

Which Teachers Consider Leaving? Workplace Relationships in Early Childhood Education

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Key Takeaways

- Approximately 9 percent of early childhood educators reported poor relationships and lack of support in their workplace.
- Those 9 percent of teachers are nearly four times more likely to look for a new job than other teachers.
- Teacher race/ethnicity and teacher-child race/ethnicity match do not seem to play a role in whether a teacher looks for a new job.
- Teachers who lack support around student behavior but report positive relationships in other parts of their work are only slightly more likely to look for a new job than teachers who have both support and positive relationships.
- Center directors who want to reduce turnover help their teachers develop strong relationships with their coworkers, as well as with the families and children they serve.
- Supports around student behavior, while important, may be secondary to fostering positive relationships.

Introduction

This brief presents important evidence that early childhood education (ECE) leaders should prioritize **relationship building** among teachers, administrators, parents, and children to curtail teacher turnover. Our research found that teachers who have positive relationships are nearly four times more likely to remain in their current roles than teachers who lack positive relationships, even if supports for managing difficult child behavior are lacking. This finding holds true across race/ethnicity, community poverty level, teacher pay, and other standard predictors of teacher turnover.

ECE center directors and school leaders can employ a myriad of strategies to foster positive relationships. Two

promising and related approaches include culturally responsive pedagogy and restorative approaches to discipline. These philosophies prioritize understanding and compassion between individuals, with attention to racial and cultural differences. Importantly, both emphasize positive relationships rather than controlling student behavior, an emphasis that aligns with the findings concerning teacher retention presented here.

Background

TEACHER TURNOVER: POLICY, RACE/ETHNICITY, AND RELATIONSHIPS

Teacher turnover in the early childhood sector significantly impacts center quality and has been exacerbated by the

COVID-19 pandemic. In 2012, approximately 13 percent of educators left jobs at an ECE center, and that number is expected to be significantly higher today.ⁱ In many cases, teacher turnover in the early childhood sector can be traced back to systemic issues of low pay and an overall lack of center resources. In the United States, child care workers rank in the bottom 2 percent for annual pay, earning a median wage of \$11.65/hour, and often relying on public income support programs and side jobs to make ends meet.ⁱⁱ

Furthermore, disparities in turnover rates by teacher race/ethnicity are well documented at the K-12 level.ⁱⁱⁱ Black and Hispanic teachers are more likely to leave the classroom than their White peers. A similar connection between race/ethnicity and turnover in ECE is hypothesized, although it is less clear.^{iv} Regardless of whether or not turnover is higher for Black and Hispanic ECE teachers compared to their White counterparts, turnover is a pressing challenge for achieving racial, gender, and economic equity. Women of color are over-represented in early childhood education, comprising approximately 40 percent of the ECE workforce, and low-income students and students of color tend to experience higher rates of teacher turnover.^v

However, a variety of interpersonal factors also play a substantial role in teacher turnover and retention. Workplace satisfaction in general is a key predictor of teacher turnover,^{vi} and the relationships and supports that teachers have in their centers are key determinants of satisfaction. In fact, research suggests that working conditions may be a primary determinant of teacher turnover, more so than qualities like race/ethnicity or socioeconomic class.^{vii} And although all teachers in a given ECE center experience similar levels of low pay and lack of resources, workplace relationships and supports may serve to explain why some ECE teachers stay in their jobs and others leave.

Through this study we sought to describe the multifaceted nature of relationships and supports in ECE centers and to connect those dynamics to teacher turnover.

Data

We used 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) data from the Workforce survey, encompassing n=4,709 early childhood educators. The data are nationally representative, taking into account race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, urbanicity, and other characteristics.

The workforce survey asked teachers a wide variety of questions about their backgrounds and present teaching experience. We selected nine survey items to encompass the different relationships teachers have in their workplaces. For the purposes of analysis, the responses for all nine items were collapsed into two response categories.¹ This means that a question asking whether the teacher knew they were appreciated by the parents is reduced from three possible answers—*never*, *once*, and *more than once*—to two: *more than once* or *never/once*. Response categories that were most similar were combined. Table 1 lists the positive response to the survey question, as well as the percentage of teachers who provided a positive response, broken down by whether or not the teacher reported looking for a new or additional job in the past three months. Table 1 reveals that teachers who are not looking for a new job are often far more likely to answer the questions positively. Responses by racial identity are included in the appendix.

