instruction instead of NCDHHS. This reflects the influence of DPI on the rest of K-12 public education. Last, one principal referred to Teaching Strategies GOLD as the policy document used frequently. This document is a formative assessment published by Teachstone to use in connection with the Creative Curriculum. This is not necessarily a policy document but an assessment of one of DCDEE's list of approved curriculums.

Teachstone also publishes CLASS, an assessment used by some NC Pre-K programs to measure interactions between teachers and students. I emailed a representative from Teachstone to see how the company defines quality, and they shared,

CLASS looks at quality by measuring the effectiveness of teacher-student interactions.

This includes what teachers do to create warm, nurturing environments where students

feel safe and secure, how teachers manage students' time, attention, and behavior in the

classroom, and how teachers stimulate language and higher order thinking skills.

(Teachstone Customer Support, personal communication, June 21, 2021)

Based on their definition and materials provided, Teachstone values some of the same things

included in the NC Foundations document, such as language modeling and positive climate.

Another policy document to examine is the Teacher Evaluation Process: NC Foundations

for Early Learning and Development (NCDHHS, 2020). Teachers must complete online training

modules to learn about the NC Foundations domains. According to the DCDEE website,

Early Childhood Educators who are enrolled with the EES Unit to attain and/or maintain

NC Birth-through-Kindergarten licensure are required to align their instruction with NC

Foundations for Early Learning and Development. Teachers will apply these standards

throughout their work as the NC Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS) appropriate to the

age group of children being taught. Use of the NCSCOS (NC Foundations for Early

Learning and Development) is required as part of the NC Teacher Evaluation Process.

Teachers are required to continuously implement instructional practices that align with

NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development, in their classroom environment to

support the developmental needs of all children. ("Teacher Evaluation Process," 2018).

Teachers must teach the standard course of study, which doesn't actually begin until

kindergarten. To supplement the standard course of study, NC Pre-K teachers are given the NC

Foundations document and an older, condensed version of Foundations called Foundations for

Preschoolers (2005). The NC Foundations document includes a developmental continuum for

each of the five domains for what the average child should be able to do. It is not a curriculum. The Foundations for Preschoolers (2005) was published by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) and includes "widely held expectations" for what preschoolers should be able to do. I believe that it is still in circulation and shared by the DCDEE website because of a chart on page 7 of the document, which aligns the standard course of study with the NC Foundations domains Figure 8 includes this chart.

Figure 8

Comparison Chart of the NC Early Learning Standards for Preschool and the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for Kindergarten

N.C. Standard Course of Study for Kindergarten	N.C. Early Learning Standards for Preschool				
	Approaches to Learning	Emotional and Social Development	Health and Physical Development	Language Development and Communication	Cognitive Development
Arts Education	★	★	★	★	★
Computer/Tech. Skills		★		★	★
English Language Arts				★	★
English Language Dev.		★	★	★	★
Guidance	★	★			★
Healthful Living		★	★		
Information Skills	★	★		★	★
Mathematics	★			★	★
Second Languages		★		★	★
Science	★		★	★	★
Social Studies	★	★		★	★

Note: Comparison of the NC Standard Course of Study for Kindergarten and the NC Early Learning Standards for Preschool within the 2005 Foundations document. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2005, p. 7.

The document also includes strategies for early educators, strategies for families, and widely held expectations for each of the five domains. This document evolved into the 2013 version of North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development. The 2013 version states that "For children to reach their full potential, adults must provide an environment and experiences that promote growth and learning in all areas described in Foundations through age-

appropriate activities, materials, and daily routines" (North Carolina Foundations, 2013, p. 18). The 2013 NC Foundations includes a chart showing how Foundations aligns with the kindergarten standard course of study. It is important to note that Foundations is not the same as the Standard Course of Study, so principals need to be well-versed in the specifics of the Foundations recommendations.

The policy knowledge that principals interviewed shared is as varied as NC Pre-K's funding streams. If principals focus more on building policy documents and DPI-sponsored training and admit they are not as familiar with actual NC Pre-K policies and evaluations, what does this say about where a district and school principal's priorities fall? Principals admit that they do not know what they need to know regarding NC Pre-K, and therefore, they lean on the teachers and sometimes the Pre-K directors for support. Yet, most principals must complete classroom observations and yearly evaluations for teachers based on their ability to teach and maintain high-quality instructional and classroom standards. Who knows what quality means in NC Pre-K teachers' classrooms and how it should be evaluated?

How School Principals Fit in the Nested Doll/ Microsystem

School principals are part of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). The microsystem is the environment that an individual encounters most frequently, such as the home, schools, and the neighborhood. Nestled inside the three outer matryoshka dolls, the principal is in direct contact with the NC Pre-K teacher, at least on a semi-regular basis. The principal is responsible for the classroom's physical maintenance and frequently has to contribute funds to fill in funding gaps left by the larger district, state, and federal funding streams. The principal must balance housing and maintaining the NC Pre-K while being too far removed from the policymakers, directors, and coordinators to have adequate knowledge of what specific quality indicators mean

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in the NC Pre-K classroom. At the mercy of two competing state systems via DPI for their K-12 teachers and NCDHHS for the NC Pre-K teachers, principals state that they interpret policies without guidance or training. Even the Pre-K directors who should be more knowledgeable about state policies are often housed in school districts that DPI governs for all other grades. NC Pre-K, to the principals, truly is the "weird cousin" of the school. The principal is tasked with taking care of it without having the knowledge or tools available. Also frequently missing in this microsystem relationship between NC Pre-K teacher and the principal is any experience on the principal's part in early care and education (Shue, Shore, & Lambert, 2012). Many school principals get their first assignment in elementary school because they typically have smaller enrollments than middle and high school. The lack of early childhood experience further removes the principal from understanding what policies and quality indicators are required for a successful NC Pre-K classroom experience.

The NC Foundations document (2013) includes stakeholders such as teachers and caregivers, families, policymakers, public schools, professional development providers, community leaders, and program administrators (The NC Foundations Task Force, 2013, p. 20). Multiple and often competing interests and stakeholders all have "skin in the game." Principals must be aware of their unique position in the nested ecosystem. The NC Foundations document (2013) asserts that "Administrators influence the resources that are available, as well as the attitudes and practices of the persons working directly with young children" (p. 21). Principals are essential for an NC Pre-K teacher's success. To support principals and teachers, district, state, and legislative stakeholders must understand principals' lack of training and information in this relationship. How do teachers feel about their evaluators and being at the mercy of the larger systems?

The Fifth (and Center) Doll: NC Pre-K Teachers

NC Pre-K teachers are at the center of the ecosystem and are at the mercy of the larger and often competing systems outside their classrooms. The legislative, state, district, and school policies and procedures must be interpreted and implemented in their classrooms. They work directly with the children every day. They are also at the mercy of time, the environment, the larger cultural and social conversation, and parents' and community stakeholders' expectations. Though they are the center of the conversation, their voices are the smallest, much like the center matryoshka doll. I hoped to have at least an equivalent percentage of NC Pre-K teachers as district administrators and Pre-K coordinators for my dissertation research, but I did not. I received email responses from teachers saying, "I'm sorry, but I don't have time to do this now." The pressures of teaching young children daily while implementing all of the policies handed down from the larger systems make NC Pre-K teachers very busy. When the COVID-19 pandemic is added, many teachers struggle with health issues, the loss of loved ones, and daily struggles to keep children healthy, safe, and engaged in learning.

It is not surprising that of the seven NC Pre-K teachers who completed my interview, all of them chose to respond through the faster and more convenient option of completing a Google Form. Of the seven respondents, six identified as living in the Mountains region of North Carolina, and one identified as living in the Piedmont region. Six out of the seven respondents identified as NC Pre-K lead teachers, and one identified as an itinerant special education teacher who works with NC Pre-K students. When asked about their role in NC Pre-K policy implementation, I had varied responses. The teachers shared that they are compliant with all policies, implementing policies in their classroom, following licensing guidelines set forth by the state and county, ensuring students can participate in NC Pre-K, and " following it" (T1, personal

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communication September 9, 2021). The NC Pre-K teachers had similar answers to principals regarding funding. Most shared that their Pre-K programs are funded through NC Pre-K funds, private pay, federal funds, and state funds.

I asked the NC Pre-K teachers what policy documents they use most frequently. They responded with Dial testing, Creative Curriculum (twice), NC Foundations (three times), Compliance Tool Kit, Teaching Strategies GOLD (twice), Ready Rosie, and the NC Pre-K attendance document. In their interviews, some of the teachers referred to Teaching Strategies GOLD as TS Gold. Many of the documents mentioned are curriculum tools, compliance documents, assessments, or communication and parent education tools. Many of the policies mentioned were not on my original list to review. It shows that NC Pre-K teachers have a different perspective because they work inside Pre-K classrooms, and I am researching them from an outside perspective. Since teachers are housed in classrooms, they see policy more in terms of curriculum since they focus on teaching and interactions with children.

When asked about the ECERS-R component of the QRIS, the teachers responded that they use it to ensure that the NC Pre-K classes are 5-Star Rated, follow all ECERS-R guidelines to maintain ratio and safety, "just for the notion that we are all 5-stars", and that classrooms are evaluated every three years. One teacher also mentioned that teachers do an ECERS-R self-study. Last, one teacher shared, "ECERS occurs every three years as part of licensing of NC PK. This happens to be my year, so I am currently looking at my environment, schedule, and items offered in the classroom for a higher score. Personally feel that it adds additional pressure to the teaching profession, and the scoring is for an "ideal" setting (T4, personal communication, September 9, 2021). Though ECERS-R is supposed to assess environmental quality, it is mainly viewed as one more requirement that adds pressure. The QRIS 5-star rating doesn't mean much

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to teachers. Do 5-star licensed Pre-K programs have higher quality than lower-rated programs? How would we know?

According to the NC Pre-K teachers, a more helpful document is the NC Foundations document. They shared that they used it in multiple ways, such as assessing the developmental levels of their students, planning lessons, and recording data in conjunction with the Creative Curriculum and lesson planning. One teacher shared, "Our Foundation targets are posted in our classroom, and TS Gold is tied into reaching these goals as well. Therefore when using the TS Gold lesson plan format, I feel that these are met and covered" (T4, personal communication, September 9, 2021). Of all policy documents discussed by the NC Pre-K teachers, they view the NC Foundations document as the most helpful and most frequently used. Another policy document often referred to by teachers is a website, NC Pre-K Kids. This website is an application for NC Pre-K teachers and administrators to complete policy documents such as the monthly attendance report.

I was very interested to see how NC Pre-K teachers define quality in NC Pre-K both systemically and individually. Regarding the most important quality components of NC Pre-K, they shared the following elements: high-quality care, available resources, quality materials, parent support, socialization of students, social-emotional skills, play-based curriculum, and compassion for children. They also shared the importance of a warm, safe environment and offering opportunities for the children to explore, problem-solve, and learn. One shared the importance of relationships, meaningful interactions, and relevant content. The most thorough response was from T5, who offered,

> I think at the base a quality program needs well educated teachers who understand and
> value developmentally appropriate practices. The classroom environment and atmosphere

need to be set up in a way that is accessible to all children, is inviting, feels

homelike/friendly, allows for exploration, and includes materials that are age appropriate.

Teachers need to be modeling and directly teaching social-emotional skills, while making

every child feel welcome and safe. This means directly teaching them to identify

emotions and teaching skills for them to deal with these emotions and engage in problem

solving. These things must be in place before children are ready for learning. A quality

program also takes the curriculum and integrates it with children's interests to make

learning interesting, engaging, and fun. I think quality programs focus on child directed

activities opposed to teacher directed activities and allow for exploration and

investigation while building problem solving skills as children learn thru play (T5,

personal communication, September 10, 2021)

These quality components are varied but represent many NC Foundations domains such as

social-emotional learning, communication, play, and cognitive development. I found it

interesting that play was mentioned three times in quality components, which is the same number

of times the district administrators and NC Pre-K coordinators shared play as a quality

component.

When asked to give a personal definition of quality in NC Pre-K, teachers shared that

quality is the "whole" of the program: environment, relationship with parents and children, and

growth of learning (T5, personal communication, September 9, 2021). Others offered responses

such as engagement, effective collaboration, whole-child centered, and education in all

developmental areas. Other answers included being helpful to families, data-based curriculum-

driven and actively engaged children, developmentally appropriate practices, safe and inviting

environments, direct teaching of social-emotional skills, and child-directed curriculum. Individual definitions of quality were more focused on children and their developmental needs.

The last question that I was curious to ask NC Pre-K teachers was how principals are trained to evaluate them. They had very different but very telling responses. One said, "NC Standards" (T1, personal communication, September 9, 2021). One said, "That I am unsure of. However, the past year, NC PK has included workshops and training for our administrators" (T4, personal communication, September 9, 2021). The other respondents shared that they are unaware of how principals are trained to evaluate them, with responses such as, "I am not sure" (T7, personal communication, September 16, 2021).

Last, some of the noteworthy responses to NC Pre-K teachers' feelings about what they wish they could change about their program include some comments and concerns. One teacher shared these sad words, "I love my job but am concerned with changes coming. A lot of the veteran teachers are leaving" She also shared a desire to educate the public that "we are a profession and not a child care or babysitting" (T4, personal communication, September 9, 2021). Teaching as a profession has taken a hit both in reputation and in practice in the last few years, especially since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. These teachers feel the fatigue of being pressured to meet all policy and societal expectations without the benefits of a decent wage or professional reputation. Another teacher shared her stress at preparing her students for kindergarten: "We need more kindergarten preparedness, not "daycare" regulations" (T1, personal communication, September 9, 2021). Teachers within the profession have different ideas about the purpose of NC Pre-K.

Policy Document Connection to NC Pre-K Teachers

As previously discussed, the NC Pre-K teachers had a consistently positive response to the NC Foundations document. They used it in lesson planning, assessment, and planning for the whole-child development and family communications. They were all aware of the ECERS-R document but responded in more concise terms. They equate ECERS-R with a hoop to jump through to maintain a 5-Star Rated license. Other policy documents mentioned were the Creative Curriculum, Ready Rosie family communication tool, Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment, and attendance documents.

Teachstone produces the Creative Curriculum and Teaching Strategies GOLD. This company has recently merged with Ready Rosie and offers the CLASS assessment of teacher-student interactions. When a statewide program seeks vendors to provide various services, Teachstone is at the ready with multiple products available. Though not mandated policies, Teachstone's products have infiltrated the NC Pre-K market and are mentioned as policy documents alongside state policies. We remember what we encounter every day. Teachers in NC Pre-K are experiencing Teachstone's products more and more.

I want to focus on the NC Teacher Evaluation Instrument most in this policy connection discussion. NC Pre-K teachers are trained in the NC Foundations domains and offer a service to children based on the rules and guidelines of NCDHHS and their early education program, NCDCDEE. However, DPI still governs the teacher evaluation instrument. NC Pre-K teachers are held to the same standards as their K-12 peers, though they teach different standards and follow a different curriculum. The North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process (NCDPI, 2018) does not mention NC Pre-K. This document also refers to the North Carolina Course of Study (2015) and The North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards (NCDPI, 2013). Neither

document includes NC Pre-K. The NC Professional Teaching Standards, Standard 3 mandates "Teachers align their instruction with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study" (NCDPI, 2013). The North Carolina Standard Course of Study (SCOS) does not start until kindergarten. What are NC Pre-K teachers supposed to teach, and how are they evaluated?

Searching for support documents led me to a crosswalk document from the NCDPI Office of Early Learning. It attempts to help NC Pre-K teachers align their instructional plans to whatever state requirement is necessary: NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development, Teaching Strategies GOLD, or the NC SCOS (K Alignment). This crosswalk is a helpful planning tool for teachers, so they have a chart to outline the words necessary for policy-mandated lesson plans. However, it does not guide NC Pre-K teachers to fit into the NC teacher evaluation mold, which doesn't start until kindergarten.

