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The Developmental Ecosystem of Childhoods in Los Angeles: Families' perspectives on how the early childhood development ecosystem mitigates barriers and facilitates Nurturing Care

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The Developmental Ecosystem of Childhoods in Los Angeles:

Families' perspectives on how the early childhood development ecosystem mitigates barriers and facilitates *Nurturing Care*

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Joseph Hyrum Wright

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Developmental Ecosystem of Childhoods in Los Angeles:
Families' perspectives on how the early childhood development ecosystem mitigates barriers and facilitates *Nurturing Care*

by

Joseph Hyrum Wright

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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Professor Edith S. Omwami, Co-Chair

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The early childhood ecosystem is comprised of individuals, organizations/institutions, and microsystems (health, education, etc.) which support young children (ages 0-5). This ecosystem is path-dependent because of historical and ecological barriers and facilitators. These barriers and facilitators are sustained by social, political, and economic structures that perpetuate patterns of inequality in early childhood outcomes.

The purpose of this research is to (1) identify these barriers and facilitators from the perspective of families in Los Angeles in Los Angeles as they seek to access informal and formal early childhood services and resources, and (2) understand the role of the early childhood

system—encompassing the individuals, institutions, and microsystems centered on childhood development embedded within the early childhood ecosystem— in helping families. This research used qualitative methods to interview families, service providers, government officials, and community members across Los Angeles County, California (LA). LA was selected given the complexity of its early-childhood ecosystem.

This research suggests that barriers and facilitators exist across the macro, meso, and micro-levels of the early childhood ecosystem - and contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities. Some of these barriers include poverty, gentrification, social isolation, language, and complicated bureaucracy. However, there are also facilitators expanding policy interests, increasing financial investments, and building social networks. Furthermore, this study found that while much of the early childhood system (embedded within the early childhood ecosystem) perpetuates patterned inequities, there are some individuals, organizations/institutions, and sub-systems that mitigate these barriers. Some of the characteristics of an effective early childhood system are strong governance and accountability, sustainable financing, strong partnerships, and empathetic and responsive programming.

Findings indicate implications for policymakers, practitioners, and academics. For example, policymakers should create policies that accounts for the early childhood ecosystem, practitioners should design relational programming, and academics should seek to understand how the early childhood system can be leveraged to influence the early childhood ecosystem.

The dissertation of Joseph Hyrum Wright is approved.

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2024

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Children live and develop within complex and dynamic ecosystems that affect their development—perhaps few are more complex and dynamic than in Los Angeles County (LA), the most populous county in the United States (U.S.) (Davis, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a; Woodhouse, 2020). Such ecosystems exert immense, yet often hidden influence on the development of a child and consist of macro, meso, and micro-level influences as well as interactions between the various entities within and among these levels. From a child development perspective, this ecosystem can facilitate the flourishing of children (Halfon et al., 2020; Lareau, 2011). At other times, children face barriers sometimes resulting in a turbulent and disorienting ecosystem that hinders growth and development (Lareau, 2011; Woodhouse, 2020). An important component of such ecosystems is the early childhood[1] system which includes individuals (formal and informal), institutions, agencies, organizations, and the sub-systems (health, education, child welfare, etc.) that specifically support a child's development from the ages of 0-5 (See Figure 1). This early childhood system *should* be designed to support children from birth to the age of five by enabling facilitators and removing barriers to healthy development (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012).

To this end, the World Health Organization and UNICEF's Nurturing Care Framework outlined five cornerstones for an early childhood system: (1) health, (2) nutrition, (3) nurturing caregiving, (4) early learning opportunities, and (5) safety and security (Britto et al., 2017). In practice, how each of these sub-systems is implemented within a cohesive early childhood

[1] Early childhood refers to holistic supports for early childhood development inclusive of education, care, health, and other services. This is distinct from a siloed early childhood support such as early childhood care or education alone.

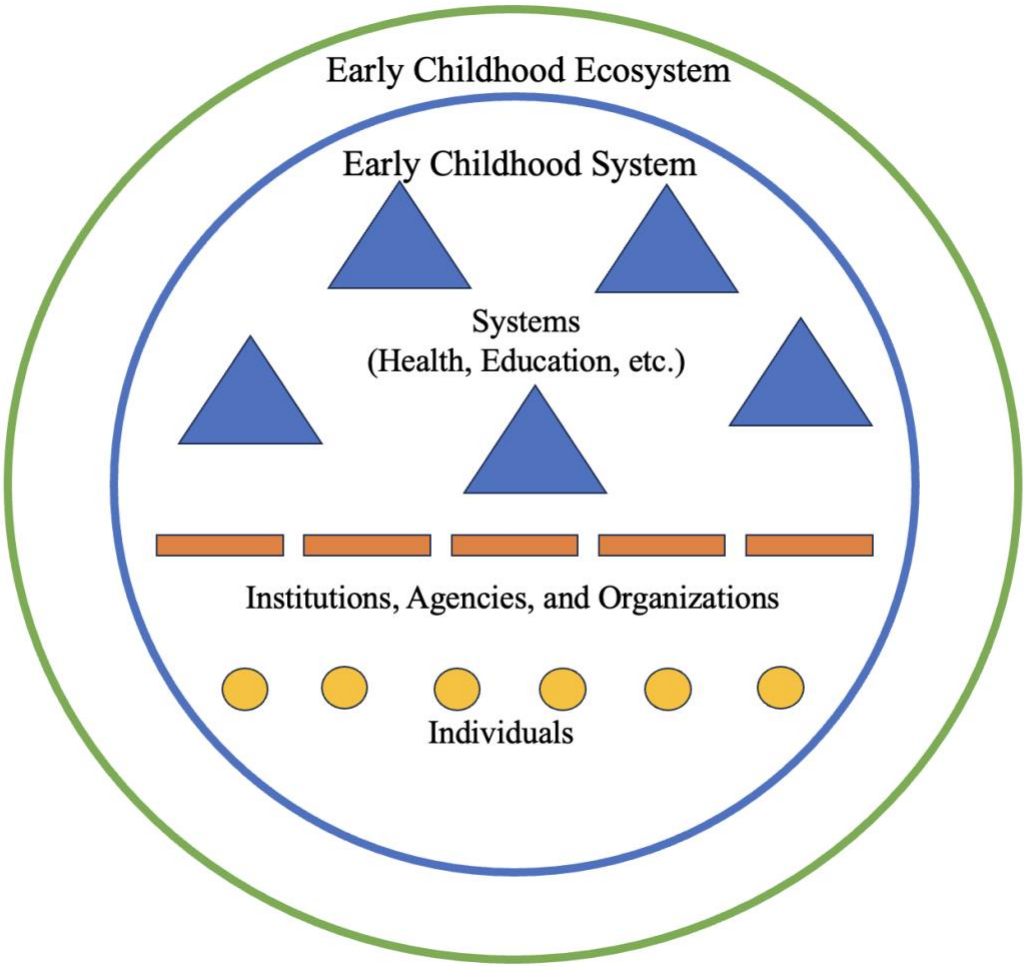
system can lead to dramatically different outcomes, impacted by political, economic, and social contexts (Woodhouse, 2020). Even if well designed, the early childhood system in a specific context can mitigate substantial challenges for families. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic some early childhood systems continued to provide resources despite service disruptions. Alternatively, certain features inherent in the system itself may also prevent progress. For example, when early childhood services are fragmented and siloed from each other, families may struggle with accessing all the support they need.

However, with effective design, early childhood systems can organize the broader early childhood ecosystem *for* children and families. They can mitigate barriers and constraints as well as catalyze enablers and facilitators to promote overall development. For instance, a well-designed relationally based early childhood resource center can offer young families not just material and financial assistance but also valuable social support. This approach extends possibilities towards long-lasting impacts across generations within communities. Understanding these key design features, such as a relationally based child resource center, is critical for ensuring a better future for children and their families.

This research responds to these concerns by investigating the contextualized interactions between children, the early childhood system, and the early childhood ecosystem within three neighborhoods of Los Angeles County. This study then analyses the role of the early childhood system in helping families in these neighborhoods navigate barriers, constraints, facilitators, and enablers within the ecosystem (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Early Childhood Ecosystem and System



Problem Statement and Research Questions

Over the past fifty years, progress have been made in improving the well-being and developmental outcomes of children (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). Despite progress, children in the U.S. still fall below peer nations in child well-being outcomes. Political, economic, and social forces in the U.S. pose significant challenges for some children, leading to

discrimination, violence, and poverty, leaving many in a vulnerable position (Fletcher & Jajtner, 2020; United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). In California specifically, almost half of children are at or near the U.S. Federal Poverty threshold placing them at a developmental risk (Bohn et al., 2013).

Children deserve a healthy start to life and the consequences of poor development are costly for individuals and society. Research continues to confirm that investments in early childhood can mitigate negative outcomes (Britto et al., 2017; *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 2000; Heckman et al., 2010; Kilburn & Karoly, 2008). With a recent convergence in the U.S. of economic and social interest in early childhood, significant efforts have been undertaken by policymakers to invest in various early childhood program interventions (Bertram & Pascal, 2016). However, not all programs and interventions are resulting in the best outcomes (Durkin et al., 2022).

It is important to better understand why some early childhood ecosystems can lead to more effective developmental outcomes than others. First and foremost, knowledge is essential for addressing disparities and inequalities, which persist along geographic, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines (Woodhouse, 2020). Depending on a family's geographic or socioeconomic status, they may encounter systematically different and often hidden constraints and barriers as well as enablers and facilitators while seeking access to support within the early childhood ecosystem they inhabit (Lareau, 2011). Therefore, it is important to interrogate the early childhood system in which policies and programs are operationalized *from the perspective of families* rather than from those managing the systems (Williams et al., 2013).

Thus, the purpose of this research is: (1) to understand the overall early development ecosystem of Los Angeles County, (2) to identify the barriers and facilitators facing families as

they seek to access informal and formal early childhood services and resources in Los Angeles County; and (3) to understand the role of the early childhood system—the structures, individuals, organizations, and systems—in helping families navigate these barriers and facilitators across their ecosystem. The research questions that inform this study are as follows:

1. What is the political, economic, and social context of the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles?
2. What are the barriers and constraints as well as facilitators and enablers embedded in the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles County and how do they promote or inhibit overall development and well-being of children?
3. What role does the early childhood system play in helping families navigate these barriers, constraints, facilitators, and enablers?

To address these questions, this research supports program managers, community partners, and policymakers in improving programming and guiding strategic policy directions. It also adds to the knowledge base about early childhood system building and contributes to practical applications regarding how they can be better designed to foster the well-being of children and families within their larger ecosystems.

Research Concepts and Theories

This research draws on the *Nurturing Care Framework* to provide the main definitions of early childhood and early childhood systems. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have developed the Nurturing Care Framework to provide a scaffolding tool for governments striving to operationalize the latest in early childhood development research and practice (World Health Organization, 2018).

However, the Nurturing Care Framework and the right to early childhood development are not operationalized in a vacuum and must be situated in a contextualized environment. Thus, this research draws on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model to help contextualize early childhood development. Ecosystems are made up of the macro (policy, economic, and social), meso (organizational and community), and micro (family) contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Woodhouse, 2020). Additionally, structuration theory is utilized to understand interactions within these socio-ecological levels amongst individuals, organizations, and systems (Giddens, 1984). The contextualized interactions between stakeholders and structures within a child's ecosystem inevitably creates conflicts and synergisms.

It is these conflicts and synergisms within the early childhood ecosystem that become barriers and constraints or facilitators and enablers of child development (Giddens, 1984; Lukes, 2005; Woodhouse, 2020). For example, actors within the healthcare, education, public health, and other systems that serve children exert power to advocate for their funding in a resource-scarce environment. The exertion of power and advocacy can create distrust and fragmentation amongst service providers which can make it difficult for families to access holistic care.

What is especially problematic is when patterns within the childhood ecosystem systematically benefit some groups while simultaneously marginalizing or excluding others (Hise, 2004; Piazza & Frankenberg, 2019; Rothstein, 2017). These patterns of systematic inclusion and exclusion often result in racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities. LA provides a compelling example of the intricate reality of an early childhood system and ecosystem. At the macro level, factors such as the political structure of the county, national housing market forces, and immigration flows influence the early childhood ecosystem (Davis, 2006). Through the meso level, challenges like fragmented service delivery and disconnected social networks further shape

this landscape. Even at the micro level, issues such as trauma and interpersonal racism play significant roles. In this complex interplay, individuals, institutions, agencies, organizations, and systems contribute to barriers and constraints as well as enablers and facilitators for children and families across the ecosystem.

However, when structured well, the purpose of an early childhood system, integrated within the developmental ecosystem, is to help families—especially the most vulnerable and marginalized (Coffman, 2007; Learning Policy Institute, 2021). This involves mitigating barriers and constraints. It also requires strengthening the facilitators and enablers of a child's ecosystem, ultimately leading to improved well-being and developmental outcomes.