Finally, the question used to assess whether a teacher was likely to leave their ECE center is the following: “In the past 3 months, have you done anything to look for a new job or an additional job?” Teachers could simply answer yes or no.

Table 1. Positive Relationships and Job Search Status

Positive Framing Survey Question Text	Percent of teachers <i>not</i> looking for a new job	Percent of teachers looking for a new job
I knew that I was appreciated by the parents more than once .***	65.7%	18.6%
Parents never blamed their child’s bad behavior on the program.***	58.9%	17.7%
I knew the children were happy with me more than once .**	64.2%	20.7%
I was never moved to a different classroom or group of children.*	58.3%	18.7%
I agree or strongly agree that I have help dealing with difficult children or parents.	35.5%	12.2%
I agree or strongly agree that my coworkers and I are treated with respect on a daily basis.***	61.8%	19.0%

¹ Binary indicators, or variables with two possible responses, are most commonly used in latent class analyses. See Nylund-Gibson & Choi, 2018.

Positive Framing Survey Question Text	Percent of teachers <i>not</i> looking for a new job	Percent of teachers looking for a new job
My supervisor helped me create a plan for professional development at least once a month. ***	44.2%	12.0%
My supervisor and I discussed how to improve my skills working with children’s behavior at least once a month.	38.6%	13.6%
My supervisor and I discussed how to improve my skills helping children learn at least once a month. **	70.0%	26.6%

NOTE: Chi-square tests were performed for each indicator variable in the first column, with the outcome variables in the second and third columns (*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001).

Analyses

We asked three key questions in this analysis. First, we explored whether we classify different sets of relationships and supports that ECE teachers have at work. Next, we asked whether those classifications predict whether a teacher plans to leave their center. Finally, we examined whether those classifications differ by teacher race/ethnicity and/or community poverty level. The analytic approach to each question is described below.

DO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS HAVE DIFFERENT, MEASURABLE SETS OF RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORTS AT WORK?

To answer this question, we used a latent class analysis (LCA), which seeks to identify groups of individuals who are similar to each other according to a set of variables. In this case, the LCA allowed us to determine the main sets of experiences that teachers have. An LCA is an appropriate method for this research question because the goal is to consider an ECE teacher’s relationship with their workplace as a collection, rather than looking at each aspect (as listed in Table 1) one at a time. Furthermore, an LCA allows the responses themselves to determine the groupings vs. researchers determining the groupings. To conduct the LCA, we analyzed the data in R without survey weights, using the depmixS4 package. Collapsed responses to the items listed in Table 1 were coded 1 for a positive response and 2 for a negative response. To determine the most appropriate number of classes, fit statistics² and interpretability were considered.

DO THOSE SETS OF RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORTS PREDICT WHETHER AN ECE TEACHER PLANS TO LEAVE THEIR CENTER?

First, we assigned all ECE teachers to the latent class in which they were determined most likely to be a member. Then we constructed logistic regression models to evaluate the extent to which latent class membership predicted whether an ECE teacher reported looking for a

new or additional job in the past three months. These regressions were conducted in Stata using appropriate survey weights. The first model included only the latent classes, and the second model included a set of covariates that may be related to teacher turnover. The third model added teacher-child race/ethnicity match indicators.

DO THE SETS OF RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORTS TEACHERS HAVE DIFFER BY TEACHER RACE/ETHNICITY AND/OR COMMUNITY POVERTY LEVEL?

To answer the third question, we constructed two chi-square tests. A categorical latent class variable was tested against teacher race/ethnicity and against community poverty level. Chi-square tests were also conducted with each individual indicator variable and the outcome variable against teacher race/ethnicity. The results for these tests were all statistically nonsignificant, except for one indicator variable, and the results can be found in the appendix.

Results

Figure 1 displays the results of the LCA. Each line on the graph represents a latent (i.e., preexisting, but difficult to see on the surface) class of ECE teachers’ experiences. Each dot on the line represents the latent class’s average response to a given question: whether the response reflected a more positive or negative classroom experience.