A second search led me to UNC Charlotte's Early Educator Support Office website. This website houses many helpful resources for NC Pre-K teachers and has information about the NCEES and NC Teacher Evaluation Process. I was excited to read some new information that I thought I had missed before. This website has resources for early childhood educators on the North Carolina Teacher evaluation system, "quality assurance and reliability process," and other documents and resources for early childhood educators. I hoped that the NCEES section would be specific to NC Pre-K teachers' evaluation challenges, specifically how they can be evaluated using the same teaching standards as their K-12 peers when standard three requires teaching to the standard course of study (SCOS). Instead of NC Pre-K specific guidance, one is directed to technical support documents so that teachers know how to use the online evaluation system standard for all K-12 teachers. This website comes from the same university that produced the Resource Manual for Administrators and Principals Supervising and Evaluating Teachers of

Young Children (de Kort-Young et al., 2016). This document outlines the teacher evaluation process for principals. However, the recommendations and steps outlined in this guide are the same as any other grade level. Also, the principals I interviewed did not have a strong (or any) knowledge of this guide's existence.

The Resource Manual for Administrators and Principals Supervising and Evaluating Teachers of Young Children (de Kort-Young et al., 2016) outlines the typical steps for a teacher evaluation. As a supplement, they offer "Guiding Questions for Pre-Observation Conferences Aligned With Standards" (p. 1-2) and "Guiding Questions for Post-Observation Conferences Aligned with Standards" (p. R). These questions are authored by DCDEE and share "helpful links" at the bottom of the page for principals. The questions are not specific to any NC Foundations domains and ask questions aligned to the general North Carolina teaching standards. The only early childhood language used in the guiding questions is the words child and children. These questions could be asked at any level of instruction. One of the links supplied takes you to the NC Pre-K NC BK Specialty Standards Document. This document was approved by the North Carolina State Board of Education in 2009 and attempted to implement some of the NC Foundations domains into B-K licensure standards. These standards do not align with the NCEES standards and are shared in the evaluator resource document in the resources section as a link. The reality is that these NC Pre-K teachers are held to the same standards and evaluations as their K-12 peers, but they are not viewed (or compensated) with parity to their K-12 peers.

How NC Pre-K Teachers fit in the Center of the Nesting Dolls/ Ecosystem

The smallest doll in the center of the matryoshka doll set is held in place by the other dolls, stacked inside each other. The center doll is at the mercy of their placement and security. If the center doll were cracked or broken, one would not see it if they looked at the dolls stacked

together. The center doll is farthest away from the largest dolls when the dolls are assembled. When all dolls are stacked together, the smallest doll must follow where the largest dolls go. If the dolls, all stacked together, are shaken, the center doll shakes the most. I believe that this is the perfect metaphor for what NC Pre-K teachers face.

The macrosystem contains the legislators, culture, laws, and other widely-held societal ideas. The exosystem includes state directors, and though they are subject to the macrosystem, they try to interpret these societal ideas and pass them down to the smaller levels of the ecosystem. Contained in the exosystem is the mesosystem, which houses the district administrators and Pre-K coordinators. They try to interpret the policies handed to them and generate new local policies and procedures for implementing them. The microsystem holds the principal, subject to all local, district, state, federal, social expectations, and policies. The principal observes and evaluates the NC Pre-K teacher, who is at the center of the ecosystem. The NC Pre-K teacher must try to understand and please every stakeholder at every other ecosystem level, though they are farthest removed from those in positions of power. Though the center of the ecosystem seems to be the center of the NC Pre-K universe, they feel the most overwhelmed, overworked, and under-appreciated. We hold teachers more accountable than any other person in the ecosystem, but we don't even know what they are supposed to do or what standards to hold them to. This is a delicate ecosystem. If the center of the ecosystem breaks down, soon the rest of the ecosystem follows. The next chapter includes my discourse analysis of the policies, literature, and interview responses. Organized by ecological system position, I discuss how discourse informs quality within each nested position.

Chapter 5: Discourse Analysis

To analyze how each of the layers of the matryoshka doll fits within the larger discourse structure, I analyze the responses of interview respondents based on the five levels of the nested ecosystem using discourse analysis. To use discourse analysis is to examine language and possibility (Fairclough, 2014). Discourse analysis allows us to explore our unexamined ways of thinking and see what social assumptions are present within words and texts. Each interview respondent is nested within each layer of the ecosystem. Social pressures and assumptions make their comments and understandings of policy possible. The interviews provide more context for the policies and help to reveal discursive notions of quality in policy and practice.

This chapter begins with a discourse analysis of overall policy and interview respondent findings. St. Pierre (2000) reminds us that "Once a discourse becomes 'normal' and 'natural,' it is difficult to think and act outside it. Within the rules of a discourse, it makes sense to say only certain things. Other statements and other ways of thinking remain unintelligible, outside the realm of possibility" (p. 485). Examining interview respondents' words in the context of the discourse of quality helps reveal what can be said about quality. Each layer of the ecosystem will be examined in this section for how discourse is put into practice through words and text. Specifically, I review policies and interviews using St. Pierre's (2000) discursive charge of seeing what is within and outside the "realm of possibility" (p. 485). The way quality is defined (if it is defined) makes certain notions of quality possible and others impossible. This section examines these possibilities and impossibilities through discourse analysis.

The discourse of quality is present frequently in the NC Pre-K policy documents. For example, in one of the central policy governing documents, North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Program Requirements and Guidance (NCDCDEE, 2021), the word quality is used

25 times. Multiple other policy documents refer to this document. Quality is not explicitly

defined anywhere in this 103-page document, but it has numerous hyperlinks to other

documents. Still, the hyperlinked documents have information about quality, such as "What to

Look for in a High-Quality, Literacy-Rich, Inclusive Pre-Kindergarten, and Kindergarten

Learning Environment" (Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.). The Pre-K fiscal and contract

manual refers to this document multiple times. Therefore, though quality is discourse, it is not

defined in the text. One must follow the links and references to other documents to understand

how the authors of this policy understand quality. Also of note in this policy is the sentence,

"The NC Pre-K Program is designed to provide high-quality educational experiences to enhance

school readiness for eligible four-year-old children" (p. 1-1). This sentence is used in many other

policy documents but is never cited, and high-quality is not defined. My dialogue in response to

this question is the same question I asked throughout many other policy documents: "What

constitutes high-quality educational experiences?"

The statement "high-quality educational experiences" (NCDCDEE, 2021, p. 1-1)

articulates what is possible and valued in NC Pre-K. The assumption is that the reader knows

what high-quality educational experiences look like and can identify, evaluate, and implement

them in practice. Individual policies and stakeholders define and consider these high-quality

educational experiences differently. I believe that reality is a social construct, and quality is

understood differently based on one's experiences and nested position. What a high-quality

educational experience looks like to someone who favors unstructured, play-based learning will

look much different than someone with a more traditional, academic-focused mindset. The

interpretation of these statements makes the difference in evaluation and practice.

Evaluation is also subject to socially constructed interpretation. NC Pre-K teachers are evaluated based on quality rating scales (e.g., the star-rated license rating system, ECERS-R). I examined the ECERS-R environmental rating system to see how the authors define the quality that the instrument intends to assess. According to the North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project (2020), "A Guide to the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Environment Rating Scale Assessment Process (ECERS-R)" quality is only mentioned once. The mention is related to the assessment report shared with the program's DCDEE child care consultant after the facility's assessment: "NC Pre-K Site Administrators and Teachers may use the results to determine if, and to what extent, program improvements are needed to maintain environment quality or improve certain program components" (p. 1). From this document, quality means environment quality. How do the authors define environment quality or assess either one? Examining social assumptions related to quality as discourse problematizes (Bacchi, 2016) the words used in the policies.

Another noteworthy finding from the policy analysis is that it took me months to search for a clear definition of quality within NC Pre-K policy documents. If NC Pre-K teachers are held to quality standards, why is it so hard to find a definition of quality? As a dissertation researcher, I spent my time and energy reading all 170 policy documents to find a definition. I do not believe that many NC Pre-K teachers have the time and energy to do this. Though different stakeholders may define quality differently, teachers must know how their evaluators consider quality and what quality indicators they are evaluating in NC Pre-K teachers' classrooms. Quality evaluations in practice have real consequences. Yet, we do not have clear quality indicators within the NC Pre-K policy documents.

Next, I attempted to clarify how quality is defined by those charged with evaluating NC Pre-K teachers by reviewing *The Resource Manual for Administrators and Principals Supervising and Evaluating Teachers of Young Children* (de Kort-Young, Lambert, Rowland, Vestal, and Ward, 2016). This manual is a resource for school administrators as they prepare to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers, and it uses the word quality 55 times. Buried within the introduction section and well before the guide for evaluation, there is a section on page 21 that includes essential components of high-quality early learning programs. The elements of a high-quality, DAP ECE program, according to de Kort- Young et al. (2016) include items such as: "Teachers and staff have a comprehensive knowledge of typical as well as atypical patterns of child development and learning…The curricula are whole-child focused and designed to meet the developmental needs of young children (programs include play, hands-on learning" (p. 21). These quality indicators are a good start for evaluators, but even within the list, how would a school administrator know if these things were happening in the classroom? If a school administrator is not trained in early childhood development, they might not know if the classroom environment was designed to meet the "developmental needs of young children" (p. 21). This is the guiding document for school administrators to know what to look for when evaluating NC Pre-K classrooms. It is unclear from the policies and the interviews when they are exposed to this information and training or if they receive any training.

The public school principals are typically charged with evaluating NC Pre-K teachers. To make sense of how NC Pre-K policies are housed under different governing organizations and how policies refer to one another, I created Figure 9. NCDHHS is the responsible organization for the most policies, with fifteen policies published, and has the most quality mentions, at 539. NCDHHS is the primary author of most NC Pre-K documents, which makes sense because

NCDHHS governs NC Pre-K. A subsection of NCDHHS is the early care and education branch,

NCDCDEE. In Figure 9, I grouped the NCDCDEE-authored policies with the NCDHHS policies

for clarity.

Figure 9

All 40 Policies Organized by Authoring Organization
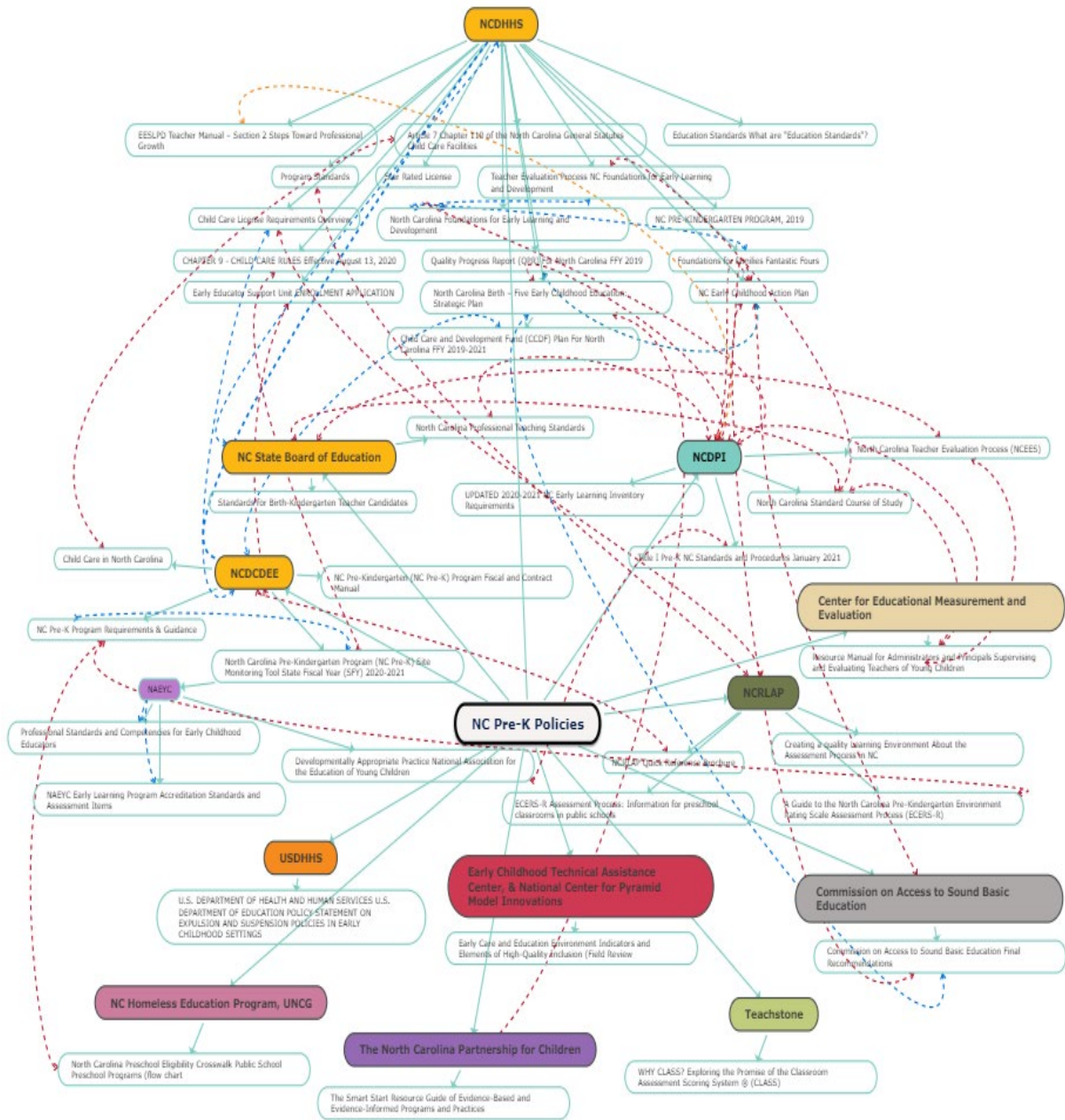
Note: All 40 Policies are organized by authoring organization with visual representations of what policies each policy refers to. Visual representation created by E. West, January 16, 2022, via Mindomo software.

Thirteen different authoring organizations author the 40 policies. NCDHHS oversees NCDCDEE and partnered with the NC State Board of Education for one policy document, demonstrated by the diagram's dotted lines.

Figure 9 demonstrates that many policies authored by many different organizations govern different aspects of NC Pre-K. Many policies refer to other policies. The chart I created shows three different sets of lines. The teal lines connect the organization to the policy. The dotted blue lines connect different policies within the same organization. The red dotted lines connect policies that refer to each other across organizations. The chart demonstrates how interconnected many policies are and how many organizations are connected to other organizations. Some policies refer to other policies and organizations indirectly, through mechanisms such as a link to a Google document within an organization's website that references a different organization.

Figure 9 also demonstrates possibilities and impossibilities regarding NC Pre-K policies within the field of discourse. First, the governance of NC Pre-K is unclear. The leading governing organizations for NC Pre-K, NCDHHS, and NCDCDEE frequently refer to NCDPI and vice versa. Different components of quality within policies refer to other policies from other organizations, and it took me months to be able to connect policy references. These relationships are socially constructed. To understand quality within the larger discourse of NC Pre-K policy is to view the relationships between policy references of quality to other policies. We see in these interconnected relationships that there are multiple and often conflicting organizations and policies all governing NC Pre-K.

After organizing the policies graphically and exploring the connections between them, I also decided to summarize each policy based on its target audience and how it defines quality (if

it defines quality). Some organizations mention quality frequently, such as the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) plan for North Carolina FFY 2019-2021, with 261 mentions of the word *quality.* Other policy documents, such as the Updated 2020-2021 NC Early Learning Inventory Requirements by NCDHHS, do not mention quality. All 40 policy documents govern the NC Pre-K teaching system. To provide a reference to how each policy defines quality, I created a table in Appendix D. While this table is informative, I wanted to visually represent how each policy defines quality (if it does), so I created a word cloud, included in Figure 10. These figures demonstrate that quality is mentioned in the texts multiple times. Of the 40 policy documents analyzed, the word quality is used 1045 times. In many documents, quality is simply mentioned but not defined. Sometimes it is linked to other policy documents and sometimes expressed through a list of quality indicators.