Methods

In this study, ecometrics is deployed as an approach to address the research questions. Sampson (2012) describes this approach as "study[ing] [the] neighborhood-level or contextual variations in their own right," using multiple methods that meet validation standards (p. 67). Following an ecometric perspective, this study uses qualitative data and analyses, supplemented with quantitative data, to demonstrate the complex and dynamic early childhood ecosystem in LA. The emphasis is on a qualitative approach, as it yields richer data on the context and experiences that influence families (Weisner, 2014b, p. 164).

Drawing from the principles of the ecometric approach, I address the first research question through an in-depth historical and cultural analysis of LA. This analysis includes interviews, field observations, and a literature review. Given the limited literature on childhood in Los Angeles, this range of data proves invaluable in unpacking how historical and cultural contexts have shaped the early childhood ecosystem of LA.

The selection of neighborhoods for this study was informed by geospatial maps from the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families & Communities. These maps incorporate early childhood outcomes and neighborhood conditions which were instrumental in revealing geographical patterns relevant to the early childhood ecosystem of LA. These data exposed the plurality of early childhood ecosystems in LA, indicating a wide array of *childhoods* bounded by factors such as geography, race, class, etc. A comparative approach was used to investigate multiple ecosystems to determine differences and similarities. Some phenomena, such as early childhood, can only be fully understood within the context of comparative studies (Broadfoot, 1999). These studies allow a more systematic examination about context, structure, and underlying processes.

For this comparative approach, three neighborhoods in LA were chosen: West Los Angeles (Santa Monica, Mar Vista, and Culver City), Central-Downtown Los Angeles (Korea Town, Pico-Union, and University Park), and South Los Angeles (Compton and Watts). In each neighborhood, in-depth interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including policy and government officials, community members, early childhood program managers, and families. These interviews aimed to identify the barriers and constraints as well as the enablers facing families and children. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

Other sources of data were used to verify and triangulate the themes, ideas, and concepts that arose from the interviews. Several interviews indicated a demographic shift occurring in Los Angeles, a trend supported by Census data. Furthermore, as a form of "ground truthing," the results were shared with policy and government officials, community members, early childhood program managers, and families. These "ground-truthing" sessions were recorded, transcribed, and coded for any additional themes or concepts that emerged. This process continued until

saturation was achieved. Throughout the research process, nearly 100 individuals were interviewed, shared information, or assisted with validating the data.

Organization of Chapters

Chapter two provides a comprehensive literature review on early childhood and early childhood systems. Chapter three introduces the theory, frameworks, and conceptual models used for data analysis. Chapter four delves into the methodological approaches employed to make sense of the complexity of an early childhood ecosystem. Chapter five addresses the first research question concerning the historical, political, and economic context of Los Angeles. This chapter incorporates a literature review, policy analysis, document reviews, and interviews to provide a coherent narrative necessary for contextualizing the early childhood ecosystem in Los Angeles. Chapter six examines the second research question, centering on the barriers and enablers influencing early childhood in Los Angeles. Chapter seven explores the third research question, offering a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of the early childhood system for children in LA; especially considering the identified barriers and constraints. Chapter eight presents a discussion of the findings of the preceding chapters, including their implications for policymakers, organizations, and researchers. Additionally, it outlines future directions for this research.

Chapter 2: Nurturing Care and Early Childhood Systems

This chapter reviews pertinent literature concerning early childhood development and early childhood systems. It begins with an examination of the Nurturing Care Framework, a globally recognized standard for early childhood development. Subsequently, the chapter explores literature on early childhood systems from international and domestic perspectives.

The Nurturing Care Framework

In 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched the Nurturing Care Framework to provide an evidence-based standard for early childhood development (World Health Organization, 2018). The Nurturing Care Framework (see Figure 2) asserts that healthy early childhood development requires: (1) good health, (2) nutrition, (3) early learning opportunities, (4) safety and security, and (5) responsive caregiving. The framework recommends that local and national governments should provide families and children with the resources needed to meet these standards (WHO & UNICEF, 2021a; World Health Organization, 2018). This framework combines crucial insights from developmental science with a rights-based lens. Appendix A provides a summary of each component of nurturing care (Britto et al., 2017; *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 2000; Bertram & Pascal, 2016; Durkin et al., 2022).

Figure 2

The Nurturing Care Framework

Nurturing Care Framework (WHO & UNICEF, 2018)

The Nurturing Care Framework also identifies barriers to a child's development, including extreme poverty, various forms of insecurity, gender inequities, violence, exposure to environmental toxins, and mental health challenges. The framework emphasizes the importance of mitigating these barriers to ensure nurturing care (Britto et al., 2017; Durkin et al., 2022; WHO & UNICEF, 2021a).

In recent years, WHO and UNICEF have developed guides and resources to assist stakeholders in operationalizing *Nurturing Care* through five strategic action areas: (1) governance, planning, and financing; (2) focusing on and engaging with families and communities; (3) strengthening services by improving systems and human resources development; (4) monitoring progress; and (5) fostering partnerships for scaling work and

innovation (WHO & UNICEF, 2021a). The Nurturing Care Framework, along with its strategic actions, establishes an international standard for early childhood development and outlines the building blocks of an early childhood system (Britto et al., 2017; Durkin et al., 2022). As previously mentioned, the Nurturing Care Framework promotes good health, nutrition, early learning, nurturing caregiving, and safety and security. In this research, it provides the core elements that must be provided to families. Each of these elements is served by a system. For example, the healthcare system comprises individuals, programs, organizations, and processes that should assist families in ensuring the health of their young children. Another example is the education system, which facilitates early learning opportunities. These "systems" might be referencing an individual system (i.e., healthcare). In the case of early childhood, various systems that serve children and families are commonly referred to as the Early Childhood System. In this research, "early childhood system" denotes this collection of smaller systems, unless stated otherwise.

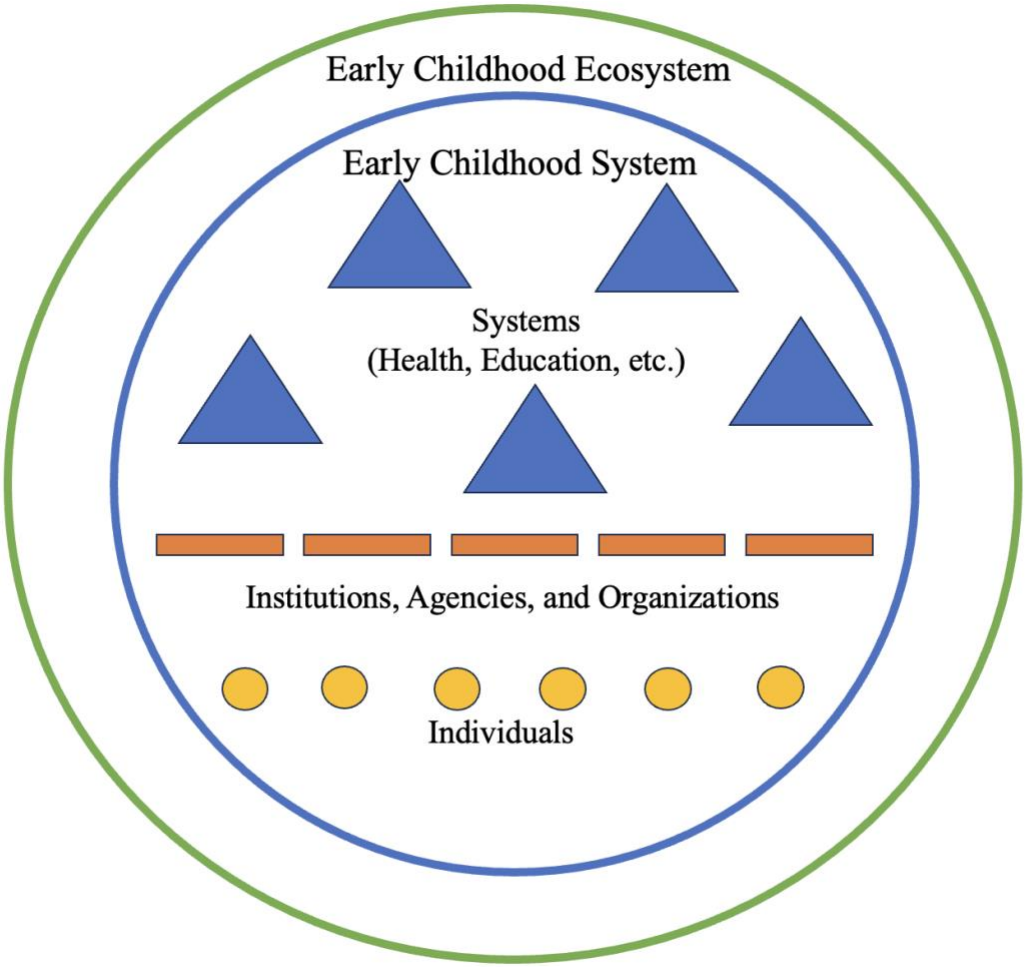
Early Childhood Systems

An early childhood system is defined as the formal and informal individuals, institutions, agencies, organizations, and systems that support a child's development from birth to the age of five (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012). The early childhood system is distinct from its sub-systems (e.g., education, health, etc.). This section focuses on the early childhood system, encompassing all its sub-systems (see Figure 1 from chapter one below; reprinted for convenience). The early childhood system can be designed to optimize various objectives, such as efficiency, effectiveness, and equity (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; World Health Organization, 2010). The

following section offers an overview of the key components that researchers have identified as integral to any early childhood system.

Figure 1 (Reprinted)

Early Childhood Ecosystem and System



Components of an Early Childhood System

The WHO and UNICEF have synthesized the findings of numerous researchers and identified seven key components of an early childhood system: (1) governance, (2) planning, (3) financing, (4) strengthening services, (5) data systems, (6) scaling, sustainability, and innovation, and (7)

stakeholder and partnership management (Britto et al., 2017; Bruner, 2012, p. 37; Goodwin et al., 2005; Kauerz & Kagan, 2012; Scott, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021a; World Health Organization, 2010). Below is a summary of the role and function of each of these components. Throughout this study, these components will be closely examined to determine if they contain inherent constraints or barriers, and to explore how they can be utilized to design systems that effectively support families.

Governance

Governance is the first key component of an early childhood system. Good governance is defined as "the structures, processes, and policies that enable a system to function consistently, effectively, and efficiently" (Kauerz & Kagan, 2012, p. 88). Ponder (2012) contends that governance is the foundation of a system, as the efficacy of the other components hinges upon strong governance. The WHO (2010) suggests that a lack of good governance leads to weaker responses and wasted resources.

Governance is attributed with two primary tasks: accountability and decision-making (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012, p. 98). Accountability includes fiscal, programmatic, workforce, performance, and outcome dimensions (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012, p. 99). In addition, the WHO and UNICEF identify coordination and policy development as key aspects of good governance (WHO & UNICEF, 2021b). They propose five steps for establishing effective governance structures: (1) establishing a high-level coordinating mechanism across sectors; (2) assessing the current situation and opportunities; (3) developing a common vision, goals, targets, and action plan; (4) assigning roles and responsibilities at national, sub-national, and local levels; and (5) implementing a sustainable financing strategy (WHO & UNICEF, 2021b). The choice of

governance structure in a community is influenced by various social, economic, and political factors. Ideally, a community's governance structure should incorporate both within-government and cross-sectoral leadership effectively (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012). Furthermore, an external champion can play a crucial role in guiding the system through its political creation and management (Scott, 2012, p. 21).

There are three basic models for coordinating leadership. The choice of which model to use depends on context and political will (Bennett, 2011; Ponder, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021b). The first model involves establishing an entity solely focused on early childhood. This approach offers clear and consistent accountability, decision-making, and coordination. However, it requires strong political will. The second option, often the most common, is a model where one sector (e.g., education) leads multiple sectors (e.g., health, child welfare, etc.) in a collaborative approach. In this model, the lead sector is serves as the decision-making and organizing entity. While less intensive as stakeholders are already in place, equal engagement can be challenging. The third model focuses on strengthening individual sectors (e.g., health, education, etc.). Although this model provides the most limitations due to the lack of coordination, it can be an appropriate option when political will and resources are limited (WHO & UNICEF, 2021b).

Kauerz and Kagan (2012) highlight some less-common models in the U.S.: (1) within-government cabinets (i.e., Children's Cabinets), (2) within-government management teams, (3) collaboratives or task forces, and (4) managing partnerships, or state-local partnerships. Some states have chosen to implement structural changes within the government by creating standalone early childhood authority. Other government entities have adopted a subsumed administrative integration model, wherein the governance structure is incorporated within an existing

organization (i.e., Early Childhood office embedded in a Department of Education). Ponder (2012) advocates for state-level cabinet positions that establish clear standards and allocate resources. At the local level, Clifford (2012) identifies collaborative early childhood councils or task forces, not-for-profit entities, or existing agencies and service delivery networks as the most effective approaches.