The Positive Overall class is the most common, with 51 percent of ECE teachers having this set of experiences. The green line represents Positive Overall and shows that on average, those ECE teachers are much closer to a 1 (positive) than a 2 (negative) for every relationship variable. The next most common set of experiences is shown by the blue line, where 40 percent of teachers are again closer to a 1 than a 2 for almost every relationship variable. The two main exceptions are “My supervisor and I discussed how to improve my skills working with children’s behavior *at least once a month*,” and “I agree or strongly

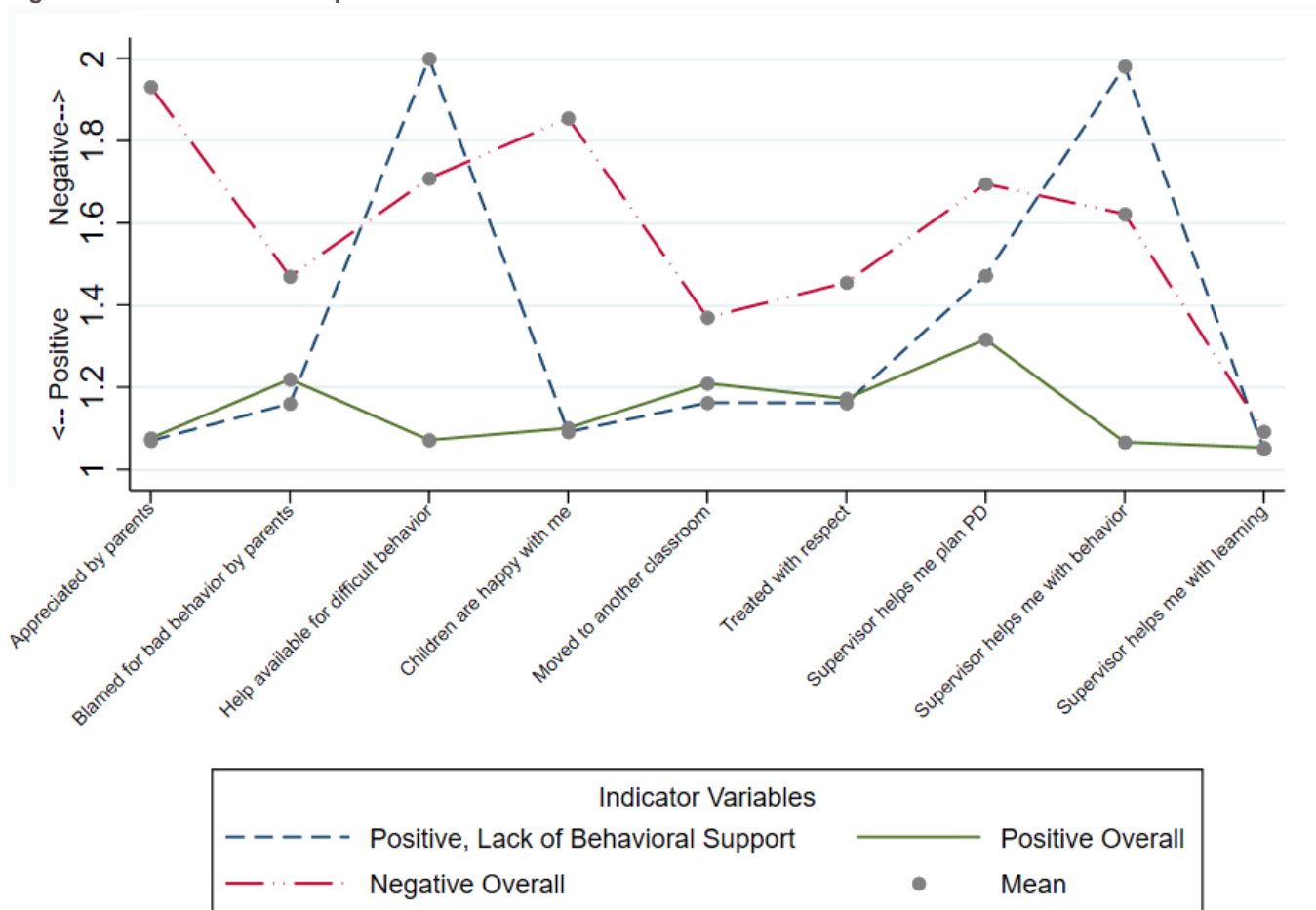
² This work reviewed the Akaike information criteria, Bayesian information criteria, and log likelihood.

agree that I have help dealing with difficult children or parents.” These teachers are much less likely to align with those two statements. This class is called Positive, Lack of Behavioral Support.