The most frequent quality mentions in the 40 policy documents were referrals to the star rating system, not defined or mentioned at all, or in discussions of teacher experience or developmentally appropriate practice (DAP).

Figure 10

Word Cloud of How Each Policy Defines Quality (If It Defines Quality)

Note: Word cloud of how each policy defines quality (if it defines quality). Word cloud generated January 16, 2022, on https://wordart.com/

The chart and word cloud represent that many policy documents mention quality, but not as many define it within the document. Some link quality definitions to other policy documents and some policies include various quality indicators. The best example of quality defined in a policy document is something created as an informational flier for parents, the North Carolina Child Care Resource and Referral Council (2016)'s "Child Care in North Carolina." This document is published in conjunction with the NCDCDEE and mentions quality 22 times within the document. Of all the policy documents that I read, this document includes the most comprehensive definition of quality. They advise parents to consider quality indicators such as star rating, program license visible, smaller teacher to student ratios, developmentally appropriate practice, positive interactions, and clear communication, little staff turnover, family involvement, a clean and safe environment, and nutritious foods (NC Child Care Resource and Referral Council, 2016, pp. 4-5). This is the first document I have read that uses plain language

to define quality in child care. This is a helpful tool for parents, but it is not intended for principals or NC Pre-K evaluators to use.

The other quality definitions listed in the chart and the word cloud are also telling. First, the most frequent explanation of quality is a lack of definition. NC Pre-K teachers are expected to understand, implement, and be evaluated based on quality, yet many NC Pre-K policies do not define quality. Many policies don't include the word quality or have it in buzzword phrases such as "high-quality education." Many policies tasked with outlining quality fail to define quality at all. This observation harkens back to the discussion that quality is assumed and not necessary to define. Quality is not clearly understood in policy and practice but is contextual. Quality's assumed nature leads many policymakers to omit its definition even in quality governing and evaluation policy documents. Figure 9 demonstrates just how various policies are regarding quality. The varying, jumbled connections exhibited in Figure 9 represent my argument that we cannot assume a universal definition of quality and demonstrate that we cannot even link governing policies coherently for one state organization, NC Pre-K. Reality is socially constructed, and this map of policies demonstrates the variation each socially constructed policy presents.

Adherence to standards is listed as another component of quality in the policies. It is critical to have standards, but many of them are not high-quality. For example, NC Pre-K teachers must follow the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards. Standard three requires teaching to the NC Standard Course of Study that doesn't actually begin until kindergarten. Is failing to adhere to these standards an example of low-quality teaching, or is this an example of a set of standards outside of the realm of possibility for NC Pre-K teachers to demonstrate?

Last, the NAEYC documents and NC Foundations document refers to the importance of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) as an example of quality. The NAEYC Governing Board (2020) asserts in their statement that DAP focuses most on "the decisions early childhood educators make that result in developmentally appropriate practice. It is important to note, however, that educators make these decisions within settings that include their specific programs as well as broader systems, states, and societal contexts" (p. 4). DAP is important in early care and education because it ensures that the child receives education on par with their developmental needs and interests. If those tasked with governing and evaluating NC Pre-K teachers are unfamiliar with or unsupportive of teaching DAP in pre-k classrooms, teachers' ability to implement DAP would also be outside the realm of possibility.

Quality in the Nested Ecosystem

Different layers of the nested ecosystem prioritize various aspects of quality. Based on all thirty interview responses, the most important components of quality within respondents' definitions of quality are children and teachers. Figure 11 demonstrates a frequency count of all of the interview respondents' definitions of quality in NC Pre-K. Of all interview responses, the importance of children, relationships with children, interactions with children, and supporting children were mentioned seventy-one times. The importance of teachers' knowledge, interactions, and their direct influence in the classroom was mentioned forty-four times. The fewest mentions were specific regulations and guidelines with only four mentions and collaborating with families with four mentions.

Figure 11

NC Pre-K Interview Respondents' Definitions of Quality
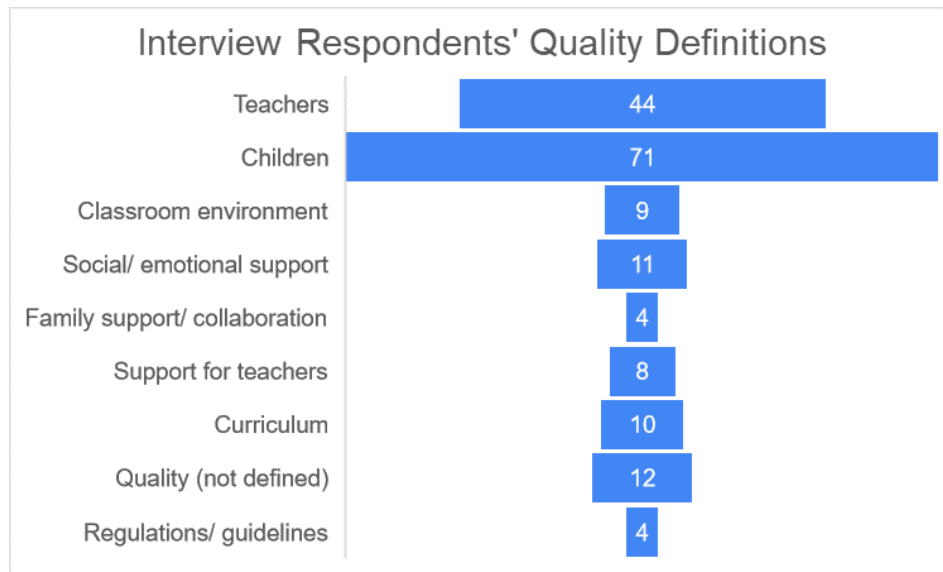
Note: Frequency count of all interview responses and how quality is defined in NC Pre-K. Chart generated by Erin West using Microsoft Excel, April 2, 2022.

Discourse within the nested layer of macrosystem functions through politics, funding policies, negotiation, and shifting priorities of different interest groups. Quality in the macrosystem functions as a collective yet conflicting focus on indicators such as finances, waitlist size, and political agreement on policy enactment.

Discourse allows the legislators to generate the "rules" of NC Pre-K policy, so they must try to be aware of the needs and priorities of the lower levels of the nested ecosystem to frame governing policies. The legislators interviewed view quality as defined by funding and also expect quality from a system funded by multiple funding streams. It is essential to consider the priorities of each funding stream.

Though state directors frequently mentioned legislators as being more in charge of funds, when I asked L1 about funding NC Pre-K, he shared that both DPI and NCDHHS have some responsibility and that the two are "having a power struggle" (L1, personal communication,

October 1, 2021). Both agencies have responsibility for one program. The two agencies are subject to the policies determined by state legislators. State legislators assert that it is the state agencies and not themselves who are locked in a power struggle. Who has responsibility?

Discourse makes certain possibilities for policymakers in policy and makes certain realities possible based on the discursive transmission of policy. Policies reflect multiple and often conflicting meanings created by discourse and enabled by constituency consent. Legislators make decisions based on what they think their constituents want and need. They are subject to external pressures from political interest groups, lobbying groups, budget shortfalls, and other political and social issues. Weedon (1987) expresses the legislators' struggle: "interest groups put a great deal of energy, time and money into promoting certain views of the world" (p. 76). Though the legislators I interviewed are interested in promoting early care and education, the voices they hear most often are the interest groups and lobbying groups. They are engaged in political battles over budgets and legislation. They shape discourse through what policies they support, but they do not often hear from the constituents that the policies directly impact.

The state-level directors have a great deal of knowledge about NC Pre-K. They worked hard to obtain the education and experience necessary to serve at this level of governance. However, their influence is limited when one examines their roles in quality implementation within NC Pre-K. The directors see teachers' challenges reflected in statements such as "nobody cares about what I do," referring to how teachers feel. They argue about the urgency of teaching reading in pre-k so children can read at grade level in third grade. The social processes of authoring, implementing and evaluating quality as they define it is limited within the state directors' ecosystem. The discourse of quality in the exosystem is discussed but not necessarily shared across other nested ecosystem levels.

Examining the words of S1 to the policy discourse sheds light on how NC Pre-K policies work in the nested system. S1 and S2 shared responses that reflect the need to disrupt the policy system, citing the importance of supporting teachers and changing academic standards to ensure better third-grade outcomes. These disruptions to policies are contradictory to some of the policies, such as S1's assertion that children unable to read in third grade is not developmentally appropriate. This assertion challenges many practices shared in the NC Foundations document and represents a contradictory stance about child development in the early years from someone tasked with representing early childhood at the state level. The state directors nested in the exosystem represent the institutions, intellectuals, and knowledge to be shared and disseminated to the rest of the ecosystem. However, they have limited power due to the political nature of the macrosystem that determines most actual policy.

The district administrators and NC Pre-K coordinators identified themselves as the "go-betweens" between state and local policy. Thus, the policy "go-betweens" have the leverage to make policy real within the district. When district administrators and NC Pre-K coordinators try to interpret policy and then craft policy and procedures to implement policies, they are engaged in meaning-making. They are also cogs in the machine of the educational system. They interpret, produce, and then evaluate based on their interpretations. Though the district administrators might have some authority to provide professional development for principals and teachers, they reflect the discursive notion of a lack of power over meaning systems (Bacchi, 2000). District administrators have some authority to generate local policies to enact state NC Pre-K policies. However, they cannot evaluate these policies as enacted in practice. Therefore, their ability to define or assess quality in NC Pre-K classroom practices is limited.

District administrators are the go-betweens. They read the policy, interpret policy, and use limited power to draft local policies. Those charged with understanding and implementing policy are also subject to the shifting, diverse, and contradictory conditions that lead to a wide variety of knowledge of policy documents. The district administrators generate policies but frequently share that they are unaware of how certain aspects of NC Pre-K are run. For example, there was significant variation in how district administrators described principal training to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers. Generating specific policies while being unaware of others represents the in-between nature of this level.

Elementary school principals must interpret and evaluate quality in policy as handed down to them from multiple and often contradictory governing organizations. The language of discourse sheds light on this challenge. One principal shared that NC Pre-K is the "weird cousin" of the school. There is some responsibility for the program but not enough authority to know what to do. What does it mean when principals describe NC Pre-K as a "weird cousin" of the rest of the elementary school? Would the weird cousin be accepted as part of the rest of the school "family" or set aside, hoping that someone else will worry about it? Discourse generates assumptions about value, possibility, and even what is acceptable within the public school.

Principals shared that they are not adequately trained to implement or evaluate NC Pre-K in their buildings. Thus, they learn what to do through this process of indirect learning. However, their quality evaluations still impact NC Pre-K teachers' ability to continue to teach. Their evaluation of how NC Pre-K teachers teach the NC Standard Course of Study, for example, is required as part of the teacher licensure process in North Carolina, even though NC Pre-K is not included in the NC Standard Course of Study. Principals, therefore, have inadequate or absent

training, but their evaluations of NC Pre-K teachers have direct consequences. Multiple and contradictory expectations are housed within the discourse of quality language and expectations.

Teachers fit within the discourse system by taking the discursive expectations of quality shared in policy and the outer layers of the nested ecosystem, combining them with their understanding of quality, and implementing these expectations and knowledge in words and practice. Teachers are enabled by policies and hindered by policies. Policies dictate what can and should be done in their classrooms. In this way, teachers lack the agency to decide what to do.

Some teachers suggested that they do not want their subject positions to be considered childcare workers or babysitters. Teachers sharing frustration with being seen as babysitters reflects social discourse about what it means to be a babysitter. An ethic of care (Noddings, 2013) in ECE is essential. However, teachers want to be viewed as professionals and do not want the diminished reputation of being viewed as *only* babysitters or childcare workers. NC Pre-K teachers are college-educated professionals who are the experts in their classrooms. They want to be viewed as the professionals they are. The language of labeling someone a babysitter is to create an identity for the NC Pre-K teacher in which they can do some things and cannot do others.

Though teachers implement policies through practice, they lack agency to determine what quality should be because they are evaluated by principals, who are unclear about what quality should look like in practice due to a lack of training. Ball et al. (2012) argue that "Policy is done by and done to teachers; they are actors and subjects, subject to and objects of policy. Policy is written onto bodies and produces particular subject positions" (p. 3). NC Pre-K teachers are subjected to unclear and competing discourses about quality in policy, yet they are subjected to the effects of how quality policies are interpreted and evaluated. They are done by the discourse

of policy. Clear and consistent consideration of quality in policy and practice seems outside the realm of possibility, though the intention of policies is uniformity. The NC Pre-K Program Requirements, we are told, "are designed to ensure that a high-quality pre-kindergarten classroom experience is provided for eligible four-year-old children in each local NC Pre-K Program and that, to the extent possible, uniformity exists across the state" (NCDHHS, 2020, p. 1-1). Uniformity is impossible because quality is a social construct, is interpreted differently based on experience, and is contingent upon the ecosystem's nested position.

Teachers within the field of NC Pre-K are done by policy and are doing policy. Discourse opens up new ideas about quality and problematizes (Bacchi, 2016) others. Through policy, literature, and interviews, quality is based on the discursive effects of social positions. Our social assumptions and experiences dictate what can be said and written about quality in NC Pre-K. I will share my concluding thoughts and discussion in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

This dissertation was a journey in pursuit of a word: *quality*. Using critical discourse analysis, I read the word quality 2638 times across the 170 policies identified initially. I narrowed the original 170 policy documents down to 40, and within the 40 policies examined for the dissertation, I read the word quality 1045 times. My pursuit of quality involved analyzing how quality is understood and addressed across the ECE trilemma (Morgan, 1986): availability, affordability, and program and teacher quality. Throughout this critical discourse analysis, I found that quality is mentioned concerning standards, finances, star ratings, classroom environment, teacher interactions, and other quality indicators. Often the word quality is used within a policy but not defined.

What does quality mean, and who decides if it is happening (or not) in NC Pre-K teachers' classrooms? My pursuit of the word *quality* was also a pursuit of how discourse informs quality in policy and practice. Analyzing discourse in policy and practice reflects Montessori et al. 's (2019) discursive process of seeking to "identify the processes by which language (re)produces social practices and helps privilege certain ways of doing, thinking, and being over others. It investigates how language figures in the constitution, contestation, and transformation of social problems" (pp. 1-2). Analyzing the discourses of quality across the trilemma also addressed issues of knowledge and evaluation, though even these meanings are socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Quality has meaning for those it impacts.

I examined quality indicators in 40 NC Pre-K policies and interviewed 30 NC Pre-K stakeholders across the ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b) of the state of North Carolina. Using the theoretical lens of social constructionism and discourse analysis, I compared the policies and interview responses within the ecosystem to the different layers of a matryoshka doll. Social

constructionism as a theoretical framework allowed me to analyze the texts, interviews, and literature for how these ecological systems are nested within the realm of the discourses of quality. Quality is a social construct and contingent based on each person's nested position within the NC Pre-K ecosystem. In writing the interview responses, the dialogue with the policies, and findings from the literature, I found that quality is deeply contextual. Many policy definitions were either unclear, referencing another policy, or missing altogether.

This research demonstrates that quality is a social construct but evaluating quality in NC Pre-K teachers' practice has real and material consequences. Principals shared that they do not feel adequately prepared to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers, and they often lean on the teachers for guidance during the evaluation process. Assuming that some principals take a less collaborative approach to understanding the NC Pre-K teachers' evaluations, teachers are subject to multiple and often unclear expectations. These unclear expectations are reflected in interview participant responses. For example, the first NC Pre-K policy document that principals listed is the facility inspection document. This is an important safety requirement but does not include anything specific to NC Pre-K. Principals refer to documents they are aware of, but their lack of training in NC Pre-K quality and evaluation is concerning.