Regardless of the chosen model, best practices for early childhood governance organizations include being: (1) informed by political concerns regarding poverty, equity, and social exclusion; (2) grounded in science and economic evidence; (3) guided by a vision of comprehensive and integrated services; (4) accessible through multiple sectoral entry points for families; (5) inclusive of early investments (during pregnancy or before conception); (6) established by statute, (7) government-led, (8) and government-funded.

Planning

The WHO and UNICEF (2021) have identified planning as a second strategic component of an early childhood system. Planning is defined as "the translation of policy objectives into concrete activities" (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021b). Over the past decade, early childhood systems planning has faced challenges such as expanding services, increasing fiscal and programmatic accountability, a focus on equity, and a growing regulatory role of the state (Kagan et al., 2012). This heightened interest, coupled with inconsistent funding, has forced planning to incorporate incremental changes that aim to balance impact and feasibility. Kagan et al. (2012) proposes principles for effective planning within early childhood systems, emphasizing that the process should be: (1) inclusive, transparent, and influential—with influential planning involving stakeholders with decision-making power; (2) driven by current

research and evidence-based theory of change; (3) cognizant of policy and political contexts; and (4) adaptable, sustainable, and subject to regular review, resulting in actionable priorities.

Clifford (2012) suggests that a common mistake in planning is the failure to include input from the local level, particularly parents and family members. Alternatively, successful planning should occur in 5–10-year cycles, setting measurable targets, and establishing an intersectoral team of planners accountable for both sector plans as well as the larger system plan. To facilitate intersectoral collaboration, leaders should engage each sector in the planning process, allocate resources based on activities, and collectively monitor and interpret metrics. Planning should occur in cycles allowing communities to assess the current situation, review progress, define interventions and services, strengthen existing services, and advocate for changes and priorities. These efforts often require systems planners to build upon existing structures by improving the equity and quality of current policies and programs, as well as by introducing various services or interventions to provide more holistic care (Clifford, 2012; L. Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; Kagan et al., 2012). Kagan et al. (2021) present eight areas for strategic planning considerations (see Table 1).

Table 1

Key Considerations for Early Childhood System Planning

Component	**Considerations**
Age	● Prenatal-3 ● 0-3 ● 0-5

	• 0-8
Quality	• Regulations and enforcement • Incentives for quality • Facilities and capital
Workforce Development	• Preservice, in-service, and education • Compensation • Professional development systems
Informed Families and Public	• Family education and support services • Public relations
Accountability	• Standards • Assessments • Data systems
Financing	• State funded • Subsidies • Childcare tax provisions • Family leave • Revenue generation
Governance	• State and local early childhood governance entities • Family and community involvement • Alignment with other systems

Services	• Which services should be included

Financing

Financing constitutes the third component of early childhood system development. It involves the procurement and distribution of monetary resources necessary for operating current services and processes, strengthening services in an equitable and sustainable way, and funding the expansion of future service delivery (Nagle, 2012). The budget for early childhood systems is the single most important policy document and serves as the "spinal column" of policy making (p. 260). There are two primary sources of funding: public and private. Public financing commonly occurs through taxes or bonds, while private funding largely originates from philanthropic donations, supplemented by limited business investments in childcare centers or family resource centers (Nagle, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021b).

In the U.S. context, both public and private funding sources have traditionally been utilized to meet the demands of an early childhood system (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Nagle, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021b, 2021a). Coffman (2012) argues that private resources play an important role in the initial development of early childhood systems or for specific projects; however, scaling and sustaining early childhood efforts ultimately necessitate public funding. Most early childhood systems structure their initiatives around the existing financing streams of various sectors (e.g., health, education, public health, etc.). However, this approach often results in a fragmented and siloed system due to the lack of incentives for cooperation.

Nagel (2012) along with the WHO and UNICEF (2021b), suggest that best practices for financing early childhood systems include: analyzing the current political economy at both the national and local level; understanding the budget processes and key stakeholder agendas;

involving a wide range of stakeholders in the process, accessing current budgets across multiple sectors; identifying *all* potential funding sources; defining inputs and outputs; keeping budgets local; and establishing accountability mechanisms. They also propose that advocacy efforts can improve funding outcomes. External champions play an integral role in the successful financing of early childhood systems (WHO & UNICEF, 2021b).

Services and Service Strengthening

Services are the fourth component of an early childhood system. They are defined as the delivery of goods, services, and resources to families and children (WHO & UNICEF, 2021d). An early childhood system entails the delivery of these interconnected and related services aimed at improving the well-being of children aged 0-5. In the U.S., national, state, and local entities (both private and public) have established various services, but often lack the interconnectedness and coordination required to function as a cohesive system (Learning Policy Institute, 2021; Scott, 2012). An essential aspect of system-building is not only to strengthen existing services but also to integrate services into a results framework, identify gaps, and implement new programs or services where necessary (WHO & UNICEF, 2021d).

One important facet of strengthening services is the development of a sustainable workforce associated with service delivery. The workforce within an early childhood system is diverse and varied, ranging from pediatricians to dieticians, and from daycare teachers to police. Workforce development requires a carefully implemented multi-pronged approach that emphasizes long-term results (WHO & UNICEF, 2021d).

Best practices for workforce development include assessing current workforce policies and practices, implementing professional development standards (certification and

credentialing), identifying gaps, establishing standards of care based on evidence-based competencies, employing effective adult learning methods to train the workforce, improving workforce conditions, and implementing supportive supervision and mentoring (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; Traylor, 2012). Employee turnover in fields that support early childhood is particularly high and is often attributed to low pay and burnout. Achieving a high-quality and sustainable system requires improving pay and compensation (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; Traylor, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021d).

Data

Data form the fifth component of an early childhood system. These systems provide information about "strategic planning, program improvement, resource management, and public accountability" (Gruendel & Stedron, 2012, p. 120). However, most early childhood data systems are a combination of independent systems lacking a holistic design and common metrics. Additionally, many data are constrained by privacy laws governing the sharing of data, further restricting their effectiveness. The lack of integration between data within an early childhood system can result in poor decision-making, fragmentation, and mistrust (Gruendel & Stedron, 2012). Building a high-quality data system requires a clear focus, patience, and time. As Coffman (2012) warns, individuals often seek too much too soon, with insufficient effort.

The WHO and UNICEF (2021e) have recommended that best practices in designing data frameworks encompass tracking data based on an agreed-upon program logic model, regularly updating routine information, and making data available to all stakeholders (including communities and families). Additionally, data frameworks should incorporate population-level measures and support existing measures such as the Early Development Index (EDI) the

Nurturing Care Framework's 24 Core Indicators. Implementation monitoring and process evaluation information should also be included. Other useful measures include family and workforce satisfaction. To prevent the reinforcement of negative stereotypes, data should be culturally appropriate and allow contextualization of the child's developmental progress (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; Traylor, 2012).

Sustainability, Scaling, and Innovation

Sustainability represents the sixth component of an early childhood system. It is characterized by the long-term stability of system components (e.g., governance, financing, etc.). For organizations focused on growth, sustainability also includes elements of spreading and scaling programs and services to reach more people. Additionally, sustainability also includes innovation to facilitate adaptation to changing contextual factors (WHO & UNICEF, 2021f).

Scaling can manifest in various dimensions, including spread (availability), depth (quality), coverage (reaching more places), and breadth (reaching more people). It may also involve integrating more activities or features into a system (Coffman, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021f). Some recommended practices for scaling include utilizing data to inform decisions and commencing with small-scale initiatives to prevent overwhelming the system with change. Effective scaling also requires participation from a diverse array of stakeholders.

Sustainability also demands the rapid testing of innovations in real-world settings and subsequently disseminating the results within communities of practice. This includes sharing both successes and failures (WHO & UNICEF, 2021f). Fostering innovation necessitates collaboration and trust among program implementers, families, researchers, and scientists. This is achieved by (1) identifying local research priorities and allocating resources for

implementation research, (2) using local and global evidence to develop scalable innovations, (3) supporting platforms for learning and research, and establishing communities of practice to facilitate peer learning, and (4) documenting and publishing findings and lessons learned (WHO & UNICEF, 2021f).

Stakeholder and Partnership Management

Stakeholder and partnership management typifies the seventh component of an early childhood system. It includes fostering collective trust among all parties involved in the establishment and suitability of an early childhood system. Numerous scholars and practitioners in the field of early childhood systems assert that stakeholder and partnership management is a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of this work (Clifford, 2012; Garcia et al., 2008; Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; Scott, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021a, 2021c).

Scott (2012) has argued that focusing on partnerships and stakeholders, especially parents, results in a synergistic impact. Establishing the level of trust necessary for this synergism requires robust networks cultivated over several years, a process especially crucial for parents (Scott, 2012, p. 23). The WHO and UNICEF (2021c) have endorsed this assertion, suggesting that early childhood systems are fundamentally about fostering collective trust, which prompts families and communities to alter their environments to promote nurturing care. To accomplish this goal, leaders of early childhood systems must equip families and communities with the information and resources necessary for change by reinforcing positive social norms, challenging negative social norms, and offering direct support for families, including all caregivers of the child (WHO & UNICEF, 2021c).

Community engagement is also vital for the success of an early childhood system. Effective practices involve adopting a strengths-based approach by leveraging family and community beliefs, practices, and needs. This includes identifying local champions and ensuring inclusive participation from all stakeholders. Engaging with the community necessitates mapping out assets, developing inclusive plans, and setting clear expectations for involvement, including the required time and effort. Throughout this process, it is essential for leaders to emerge and develop, often requiring the process to be enjoyable to keep individuals engaged (WHO & UNICEF, 2021c). Furthermore, community engagement includes accountability and public relations. Accountability begins by involving community members in the planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating processes. Citizen report cards, participatory budgeting, and social audits are examples of mechanisms to engage community members. Additionally, it is crucial for external stakeholders (i.e., outside of the system) to recognize the positive impact of the system (WHO & UNICEF, 2021c).

System Barriers

Scott (2012) has lamented that despite years of study and publication, much of the "systems work" fails to achieve the intended results. This lack of "tangible progress" is shaped by internal and external barriers. The WHO and UNICEF (2021c) have suggested that the failure to adopt evidence-based innovations is a major barrier. Table 2 illustrates the persistence of "old thinking" that many system designers still adhere to, even considering the availability of "new thinking" that could lead to improved outcomes.

Table 2

Old and New Thinking of Early Childhood Systems

Old Thinking	**New Thinking (The Place-Based Approach)**
Parent focus or child focus	Child and family well-being
Maternal involvement	Family engagement
Information	Holistic social and economic support
Isolated programs	Connected services
Separate sectors	Multisectoral collaboration
Single-program impact	Collective impact

Note. The above table is drawn from the WHO and UNICEF (2021c, p. 4).

Kagan and Kauerz (2012) have identified four barriers to systems building, including (1) the pervasiveness of change and the need to contextualize approaches, (2) the necessity to plan and act simultaneously across sectors, (3) the requirement for multiple models and approaches alongside evaluations, and (4) the need to simplify terminology, definitions, and forge a common understanding (pp. 6–11). Additionally, scholars have located further internal and external systems barriers outlined in Table 3 below (Bertram & Pascal, 2016; Bruner, 2012; Cantor et al., n.d.; Clifford, 2012; Coffman, 2012; García, 2012; Gruendel & Stedron, 2012; Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; S. Kagan et al., 2012; Klein, 2012; Mintz, 2006; Nagle, 2012; National Academy of Medicine et al., 2016; Ponder, 2012; Scott, 2012; Traylor, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021a; World Health Organization, 2007; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992).

Table 3

Early Childhood Systems Internal and External Barriers to a Successful System

Internal Barriers	**External Barriers**
Competition for scarce resources and political processes	Short-term mindset regarding outcomes leading to short-term support
Lack of cooperation between sectors	Lack of local support
Inaccurate estimates of costs	Alienated stakeholders
Higher spending not resulting in better outcomes	Losing momentum and commitment
Lack of preparation	Unengaged communities
Balancing proven practices and innovation	Uninvolved family members
Weak links to other services	Unhelpful values and beliefs
Focusing on single programs	Hard to reach families
Lack of motivation	Community doesn't feel listened to
Poor messaging and programing	Fear-induced apathy
Lack of formative research	Lack of motivation

Only targeting mothers	Lack of legal provisions, rights, and entitlements
Forgetting there is a system	Good intentions but limited investment
Fragmentation of care	Social exclusion and stigma
Lack of shared accountability	Missing hard to reach populations
Lack of knowledge and understanding about the workforce	Lack of budget line fundings mechanisms
Lack of shared experiences cross sectors	Inability to connect with private sector
Social exclusion and stigma	Unwillingness to pay for services
Lack of early identification and referral pathways	Social conceptions about who children are and the role of women/unpaid work
Being overwhelmed by emergencies - i.e., Covid 19	Poor infrastructure and communication technologies
Lack of coordination amongst services	Dealing with diverse interests
Data that are not comparable	Confusion over local and macro level governance and authority
High cost of population surveys	
Lack of coverage, quality, or time	

Starting data collection and monitoring too late	
Lack of time, data, and money for monitoring	
Primary care services just monitor and refer	
Overburdening systems and the workforce, especially when scaling	
Ignoring those who don't show up on data	
Lack of frontline workers capabilities and skills	
Building and sustaining strong leadership and staffing	

The internal and external barriers confronting early childhood systems are significant, and most efforts to tackle these issues have either been too slow or incremental to adapt to rapidly changing contexts (Scott, 2012, p. 20).