Finally, 9 percent of teachers fell into the Negative Overall class, illustrated by the red line. Teachers in that class are less likely to feel that they are appreciated by parents or that their children are happy with them. These teachers are

more likely to feel as though parents blame them for their children’s bad behavior, are less likely to feel as though they and their coworkers are treated with respect, and are less likely to feel as though there is help available to deal with difficult parents or children. Lastly, these teachers also receive less frequent support from their supervisors around working with children’s behavior and creating plans for professional development.

Figure 1. Teacher Relationships Latent Classes



Note: PD stands for professional development in the x-axis shown in Figure 1.

DO THE LATENT CLASSES PREDICT A TEACHER’S INTENT TO LEAVE THEIR CENTER?

ECE teachers who fall into the Negative Class are significantly more likely to report having looked for a new or additional job in the past three months compared with teachers who fall into either of the other classes. Negative Class membership predicts whether a teacher has reported looking for a new job even when holding many covariates constant, including hourly wage, years of experience, self-reported indicators of depression,

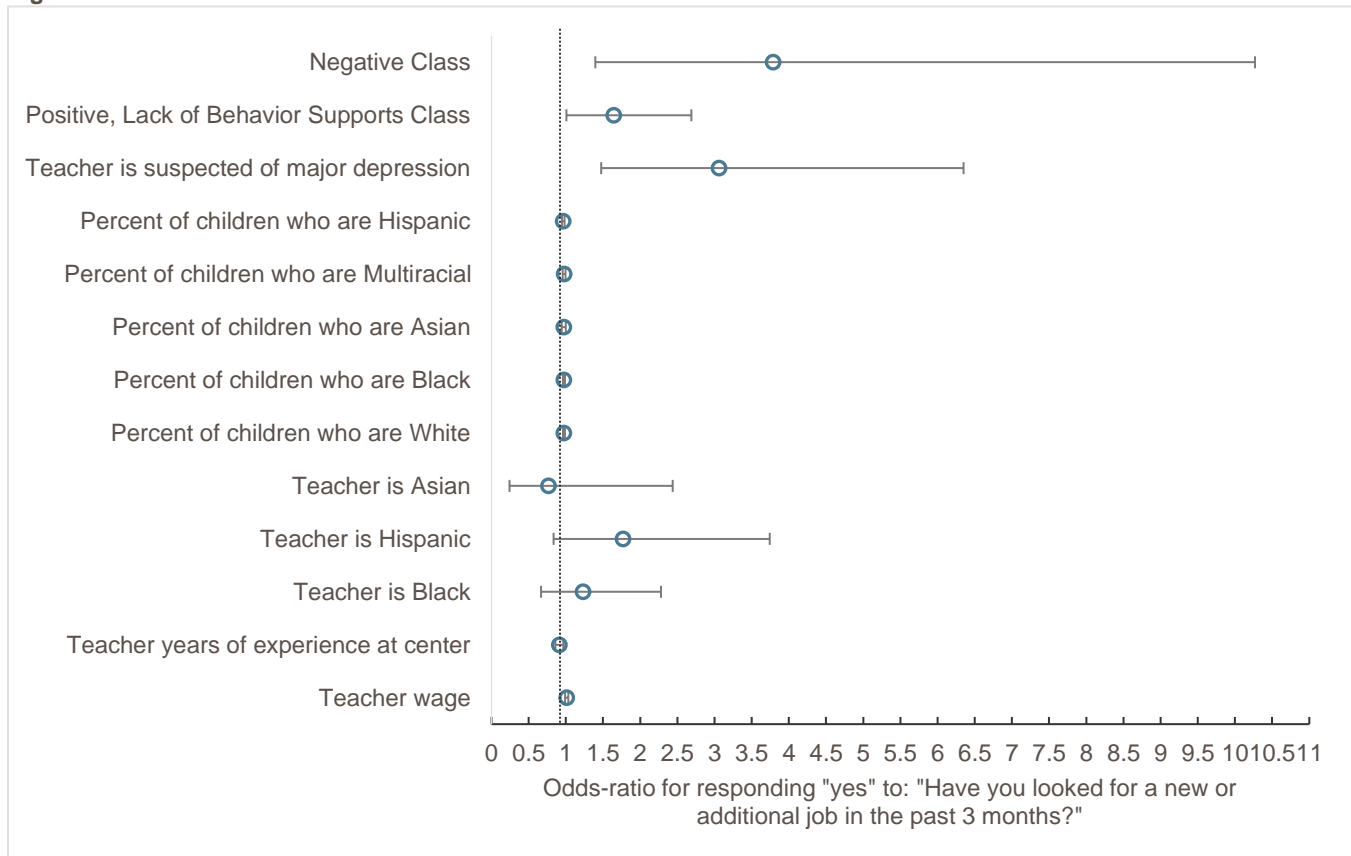
household income, whether more than half of their household income comes from ECE work, race/ethnicity, community poverty, community urbanicity, and the center’s mix of public and private funding. In addition, teachers fell into each class evenly by race/ethnicity and community poverty. See Appendix for details.