The further out from the microsystem one travels, the less likely stakeholders are to have a clear understanding of the quality evaluation process in NC Pre-K classrooms. However, the decisions made at the macrosystem and exosystem level directly impact principals in the microsystem, and all outside levels impact NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes, beliefs about teaching and their profession, and how quality is understood and implemented in practice. Teacher respondents shared their frustrations with teaching NC Pre-K and stated that even veteran teachers are leaving the profession. A state director even shared that many teachers feel that

"nobody cares what I do." These feelings represent the multiple and conflicting expectations of NC Pre-K policy and evaluation.

To revisit an essential argument from cultural anthropologist Tobin (2005), "attempts to come up with universal, decontextualized, external standards of quality are conceptually flawed, politically dangerous, and often counter-productive" (p. 425). The discourses and quality standards are not universal, even in one state program. Attempts to generate universal standards using unclear and often contradictory policy documents are unnecessary. Tobin (2002) also reminds us that "The quality standards of earlier eras were not worse, just different" (p. 427). We must remember that quality is a social construct and the product of discourse. Analyzing the discourses of quality across the policies, literature, and interviews helps me see how my hunch about quality can lead to a multi-system, multi-layered analysis of quality across NC Pre-K.

When I began this research with an initial hunch about quality, I asked: What are the discourses of quality in NC Pre-K programs, policies, and practices? My answer is that the discourses of quality in NC Pre-K are multiple and often contradictory, contextual, and contingent based on nested positions within the ecosystem. Policymakers and policy recipients are subject to discourse. Quality mentions in policies are not always translated as quality implementation in practice. Discourse determines how policies are understood, defined, enacted, and evaluated. Quality is nested in the discourse, subject to ever-shifting power relations within each layer of the nested ecosystem.

Stakeholders are positioned within these shifting and often contradictory discourses of quality. My second research question was: How do stakeholders' positions within the nested ecosystem of NC Pre-K policy shape their perspectives of quality in NC Pre-K? Different layers of the nested ecosystem view and define quality in different ways. The macrosystem legislators

used financial and regulatory terms more often when describing quality. In contrast, the nested mesosystem, microsystem, and center used more affective words such as relationships, social and emotional learning (SEL), and caring. These quality definitions are therefore contingent based on position within the nested system. Consequently, quality itself is contingent based on the nested position in the ecosystem.

The outer layers of the matryoshka doll generate the policies that are then implemented and evaluated by the microsystem and center of the doll. This system puts an undue burden on the center of the ecosystem, and NC Pre-K teacher respondents shared many of their concerns in the interviews. Beyond their stated concerns, society is beginning to acknowledge that early childhood educators are the backbone of the economy. Without early childhood educators, many parents cannot participate in the workforce. This position reflects the availability and affordability aspects of the ECE trilemma. However, the turnover rates of ECE teachers are much higher than their K-12 peers because of a societal lack of respect and low wages. An examination of the ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b) interacting together based on social assumptions about power, policy, and quality help to contextualize our understanding of what can be said within the larger field of discourse and what can be pushed against to create change. Quality definitions are contingent based on the nested system position.

My last research question was: How do the discourses of quality in NC Pre-K policies articulate within the ECE trilemma (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987)? The discourses of quality in NC Pre-K must include all three components: availability, affordability, and program and teacher quality. This chapter summarizes my findings with a brief review of the literature and discusses limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research. I begin with a brief discussion on how quality is defined through the ECE trilemma within policies, literature, and interviews.

The ECE Trilemma as NC Pre-K Quality Definition

Pursuing a universally understood and agreed-upon definition was an impossible task as a social constructionist (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). My strategy of examining stakeholders' understanding of quality within each layer of the nested ecosystem represents my pursuit of understanding these multiple realities. Though multiple realities exist and multiple social constructions of quality exist across the nested ecosystem, I did generate three definitions of quality NC Pre-K based on the literature, policy, and practice.

I model my definitions of quality based on Morgan's (1986) and the NAEYC's (1987) description of the early care and education "trilemma," involving quality, availability, and affordability. The quality components included in my categories based on literature, policy, and practice all have parts of this overarching trilemma. Like every other early childhood program, NC Pre-K must be affordable for families and governments. It must be available for families, and teachers must be compensated appropriately to be available to families and students. Quality must reflect teacher qualifications, interactions with students and families, program components such as materials and environment, health, safety, and sanitation. These components combined represent the three sides of the trilemma, and all three sides must be addressed in a definition of quality in NC Pre-K.

Quality Definition

Quality is a social construct, but it has material consequences for NC Pre-K teachers in their evaluations, so we must continue pursuing a comprehensive definition. Fairclough (2014) asserts that "although aspects of the social world such as social institutions are ultimately socially constructed, once constructed they are realities which affect and limit the textual (or 'discursive') construction of the social" (p. 383). Thus, to define quality in NC Pre-K policy and

practice, we must address all three aspects of the trilemma. The whole program falls like a three-legged stool if one ignores one key component. Framing the definition through the trilemma and based on the literature, policy documents, and interviews, quality is defined in program and teacher quality, affordability, and availability for families. Quality includes many essential components within the trilemma. The ECE trilemma contains the elements of availability, affordability, and program and teacher quality. Availability includes aspects such as type and location of care and whether or not children can access the care or if they must wait on long waitlists. Affordability includes parent tuition requirements, staff salaries, and external funding sources. Last, program and teacher quality include teacher experience, education, center accreditation, and environmental quality (Lash and McMullen, 2008, p. 36- 37).

Based on the position within the ecosystem, participants and policies address different components of the trilemma. Many policies address financial aspects of the trilemma, such as teacher compensation and minimum funding structures to address availability for families. Typically, these policies are nested within the macrosystem level of the nested system. Policies and respondents share more program-specific quality measures within the exosystem with a considerable finance discussion. In the middle sections of the ecosystem, respondents discuss more programmatic aspects of the trilemma. Thus, the nested ecosystem fits within the trilemma in the same way that a circle can fit within a triangle. Alternatively, the triangle can fit within the ecosystem. It is impossible to isolate one from the other, as they are nested together. We cannot remove program quality from the triangle, for example, because it is nested within each level of the nested ecosystem. The components are nested within the trilemma, and the trilemma is nested within the ecosystem.

NC Pre-K quality combines all three aspects of the trilemma, nested within each layer of the ecosystem. Program and teacher quality at all levels, availability for families (including positive relationships and open communication), and affordability for organizations to run the programs. To truly incorporate quality and define quality in NC Pre-K, we must include all three aspects of the trilemma at all ecosystem levels. To represent how the interview participants fit within both the nested ecosystem and the ECE trilemma, I created Figure 12.

Figure 12

The ECE Trilemma (Morgan, 1986; NAEYC, 1987) as Demonstrated by Interview Respondents' Positions Within the Nested Ecosystem and Their Role in the ECE Trilemma.
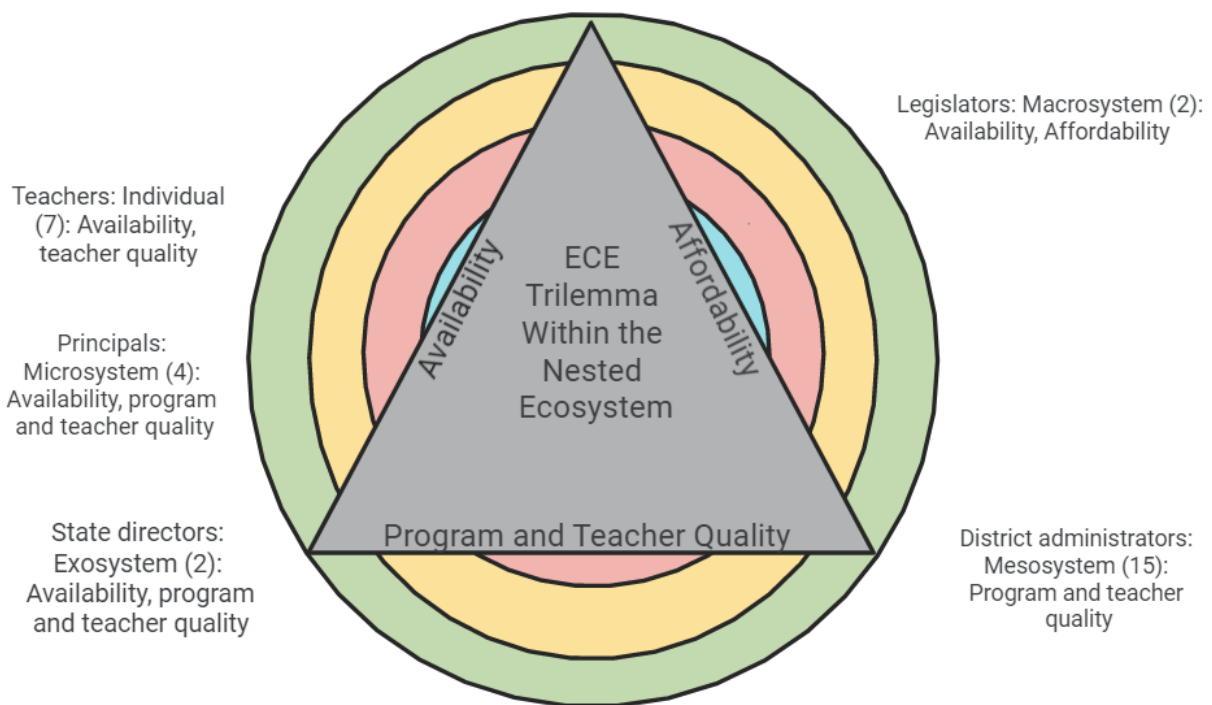
Note: The ECE trilemma and nested ecosystem together with interview participants' positions within each. Image created by Erin West via Google Jamboard, April 7, 2022.

Quality is Availability

For children to reap the benefits of NC Pre-K, they need to attend NC Pre-K. Thus, availability is first. Legislators discuss the importance of expanding programs statewide through

their interview responses, focusing on reducing waitlists. The NC Early Childhood Action Plan addresses this by increasing the percentage of children attending NC Pre-K programs. Parents need available ECE for their children, including NC Pre-K, to go to work. Availability is necessary. However, the multiple and competing agencies and discourses surrounding NC Pre-K make availability unclear: "The NC Pre-K Program is built upon a system of existing local Smart Start partnerships, public school systems, Head Start agencies, and other entities that demonstrate the ability to provide high-quality pre-kindergarten services for eligible four-year-old children" (North Carolina Pre-K Program Requirements and Guidance, p. 2-1). When multiple systems interact, availability can decrease due to competing priorities. The bystander effect (Darley and Latane, 1968) kicks in. Multiple and competing perspectives and voices present in the ecosystem lead individuals to reduce their feelings of personal responsibility to act. If one organization shifts its priorities, it creates a ripple effect that impacts the abilities of the other organizations to provide the same service. Too many hands in the pot make it tricky to know what the actual recipe is and who is responsible for each component. Too many cooks in the kitchen make it hard to reach the pot altogether.

Another aspect of availability is teacher availability. Multiple respondents shared their concerns about teacher morale and teacher turnover. Even state-level directors assert that teachers feel that "nobody cares about what I [teachers] do" (S2, personal communication, November 10, 2021). Availability is teachers remaining in the classroom. Morale must improve for teachers to stay in the profession.

Availability also means teachers with adequate training and administrative support because respondents argue it's "a really challenging thing for K-3 teachers to do what they think is quality because they often don't get the level of support and there's a pushback, especially if

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you don't have a principal who wants to be a principal in the elementary school" (A6, personal communication, August 27, 2021). Availability also means being paid well enough and trained adequately to provide quality care. As a district administrator shared, "You can't give out what you don't have yourself" (A5, personal communication, August 27, 2021) regarding teacher pay and support. These components are essential to providing quality in NC Pre-K.

I found the availability component missing from many policy documents and interview responses. Still, it is discussed in the "Child Care in North Carolina" guideline for parents published by the North Carolina Child Care Resource and Referral Council (2016). This document recommends specific quality indicators when choosing a child care program and includes availability indicators of staff: "Consistent supervision of children; Each staff member is responsible for the same children each day. Well-trained, dedicated staff; Staff has education and training in child development and early education. The program has little staff turnover" (p. 1). As a quality component of the NC Pre-K trilemma, availability must be addressed not just of programs but of staff, administration, and how consistent teachers are with providing care.

Availability includes frequent communication and collaboration with families, and many policies, articles, and interview responses reference this collaboration with families. This communication would ideally be an equal partnership, where families are also available for cooperation and stay in open contact with the school. Families are also nested within the larger community, so schools should be accessible and collaborative within the larger community as well. Availability also needs to address mesosystem and exosystem components such as expanding access for more families, providing transportation to and from school, and providing more than the current 6 ½ hour daily NC Pre-K schedule. Families need full-time care for their children if they engage in full-time work. Many families (mine included) could not participate in

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the workforce full-time due to a lack of available ECE. If we want to ensure that children are participating in quality NC Pre-K, we must ensure that we account for the timing and logistics of NC Pre-K. Thus, availability leads to the second side of the trilemma: affordability.

Quality is Affordability

NC Pre-K must be available for children, but it must also be affordable for families, states, and districts. Multiple interview respondents discussed the importance of expanding funding for NC Pre-K for "full day, full year, and full cost" (A5, personal communication, August 27, 2021). Partial funding from multiple funding streams leads to significant budget shortfalls. As of 2019, NC Pre-K was only enrolling 47% of eligible four-year-old students at an average of 10% of total family income (NC Early Childhood Action Plan, 2019, p. 32). Though policy documents applaud the multiple funding sources combined to run NC Pre-K, this combination falls too far short of the NC Early Childhood Action Plan's goal of 75% enrollment. President Biden's Build Back Better Plan (2021/ 2022) initiative discusses the need for universal pre-K. However, the federal government has not succeeded in passing this legislation through law.

Part of affordability has to focus on government affordability. State legislators in the macrosystem must advocate for additional funding and listen to the constituents within the nested systems to convince stakeholders and constituents to increase funding. The legislators I interviewed discussed funding at length, and L1 alluded to the idea that only legislators who serve on finance committees have authority and leverage within the state government. Funding legislation is stalled due to a lack of agreement between political parties (L1, personal communication, October 1, 2021). L2 spoke about budget and affordability and his role in trying

to reduce waitlist sizes for NC Pre-K, budget negotiations, and increasing teacher salary through the enhanced early childhood workforce bill (which he admitted failed to pass in the NC Senate).

Another major issue surrounding the affordability of NC Pre-K in North Carolina is the Leandro (Leandro v. State, 346 N.C. 336, 354, 488 S.E. 2nd 249, 259 1997) lawsuit. L2 discussed the "constitutional crisis" facing the three branches of the North Carolina government related to the Leandro court ruling (Leandro v. State, 346 N.C. 336, 354, 488 S.E. 2nd 249, 259 1997). The court ruled that students are not receiving a "sound, basic education" (WestEd, 2019) based on insufficient funding structures. The governor organized a Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education in 2017 to share recommendations with legislators. The commission published its findings in 2020 and included multiple financial recommendations, including early care and education funding. The commission recommended the state should determine an "adequate level of funding in order to provide a sound basic education to every student, accounting for individual student needs, the concentration of high-needs students in schools and LEAs, and the importance of high quality early childhood education" (Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education, 2020, p. 4). Affordability includes students according to their recommendations, but it also includes teachers. Affordability means teachers can afford to live and work in North Carolina, which would involve "the state should set and maintain a robust statewide salary schedule that is sufficient to attract and retain high quality educators in districts throughout the state" (Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education, 2017, p. 4).

Even though NC Pre-K does not get adequate funding for the enrollment goals set by the NC Early Childhood Action Plan, legislators are aware of how budgetary shortfalls impact teachers. Quality must involve government affordability *and* teachers' ability to live and provide quality educational programming. Funding is essential, but the last part of the quality trilemma is

the aspect most discussed throughout the literature, policies, and interviews: program and teacher quality.