No system is perfect, but building innovation and improvement is critical for a successful early childhood system. The most common approach for system improvement combines various programs and resources into a semi-coordinated entity or collaborative architecture. However, this approach often fails because the programs themselves are generally of moderate to poor quality, and merely stitching together such subpar programs does not yield improved outcomes

(Klein, 2012, pp. 27–28). Furthermore, the system components of financing, data, and governance typically do not facilitate deeper integration.

Conclusion

This research investigates how an early childhood system contributes to achieving equitable early childhood outcomes. The Nurturing Care Framework has furnished researchers, practitioners, and policymakers with an evidence-based foundation on how to promote child wellbeing, which will serve as a crucial perspective for this study. The accompanying *Nurturing Care Handbook* has integrated evidence-based approaches to early childhood systems building, offering an essential lens for addressing the research questions.

While the various components of the early childhood system outlined in this chapter provide a useful framework for systems building, what remains unclear is *how* these changes can be effectively implemented, particularly considering the barriers that hinder systems building. The aim of this research is to address this gap in the literature by examining how a successful early childhood system in LA overcomes these barriers. Before discussing the methodology employed to address this question in Chapter 4, Chapter 3 provides an overview of the concepts and theories guiding the research.

Chapter 3: Theory, Frameworks, and Conceptual Model

This chapter explores the key concepts and theories that underpin an analytical approach to the research questions addressed in this study. The analysis is rooted in ecological thinking, drawing upon the socio-ecological model of development formulated by Bronfenbrenner (1994). This framework helps to conceptualize the various components of the early childhood system and developmental ecosystem discussed in Chapter Two. Within a socio-ecological model spanning different levels, this approach considers the role of agency, which is constrained by structures within these ecosystems. As a result, there is a shift towards viewing early childhood through the lens of what researchers refer to as complex adaptive ecosystems (Holland, 1992; Resnicow & Page, 2008; Tan et al., 2005).

This chapter further discusses how structuration theory provides deeper insights into the manifestation of barriers and facilitators within these ecosystems. As suggested, this phenomenon stems from the processes of "othering" and "belonging" that gradually embed themselves over time, leading to systemic inequalities that surface at the population level (powell, 2012). The chapter then presents a conceptual model utilized throughout this research to elucidate potential pathways leading to patterned and structural inequalities, as well as resilience in Los Angeles.

Operationalizing Early Childhood Systems

Chapter 2 provided an in-depth analysis of the early childhood system, its components, including individuals, institutions, agencies, organizations, and sub-systems that support a child's development from birth to the age of five (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012). While there are definitions and operationalizations for over 50 different types of systems and their underlying theories (i.e.,

data systems, service systems, etc.), this study operationalizes an early childhood system as a distinct entity.

At the foundation of this early childhood system are individuals who collectively make up institutions or organizations. For example, employees (individuals) create a family resource center (organization). Sometimes a group of organizations all share similar purposes in their design. For example, pediatricians (individuals) make up several clinics (organizations) but bounded together in purpose, alongside other aspects related to pediatric health, these pediatricians' offices make up part of a pediatric health system. Preschools might not be part of this pediatric health system, yet they are part of the early childhood education system, a separate and distinct system. These systems can be simple and complex in their design.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, this study focuses on those systems that make up the Nurturing Care Framework including health, education, nutrition, safety and security, and nurturing care. The nurturing care system itself can be made up of both care providers, but also families themselves, which are a system (i.e., family system) within themselves. Within this research, these systems are referred to as sub-systems, in that they are part of a larger system referred to as the early childhood system. The early childhood system is the collective combination, both formal and informal as well as loosely and strongly bounded entities within a defined space and place. For the purposes of this dissertation, that space and place is LA County.

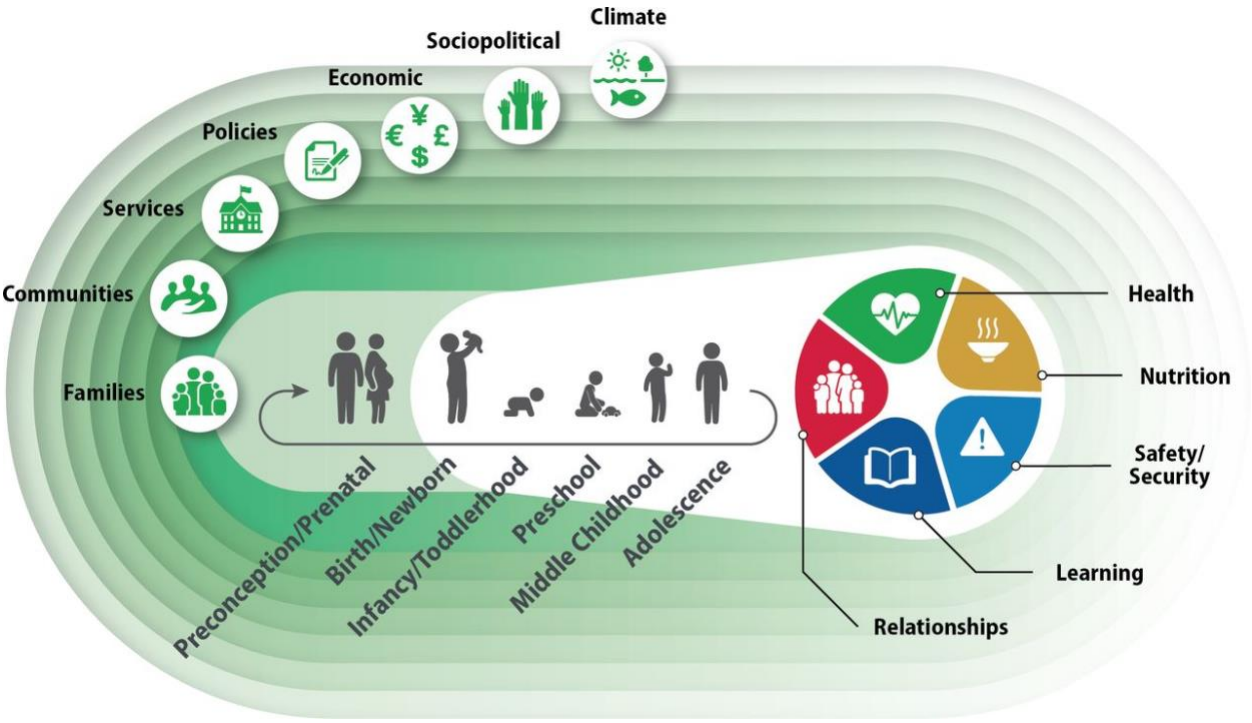
These individuals, organizations and sub-systems are also defined by their relationship with each other as well as the inter-connecting processes that are embedded over time. These interactions and processes, discussed below when outlining the theory of structuration, are critical components of how barriers and facilitators manifest themselves and also how they are mitigated or enabled.

Contextualizing Early Childhood: The Socio-Ecological Model

The socio-ecological model of development serves as the foundation for most early childhood research (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Woodhouse, 2020). According to this model, understanding a child's development requires an interrogation of the social ecology shaping a child's life. This developmental ecosystem includes micro, meso, and macro contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The micro context encompasses the immediate surroundings of the child, including the home and family. The meso context refers to the community and neighborhood, while the macro context includes the political, economic, and social-cultural influences on a child's life (Biggeri & Ferrone, 2022; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Woodhouse, 2020). Figure 3 provides a conceptual model illustrating how the socio-ecological model can be combined with the Nurturing Care Framework.

Figure 3

Nurturing Care Framework Embedded within the Socio-ecological Model



See Black et al. (2021).

In this model, the Nurturing Care Framework encompasses the child at birth (while still influencing preconception and prenatal development). However, nurturing care and development do not unfold in isolation. Instead, they are embedded within the contextual socio-ecological layers of families, communities, services, policies, economic conditions, sociopolitical conditions, and the environment. Within each of these layers are also social processes that operate within and between these layers.

Woodhouse (2008) has proposed that as we continue to gain insight into the significance of developmental processes, it becomes increasingly evident that social processes form the foundation of social contexts (p. 16). Woodhouse provides a clear articulation of the supplementary components comprising an ecological view of early childhood, including facets of social position (race, class, gender, etc.), as well as time.

Early Childhood Ecosystems

The socio-ecological model provides researchers with a useful framework for understanding a child's developmental environment. This contextualized environment is defined as the early childhood ecosystem. The early childhood developmental ecosystem[2] encapsulates all factors influencing the child's development. The early childhood ecosystem includes all processes, mindsets, values, agents, structures, and organizations that shape a child's developmental trajectory, from government policies and neighborhood parks to social values about children and the number of grocery stores available.

An early childhood ecosystem differs significantly from an early childhood system, as outlined in Chapter 2. While an early childhood system comprises both formal and informal individuals, institutions, agencies, organizations, and systems *within* the early childhood ecosystem aimed at supporting a child's development from the ages of 0-5, the early childhood ecosystem is much broader. It encompasses all processes, mindsets, values, agents, structures, and organizations influencing a child's trajectory, not solely those dedicated to their development and well-being. The following section provides a concise overview and definitions of the key components of an early childhood ecosystem, along with some of the significant ecosystem influences and interactions.

Ecosystem Components

[2] For the rest of this research study, the term "early childhood ecosystem" will be used to refer specifically to the early childhood developmental ecosystem.

Micro-level

The child: The child is the center of the early childhood ecosystem. (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Woodhouse, 2020). As the central actor, the child both acts and is acted upon. The ecosystem should be organized in a way to enhance the child's well-being and development (WHO, 2018).

The child-caregiver dyad: The child-caregiver dyad provides a frequently overlooked aspect of the early childhood ecosystem. Differing from the broader family structure, this dyad generally involves one or two caregivers offering a more concentrated amount of caregiving than the larger family unit. The Nurturing Care Framework underscores the distinctive significance of the child-caregiver bond, as it provides a deeper sense of security formidable for healthy development (WHO, 2018). These primary caregiver(s) dedicate themselves more extensively to ensuring nurturing care for the child, thus playing a pivotal role in the child's stability and development (Britto et al., 2017; Goodwin et al., 2005; WHO, 2018).

Additional caregivers and family: The immediate and extended family members and caregivers such as nannies, constitute the immediate social circle of most children ages 0-5. Moreover, the economic and social stability within the family and household environment shapes the child's development by influencing priorities, values, and behavioral patterns (Angley et al., 2015).

Meso-level

Community/Neighborhood: The community and neighborhood represent another vital component of the early childhood ecosystem. They encompass the physical spaces regularly frequented by a child and their family, along with the associated social, cultural, and political context. The

community and neighborhood are the unit of analysis that Sampson (2012) underscores the significance of community and neighborhood as enduring elements of social functioning, despite being relatively less understood.

Institutions, Agencies, Organizations, and Sub-systems (preschool, dentist, pediatrician, etc.): Institutions and organizations are the entities *within* a community or neighborhood specifically designed to cater to children's needs. Some of these organizations are public, while others are private. The difference between public and private institutions and organizations can significantly influence the accessibility and cost of resources available to children, profoundly impacting access to essential services.

As mentioned in Chapter 2 and in the previous section on operationalizing systems, these various institutions, agencies, and organizations can also be bounded together to create a sub-system (i.e., education system, health system, etc.). These subsystems also encompass the processes and interactions that operate within them and between them.

Exosphere: The exosphere includes institutions, agencies, organizations, and other community-level components that influence a child but are not primarily designed to serve them. For instance, a father's workplace directly impacts a child but is not specifically intended to provide support for children or families (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Woodhouse, 2020).

Local and semi-local cultural, economic, political, and social contexts: The macro and meso ecological levels are influenced by and shape cultural, economic, political, and social standards, attitudes, norms, policies, and processes. For example, the prevailing political attitudes in a

county or neighborhood may influence the community's attitude towards its children. Woodhouse (2020) highlights that the interplay between organizations, institutions, and their contexts can create confusion and contradictions for children. For instance, a child might feel loved at home but unsafe in their community. Understanding these environments and their interactions is crucial for comprehending child development within a specific context.

Macro-level

International and national cultural, economic, political, and social contexts: All ecological levels are subject to the influence of macro-level forces, which include international and national cultural, economic, political, social standards, attitudes, norms, policies, and processes. The challenge lies in tracing the connections between these macro-level influences and the outcomes experienced by children and families (Mills, 1959). For example, economic policies formulated in Washington D.C. or conflicts in other countries can significantly impact the cost of living for young families across the U.S. For many families, the challenges they encounter, such as high rent and inflation, stem from problems originating at the macro-level. Consequently, the struggle becomes "finding *local* solutions to *globally conceived* trouble and quandaries" (Bauman, 2007, p. 83).