Figure 2 presents the odds ratios for the Negative Overall and Positive, Lack of Behaviors Supports classes vs. the Positive Overall class, along with a set of covariates predicting an ECE teacher’s intent to leave their ECE

center. The odds ratio indicates how many times more likely an individual is to answer yes to the question if a given covariate applies to the ECE teacher. The bars represent a 95 percent confidence interval, meaning that we can be 95 percent confident that the odds ratio truly falls within those boundaries. This figure indicates that an ECE teacher in the Negative Overall class is almost four

times more likely to report looking for a new job than teachers who are in the Positive Overall class. In addition, teachers who fall into the Positive, Lack of Behavior Supports class are slightly more likely to report looking for a new job than teachers who fall into the Positive Overall class.

Figure 2. Odds Ratios of Intent to Leave ECE Center for Select Covariates



DO THE LATENT CLASSES DIFFER BY TEACHER RACE/ETHNICITY AND/OR COMMUNITY POVERTY LEVEL?

Teacher race/ethnicity and the community poverty level of the ECE center in which they worked were not associated with latent class membership. This is an encouraging

finding, as we predicted that teachers of color or teachers in predominately low-income centers may have more negative experiences given the findings in the K-12 literature.^{viii} Figures 3 and 4 display the similar distributions of latent classes across racial/ethnic categories and community poverty levels.