Quality is Program and Teacher Quality

The third side of the early care and education trilemma is quality. Since I am working to define quality, this side includes two components: teacher quality and program quality. Program quality comprises nutrition, health and sanitation, safety, curriculum, and screening assessments. Quality includes classroom materials that must be available both inside and outside and the daily schedule of the NC Pre-K classroom. Many of these items are included in policies and are evaluated using the ECERS-R assessment (NCRLAP, 2020). Children need a safe and healthy classroom environment. Educators need the structure and support based on program quality standards to provide these things. Program quality is essential.

Policies dictate program quality components. Assessments clarify how many materials are needed and how often they should be used. Inspection requirements such as health and sanitation are crucial, especially during a global pandemic. We must keep our children healthy and safe. These items are included in part of the US State Department's (2017) list of quality indicators: "Many varied age-appropriate materials and activities within the children's reach; A healthy and safe environment for children; Nutritious meals and/or snacks" (US State Department, 2017, p. 4). Health and safety are paramount in any program.

When asked about NC Pre-K specific quality components, many interview respondents shared that teachers are the most critical part. Specifically, district administrators listed quality instruction, highly qualified teachers (bachelor's degree, licensed, professional development in early care and education), and teachers paid with parity to K-12 teachers as essential quality elements. The current quality assessment used in NC Pre-K, the star-rated license, assesses

quality via teacher education and experience, classroom environment through the ECERS-R (NCRLAP, 2020), and an additional quality point.

What specific aspects of teacher quality are included in my definition of quality? Based on the literature (Barnett 2003; de Kort-Young et al., 2016), teachers should have at least a bachelor's degree and have early childhood training or licensure with ongoing training and professional development in early care and education and child development. Teachers must know what and how to teach, so their ECE education and training are central when discussing teacher quality. Strong knowledge of child development is essential for teacher quality in NC Pre-K. This assertion is echoed in the North Carolina Foundations document and many interview responses. According to DCDEE (2018), "Teachers are required to continuously implement instructional practices that align with NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development, in their classroom environment to support the developmental needs of all children" ("Teacher Evaluation Process," 2018, p. 1). Teachers must have a strong knowledge of child development to support children's developmental needs.

Teacher quality also includes interactions with students and families. Many respondents and policies address the importance of being warm, nurturing, comforting, engaging, and fun. These indicators reflect the affective measures necessary to build and maintain positive relationships. Relationships are also central in the frequent mentions of ratios within policies. Teachers cannot maintain close, warm, nurturing relationships if they are overwhelmed with the number of students in their classrooms. Part of The North Carolina Pre-K Program Requirements and Guidance (2020) is the assertion that maintaining a 1:9 staff to child ratio is part of nationally accepted early learning benchmarks for measuring quality (NCDHHS, 2020, para. 2). Smaller ratio requirements are essential for maintaining relationships and knowing students to

teach and assess them. However, ratios are also part of the other sides of the trilemma: availability and affordability. Smaller ratios mean more teachers must be hired to meet the ratio requirements, or fewer students can enroll in the program. To have an educated, caring teacher in the classroom, we must address all three sides of the trilemma.

Analysis - Literature Links

Using the lens of discourse analysis within the larger framework of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) allows me to investigate meanings as written and analyze possible assumptions. My pursuit of quality within NC Pre-K policy was an adventure in discourse. Based on the literature, policies, and interviews, I define quality by its role within the three sides of the early childhood trilemma: quality, availability, and affordability. The networks of discourse house the three sides of the trilemma. This section outlines how I describe quality in these three ways.

Policies involving quality are contextual. When using a social constructionist lens to examine the discourse of quality within these policy documents, we must not forget the contexts in which they were written and their intended audience. The matryoshka dolls help frame the context for each policy and its implementation within NC Pre-K. Gee and Handford (2012) share that "Any aspect of context can affect the meaning of an (oral or written) utterance" (p. 4). Context is subjective, and therefore, quality definitions are contextual. Context is specific to the needs of the individual and their social construction of reality.

A policy is done by and done to NC Pre-K teachers within the larger discourse. Policy in NC Pre-K is written outside the realm of the classroom by people who do not usually see how it gets enacted in classroom practice. An interview respondent said, "too many people have their hands in the pot" of policy creation. Still, I argue that not enough people have their hands in the

pot of teacher support, observation, and evaluation. We write the policies and assume that their meaning is universal to all, and then criticize the teacher when they fall short of the policy's intended purpose. Many of the policies written are actually in conflict with one another, and many of the policies contradict each other.

Addressing the Gaps

Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) ecological systems theory is frequently taught in undergraduate programs, so teacher education candidates understand the multiple systems children encounter and how they impact their lived experiences. When reading about this theory in undergraduate elementary education textbooks, we often see a child's picture in the center of the circles. In my discussion of the ecological system, children were absent. It was the NC Pre-K teacher in the center. Why? Children should be (and are) the customers and clients of the NC Pre-K program. Policies imagined, interpreted, enacted, and evaluated are indirectly aimed at children's educational and personal lives. We enact health and safety policies, for example, to keep children healthy and safe while they are in our care. I do not omit children from my argument. Instead, I keep NC Pre-K teachers at the center of the debate because they are the ones closest to the children and most able to influence children's academic and emotional well-being. Everything I do in my career and academic pursuits is because I have a deep respect for children. Children are my focus and why I chose to pursue a doctorate in educational leadership. Their story is missing from the interviews but is very present in my academic and career pursuits.

The word *quality* is an educational buzzword, ever-present in educational policy. It is part of the educational macrosystem because it is part of the cultural discourse. I found numerous examples of how quality is assumed, contextual, and contingent based on nested position. I also found that the interview respondents' definition of quality differs from the policies. Figure 13

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shows the policies' definitions of quality on the left and the interview respondents' descriptions of quality on the right. This figure represents that the policies and respondents have very different considerations of quality. Policies often discuss standards and star ratings or do not define quality. Respondents share traits such as meeting children's needs, teachers, family engagement, and emotional skills in their definitions of quality. The focus of policies based on quality definitions differs from the focus of policy recipients.

Figure 13

Word Art to Represent How Policies Define Quality, Left, and How Interview Respondents Define Quality, Right

Note: Word cloud of policies' definition of quality (left) versus interview respondents' definition of quality (right). Word clouds generated on https://wordart.com/create

The word clouds also represent the socially constructed nature of policy, quality, and implementation in NC Pre-K. Stakeholders must interpret policies about quality elements in NC Pre-K, and the side-by-side word clouds demonstrate the large variation in interpretations. Interview participants were more likely to include specific people, such as teachers and children, in their quality definitions. The policies were more likely to include standards, ratings, or no definitions at all. This difference also demonstrates that the discourses of quality are interpreted and implemented differently from policy to practice.

What's Missing?

My search for quality in policy and practice revealed some items that need to be discussed. In discourse analysis, following assumptions, words, and practices help the researcher see what else might be missing in the pursuit of a concept. Thus, my strategy of concentrated looking helped me see not just what is written, but the discursive assumptions present within policies and interviews. Tobin (2005) cautions us that "it is intellectually and methodologically unsound to attempt to understand another people's cultural practices using the assumptions and categories of one's own culture" (p. 425). Examining how others consider quality within the ecosystem helps us expand our own assumptions. Many NC Pre-K policies examine regulatory items such as teacher and student ratios, the ECERS-R environmental assessment, and education requirements to be a lead teacher. These items represent aspects of the ECE trilemma but miss the relationship support needed to maintain teachers' sense of well-being and ignore the importance of care within the caregiving profession. Seeing what these policies emphasize reveals what is not emphasized: care and caregiving. We must understand that teachers are the caregivers, but we must empathize with their struggles.

Care

I believe that the main component missing from NC Pre-K policy and practice is an overarching discourse not on quality but on care and caregiving. Care is quality. Part of care is empathy. Noddings (2013) asserts,

> Apprehending the other's reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring. For if I take on the other's reality as possibility and begin to feel its reality, I feel, also, that I must act accordingly; that is, I am impelled to act as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other. (p. 16)

Any aspect of quality within the broader conversation of NC Pre-K must include caring for teachers so they can provide better care for their students. Empathizing with stakeholders across the different layers of the nested ecosystem will also help to build an understanding of how others consider quality in NC Pre-K.

We must center care on all levels of the NC Pre-K nested ecosystem. Caring for self and others is one of the foundational skills necessary for human existence. Self-care is within some of the curriculum, such as handwashing and basic hygiene practices. We include care in nutritional standards and allude to care in our social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. We address care in teaching developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) when assessing children's developmental growth across the continuum of care. Noddings (2013) urges that "The commitment to act on behalf of the cared-for, a continued interest in his reality throughout the appropriate time span, and the continual renewal of commitment over this span of time are the essential elements of caring from the inner view" (p. 16). Care must include advocating for the needs and interests of NC Pre-K teachers, students, families, and stakeholders.

Society

Part of the macrosystem that I did not discuss is society at large. How does society view NC Pre-K teachers? Many respondents shared a desire for universal pre-k. If this desire came to fruition, many more children would attend school at a much earlier age. Part of the North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan (2019) is to increase enrollment from 47% to 75% by 2025. The action plan asserts that cross-sector collaboration is the key to this success, but I believe that our current cross-sector collaboration is not working. There are too many competing sectors, and the NC Pre-K teachers and families are suffering. We need one unified system with consistent funds to provide universal pre-k for all families in North Carolina. When the

NCDHHS 2019 action plan proudly shares the data that there is a $2 to $4 return on every $1 invested in early care and education, it makes sense financially and academically to promote universal pre-k.

If North Carolina adopted a universal pre-k program, that would require a significant increase in NC Pre-K teachers and staff. If NC Pre-K teachers have the same university training and teaching licensure as their K-12 peers, this would require a significant increase in the number of early childhood (B-K) teacher education candidates in the university systems. Are universities equipped to handle such an increase? Are high school students encouraged to attend college and major in early care and education at the moment? When high school students and parents know that a career in early care and education will most likely lead to a life of poverty-level wages paired with high student loans, the future looks bleak for the profession. We must, as a society, revamp the image of early care and education and pay them as the professionals they are.

Recommendations

Through my discourse analysis, review of the literature, and interviews, I found that many NC Pre-K stakeholders are not living the practices outlined in our policies. Even the child-centered NC Foundations document asserts that its role is to prepare children for kindergarten. What does it mean to be ready for kindergarten? Many interpret readiness as solely academic readiness. This academic preparation seeps down from the outer layers of the ecosystem. Even the state directors, well-versed in early childhood development, share that it's developmentally inappropriate if a child can't read in the third grade. Multiple and conflicting perspectives within the nested system leads to multiple and contradicting policy implementation expectations. We must remember the Tennessee pre-k study (Lipsey, Farran & Durkin, 2018) as a cautionary tale

within the broader context of care and empathy. Focusing too much on academics too soon can lead to negative school success later in life.

Centering Care

Caring for children must include meeting their developmental needs, allowing them to play, and providing quality across all aspects of the ECE trilemma. I believe that care is missing from the current quality conversation, and therefore, including it as central is my first recommendation. We must provide care in salary increases, professional development, supportive and trained administrators, and adequate materials. All aspects of the ECE trilemma are involved within the discourse of care. We need to listen to teachers instead of simply pushing more and more policies down at them from the outer layers. Classroom quality improves when there is a positive organizational climate (Dennis & O'Connor, 2010). Teachers must care and be cared for.

In addition to improving and addressing care throughout the NC Pre-K system, I believe that there are other essential components to address to strengthen NC Pre-K as a whole. This section includes my recommendations based on the interviews, policies, analysis, and literature.

Principal Training

One of the biggest challenges to NC Pre-K teacher evaluation quality and equity is the training of principals. Elementary school principals are charged with observing, evaluating, and supporting NC Pre-K teachers, with very little training or support. This is such a big problem statewide that the Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education. (2020), the organization tasked by Governor Cooper to give their recommendations to the state of North Carolina based on the Leandro ruling (1994), weighed in on the issue. They argue that North Carolina should provide "professional development for effective leadership for early learning. This

recommendation should align with Commission recommendations on principals, with an emphasis on the specific needs in elementary school" (p. 17). Based on interviews and these findings, we must improve conditions and training for teachers and principals.

Elementary school principals face enormous amounts of pressure. They must evaluate NC Pre-K teachers when they frequently do not have the necessary training, preparation, or experience. There is a great deal of research regarding the importance of the principal in leading and improving the educational outcomes of students in their buildings (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Shue et al., 2012; & Bish, Shore, & Shue, 2011). Research also reflects the need for additional training and professional development for principals to monitor, support, and evaluate Pre-K programs in their schools (Heikka et al., 2019). These challenges are not unique to North Carolina but are occurring worldwide. If the center and the microsystem are unprepared, what must be done to improve the quality of NC Pre-K programs for students?

Darling-Hammond et al. (2010) argue that "principals are now regarded as central to the task of building schools that promote powerful teaching and learning for all students, rather than merely maintaining the status quo" (p. 4). Principals carry the weight of the outer layers of the ecosystem without having the full training, preparation, and experience necessary to ensure the success of these expectations. Many respondents shared that teacher education and experience are essential components of a quality NC Pre-K program. I argue that both teachers and principals need more training and professional development to improve classroom teaching, learning, and classroom environment. This recommendation is shared by Barnett (2003), who recommends stakeholders "Encourage higher education institutions to develop the faculty and programs required for the professional development of early childhood teachers" (p. 1). Though

Barnett is specifically discussing teachers, I believe this recommendation is sound for principals due to the frustrations voiced by multiple stakeholders within the ecological system.

Communication Across the Ecosystem

I believe that every level of the ecological system needs to listen to every other level. This dissertation is, if nothing else, a plea for stakeholders to open up their layer of matryoshka dolls and try to listen to the needs and ideas of the other dolls within the nested system. Listening improves empathy, which is a critical aspect of care. Communication allows stakeholders the ability to share their "stories in a way that can push open, and push forward, shared spaces of imagination and hope" (Miller, 2017, p. 190). Multiple competing organizations with multiple stories and priorities govern our pre-k system. People on the outside think they know what needs to happen for the system to go well. Still, when you listen to the people working with our children at the center of the ecosystem, they feel ignored, overwhelmed, and leave the profession. We must address the issues system-wide to preserve the entire ecosystem's health. We must care for the caregivers. We must support and protect our teachers. They have been through enough, especially in this time of political discord and the global COVID-19 pandemic.

We must try to understand the contexts of each policy and how our personal, contextual understanding might muddle the message for the other members of the NC Pre-K ecosystem. We think we understand what everyone else is supposed to do. When you look at all of the moving pieces and parts of simply trying to get to the root of one word, *quality*, the meanings are very contextual, missing, or specific to one area and not to the program. Foucault (1994/1981) warned us about this when he argued that "easy understanding and easy dismissal are both careless" (p. 478). People have a lot of different ideas about what NC Pre-K should look like within policy

and in practice. Examining the contextualization and discourse of policy intentions and policy implementation helps shed light on the system as a whole.

Consolidation of NC Pre-K Governing Organizations into One

Next, I believe there needs to be one governing organization for NC Pre-K policy, evaluation, and teacher licensure. Principals and teachers are overwhelmed by the multiple and competing expectations of NCDHHS and NCDPI. Teachers in Pre-K through 12 are expected to meet the expectations of NCDPI, but NCDHHS technically governs NC Pre-K. The dominant voice in training is NCDPI. NC Pre-K needs to have a more robust governance structure in NCDHHS, or NCDPI needs to take over all aspects of NC Pre-K. This change would be a challenge because NCDPI's budget is considerably smaller than NCDHHS for NC Pre-K, and it would have to adopt a separate set of standards for NC Pre-K teachers. Ideally, these standards would come from the North Carolina Foundations Task Force and mandate developmentally appropriate practice. Budgets would need to be expanded for NCDPI in order to make this merger possible. Principals would need additional training at the graduate level and within school districts to conduct fair and thorough evaluations of NC Pre-K teachers based on clear standards.