Planetary conditions: Climate change exerts significant impacts on child development, leading to increased levels of air pollution and a rise in the number of school days missed (Carney, 2021; Masson-Delmotte et al., 2018; Randell & Gray, 2019; Sanson & Burke, 2020). Events such as wildfires and hurricanes, stemming from climate change, directly relate to disruptions and insecurities during critical developmental stages for children.

Additional Considerations of Place and Space

Place and space matter for child development. Gieryn (2000) explains that our sense of identity and ways of life are inherently intertwined with our living environments. He outlines three key components of place and space: (1) geographic location, (2) material infrastructure, and (3) investments imbued with meaning and value. For instance, a neighborhood exemplifies the significance of place and space by encompassing all three components: geographical locality, material forms, and associated values and meanings (Sampson, 2012).

Gieryn (2000) states that place serves to stabilize social structures and confer durability. Moreover, it delineates differences and hierarchies while shaping patterns of face-to-face interactions among individuals. Place also "embodies and secures" intangible aspects such as culture, identities, and memories (p. 473). He emphasizes the socio-cultural dimensions of place by asserting, "the very idea of 'neighborhood' is not inherent in any arrangement of streets and houses, but rather is an ongoing practical and discursive production and imagining of a people. 'Locality' is as much phenomenological as spatial" (pp. 472–473). For instance, two children who inhabiting the same geographical area may experience dramatically different early childhood ecosystems and outcomes. This illustrates that the same geographical space can host multiple distinct patterns of *childhoods* concurrently, influenced by sociocultural factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, or income. It also implies the possibility of multiple early childhood ecosystems coexisting within the same location simultaneously. In a city like Los Angeles, these distinct patterns of childhoods appear to be a reality. Therefore, comprehending a place like Los Angeles requires an understanding of its meaning and functioning of processes within its complex early childhood ecosystem.

Ecosystem processes and complexity

Ecosystems are also characterized by their unique processes, and few places exemplify the functioning of an early childhood ecosystem as distinctly as Los Angeles. Truly comprehending a locale like Los Angeles necessitates grasping these intricate processes and their complexity, as they directly shape outcomes. Within such ecosystems, processes are seldom dictated by a single agent; instead, they often unfold spontaneously based on a loose yet deeply ingrained set of assumptions, values, and principles. This is why some argue that the early childhood ecosystems function as complex adaptive systems (Holland, 1992; Resnicow & Page, 2008; Tan et al., 2005).

Early Childhood Ecosystems and Complexity

Considering a child's first five years offers profound insights into how early childhood ecosystems operate within principles of complexity, especially in locales like Los Angeles. For instance, within a particular ecosystem, there may be dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of children, each characterized by a nearly infinite set of latent traits such as individual genetic make-up, family dynamics, and various other personal attributes. Each child interacts with countless individuals—caregivers, siblings, doctors, nurses, preschool teachers, librarians, and more—across numerous locations they frequent, including home, school, church, parks, etc.. This reality unfolds continuously, shaping the child’s experiences hour by hour, day by day, month by month, and year by year throughout their early years.

In this manner, early childhood ecosystems display several fundamental traits of complex adaptive systems, such as the presence of diverse actors, non-linearity, chaos, and a dearth of centrally planned adaptations (Sarriot & Kouletio, 2015). Some of these include:

Multiple, Diverse Actors: Early childhood ecosystems have a multitude of actors, ranging from early childhood educators to pediatricians, and from parents to child welfare specialists (Scott, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021a). Each of these actors is motivated by their own objectives and priorities within the early childhood ecosystem, behaving in accordance with their standpoint on what the child needs.

Non-Linearity: Early childhood ecosystems do not adhere to linearity in their outcome production. While some components, like school and grade progression, may exhibit linear patterns, most other elements of the ecosystem—such as actors, institutions, and processes—tend to operate in a non-linear manner.

Chaos: In addition to non-linearity, early childhood ecosystems demonstrate a significant degree of unpredictability or randomness, often referred to as chaos. While a child's home environment may provide some stability, the overall functioning of the early childhood ecosystem lacks predictability. For instance, changes in policymakers occur with elections cycles, and early childhood educators may transition to new jobs.

Lack of Centrally Planned Adaptations: The concepts of multiple diverse actors and chaos imply a lack of centrally planned adaptions. While it might appear that ecosystems adapt randomly,

evidence suggests that adaptations occur as various actors seek to maximize their effectiveness within their specific domains. As actors exercise their agency, other participants in the ecosystem adjust to optimize their own effectiveness. When this cascading effect of adaptation becomes excessively chaotic, the agents within an ecosystem may find it too destabilizing. However, most actors within an ecosystem thrive with some level of chaos, as it fosters innovation and flexibility.

Collective Efficacy

While an early childhood ecosystem demonstrates elements of complexity, there are still processes within it that can be understood. One key process in an early childhood ecosystem is collective efficacy. Sampson (2012) defines collective efficacy as the convergence of "two fundamental mechanisms—social cohesion (the 'collectivity' part of the concept) and shared expectations for control (the 'efficacy' part of the concept)" (pp. 152–153).

While often concealed and challenging to observe, collective efficacy is a significant social process or aspect of a community ecosystem functioning. Just as self-efficacy has been demonstrated to correlate with improved health outcomes, collective efficacy has been linked to health, crime, and various other population outcomes such as birth weight, teen pregnancy, asthma, and mortality, indicating its relevance to population well-being (p. 178).

Furthermore, organizational structures such as service systems or nonprofits (e.g., neighborhood watches, block groups, tenant associations, or afternoon programs) contribute to the enhancement of collective efficacy. Trusted organizations play a vital role in facilitating deeper social networks and a shared sense of expectations (p. 158). Lastly, collective efficacy is influenced not only by institutions but also by other contextual factors such as culture, social

order, and other "structural characteristics" of a community's functioning (p. 154). For example, "cumulative disadvantage[s]" can destroy a sense of collective efficacy, thereby impeding what a community is seeks to accomplish.

Summary

The approach adopted in this study considers early childhood ecosystems as complex ecosystems that produce lasting patterns with the potential to impact children and families positively and negatively. Collective efficacy is pivotal in shaping these patterns. Therefore, outcomes in early childhood development, when viewed through an ecosystem lens, are not random but rather influenced by the structures and agents within an ecosystem, which generate patterns impacting developmental outcomes (Gieryn, 2000).

Structuration Theory

Structuration theory unpacks the complex interaction among agents within ecosystems, bound by existing structures. Across the early childhood ecosystem, individuals in institutions, agencies, and organizations wield agency, power and influence conditioned by prevailing values. Giddens (1984) defines agents as individuals who take actions and exert various forms of power. This includes not only individual persons but also reflexive institutions and structures within our social world.

Power and agency, evident among the diverse ecological entities—individuals, institutions, agencies, organizations, and sub-systems— are heavily contextualized. This contextuality is entrenched in the political, economic, and social dynamics within a particular ecosystem (Giddens, 1984). The nuanced interactions among these components, exercising

agency and power, yield both conflicts and synergies; it is these conflicts and synergies that either become barriers and constraints or facilitators and enablers of child development within an ecosystem (Giddens, 1984; Lukes, 2005; Woodhouse, 2020).

These barriers, constraints, enablers, and facilitators can manifest in tangible and intangible forms, known or hidden from view (Lukes, 2005; Mills, 1959). For example, within a resource-scarce environment, various sub-systems like healthcare, education, and public health exert their power to secure funding, leading to distrust and fragmentation among service providers. Consequently, accessing holistic care and services becomes challenging for families.

It is pertinent to uncover instances where the exercise of power and agency within a specific early childhood ecosystem becomes ingrained in values and processes, effectively becoming a structure. These structures within the early childhood ecosystem systematically advantage certain groups while systematically marginalizing or excluding others (Hise, 2004; Piazza & Frankenberg, 2019; Rothstein, 2017). The outcomes of this systematic inclusion and exclusion are disparities and discrimination, typically along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines (Giddens, 1984; Lareau, 2011; Rothstein, 2017; Sampson, 2012).

Just as systematic patterns of exclusion may operate, systematic structures of resilience may also come into play, where agents develop collective efficacy, as mentioned in the previous section, to improve outcomes for early childhood ecosystems (Giddens, 1984). For instance, the agency and power of individuals, groups, and organizations might be democratized in a way that fosters inclusion rather than exclusion. As an example, the purpose of an early childhood system, embedded as a structure within the larger ecosystem, might be to assist families, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, in mitigating various barriers and constraints, while enhancing the facilitators and enablers within the child ecosystem to yield better well-being and

developmental outcomes (Coffman, 2007; Learning Policy Institute, 2021). Children, families, and communities also wield their own agency and power to propel community change and resilience. These agents leverage their power and agency to influence the early childhood ecosystem, striving for more favorable outcomes for children.

Inclusion, Exclusion, Othering and Belonging

A growing number of researchers are interrogating the role that race, class, gender, and place play in perpetuating developmental inequalities (Lareau, 2011, p. 363). Powell (2012) argues that these inequalities solidify as structures of inclusion, exclusion, othering, and belonging, resulting in population-level inequalities. These structural inequalities stem from the choices and values of agents, becoming embedded ecosystem processes and serving as the barriers, constraints, facilitators, and enablers that children and families encounter when seeking developmental resources (Giddens, 1984; Hise, 2004; Piazza & Frankenberg, 2019; Rothstein, 2017).

Lareau (2011) suggests that some children, parents, caretakers, and others internalize cultural or organizational scripts that aid them in navigating these structures more effectively. For example, children from high-income families may learn to seek a second opinion from a different pediatrician, whereas low-income families tend to be more compliant and less questioning of authority figures (p. 166). She further argues that the interactions between agents and structures form the "lifeblood of the stratification process" as some parents grapple with navigating certain institutions such as schools, hospitals, or similar institutions (p. 363). This misalignment, according to Lareau, is systematic and entrenched, privileging some families over others. However, this should not be solely viewed through a deficit lens, as there are structures that promote resilience and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

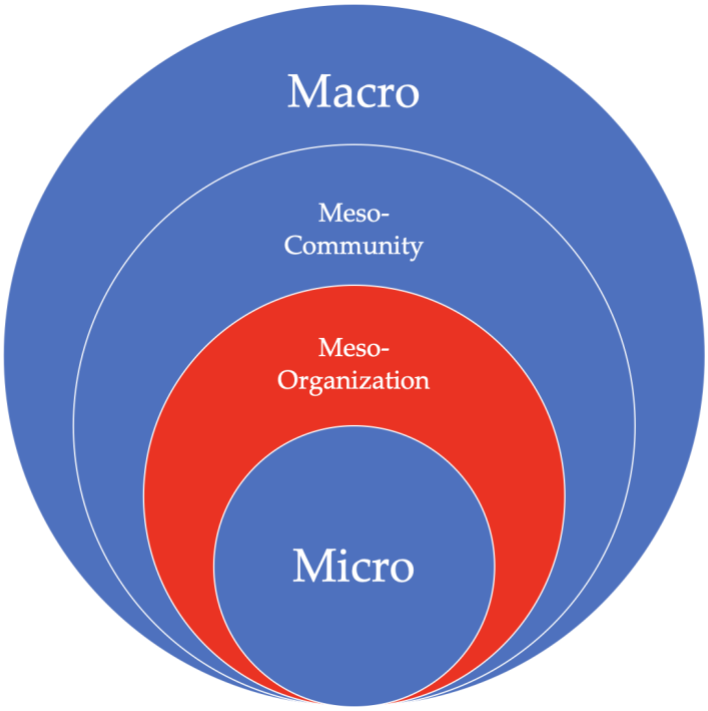
Barriers and constraints, as well as enablers and facilities, are present within early childhood ecosystems. Structuration theory proposes that comprehending the diverse structures within an early childhood ecosystem and how agents engage with those structures can assist researchers in designing early childhood systems more effectively to address the needs of families.

Conceptual Model

Based on the concepts and theories discussed above, Figures 4 & 5 present two distinct conceptual models that inform the approach taken to address the research questions. The first model (Figure 4) outlines the ecology of early childhood, simplified for presentational purposes into the macro, meso, and micro levels. The meso-level is further divided into the meso-community level, which encompasses the community-level influences on a child and their development, and the meso-organizational level, which includes the early childhood system. This level is particularly relevant for this research and is highlighted in red to illustrate its position within the early childhood ecosystem.