Figure 3. Latent Class Membership by Race/Ethnicity

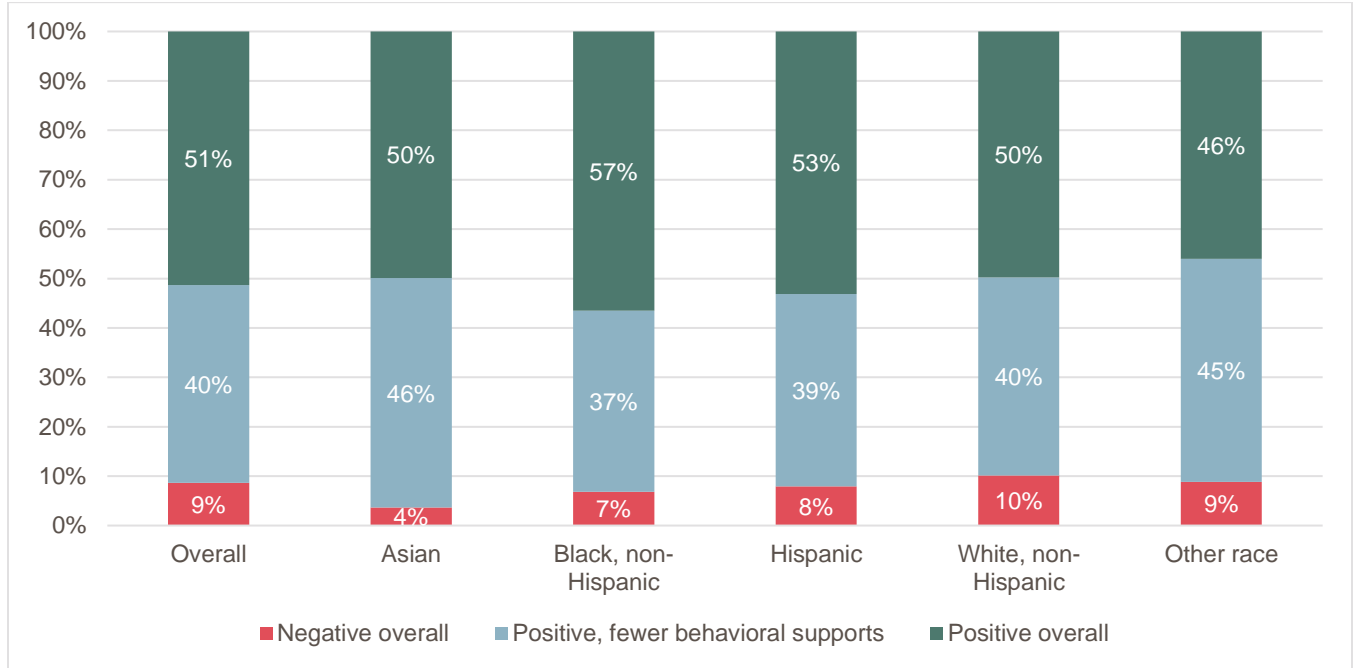
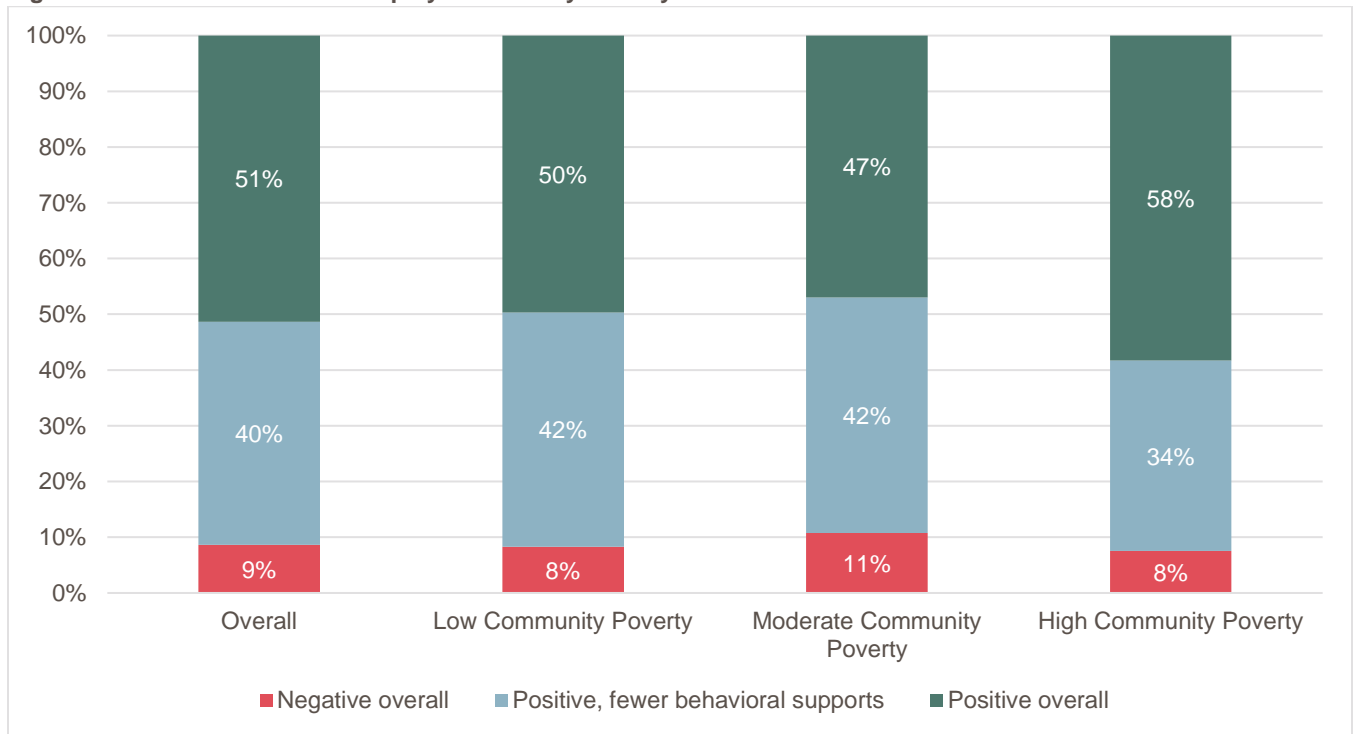