Moving from Cross-Sector Governance to Successful Collaboration

Cross-sector collaboration is necessary to cross the boundaries of the matryoshka ecosystem and begin to understand how policies inform practice at every level of NC Pre-K. However, cross-sector collaboration is ineffective when it results in cross-sector governance. This is what NC Pre-K is seeing now with NCDHHS, the NC Child Care Commission, and in many ways, NCDPI all governing various aspects of the NC Pre-K program. One governing organization, with one set of governing standards for teacher evaluation and classroom

evaluation, who also maintains the budget for the entire program would help eliminate the bystander effect that I believe is currently happening and ensure that every level of the matryoshka ecosystem knows what is expected and how every level considers quality in NC Pre-K.

To resolve the issue of NC Pre-K teachers being evaluated on teaching to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, I believe that the North Carolina Foundations Task Force should work with NCEES to create a separate and developmentally-appropriate NC Pre-K teacher evaluation instrument. This would ensure that NC Pre-K teachers are evaluated for the content they actually teach and developmentally appropriate content. Suppose this is not feasible due to limited resources. In that case, NC Pre-K teachers should not be held accountable for teaching Standard Three in the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, as the curriculum does not apply to NC Pre-K.

Additionally, though many stakeholders across North Carolina complain about the limitations of the QRIS system and specifically NCRLAP's ECERS-R assessment, it is still the mandatory classroom environment assessment for all NC Pre-K teachers. Even within the action plan, recommendations focus more on increasing enrollment in 4 and 5-Star Rated programs than overhauling the actual star-rated NCRLAP program. To quote a respondent, "people have too much skin in the game" to want to change their ways.

Update the QRIS Evaluation Instrument

I believe that improving the QRIS star-rated license assessment is necessary to improve the actual quality of NC Pre-K. NC Pre-K teachers must maintain 4 or 5 stars to maintain their licensure. In addition to teacher observations and yearly evaluations conducted by the school principal, the NCRLAP organization evaluates the NC Pre-K teacher using the ECERS-R

evaluation instrument. Ishimine and Tayler (2013) argue that "Cross-sectional data collection, which include ECERS-R, also limit opportunities to explore details of staff/teacher intentions and practice in the classroom" (p. 279). An example of this is that the ECERS-R results go to the NC Child Care Consultant with NCDCDEE. Results are then shared with the center director, and the star-rated license scores are published publicly. Are results used with teachers to actually improve practice? Getting the assessment completed and published takes multiple steps, multiple organizations, and the posted license looks more like a subjective public review than any actual quality assessment. I believe that the QRIS star-rated licensing instrument should be revamped to include elements of care such as positive and nurturing relationships and should be more than a simple check-box evaluation system. There should be extensive training for principals, NCRLAP assessors, and site directors to understand children's developmental needs, and the new instrument should focus more on meeting these needs.

Though the QRIS is the mandatory evaluation system for NC Pre-K, teachers are also subject to the NCEES teacher evaluation system. These agencies often conflict with expectations, and principals must understand the expectations of both. Additionally, combining agencies into one single governing organization would help to eliminate some of these conflicts and help to streamline the policy expectations for NC Pre-K.

While part of the star-rated license score includes teacher education, we must support teachers financially for them to improve their education levels. Poverty-level wages do not support enhanced education levels because additional training and degrees are expensive and time-consuming. I believe that teacher education is an essential element of teacher quality, and researchers confirm this (Barnett, 2003; de Kort-Young et al., 2016). Teachers' education should be a component of quality in NC Pre-K. However, we must make this education more affordable

and provide desirable wages. We must improve training for principals and all NC Pre-K assessors, including more comprehensive quality indicators in NC Pre-K teachers' evaluation instruments.

Re-centering the Importance of Play

Another recommendation is re-centering play in NC Pre-K. Though some state and district directors emphasize academic preparation as the most important, multiple research studies support the importance of play in children's academic success later in life (Gibbons, 2007; Stagnitti et al., 2016; Stringer, 2018). Stagnitti et al. (2016) found that "in addition to improving play skills and narrative language ability, the play-based curriculum also had a positive influence on the acquisition of grammar" (p. 390). Play allows children to strengthen their oral language skills, learn abstract thinking, improve self-regulation, and practice social skills necessary for later academic success (Stringer, 2018). De-emphasizing play leads to disastrous results, as the Tennessee pre-k study demonstrates (Lipsey, Farran, & Durkin, 2017). Any examination of quality is insufficient without including the needs of the child. To improve pre-k outcomes, Kamenetz (2022b) asserts, "We might actually get better results… from simply letting little children play" (p. 1). Any quality standards for young children must not ignore children's developmental needs, such as the need to play. NC Pre-K should not just be a mini-kindergarten or academic preparation boot camp. This recommendation to re-center play contradicts the argument that Pre-K should center on kindergarten (academic) readiness. Children need care, and they need play. They need positive environments where they are safe, engaged, and comfortable.

Increased Funding for NC Pre-K

According to my recommendations, improving NC Pre-K involves increased funding, which is an expensive investment. However, every NC Pre-K teacher who quits the profession due to frustration and burnout is expensive. From where would the funding come? Budgets could shift. Consolidating governing agencies into one would streamline funding for NC Pre-K. COVID-19 relief funds could be utilized. Personnel could change from one organization to another. State legislators could listen to stakeholders and fully fund the Leandro budget. If NC Pre-K is housed under the full governance of NCDPI, would this require NC Pre-K teachers to be paid with parity to their K-12 peers? Would our society accept a public education system that fully accepts and embraces pre-k as part of the system? This, I believe, is one of the most significant issues. Barnett (2003) shares this concern:

> Research confirms that preschool teacher quality is strongly linked to compensation. Poor pay and benefits make it difficult to recruit and hire professionally-qualified early education teachers. In addition, poor compensation contributes to high turnover, which harms educational quality and wastes the resources spent on teacher preparation and continuing education.' We stand to lose far more in educational benefits than we save by underpaying preschool teachers (p. 3).

Cutting corners financially upfront is costing society much more in the long run. Caring for caregivers is a worthwhile investment because it helps heal the ecosystem's center and strengthens the entire nested system.

What might have started as a simple search for a word has become much more extensive. Seeking a definition of quality in policy and practice includes seeking answers for overworked and overwhelmed teachers and parents. We must empathize. We must care. If we want true

quality in NC Pre-K, we must address all three aspects of the trilemma: quality, affordability, and availability.

Limitations

I originally planned to interview all NC Pre-K stakeholders via Zoom. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, I could not secure as many Zoom interviews as initially planned. Teachers, in particular, responded to my recruitment emails stating that they lacked time to participate in Zoom interviews. Therefore, I adapted the original plan and allowed participants to answer the interview questions via Google Form. This also explains why some of the responses are more limited and less conversational in tone. Google Forms are a helpful option to gain information, but Zoom responses are more conversational in nature.

COVID-19

As of the writing of this dissertation, our society is still struggling with the COVID-19 global pandemic. What began in March 2020 has evolved to the spring of 2022 as an unsettled, unhealthy reality. We live in a time of forced quarantines, mask mandates, sickness, and uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While writing this dissertation, my entire family and I had COVID-19. I had no childcare for my young children, so I spent many late nights, early mornings, and stolen hours during my children's playtime writing. My interviews were hard to get because people across the state are all struggling with the same things that I am. Every day we heard the news of family members dying, schools closing, new illnesses, and political unrest. We live in uncertain times, all trying to do our best. We are trying to survive. Just the timing of this study limits it in some ways.

I also wanted to complete all of my interviews via Zoom or in-person. Due to social distancing requirements from COVID-19, that didn't happen. Many email recipients declined my

interview request because they were overwhelmed and overworked. I was proud to complete 11 Zoom interviews, one email interview, and 18 Google form interviews. The change in interview format was not my original approach, but when life happens, you must pivot.

Last, this study examined one part of the larger ECE world: NC Pre-K. Many children leave their home environment much earlier in daycare, childcare, or infant and toddler programs. One of the state directors mentioned needing additional research and resources for infants and toddlers. My study only examined the policies governing NC Pre-K, which is for four-year-old children. I believe that further research on infant, toddler, three-year-old, and other ECE systems is needed to understand better how quality is implemented in policy and practice. This study only examined one year in the life of children in North Carolina. Though pre-k is common nationwide, each state has different standards and expectations. Further research could also examine how a nationwide sample of pre-k programs defines quality in policy and practice.

Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

This study examined the discourse of quality within the conceptual framework of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Reviewing policy within the larger framework of discourse and social constructionism problematizes (Bacchi, 2016) the contexts of these supposed neutral policy frameworks and enactments. We must examine the contexts, assumptions, and actual interpretations of these policies implemented in schools. What are political and social pressures at each ecosystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b)? Why are legislators focused on specific policies and unaware of others? Why are the middle levels of the ecosystem most well-versed in policy information but have the least amount of power to implement policy? Last, why are principals torn between two conflicting policy governance organizations (DPI and NCDHHS) when conducting NC Pre-K teacher evaluations? Why do the

middle ecosystem levels think that principals are trained and equipped to evaluate quality in the NC Pre-K classroom when they readily admit they are not?

As discourse within the framework of social constructionism, quality is always contingent, situated, and contextual. There is no universal definition of quality in NC Pre-K, just as there is no universal definition of quality in the dictionary. Thus, to evaluate quality in policy and practice, one must examine all of the layers of the nested ecosystem, all three legs of the early care and education trilemma, and how they interpret and consider quality based on their experiences and understanding of relations of power. We are all nested in the ecosystem.

Implications

As a mother, early childhood educator, scholar, and advocate for children, my goal is to continue to serve as a champion for teachers, families, and children. If this study serves no other purpose, I want teachers to know that I tried to amplify their voices and respond to their concerns about "nobody cares about what I do" and "nobody listens to me." I am listening. I am working to make sure the powers that be are listening too. Quality matters to every stakeholder, and we need to listen to each other to understand how quality is understood at each level of the nested ecosystem.

Therefore, I wrote this study for multiple audiences. I hope that stakeholders from every level of the ecosystem/nested doll system read the words and struggles from every other level. My goal is to broaden the understanding of how policy is interpreted and evaluated at every ecosystem level. I believe that a research study of this magnitude has the potential to reach a larger audience. I hope to publish findings specific to each ecosystem level so that each audience will understand. I plan to include the words of other level respondents in each published document to try to bridge the gaps between each nested doll. We have to understand the

contextualized nature of everyone else's lived experience. We cannot truly understand how quality is defined unless we genuinely understand the contexts that frame each ecosystem layer.

As mentioned previously, quality is a social construct, but the evaluation of quality in NC Pre-K teachers' classrooms has real and material consequences. Therefore, the investigation of quality considerations at every level of the nested ecosystem is essential in order to better support teachers receiving fair and consistent evaluations. Teachers must know what is expected of them, and right now, the policies informing their practices and evaluations are often conflicting and unclear. With teachers leaving the ECE workforce in such large numbers (Martin, 2022), fair and clear teacher evaluations must be prioritized.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research would expand on and further investigate the stakeholders at each layer of the ecosystem/nested doll. Future research would focus on creating a new, comprehensive quality evaluation tool for NC Pre-K. The other area for future research would focus on improving cross-sector collaboration efforts and expanding NC Pre-K goals within the NC Early Childhood Action Plan (2019). This expansion and collaboration would help stakeholders empathize with other stakeholders, share ideas, and share resources. Future research studies would also include how to increase funding to expand NC Pre-K and address the needs of the ECE trilemma.

These areas: care, principal training, updating evaluation and curriculum standards, increased funding, improving North Carolina's QRIS system to include more comprehensive quality components, and improving the cross-sector collaboration while combining governing organizations, reflect the culmination of my suggestions for future research. To pursue the word *quality* is to follow it through to fruition at every level of the nested ecosystem. Yet, each policy

is context-specific, and there are multiple competing organizations creating, governing, and evaluating quality in policy in NC Pre-K. As an advocate, ECE educator, and parent, my charge is to understand quality better and how it is considered across the ecosystem so that children can hopefully experience quality not just in some abstract policies "out there" but within their daily lives as Pre-K students.

Quality is discourse. There are many terms in ECE that also serve as discourse. Future research could also focus on other discursive terms, such as readiness and kindergarten. Interview respondents asserted the urgency and importance of being "ready for kindergarten" as though everyone knows what it means to be ready. Ready for what, exactly? What is society's expectation of kindergarten, and what does it mean to be ready? With responses focusing on academic skills, my hunch is that many respondents, and perhaps society as a whole, believe that readiness for kindergarten means being prepared academically. We see in the Tennessee pre-k study (Farran & Lipsey, 2016) that a narrow focus on traditional academic preparation in pre-k has negative effects on students' overall school success. What would cultural shifts in the discourse of readiness and kindergarten need to happen in order to change what readiness and kindergarten mean? Future research would focus on changing the dialogue about what it means to be ready for kindergarten and what the goals of kindergarten should be.

To make these improvements, first, we need to know what is happening. We need to understand how people feel about what is happening. We need to listen. We need to read. We need to "think and act relationally" (Apple, 2019, p. 279). We need to prepare principals better and provide them training to understand and evaluate NC Pre-K. We need a more comprehensive evaluation instrument for quality in NC Pre-K. We need to empathize and work across sectors to find a solution that focuses more on actual quality in practice than maintaining the confusing

status quo. If early childhood educators can pivot, policymakers can, too. If it takes a village to raise a child, we must care for the caregivers in every village in North Carolina. We must pay attention to the needs of the children. Our children, our teachers, and our villages deserve better.

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Appendix A: All Policy Documents Read for Dissertation Research

Document
NC Pre-K Program Requirements & Guidance
Title I Pre-K NC Standards and Procedures January 2021
North Carolina Guide for the Early Years Second Edition
North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development
2018-2019 ALLOTMENT POLICY MANUAL
2016 - 2017 ALLOTMENT POLICY MANUAL
NC PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM, 2019
CHAPTER 9 - CHILD CARE RULES Effective August 13, 2020
Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Plan For North Carolina FFY 2019-2021
Quality Progress Report (QPR) For North Carolina FFY 2019
2020-2021 ALLOTMENT POLICY MANUAL
2019-2022 ALLOTMENT POLICY MANUAL Funds Related to Coronavirus/COVID-19
BIRTH – THIRD GRADE INTERAGENCY COUNCIL PROGRESS REPORT
BIRTH-3RD GRADE INTERAGENCY COUNCIL QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT
B-3-Interagency-Council
North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K) Site Monitoring Tool State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2020-2021
North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards
Foundations for families Fantastic Fours
Criteria Report Birth Through Third Grade
Early Educator Support Unit ENROLLMENT APPLICATION
NCPre-K_rule3000October2017
A Guide to the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Environment Rating Scale Assessment Process (ECERS-R)
WHY CLASS? Exploring the Promise of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System ® (CLASS)
UPDATED 2020-2021 NC Early Learning Inventory Requirements
Developmentally Appropriate Practice National Association for the Education of Young Children
The Every Student Succeeds Act Federal Grant Programs STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES MANUAL SUB-GRANTEE MONITORING January, 2017
Child Care License Requirements Overview
North Carolina Preschool Eligibility Crosswalk Public School Preschool Programs (flow chart)