Figure 4

Conceptual Framework: Early Childhood Ecosystem



The model presented in Figure 5 conceptualizes the early childhood ecosystem, early childhood system and subsystems, barriers, and facilitators using a biological-like framing. In this conceptualization, the early childhood ecosystem is like a snapshot of the human body with various virus and other toxins (barriers) floating around, as well as nutrients (facilitators). These barriers and facilitators can be found across all levels of the early childhood ecosystem (macro, meso, and micro). The same barrier and facilitator can also manifest itself in different forms or functions across the early childhood ecosystem. For example, racism at the macro-level, can also manifest as racism at the meso, and even micro level. Additionally, like viruses that interact with their environment to mutate and change, barriers and facilitators interact with various structures, organizations, families, and individuals to mutate and change for both the good and bad. They can also create synergistic impacts. For example, the barrier of low-income socio-economic background (micro-level) can interact with the barrier of gentrification (macro/meso level)

within a neighborhood creating a uniquely challenging barrier for a family to face. Or the barrier of family trauma (micro-level) can interact with perceived lack of neighborhood safety (meso-level) causing a mother to keep her child indoors despite the importance of play outside. As mentioned regarding complexity and structuration theory at the beginning of this chapter, the functioning, processes, and interactions within this ecological framing of early childhood is complex, poly-centric in governance, random, non-linear and adaptive.

At the center of this biological-like conceptual framework is the family unit, who are in focus in this study. While this conceptual model shows the family as static and centric, the reality is far from true. For this research, the family unit is simply the point of perspective.

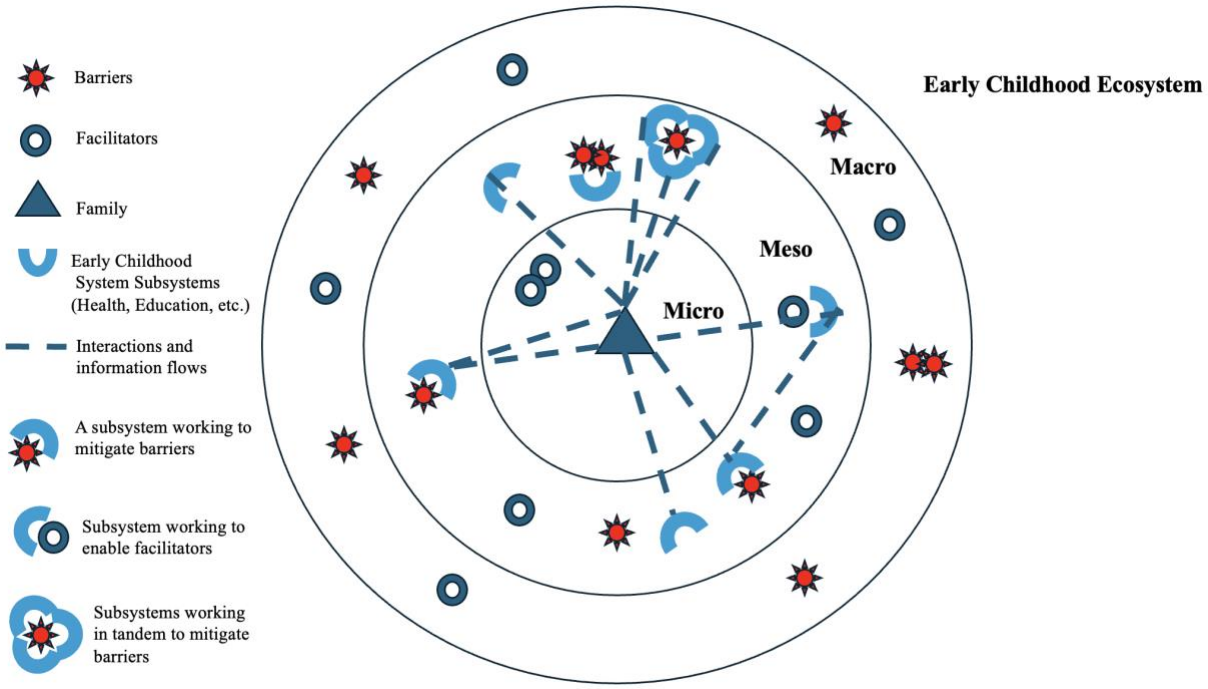
The early childhood system, which includes individuals (formal and informal), institutions, agencies, organizations, and the sub-systems (health, education, child welfare, etc.) that specifically support a child's development from the ages of 0-5, is represented similarly to leukocytes, enterocytes, and red blood cells within the body. When functioning well, the early childhood system acts to mitigate the impact of harmful entities (like while blood cells or leukocytes). To do this best, the early childhood system must interact directly the family to understand the barriers they are facing and simultaneously understand the barrier enough to know how to mitigate it. In this way the interaction is multi-fold with information flowing back and forth between the family, the early childhood system, and the barrier. Additionally, doesn't only mitigate barriers. When functioning well, the early childhood system also acts to enable facilitators. Like enterocytes that bring nutrients into the cells, the early childhood system plays a key role in helping to enable facilitators.

Within this model, the early childhood system plays a unique and important role in mitigating barriers while also helping to enable facilitators. To do so, this requires constant

feedback from the ecosystem and from the children and families it is trying to support. The system must also be flexible and adaptable enough to take in new information as barriers and facilitators arise in an ever-changing environment. Additionally, the early childhood system is made up of these various sub-systems (health, education, etc.) that work in tandem to produce the outcomes that we see patterned across communities. Figure 5 highlights this complex set of interactions between families, subsystems, barriers, and facilities across the early childhood ecosystem.

Figure 5

Conceptual Model: Early Childhood Ecosystem and Its Components



Chapter 6 of this dissertation will elucidate the various barriers and facilitators that families in Los Angeles identified through this research. The analysis will also highlight aspects

of these complex interactions and processes to highlight their impact on family and child outcomes. Like this model shows, Chapter 6 will highlight ways these barriers and facilitators interact with each other and with families, and operate across the macro, meso, and micro levels. Chapter 7 will then analyze how the early childhood system—comprised of individuals (formal and informal), institutions, agencies, organizations, and sub-systems (health, education, child welfare, etc.)—can work to mitigate barriers and enable facilitators.

Conclusion

The research questions addressed in this study are approached with the understanding that within the early childhood ecosystem, there exist underlying values, patterns, and processes that manifest in the interactions amongst various individuals, institutions, agencies, organizations, and sub-systems. These elements create both barriers and constraints, as well as facilitators and enablers, for families and children seeking resources during early childhood development (Giddens, 1984; Lareau, 2011).

The structure of an ecosystem generates observable patterns of *childhoods* within particular geographical areas, which persist even as individuals move in and out of communities and neighborhoods. These consistent outcomes demonstrate the vastness of the developmental ecosystem at a population level. Within the ecosystem, both inequality and resilience can be identified, underscoring the importance of understanding the specific barriers, constraints, facilitators, and enablers present.

In theory, the early childhood system—comprising individuals, institutions, agencies, organizations, and systems dedicated to supporting children aged 0-5—is intended to assist families in navigating the developmental ecosystem. However, as discussed, processes within the

ecosystem processes, such as othering and belonging, can lead to exclusions based on factors like race, class, gender, and place. This often results in negative outcomes for certain groups of children. Nonetheless, some families or communities may develop their own patterns of collective efficacy and resilience, leading to positive deviance and thriving outcomes for children.

At the core of this research is the investigation into how families and communities cultivate collective efficacy and resilience, and the role of the early childhood system in this process. This inquiry necessitates centering the experience of families—the group for whom the ecosystem is *supposed* to function on behalf of— and systematically examining each layer of the developmental ecosystem to identify barriers, constraints, facilitators, and enablers at each level. Therefore, this study utilizes the theories and tools outlined in this chapter to inform the research process, uncovering the dynamics within the developmental ecosystem, and understanding how the system either supports or impedes families as they maneuver this complex ecosystem.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The research interrogates the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles. Unlike studies that often focus on specific aspects of the ecosystem, such as immunization rates or developmental screening rates, this research aims to understand the early childhood ecosystem of LA from the perspective of families by examining the underlying barriers, constraints, facilitators, and enablers and the processes and interactions that undergird them within the childhood ecosystem. Further, it seeks to understand the early childhood system's functioning in mitigating or enabling the barriers and facilitators (Weisner, 2014b; Woodhouse, 2020). This chapter provides valuable insight into the research design, process, selection of sites and context, methods and samples utilized, ethical considerations considered, timeline established for the research, and the composition of the research team involved in conducting this investigation.

Research Design

This research was designed using the principles of ecometrics enhanced with a unique qualitative process. Sampson (2012) defines ecometrics as:

> the study of neighborhood-level or contextual variations in their own right, adopting an eclectic style of data collection that relies on multiple methods but that always connects to some form of empirical assessment of social-ecological properties, accompanied by systematic standards for validation. (p. 23)

Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of incorporating context and history into the research process (p. 425). Ecometrics differs from other research designs because in that it does not prioritize specific discipline; instead, social phenomena take precedence over any particular

research method, resulting in a more holistic and systematic approach to understanding social processes and mechanisms (p. 23).

This research is also informed by vertical case study methodology (Crowe et al., 2011; Scholz & Tietje, 2002, p. 25; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). Vertical case studies enable researchers to examine an issue or phenomenon across the micro, meso, and macro ecological levels (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). This approach facilitates "interpretation[s] within a broader cultural, historical, and political investigation" while also examining "larger structures, forces, and policies" (p. 96).

This case study design acknowledges that the early childhood ecosystem is "a deeply political process of cultural production shaped by social actors in disparate locations who exert incongruent amounts of influence" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014, p. 132). It also recognizes that ecological processes are complex rather than "linear, additive, and predictable" (Weisner, 2014b, p. 163). Using this design enables addressing the complexities outlined in Chapter 3 by applying methods that allow for observing complexity in context. This approach brings the "messiness of actual, situated practice by human agents" to the forefront (Erickson, 2006, p. 241). Consequently, qualitative methods were chosen for their ability to provide "information on settings and contexts, and on the experiences, meanings systems and normative scripts that drive family life" (Weisner, 2014b, p. 164).

This research process was also iterative, in which an initial set of interviews was completed and analyzed; however, the analysis was then provided to groups of individuals within research site communities so that they could provide feedback, deeper insights, and nuance to the data analysis. As explained below, this process allowed community and family perspectives to be centered throughout the process.

Research Process

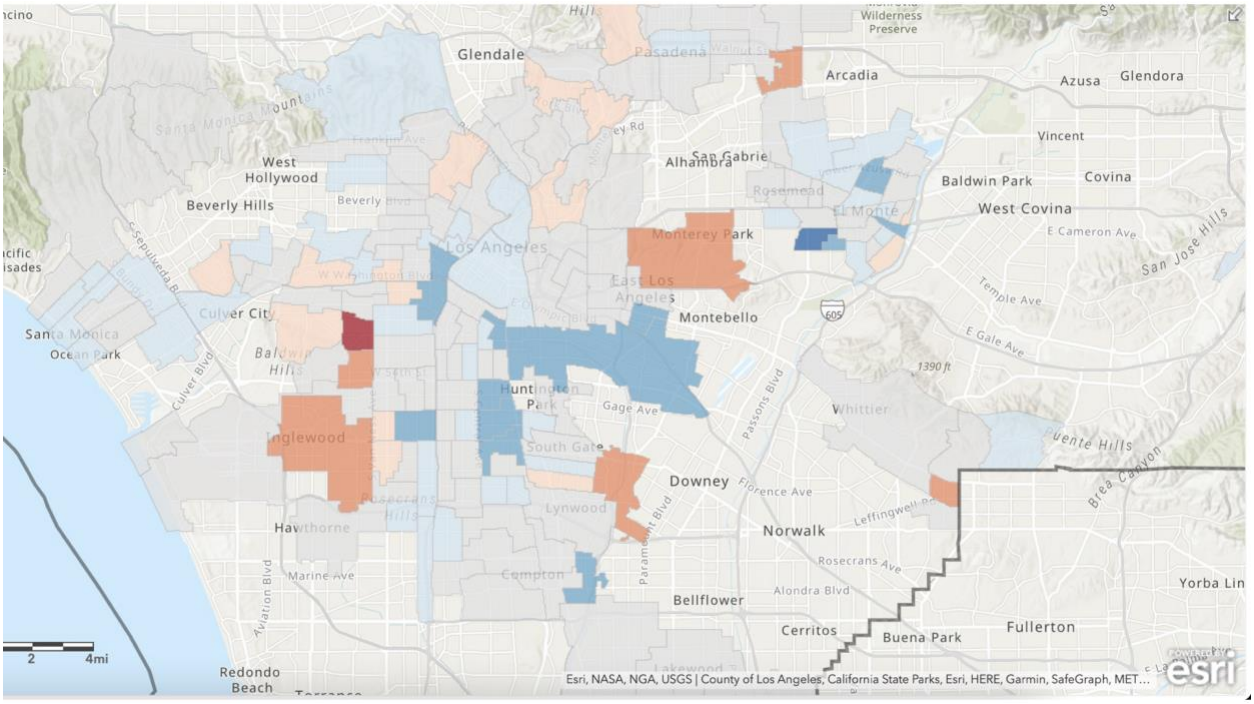
The research process consisted of five phases. Initially, researchers identified sites and conducted a thorough cultural-historical analysis of LA. Interviews were carried out with community members to gain insight into the social, cultural, and historical context. Subsequently, in the second phase, interviews and observations were implemented to explore how the interaction between the early childhood system and ecosystem. Phase three involved facilitating interviews and focus groups with families to understand their utilization of various resources and identify potential barriers or facilitators to accessing these services. In the fourth phase, data from the previous phases were analyzed and shared with (1) parents and families, (2) program managers of various programs, (3) systems specialists, and (4) policymakers for validation and verification of the findings. Lastly, in the fifth phase, comments and feedback collected in phase four, along with the researchers' notes, were coded and integrated into the overall research data. A final analysis was then conducted using all available data and to draw conclusive findings.