Figure 4. Latent Class Membership by Community Poverty Level



Implications

In the wake of COVID-19, the ECE sector is facing a severe workforce crisis. Teachers have faced unprecedented challenges and are leaving the classroom at an accelerated rate. This analysis highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships to understanding teacher turnover and suggests that poor relationships are a strong warning sign of a teacher wanting to leave their ECE center. ECE center directors may be well advised to pay attention to and talk with their teachers about their relationships with children, families, and coworkers. Furthermore, the fact that teachers who are in the Positive, Lack of Behavior Supports class are only slightly more

likely to consider leaving their center suggests that child behavior–related challenges likely are more manageable when teachers have positive relationships with those around them. In many cases, if resources are limited, improving relationships among teachers, families, and children should take priority over providing additional behavior supports.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Table 2. Logistic Regression Models of Looking for a New or Additional Job

	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3	
Yes, I have looked for a new or additional job in the past three months.	Odds ratio coefficient	95% CI	Odds ratio coefficient	95% CI	Odds ratio coefficient	95% CI
State 3: Negative	3.53***	(2.12, 5.89)	3.59*	(1.35, 9.56)	3.61*	(1.34, 9.71)
State 1: <i>Generally positive, no behavioral supports</i>	1.05	(0.75, 1.47)	1.63*	(1.00, 2.65)	1.65*	(1.01, 2.70)
Respondent is suspected of major depressive disorder			2.92***	(1.48, 5.76)	3.03***	(1.54, 5.96)
Hourly wage			1.01	(0.99, 1.03)	1.01	(0.99, 1.03)
Years of experience			0.91***	(0.86, 0.96)	0.91***	(0.86, 0.97)
Household income is under \$30,000			0.81	(0.49, 1.33)	0.83	(0.51, 1.36)
More than half of household income comes from ECE work			0.64	(0.38, 1.09)	0.63	(0.37, 1.08)
Hispanic			1.69	(0.79, 3.64)	2.83	(0.92, 8.68)
Asian			0.84	(0.26, 2.71)	1.28	(0.32, 5.07)
Black			1.42	(0.77, 2.63)	1.51	(0.47, 4.88)
Other			3.46	(1.41, 8.52)	3.53*	(1.19, 10.45)
Percent of children who are Asian			0.97	(0.95, 1.00)	0.97	(0.94, 1.00)
Percent of children who are Black			0.97***	(0.96, 0.99)	0.97**	(0.96, 0.99)
Percent of children who are Hispanic			0.97***	(0.95, 0.98)	0.97*	(0.95, 0.99)
Percent of children who are multiracial			0.97**	(0.96, 0.99)	0.97***	(0.95, 0.99)
Percent of children who are White			0.97***	(0.96, 0.99)	0.97***	(0.96, 0.99)
Moderate community poverty			0.97	(0.55, 1.70)	0.96	(0.55, 1.66)
High community poverty			0.91	(0.51, 1.64)	0.92	(0.51, 1.66)
Moderate urban density			2.37*	(1.16, 4.81)	2.48*	(1.23, 5.02)
Low urban density			0.45	(0.18, 1.13)	0.48	(0.19, 1.21)
Center receives no public dollars			0.86	(0.35, 2.07)	0.85	(0.35, 2.06)
Center receives mostly private dollars (>67%)			1.05	(0.56, 1.95)	1.02	(0.55, 1.91)
Center receives a mix of private and public dollars ^a			1.82	(0.86, 3.85)	1.84	(0.86, 3.96)
Center receives mostly public dollars (>67%)			1.21	(0.68, 2.15)	1.19	(0.67, 2.12)
% match: Asian teacher, Asian children					0.98	(0.94, 1.02)
% match: Black teacher, Black children					1.00	(0.98, 1.02)
% match: Hispanic teacher, Hispanic children					0.98	(0.96, 1.00)
% match: White teacher, White children					1.00	(0.99, 1.02)
Constant	0.30***	(0.24, 0.37)	4.80	(1.00, 23.0)	4.47	(0.90, 22.28)
<i>Archer-Lemeshow goodness of fit test p value³</i>			0.07		0.07	
<i>N = 4,709; *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001</i>						

³ As recommended by Archer & Lemeshow, 2006.