Teacher Evaluation Process NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development
Star Rated License
NC Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Program Fiscal and Contract Manual
Program Standards
Education Standards What are "Education Standards"?
DIVISION OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND EARLY EDUCATION EARLY EDUCATION BRANCH - NC PRE-K PROGRAM EARLY EDUCATOR SUPPORT (EES) UNIT
Early Educator Support Offices at ECU and UNC Charlotte 2020-21 Amendment GUIDELINES AND PROTOCOL
NCRLAP Quick Reference Brochure
ECERS-R Assessment Process: Information for preschool classrooms in public schools
NIEER North Carolina State Profile, 2020
Article 7 Chapter 110 of the North Carolina General Statutes Child Care Facilities
EESLPD Teacher Manual – Section 2 Steps Toward Professional Growth
North Carolina TEACHER EVALUATION PROCESS
North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards
Temporary Assessment Process
Creating a quality Learning Environment About the Assessment Process in NC
Study Costs and Effectiveness Associated with NC Pre-K Slots Session Law 2016-94, Section 12B.4, as amended by Measurability Assessments/Budget Technical Corrections, Session Law 2016-123, Section 5.4
The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects
Effects of the Tennessee Prekindergarten Program on children's achievement and behavior through third grade
BRIDGING SECTORS TO CO-CREATE NC PATHWAYS TO GRADE-LEVEL READING NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION
PATHWAYS TO GRADE-LEVEL READING ACTION FRAMEWORK
SHARED MEASURES OF SUCCESS TO PUT NORTH CAROLINA'S CHILDREN ON A PATHWAY TO GRADE-LEVEL READING
ECERS-R worksheet bundle Thinking More about Personal Care Routines
TEMPORARY ASSESSMENT PROCESS: NC ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR THE MODIFIED ECERS-R ASSESSMENT
A Guide to the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Temporary Assessment Process for the ECERS-R
CHILD CARE CENTERS: BASIC INFORMATION FOR POTENTIAL PROVIDERS
Quality Costs

Prelicensing Guide
Working in Early Care and Education in North Carolina 2019 Workforce Study
North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Program Requirements and Guidance Addendum
NC Pre-K Standardized Site Selection Rubric
Instructions for Using the NC Pre-K Site Selection Rubric
NC Pre-K Site Selection Roles/Responsibilities
NC Pre-K Site Application
Division of Child Development and Early Education Improving Access to Early Care and Education Services for Homeless Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Education. (2015). Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings
NCDCDEE Early Childhood Suspension and Expulsion Policy
State Leadership Team Benchmarks of Quality: Implementing Evidence-Based Practices Statewide
Benchmarks of Quality for Classroom-Based Programs1 (Implementing Recommended Practices Edition)
Benchmarks of Quality for Home-Visiting Programs1 (Implementing Recommended Practices Edition)
Developing High Quality, Functional IFSP Outcomes and IEP Goals Training Package Guidance for Trainers
Family and Child Outcomes for Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education April 2005
Quality Indicators of Inclusive Early Childhood Programs/Practices A Compilation of Selected Resources
Community Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion (Field Review)
A System Framework for Building High-Quality Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education Programs
Growing Up Well: Supporting Young Children's Social Emotional Development and Mental Health in North Carolina July 2012
Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality Measures: Updated User's Manual
Quality Inclusive Early Childhood Programs: 10 Things to Look For
Local Child Outcomes Measurement System (L-COMS)
State Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion (Field Review)
Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion (Field Review
Local Program Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion (Field Review)
Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education Final Recommendations

Child Care in North Carolina
Resource Manual for Administrators and Principals Supervising and Evaluating Teachers of Young Children
Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators
The Smart Start Resource Guide of Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Programs and Practices
North Carolina Child Care Resources & Referral Council Information for Policy Makers and Planners
North Carolina Child Care Resources & Referral Council Importance of Quality Training
NC Early Childhood Action Plan
North Carolina's Statewide Birth through Five Strategic Plan
North Carolina Statewide Birth-5 Needs Assessment Final Report
North Carolina Standard Course of Study
North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process (NCEES)

Appendix B: NC Pre-K Policies Reviewed for Critical Discourse Analysis

NC Pre-K Program Requirements & Guidance
Title I Pre-K NC Standards and Procedures January 2021
North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development
NC PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM, 2019
CHAPTER 9 - CHILD CARE RULES Effective August 13, 2020
Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Plan For North Carolina FFY 2019-2021
Quality Progress Report (QPR) For North Carolina FFY 2019
North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K) Site Monitoring Tool State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2020-2021
Foundations for families Fantastic Fours
Early Educator Support Unit ENROLLMENT APPLICATION
A Guide to the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Environment Rating Scale Assessment Process (ECERS-R)
WHY CLASS? Exploring the Promise of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System ® (CLASS)
UPDATED 2020-2021 NC Early Learning Inventory Requirements
Developmentally Appropriate Practice National Association for the Education of Young Children
Child Care License Requirements Overview
North Carolina Preschool Eligibility Crosswalk Public School Preschool Programs (flow chart)
NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation Standards and Assessment Items
Standards for Birth-Kindergarten Teacher Candidates
Teacher Evaluation Process NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development
Star Rated License
NC Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Program Fiscal and Contract Manual
Program Standards
Education Standards What are "Education Standards"?
NCRLAP Quick Reference Brochure
ECERS-R Assessment Process: Information for preschool classrooms in public schools
NC Pre-K Policies Reviewed for Critical Discourse Policy Analysis
Article 7 Chapter 110 of the North Carolina General Statutes Child Care Facilities
EESLPD Teacher Manual – Section 2 Steps Toward Professional Growth
Creating a quality Learning Environment About the Assessment Process in NC

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION POLICY STATEMENT ON EXPULSION AND SUSPENSION POLICIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS
Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion (Field Review
Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education Final Recommendations
Child Care in North Carolina
Resource Manual for Administrators and Principals Supervising and Evaluating Teachers of Young Children
Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators
The Smart Start Resource Guide of Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Programs and Practices
NC Early Childhood Action Plan
North Carolina's Statewide Birth through Five Strategic Plan
North Carolina Statewide Birth-5 Needs Assessment Final Report

Note: the names of the 40 NC Pre-K policies analyzed for this dissertation. For a full list of policies reviewed for the dissertation, see Appendix A.

Appendix C

Interview Respondents by Geographic Region, Position, and Role Within Ecological System and ECE Trilemma

Geographic Region	What is your position?	Role within ecosystem	Role in ECE Trilemma
Coastal	Assistant principal	microsystem	Teacher quality
Coastal	Executive director, contract admin for two counties and two districts	mesosystem	Availability, program and teacher quality
Coastal	early learning coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Coastal	Preschool Coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Coastal	Nc Pre K Administrator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Mountain	Director of Exceptional Children and Pre-K Programs	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Mountain	Preschool Coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Mountain	Preschool Program Coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Mountain	Pre-K teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
Mountain	Pre-K Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
Mountain	Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
Mountain	NC PK Lead Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
Mountain	Itinerant Special Education Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
Mountain	Pre-K Lead teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality

Mountain	Principal	microsystem	Availability, program and teacher quality
Mountain	Principal	microsystem	Availability, program and teacher quality
Mountain	preschool coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Mountain	pre-k and elementary ed director	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Mountain	pre-k program specialist	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Mountain	former director of DCDEE	exosystem	Availability, program and teacher quality
Mountain	Assistant superintendent	mesosystem	Availability, affordability
Piedmont	Preschool Coordinator	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Piedmont	Preschool Specialist	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Piedmont	Director of Preschool Programs	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Piedmont	Teacher	individual	Availability, teacher quality
Piedmont	NC Pre-K coordinator and EC specialist	mesosystem	Program and teacher quality
Piedmont	elementary principal	microsystem	Availability, program and teacher quality
Piedmont	Retired member of NC General Assembly, NC House of Representatives	macrosystem	Availability, affordability
Piedmont	North Carolina Senator	macrosystem	Availability, affordability
Piedmont	Chair for NC Pre-K Governance Committee, NC Child Care Commission	exosystem	Availability, program and teacher quality

Note: Chart of all interview participants including geographic region, position, and membership within the ecological system

Appendix D

Each of the 40 Policies Organized by Authoring Organization, Quality Definition, and Who the Policy Rules Apply To

Name of Policy	Who Wrote It	Number of times quality is used	Quality definition	Policy Rules Apply to:
NC Pre-K Program Requirements & Guidance	NCDCDEE	25	Quality is referred to in other linked documents, specifically EC documents, quality via academic success	NC Pre-K teacher, principal, and district administrator/ Pre-K coordinator
Title I Pre-K NC Standards and Procedures January 2021	NCDPI	9	Mentioned but not defined	principal, and district administrator/ Pre-K coordinator
North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development	NCDHHS (NC Foundations Task Force)	17	Quality is discussed but not defined	Teachers, parents, principals, district admin
NC PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM, 2019	NCDHHS	4	Quality referenced as 5 stars and quality development funds	Written by legislators for state and district administrators
CHAPTER 9 - CHILD CARE RULES Effective August 13, 2020	NCDHHS	17	Quality related to ECERS-R rating and quality points	Teachers, principals, directors, admin (any childcare admin or provider)
Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Plan For North Carolina FFY 2019-2021	NCDHHS	261	Quality indicators	State, DCDEE (who implements the CCDF)
Quality Progress Report (QPR) For North Carolina FFY 2019	NCDHHS	120	ECERS assessment, results from NC Pre-Kindergarten Study for 2017-18	State and district administrators
North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K) Site Monitoring Tool State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2020-2021	NCDCDEE	1	Quality is following the rules	State, district, and school admin, NC Pre-K teacher
Foundations for families Fantastic Fours	NCDHHS	0	Quality is not mentioned	Families, NC Pre-K teachers
Early Educator Support Unit ENROLLMENT APPLICATION	NCDHHS	0	Quality isn't mentioned	NC Pre-K teachers, district admin, school admin

A Guide to the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Environment Rating Scale Assessment Process (ECERS-R)	NCRLAP	1	Quality in program environment	District, school admin, and NC Pre-K teachers
WHY CLASS? Exploring the Promise of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System ® (CLASS)	Teachstone	50	Teacher-student interactions	District admin, state directors
UPDATED 2020-2021 NC Early Learning Inventory Requirements	NCDPI	0	0	NC Pre-K teachers, school admin, district admin
Developmentally Appropriate Practice National Association for the Education of Young Children	NAEYC	20	Quality in DAP	NC Pre-K teachers
Child Care License Requirements Overview	NCDHHS	0	0	State, district, and school admin
North Carolina Preschool Eligibility Crosswalk Public School Preschool Programs (flow chart)	NC Homeless Education Program, UNCG	0	0	Families, district admin, state admin
NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation Standards and Assessment Items	NAEYC	35	Quality through leadership and the 10 standards	District admin and pre-k coordinator), probably also teacher education professors, policy makers
Standards for Birth-Kindergarten Teacher Candidates	NCDHHS/ NC State Board of Education	0	0	NC Pre-K teachers, principals, district admin
Teacher Evaluation Process NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development	NCDHHS	1	NC Foundations	NC Pre-K teachers, principals, district admin
Star Rated License	NCDHHS	2	Star rating	District admin, principals, NC Pre-K teachers
NC Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Program Fiscal and Contract Manual	NCDCDEE	15	Funding rules	State and district admin, pre-k coordinators
Program Standards	NCDHHS	3	Program standards	parents
Education Standards What are "Education Standards"?	NCDHHS	1	Staff education	parents
NCRLAP Quick Reference Brochure	NCRLAP	8	ECERS-R	NC Pre-K teacher

ECERS-R Assessment Process: Information for preschool classrooms in public schools	NCRLAP	1	average	NC Pre-K teacher and principal (NC Pre-K classroom assessor)
Article 7 Chapter 110 of the North Carolina General Statutes Child Care Facilities	NCDHHS	5	Program standards	Directors of non-public school child care centers
EESLPD Teacher Manual – Section 2 Steps Toward Professional Growth	NCDHHS	0	Not defined	NC Pre-K teacher evaluator (principal)
Creating a quality Learning Environment About the Assessment Process in NC	NCRLAP	18	ECERS-R, quality is average score	NC Pre-K teachers
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services U.S. Department of Education Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings	USDHHS	16	Positive experience, learning and development	NC Pre-K teachers, principals, district admin, Pre-K coordinators
Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion (Field Review)	Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, & National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (2020)	12	Quality indicators	NC Pre-K Teachers/ EC Teachers, principals, district admin
Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education Final Recommendations	Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education	50	funding	Governor, legislators, state directors
Child Care in North Carolina	NCDCDEE	22	Quality indicators on pps 4-5	parents
Resource Manual for Administrators and Principals Supervising and Evaluating Teachers of Young Children	Center for Educational Measurement and Evaluation	55	Program standards and quality indicators	Principals and NC Pre-K assessors (Pre-K coordinator)
Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators	NAEYC	40	Educators' knowledge, practices, and learning environment	NC Pre-K teachers
The Smart Start Resource Guide of Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Programs and Practices	The North Carolina Partnership for Children	120	Teacher coaching and mentoring	District admin, NC Pre-K teachers

North Carolina Birth – Five Early Childhood Education: Strategic Plan	NCDHHS	75	High-quality early learning, quality measured via quality rating systems (ECERS-R)	State and district admin, NC Pre-K teachers
NC Early Childhood Action Plan	NCDHHS	33	Health. Safety, and learning	State and district admin
NCSCOS	NCDPI	0	Adherence to standards	NC Pre-K teachers, principals, district admin
North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards	NC State Board of Education	2	Professional development	NC Pre-K teacher, principal, district admin, state admin
North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process (NCEES)	NCDPI	6	Proficient or higher on all standards, teaching, professional development	NC Pre-K teacher, principal, district admin, state admin

Note: The 40 policies organized by the organization, quality definition, number of times quality is mentioned, and audience for each policy.

Appendix E

IRB Request for Initial Review

IRB Number: 21-0274

Date Routing Complete: May 20, 2021

Exempted: June 9, 2021

Reference ID: 109856

Appendix F

Recruitment Materials

Email Recruitment

Subject Line: Participants sought for a North Carolina Pre-K policy research study

Erin West, a doctoral student at Appalachian State University, is looking for participants for a research study. You are receiving this email because you are a school district leader or NC Pre-K director, as identified on your school district website. Your email address was obtained from your school district website. This study is about how NC Pre-K policies are interpreted and implemented, specifically looking at how quality is understood, implemented, and evaluated. If you take part in this study, you would be asked to attend a brief Zoom interview session, where the researcher will ask you a series of questions related to NC Pre-K policies and the implementation of these policies in your district. Interview sessions will be no longer than 20 minutes.

To be able to take part in this study, individuals must be a school district leader in charge of program implementation and policy decisions regarding NC Pre-K. Your responses to the interview questions will be shared with you so that you can clarify or edit any responses. Additionally, your names and districts will be confidential, and results will be written using pseudonyms. Data from interviews will be stored in a secure, university-sponsored location in order to ensure confidentiality. If you are interested in participating or have any questions about the study, please email Erin West, westek@appstate.edu, or call (910) 773-9691.

Email is generally not a secure way to communicate sensitive information or health related information as there are many ways for unauthorized users to access email. You should avoid sending sensitive, detailed personal information by email. Email should also not be used to

convey information of an urgent nature. If you need to talk to someone immediately or would

prefer not to receive study communication by email, please contact Erin West, doctoral student,

(910) 773-9691

Thank you,

Erin West, doctoral student, Appalachian State University

westek@appstate.edu

Consent Forms

Information to Consider about this Research

A Critical Policy Analysis of North Carolina Pre-K Policy and Implementation

Principal Investigator: Erin West

Department: Educational Leadership, EDD

Contact Information: Erin West, westek@appstate.edu, (804) 283-4490, Barbara Howard, dissertation chair, howardbb@appstate.edu, (828) 262-7619

You are invited to participate in a research study about how NC Pre-K policies are interpreted and implemented, specifically looking at how quality is understood, implemented, and evaluated.

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in a brief Zoom interview to answer questions about NC Pre-K policy and implementation.

Benefits of the research may include supporting a doctoral student with dissertation research.

Risks and discomforts: there are no anticipated risks or discomforts. Your responses will be stored in a secure, university-sponsored location, and your name and location will be confidential. Names and geographic locations will be written as pseudonyms.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to continue with the interview or have your responses recorded and shared for any reason.

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Erin West, doctoral student, or Dr. Barbara Howard, dissertation chair.

The Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has determined that this study is exempt from IRB oversight.

I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years old, have read the above information, and agree to participate in the research procedures stated above.

I agree to participate in the study.