Sites and Context

The sites were chosen based on data from the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families & Communities and the Early Development Index (EDI) (Halfon et al., 2020). The center's team identified areas in Los Angeles where there are positive early childhood outcomes at the population level, shown in blue on Image 1. Three areas were selected based on areas in which: (1) Downtown (Pico Union, Fashion Park, and University Park), (2) South LA (Watts and Compton or Service Planning Area 6), and Santa Monica.

Image 1

Site Selection Map



Methods and Samples

Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and group listening sessions, formed the basis of this research. Semi-structured interview guides were selected for their ability to offer a balance between flexibility and focus in exploring the experiences of families, program managers, and other stakeholders. Group listening sessions were employed to validate the aggregated data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Seidman, 2019). Additionally, secondary quantitative data, such as census data, was utilized to enhance the understanding, triangulation, and validation of the qualitative findings. Interview protocols can be found in Appendixes B, C, & D. The research was carried out in multiple phases, as detailed below.

Phase 1: Historical and Current Context of Los Angeles Early Childhood Ecosystem and Research Sites

During the first phase, an analysis of literature and interviews was undertaken to delve into the social, political, economic, and cultural context of Los Angeles. The dataset comprised academic and popular books, alongside reports sourced from governmental, academic, and other pertinent entities. Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals possessing familiarity with the political and social-cultural context of Los Angeles or the designated research sites, serving in roles such as community-leaders or long-standing residents. A total of 17 interviews were used for the subsequent analysis. Refer to Table 4 for a summary of the interview participants.

Phase 2: Early Childhood Systems Analysis

In the second phase, interviews were conducted with program managers to gain insights into the integration of their respective programs and resources within the larger early childhood system. These discussions aimed to elucidate the program managers' perspectives on the early childhood system and ecosystem. Moreover, program managers were tasked with identifying barriers and facilitators for families in navigating the upbringing of children in Los Angeles and ensuring healthy development.

The eligibility criteria for program managers included overseeing a program providing services to families with children aged 0-5 situated within or in proximity to the research sites. Furthermore, the program needed to align with the Nurturing Care Framework. An initial list of potential program managers was compiled, followed by sending emails to the identified individuals. A snowball sampling method was used to identify further participants. This iterative

process persisted until saturation of key themes and concepts was achieved. Ultimately, 20 program managers were interviewed, representing 14 different organizations or institutions.

Phase 3: Qualitative Research with Families

During the third phase, interviews were implemented with parents of children residing within the early childhood ecosystem research sites, with interviews conducted in their native language as needed. Non-English interviews were subsequently translated. The inclusion criteria for parents included self-identification as marginalized or minority individuals, having children aged 0-5, and living within a research site. Parents were identified through purposeful sampling, email outreach, engagement with gatekeepers, and distribution of flyers. This process continued until saturation of themes relevant to the research was attained. In total, 24 parents participated in the interviews. Among them, 71 percent of the families self-identified as low-income Latino or Hispanic, 21 percent as low-income African American or Black, and 8 percent as low-income Korean (refer to Table 4 for details).

Phase 4: Validation and Group Listening Sessions

During the fourth phase, a preliminary data analysis was undertaken. The interviews were transcribed and translated if needed. A combination of in-vivo and open coding was employed to delineate themes and concepts within the conceptual model. A codebook was formulated and utilized for the remainder of the study with minimal modifications. Those codes make up Chapters 5,6, and 7 of this dissertation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The findings from this analysis were structured into a presentation, which was shared in group listening sessions with various stakeholders and community members, including: 1) parents and families, (2) program managers,

(3) systems specialists, and (4) policy makers. The research findings were disseminated, and participants were asked to respond, offer insights, and provide critical feedback. Approximately 60 individuals participated in these sessions.

These sessions were recorded, and the recordings were transcribed for use in subsequent rounds of data analysis. Participants were also encouraged to submit additional feedback via email, which was also integrated into further rounds of analysis. The journals and field notes of the research team were also incorporated in the final analysis.

Phase 5: Final Collection of Data and Analysis

During the fifth phase, all the data was coded and analyzed.

Table 4

Interviewee Overview

Interviewee Overview		
Interviewee Title		
	Parents and Families	24
	Program Managers	20
	Systems Specialists	4
	Policy Makers	4
	Community Members	9
	Total	**61**
Gender		
	Male	42

	Female	19
	Total	**61**
Race/Ethnicity		
	White	9
	African American/Black	6
	Korean	7
	Chinese	1
	Hispanic or Latinx	38
	Total	**61**
Location		
	Downtown	24
	South LA	18
	Santa Monica	10
	Other LA	9
	Total	**61**

IRB, Consent, and Data Management

UCLA's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this research, adhering to all relevant policies. See Appendixes E and F for details. No further ethical considerations arose during the study.

Timeline

The research was conducted from December 2020 to July 2022. The historical and contextual analysis, systems analysis, and interviews occurred concurrently. Group listening sessions commenced in Fall 2021 and extended through Spring 2022, with final analysis occurring during the Summer of 2022.

Research Team

Three research assistants helped in conducting interviews with families. They were female UCLA graduates selected for their similar neighborhoods and demographic backgrounds to the interviewees. All interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the interviewee, English or Spanish, with two members of the team being bilingual. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and translated, if necessary, with transcriptions and translations reviewed by at least two team members. All three assistants had prior research experience and were trained in the specific approaches, definitions, and other sensitivities relevant to this research.

After each interview, the researcher recorded observational notes in a research journal for 15-20 minutes. These notes were included in the data analysis. Additionally, monthly one-on-one research meetings were held with each assistant to review progress and address any questions. Recordings of these meetings were also incorporated into the analysis.

Chapter 5: The Early Childhood Ecosystem of Los Angeles | Findings for Research Question 1

This chapter addresses the first research question: “What is the political, economic, and social context of the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles?” Its purpose is to examine elements of Los Angeles’ history and context to grasp potential influences on early childhood development. For instance, the impact of migration and immigration on the early childhood ecosystem is significant, warranting an exploration of immigration patterns in Los Angeles. Similarly, delving into the history of housing segregation through practices like “redlining" is crucial not only for understanding current housing policies but also for deciphering the origins of contemporary concentrations of deprivation (Sampson, 2012). As Sampson suggests, incorporating context and history into the research process is essential for understanding “interlocking structures and mechanisms” (p. 425) that constitute the barriers, constraints, facilitators, and enablers embedded in the early childhood ecosystem of LA. This chapter draws on both secondary sources (books, articles, data, etc.) and primary data, including interviews to fulfill its objectives.

The analysis suggests the following:

(1) The early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles is a complex adaptive system, with interconnected parts functioning independently yet in sync to produce specific outcomes.

(2) Some of these outcomes are stable, seeing little change over time (i.e., governance structures), while others (i.e., housing prices) are changing due to internal and external contextual pressures brought on by government structures, economic and social policy shifts, funding, and competition.

(3) Historical legacies of othering and belonging are still manifesting themselves within the early childhood ecosystem at the population and neighborhood level. Some of these key mechanisms of othering and belonging include factors of race, income, and immigration status.

(4) Los Angeles is experiencing demographic shifts resulting in new patterns of inequalities. These shifts have been a result of housing policies, neighborhood development, and economic policy.

The combined impact of these conditions influences child well-being in both positive and negative ways, as will be demonstrated in Chapters 6 and 7.

Los Angeles Context

Los Angeles, encompassing both the city and the county, presents one of the most intricate contexts for studying early childhood systems. It stands as the largest government entity outside of state jurisdiction and boasts a higher population density than any other urban area in America (Baldwin, 2021, pp. 3–5). Consequently, Los Angeles County functions in a manner distinct from any other governmental body (Krist, 2018, p. 159). Los Angeles County is composed of 88 cities, each with its own city council and mayor. The largest of these cities (Los Angeles) is home to a population of 3.8 million individuals, constituting 39 percent of the county's total 9.8 million residents. Among these almost 10 million residents, representing approximately 140 cultures and speaking 224 languages (Los Angeles County, 2022).

Davis (2006) identified several distinctive features that set Los Angeles apart from other large cities in the U.S. These included: (1) deficient public transportation infrastructure, rendering mobility challenging without vehicles; (2) peripheral investment by major corporations

leading, resulting in inadequate investment in infrastructure; (3) a decline in manufacturing and other industries; (4) escalating inequality; (5) a shortage of affordable housing; (6) prevalence of violence; and (7) centrist democrats prioritizing their fiscal interests over investments in social programs. These features, spanning economic, social, or political domains, profoundly shape the developmental ecosystems of children, consequently influencing their developmental outcomes.

From the macro level (i.e., political structure of the county, the national housing market forces, immigration flows) through the meso level (i.e., fragmented service delivery, disconnected social networks, lack of public transportation, parks, etc.), and down to the micro level (i.e., interpersonal racism, intergenerational poverty, etc.), we see evidence of how structures and systems produce barriers and constraints as well as enablers and facilitators for children and families (Davis, 2006). This chapter provides an overview of Los Angeles' geographical landscape, followed by an examination of its political, economic, and social contexts.

Geography

Geography, particularly human geography, holds significant importance in understanding any context as it transcends beyond physical places and is a political act. Geography and place are at the center of any ecosystem, including an early childhood ecosystem. As Baldwin (2021, p. 64) articulates, human geography in Los Angeles is the product of historical legacies such as bloodshed, treaties, redlining, and epidemics, among other invisible forces, which are "difficult to comprehend" but can feel like a lingering "ghost." Thus, any discussion about Los Angeles County must inherently be situated within a larger historical-political and geographical context. This examination of geography begins by evaluating maps delineating key areas pivotal to this

research. These maps not only illustrate the research sites analyzed in this study but also include many places referenced throughout the interviews, thereby providing an in-depth perspective on the geographic landscape under investigation.

Image 2 illustrates the topographical contours of Los Angeles County. An important aspect of this map is the way the mountains divide the county into the basin area and the high plains, now known as the Antelope Valley area. This separation between the basin and the Antelope Valley is critical for understanding current demographics shifts within the county and understanding the perspective of those interviewed.

Image 2

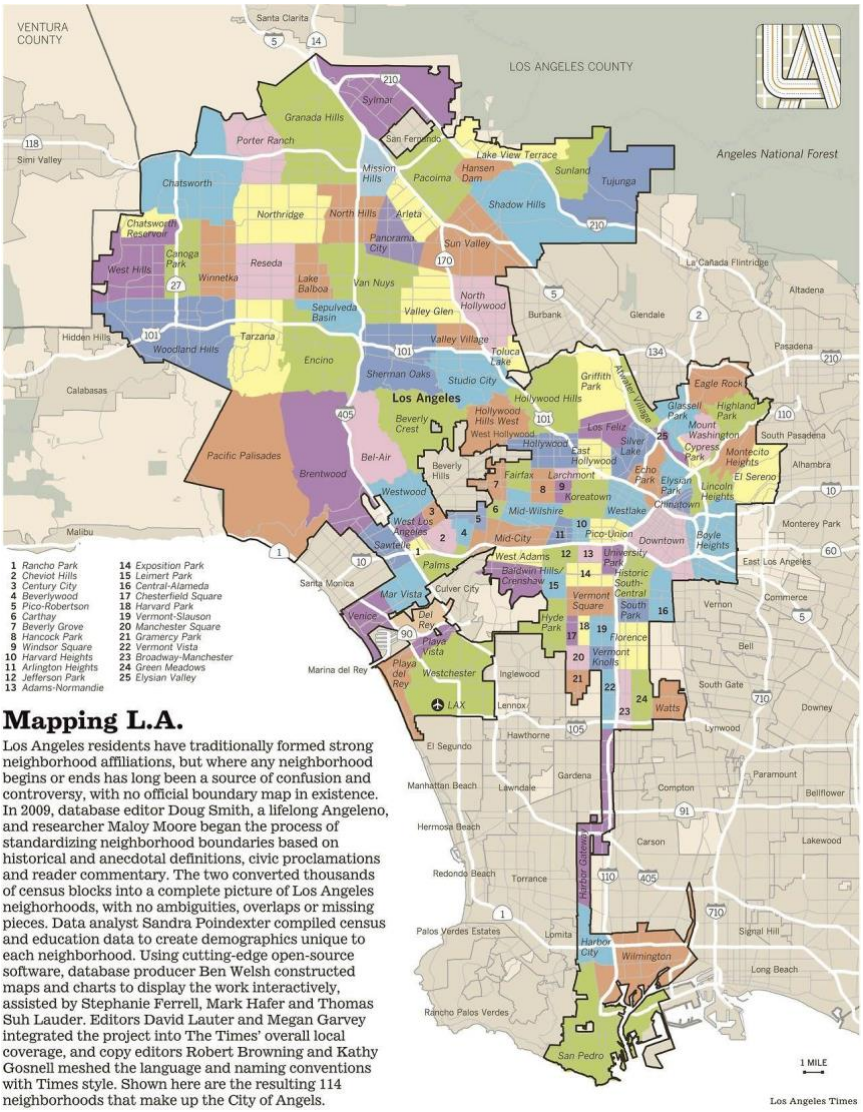
Topographical Map of Los Angeles County

Note. See Los Angeles County Chamber of Commerce (1931).