This analysis examined turnover intentions and each individual relationship and support indicator by teacher race/ethnicity. No statistically significant differences in turnover intentions were observed. Statistically significant differences in support were indicated in only the following

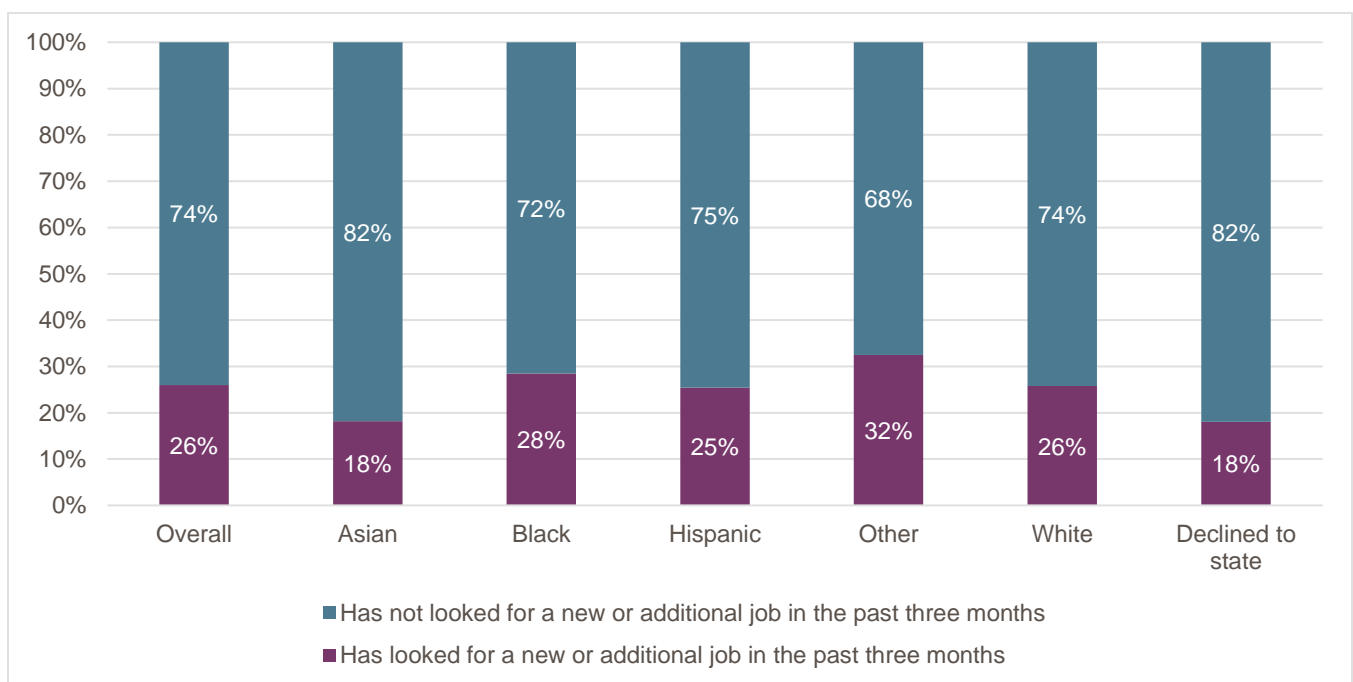
variable: “My supervisor helped me create a plan for professional development at least once a month.” Black and Hispanic educators were more likely to respond “yes” to this item than teachers of other races/ethnicities.

Table 3. Teachers’ Relationships by Race/Ethnicity

Positive Framing Survey Question Text	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Other
I knew that I was appreciated by the parents more than once .	94.1%	84.3%	87.2%	82.8%	85.0%
Parents never blamed their child’s bad behavior on the program.	83.0%	73.5%	78.3%	76.2%	81.9%
I knew the children were happy with me more than once .	90.8%	86.3%	85.3%	84.8%	73.4%
I was never moved to a different classroom or group of children.	75.2%	75.4%	74.9%	77.8%	78.2%
I agree or strongly agree that I have help dealing with difficult children or parents.	41.2%	51.2%	51.8%	46.2%	39.2%
I agree or strongly agree that my coworkers and I are treated with respect on a daily basis.	83.9%	81.4%	80.7%	80.0%	87.9%
My supervisor helped me create a plan for professional development at least once a month .*	51.6%	65.5%	61.9%	51.7%	69.7%
My supervisor and I discussed how to improve my skills working with children’s behavior at least once a month .	47.0%	55.7%	52.1%	51.8%	45.3%
My supervisor and I discussed how to improve my skills helping children learn at least once a month .	96.6%	93.6%	94.4%	96.4%	98.3%

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 5. Turnover Intention by Race/Ethnicity⁴



⁴ No statistical differences were observed by teacher racial identity.

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