_____   _____

Signature   Date

Appendix H

Each layer of the NC Pre-K ecosystem is color-coded to match the policies governing each layer

State Level Legislators

State Directors: DCDEE, NC Child Care Commission

Pre-K Directors, School District Leadership

School Principals

Pre-K Classroom Teachers
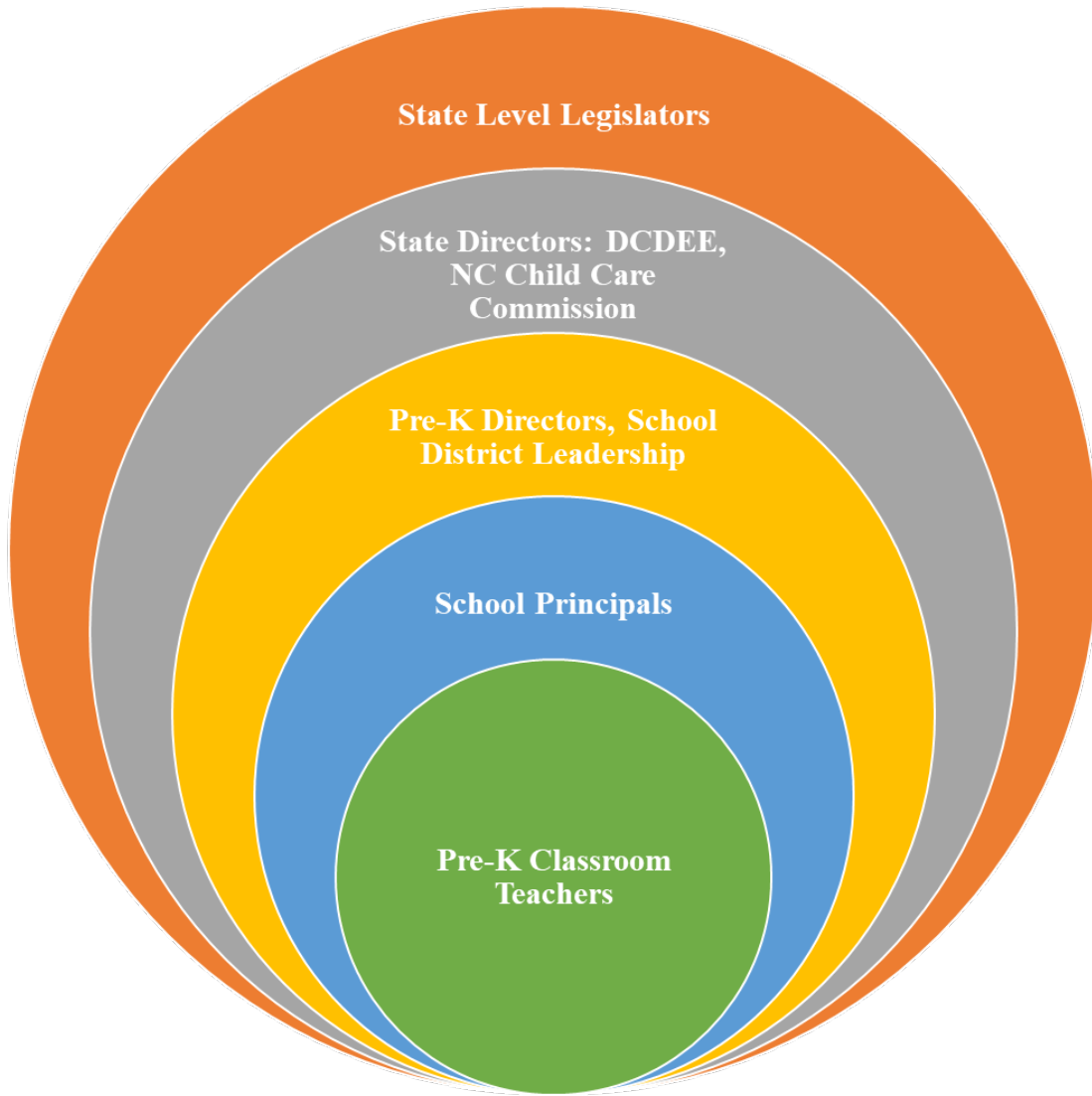
Governing Policies for Each Ecological System
MACROSYSTEM NC Pre-Kindergarten Program, 2019, Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education Final Recommendations, North Carolina Birth – Five Early Childhood Education: Strategic Plan, NC Early Childhood Action Plan
EXOSYSTEM North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development, NC Pre-Kindergarten Program, 2019, Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Plan For North Carolina FFY

2019-2021, Quality Progress Report (QPR) For North Carolina FFY 2019, North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K) Site Monitoring Tool State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2020-2021, WHY CLASS? Exploring the Promise of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System ® (CLASS), Child Care License Requirements Overview, North Carolina Preschool Eligibility Crosswalk Public School Preschool Programs (flow chart), NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation Standards and Assessment Items, NC Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Program Fiscal and Contract Manual, Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education Final Recommendations, North Carolina Birth – Five Early Childhood Education: Strategic Plan, NC Early Childhood Action Plan, NC Standard Course of Study, North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards, North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process (NCEES)

MESOSYSTEM
NC Pre-K Program Requirements & Guidance, Title I Pre-K NC Standards and Procedures January 2021, North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development, NC Pre-Kindergarten Program, 2019, Chapter 9 - Child Care Rules Effective August 13, 2020, Quality Progress Report (QPR) For North Carolina FFY 2019, North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K) Site Monitoring Tool State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2020-2021, Early Educator Support Unit Enrollment Application, A Guide to the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Environment Rating Scale Assessment Process (ECERS-R), WHY CLASS? Exploring the Promise of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System ® (CLASS), Updated 2020-2021 NC Early Learning Inventory Requirements, Child Care License Requirements Overview, North Carolina Preschool Eligibility Crosswalk Public School Preschool Programs (flow chart), NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation Standards and Assessment Items, Standards for Birth-Kindergarten Teacher Candidates, Teacher Evaluation Process NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development, Star Rated License, NC Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Program Fiscal and Contract Manual, Article 7 Chapter 110 of the North Carolina General Statutes Child Care Facilities, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services U.S. Department of Education Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings, Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion (Field Review), Resource Manual for Administrators and Principals Supervising and Evaluating Teachers of Young Children, The Smart Start Resource Guide of Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Programs and Practices, North Carolina Birth – Five Early Childhood Education: Strategic Plan, NC Early Childhood Action Plan, NC Standard Course of Study, North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards, North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process (NCEES)

MICROSYSTEM

NC Pre-K Program Requirements & Guidance, Title I Pre-K NC Standards and Procedures January 2021, North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development, Chapter 9 - Child Care Rules Effective August 13, 2020, North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K) Site Monitoring Tool State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2020-2021, Foundations for families Fantastic Fours, Early Educator Support Unit Enrollment Application, A Guide to the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Environment Rating Scale Assessment Process (ECERS-R), Updated 2020-2021 NC Early Learning Inventory Requirements, Child Care License Requirements Overview, North Carolina Preschool Eligibility Crosswalk Public School Preschool Programs (flow chart), NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation Standards and Assessment Items, Standards for Birth-Kindergarten Teacher Candidates, Teacher Evaluation Process NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development, Star Rated License, Program Standards, Education Standards What are "Education Standards"?, ECERS-R Assessment Process: Information for preschool classrooms in public schools, Article 7 Chapter 110 of the North Carolina General Statutes Child Care Facilities, EESLPD Teacher Manual – Section 2 Steps Toward Professional Growth, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services U.S. Department of Education Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings, Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion (Field Review), Child Care in North Carolina, Resource Manual for Administrators and Principals Supervising and Evaluating Teachers of Young Children, NC Standard Course of Study, North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards, North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process (NCEES)

INDIVIDUAL

NC Pre-K Program Requirements and Guidance, North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development, Chapter 9 - Child Care Rules Effective August 13, 2020, North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K) Site Monitoring Tool State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2020-2021, Foundations for families Fantastic Fours, Early Educator Support Unit Enrollment Application, A Guide to the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Environment Rating Scale Assessment Process (ECERS-R), Updated 2020-2021 NC Early Learning Inventory Requirements, Developmentally Appropriate Practice National Association for the Education of Young Children, Standards for Birth-Kindergarten Teacher Candidates, Teacher Evaluation Process NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development, Star Rated License, NCRLAP Quick Reference Brochure, ECERS-R Assessment Process: Information for preschool classrooms in public schools, Creating a quality Learning Environment About the Assessment Process in NC, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services U.S. Department of Education Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings, Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion (Field Review), Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators, The Smart Start Resource Guide of Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Programs and Practices, North Carolina Birth – Five Early Childhood Education: Strategic Plan, NC Standard Course of Study, North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards, North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process (NCEES)

Note: The NC Pre-K policy ecosystem with color-coded policies. Ecosystem illustration and chart created in MS Word by Erin West, 2022.

Appendix I

Interview Protocols

Interviews took place via Zoom or Google Form. I asked participants a series of semi-structured interview questions related to quality indicators in NC Pre-K policy and implementation. The specific questions sometimes differed based on interaction with the participant, but I have included some sample interview questions here.

What is your position within your district?

What is your role regarding NC Pre-K policy implementation?

What are the most important components of a quality NC Pre-K program?

How do you fund your NC Pre-K program?

How do you recruit, retain, and evaluate NC Pre-K teachers?

What do you hope to see when you observe an NC Pre-K classroom?

How are principals trained to evaluate NC Pre-K teachers?

How do you define quality in NC Pre-K?

What do you wish you could add or change about your NC Pre-K program(s)?

What other comments do you have about NC Pre-K policies and implementation?

Note: The three geographic regions in North Carolina.
https://www.thinglink.com/scene/697563257988186112

Appendix J

Comparison of responsibilities of NCDCDEE and The NC Child Care Commission

Responsibilities of DCDEE	Powers and Duties of the Child Care Commission
To ensure the health and safety of children in child care programs DCDEE: ● Licenses, monitors and provides technical assistance to child care programs ● Conducts comprehensive Criminal Background Checks with all individuals who work in licensed or regulated child care programs and other social and human services programs ● Supports the NC Child Care Commission which has responsibility to create, amend or repeal rules to implement Child Care Law To promote quality child care by implementing evidence-based standards DCDEE: ● Evaluates teacher and administrator education to determine qualification for different positions in child care programs ● Licenses early childhood educators in non-public programs ● Administers the NC Prekindergarten (NC Pre-K) program ● Funds the statewide Child Care Resource and Referral system which provides evidence- based technical assistance, professional development, coaching and compensation supports for early childhood professionals ● Works with a variety of early	The North Carolina Child Care Commission has the authority to establish rules for the licensing and regulation of child care centers and homes in North Carolina. This authority is identified in G.S. 110-88 and is summarized below: ● To develop policies and procedures for issuing permits to child care centers and homes that meet all applicable standards. ● To adopt applicable rules and standards based on the capacity of a child care facility. ● To require inspections by and satisfactory written reports from representatives of local or State health agencies and fire and building inspection agencies and from representatives of the Department prior to issuing an initial permit to any child care center. ● To require annual inspection by and satisfactory written reports from representatives of local and State health agencies and fire inspection agencies after a license is issued. ● To make rules and develop policies for the implementation of Article 7, Chapter 110 including procedures for application, approval, annual compliance visits for centers and revocation of permits. ● To adopt rules for issuing a provisional license that shall be in effect for no more than 12 consecutive months to a child care facility that does not conform in every respect with the standards established in Chapter 110 and the rules adopted by the Commission if the facility is making a reasonable effort to conform to the standards. ● To make rules for administrative action against a child care center or child care home when the Secretary's investigation substantiates that child abuse or neglect did occur in the facility. * The type of sanction is to be determined by the severity of the incident and the probability of reoccurrence. The rules shall provide for written warnings and special provisional licenses. ● To develop and adopt voluntary enhanced program standards which reflect higher quality child care than the mandatory standards established in Chapter 110.

childhood partners to provide training, coaching, and evaluation for early childhood professionals across the state ● Collaborates with the state funded NC Partnership for Children/Smart Start To increase access to quality child care to families and children across North Carolina DCDEE: ● Administers North Carolina's Subsidized Child Care Assistance program ● Provides parents a web-based tool to search for quality child care programs ● Collaborates with early childhood partners and homeless service providers to address the need for child care for families experiencing homelessness or temporary housing arrangements ● Administers NC's Child Care and Development Fund federal block grant.	These enhanced program standards must address, at a minimum, staff child ratios, staff qualifications, parent involvement, operational and personnel policies, developmentally appropriate curricula, and facility square footage. ● To adopt rules for issuing a temporary license that will expire in six months that may be issued to the operator of a new center or to the operator of a previously licensed center when a change in ownership or license occurs. ● To adopt rules for child care facilities that provide care for children who are mildly sick. ● To adopt rules regulating the amount of time a child care administrator will be on-site at a child care center. ● To develop a procedure by which the Department furnishes the forms required to implement Chapter 110. ● To adopt rules for child care facilities that provide care for medically fragile children. ● To adopt rules establishing standards for certification of child care centers providing Developmental Day programs. ● To adopt rules for programmatic standards for regulation of prekindergarten classrooms and to review and approve comprehensive, evidenced-based early childhood curricula with a reading component. These curricula shall be added to the currently approved "More At Four" curricula. * The Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services delegates authority for this function to the Division of Child Development and Early Education.

Note: The NC Child Care Commission information is from
https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Home/Child-Care-Commission/Commission-Powers-and-Duties
and the NCDCDEE information is from
https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Home/About#:~:text=Responsibilities%20of%20DCDEE&text=Conducts%20comprehensive%20Criminal%20Background%20Checks,to%20implement%20Child%20Care%20Law

Appendix K

NC Pre-K Interview Respondents' Definitions of Quality

Qualified teachers	5	**Total based on categories**		
high quality teachers	2	Teachers	44	
teachers	34	Children	71	
regular education teachers	1	Classroom environment	9	
special education teachers	1	Social/ emotional support	11	
teachers' education level	1	Family support/ collaboration	4	
Teachers	44	Support for teachers	8	
knowledge of children	1	Curriculum	10	
understanding of children	2	Quality (not defined)	12	
students	12	Regulations/ guidelines	4	
children development	5			
children	39			
whole children	3			
quality program	6			
happy healthy students	1			
assets of children	1			
unique learning ability	1			
Children	71			
socialization of students	1			
healthy physical environment	1			
free play center	1			
fun inviting manner	1			
early childhood education	1			
appropriate practice	3			
area of development	1			
Classroom environment	9			
SEL	6			
emotional skills	3			
second step resources	1			
social emotional support	1			
Social and emotional support	11			
family engagement	2			
working class parents	1			
number of family	1			
Family support	4			
teachers support	2			
program support	2			

adequate material	2
common planning time	1
staff development opportunities	1
Support for teachers	8
based curriculum	2
lessons plan	2
quality instructions	2
directed activities	3
rigor of kindergarten	1
Curriculum	10
many important components	1
quality NC pre	1
high quality care	1
high quality program	1
high quality	7
quality NCPK program	1
Quality not defined	12
kindergarten transition point	1
PreK compliance guidelines	1
high scope assessment	1
children care regulations	1
Regulations/ guidelines	4

Vita

Erin K. West was born in West Branch, Michigan, in 1981. She attended elementary school and middle school in West Branch and graduated from Ogemaw Heights High School with honors in 1999. She attended Alma College, majored in elementary education with minors in English and psychology, and graduated in Spring 2003. She was a North Carolina Principal Fellow and attended Fayetteville State University for her Master of School Administration, graduating with honors in Spring 2009. She completed her Education Specialist degree from Appalachian State University in December 2019. She completed her dissertation and received her doctoral degree in educational leadership, EdD, from Appalachian State University in Spring 2022.

She lives in Seven Lakes, North Carolina, with her husband and two beautiful children. She is an in-school mentor and tutoring coordinator and is actively involved in many community volunteer organizations.