The next map (Image 3) sheds light on an additional feature of the geographic narrative, specifically the City of Los Angeles as a subset of the county. Created by the Los Angeles Times *Mapping LA* project, this map showcases Los Angeles city as a complex entity of comprising various neighborhoods and regions stretching from Sylmar in the north to San Pedro in the south. Upon examining the map and noting the irregular divisions, one may infer the influence of various forms of gerrymandering and other political and economic negotiations. For example, the elongated strip of land extending south to the Port of Los Angeles appears peculiar until one considers that this configuration enables Los Angeles to claim the port as part of the city. These political actions suggest that the ecosystems and geographies that influence children and families are indeed political as much as they are geographic.

Image 3

Los Angeles Time Mapping LA Project Map of the City and Neighborhoods



Note. (Los Angeles Times, 2009)

It is important to note what is *not* part of the city of Los Angeles. Wealthier enclaves such as Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, and Culver City either established themselves independently of Los Angeles City or broke off and became self-incorporated cities over time. Certain low-income

and minority areas, particularly across the east side and southern regions of the LA basin, have also pursued self-incorporation. While some of these cities were previously a part of Los Angeles City, the timing and demographic composition of their departure remain vague. Each city's decision to separate was driven by various factors (Baldwin, 2021; Davis, 2006; Los Angeles Times, 2009). Presently, these affluent areas serve as thriving environments for children and families, often in stark contrast to neighboring areas less than five miles away. This further demonstrates how political decisions mold ecosystems; thereby influencing the well-being and developmental trajectories of children.

The physical geography of Los Angeles is important for at least three reasons. First, it aids in contextualizing the locations referenced by interviewees, providing clarity on their spatial relationships. For example, understanding the geographic proximity and connection between "South LA" and the "Antelope Valley" is essential for discussions concerning the "South LA to Antelope Valley pipeline." Second, the geographical features portrayed on maps exert influence on the political, economic, and social dynamics of Los Angeles. The coastal region (generally high-income) affects housing prices, thereby pushing residents towards warmer, rural areas with limited physical and social infrastructure. Additionally, the San Gabriel Mountains serve as a natural barrier, dividing the county into distinct zones (basin and plain), thus shaping the residential patterns and geographic landscape for children. Third, when analyzing population-level outcomes in health or education, understanding their geographic distribution is imperative. Early Development Index (EDI) outcomes indicate variations in vulnerability across different locations, influenced by economic, social, and political factors. These disparities are often entrenched and manifest as place-based phenomena, reflecting long-standing inequalities perpetuated by historical decisions such as economic investments or divestments, housing

covenants, and other socio-political determinants. These geographical insights are crucial for unpacking the complexities of inequality, which will be further explored in Chapter 6.

Maps serve as important political documents that illuminate systems of power and inequality. Later, housing maps will be utilized to elucidate the historical-political, economic, and social contexts underlying these disparities. These contexts, including political, economic, and social factors, are described in the following sections.

Political Context

The political context of Los Angeles City and County significantly shapes early childhood services through (1) governance structures and leadership, and (2) financing, administration, and decision-making processes, along with the incentives they provide. The influence of Los Angeles' political context on the early childhood ecosystem is not a recent or unique occurrence within social programs. As one politician interviewed for this research noted regarding the political negotiations associated in developing and maintaining social programs, "I mean, that's politics and that goes on in every level of government and has gone on since the scriptures were written." (CM_045)

Governance Structure and Leadership

Inadequate leadership, combined with a lack of accountability and ineffective governance, appears to impede equitable child development. When asked whether Los Angeles County is a good place to raise children, a former city and county elected official said, "Absolutely not" (PM_0045). He directly placed blame on the complexity surrounding the governance of human services, including early childhood development. In Los Angeles, human services, which include

many early childhood services, fall under the jurisdiction of the county. However, the county government in Los Angeles is unlike any other.

As Baldwin (2021) described, “Los Angeles County, the largest local governmental unit in North America, [is] overseen by an elected panel of five supervisors—the “five little kings,” …each representing more than two million people, with immense administrative, legislative, even judicial powers” (p. 10). One of the interviewees (CM_45) echoed these sentiments, “the county is the human service arm…. but over the years…the county became this huge megalopolis, the structure, the governance structure never changed and it's one of my pet peeves.” (CM_45) continued:

> …in Los Angeles County, [the size of] the eighth largest state in the Union, we run this…$42 billion [dollar] budget—…110,000 employees—we run it by committee and that's what a five-member board is when there's nobody in charge…because when five people are in charge, nobody's in charge.

For children’s wellbeing, this means that there is no single entity that is tracking their outcomes. The result is a governance structure that allows for little to no accountability. However, the issue also extends beyond accountability. An interviewee (PM_008) highlighted a potential gap in county and city leadership and governance as follows:

> I don't mean leadership within respective organizations, but true city wide leadership and yes, we have a mayor, and we've got Board of Supervisors, and we've got councilmen, but I really don't think that we have, in a very, very long time, had a leader that specifically African American and Latino families really felt were championing their causes was someone they could trust, and really understood their needs.

Strong, visionary leaders are crucial as they inspire action and accountability. Without such leadership, segments of the population may feel disconnected and isolated. Chapter 7 will further demonstrate the positive impact that a visionary leader can have.

Financing, Administration, and Decision Making

The financing of early childhood programs is inherently political, as funding decisions are typically driven by policy-making bodies. However, these programs operate under diverse financial structures, with some being federally, state, county, or city-funded, whiles others are entirely independent. These circumstances leads to fragmentation. Additionally, many programs were designed as separate entities, resulting in siloed operations. For example, systems such as the *Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)* and *CalFresh* have distinct administrative processes, necessitating thousands of families to navigate multiple procedures for accessing benefits (California WIC Association, 2015).

Beyond programs, the funding of the early childhood ecosystem in Los Angeles is also fragmented between budgets for school, human services, parks and recreation, roads, etc. While some monies might be protected or have specific qualification, other strands of funding are competitive. However, CM_045 emphasized that human services dollars are handled differently than other money, noting:

> there are guidelines for how you spend human service money, most of our human service money [is] not coming from local tax money. It comes from the federal and state government…Our welfare office shouldn't be the Los Angeles County Department of Public and Social Services, it should be the California Department

> of Public and Social Services Los Angeles branch, because that's, that's what we are. It's the state passing [money] through to us. They're supposed to hold us accountable.

However, this complexity does not extend to other types of funding, such as those allocated for education or physical and digital infrastructure, including data systems, parks, and roads. This situation is further complicated by the intricate network of entities receiving these funds. While the intention may be to distribute power evenly, the reality is fragmented, overly bureaucratic system characterized by little accountability. For example, there are over 75 school districts within Los Angeles County. These entities do not match the county governance structure in terms of county supervisors. It is the same for public health services. As one interviewee (CM_045) explains:

> I'll tell you what happens in LA…They created what are called [public health] SPAs, I think the acronym for service provider areas…There are nine of them…and it was done intentionally not to overlap congruently with supervisorial districts so that… it wouldn't be the supervisor fighting for funding versus that supervisor. Generally speaking…when we had general fund money…there would be a fight over, you know, how much does the Antelope Valley get versus how much in South LA gets? How much does West LA get?

Later, the same interviewee pointed out that while this system prevents any single entity from wielding excessive power, it also hinders synergistic funding, leads to fragmented administration, and creates a gap in accountability.

These difficulties expand beyond families. Another interviewee (PM_015) extensively discussed the political complexities of being a service provider in Los Angeles County. PM_015 emphasized two important contextual factors. First, LA County lacks the capacity to meet the community's needs and often resorts to hiring consultants or community-based organizations for assistance. While this contracting approach expedites work completion and prevents bloating of county government, it fosters intense competition among service providers, reducing collaboration and hindering capacity building within the county. Second, the same interviewee noted that excessive reliance on contracting results in high fragmentation levels, with conflicting agendas and priorities among service providers.

Perhaps the strongest indictment regarding the impact of the political context on the early childhood ecosystem came from (CM_047), an interviewee who served in a high-level advisory position to a county official with direct responsibility for children. According to CM_047, county supervisors often show little interest or accountability for matters concerning early childhood, which profoundly affects decision-making processes and resource allocation. Moreover, the interviewee noted that even when a county official chaired the board of commissioners for First Five LA, a public entity tasked with early childhood development and funded by public tax dollars, minimal attention or effort was invested due to perceived limited payoff regarding issues voters cared about.

It is worthwhile to note, that First Five LA is one of the largest entities with a specific purpose to improve early childhood outcomes. Additionally, it is a pass-through entity, in which billions of dollars flow through it and into other programs and organizations. Despite the outsized role it plays, it was rarely if ever mentioned during this research. Regardless of its size and role, it seems that few effectively connect it with the role it should be playing.

Economic Context

Beyond the political context of Los Angeles, the economic landscape of the county significantly influences early childhood development. In some cases, economic factors often determine the accessibility and availability of resources, as well as housing costs and levels of inequality. In the Los Angeles, despite boasting a substantial economy with a GDP of almost a trillion USD per year, families continue to face considerable challenges (Mitra & Kane, 2018). While much could be said about such a large economy, this section will primarily address two major concerns frequently raised by interviewees: (1) poverty and its impact on health outcomes, and (2) gentrification, including affordability and displacement in housing.

Poverty and Los Angeles

Despite a strong economy, nearly all interviewees highlighted inequality and poverty as significant barriers for children and families in Los Angeles, often tracing their origins to historical roots. CM_048 outlined the long-term effects of deteriorating economic and social conditions of South Los Angeles. They suggested that during the 1960s and 1870s, most workers were unionized and could afford the "American Dream;" however, globalization of the 1980s saw a shift, with "white folks" leaving to seek jobs elsewhere, while African American populations, with less wealth and lower incomes, faced greater difficulty relocating, leaving them stuck without viable job prospects.

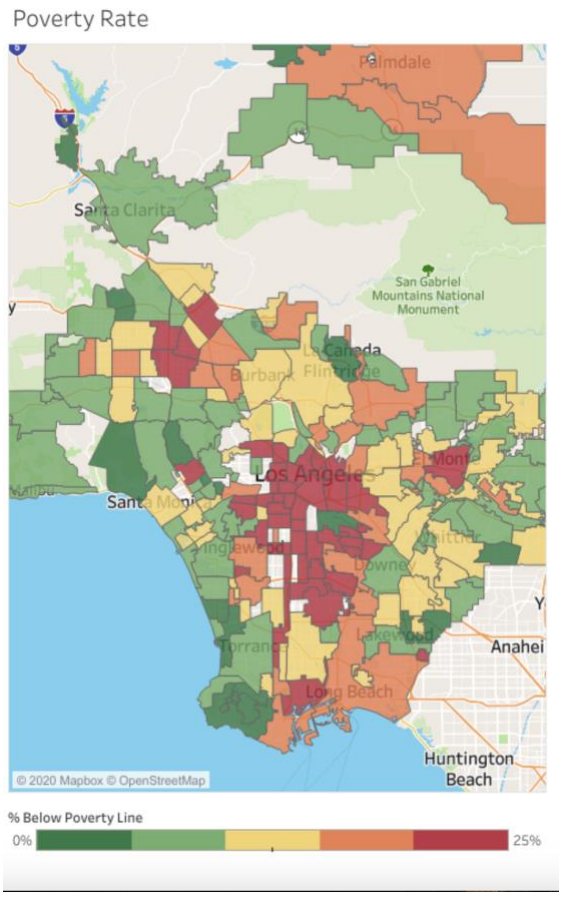
This idea of escalating poverty, particularly affecting minority communities, resonated throughout other interviews as well. GT_008 explained, "Poverty is the foundation for every challenge that the South LA community is faced with, it really is, and you can connect every

challenge right back to that." External data validates this perspective. Recent studies on neighborhood poverty concentration demonstrate that poverty in South LA has been enduring and intergenerational, tracing back to the 1980s and 1990s and persisting to the present day (Benzow & Fikri, 2020).

The following map (Image 4) illustrates the standard poverty rates across the county. Poverty is predominantly concentrated in the Central Los Angeles area, the South Los Angeles area, the East Los Angeles area, and extends into the valley above downtown.

Image 4

Poverty Rate Los Angeles County

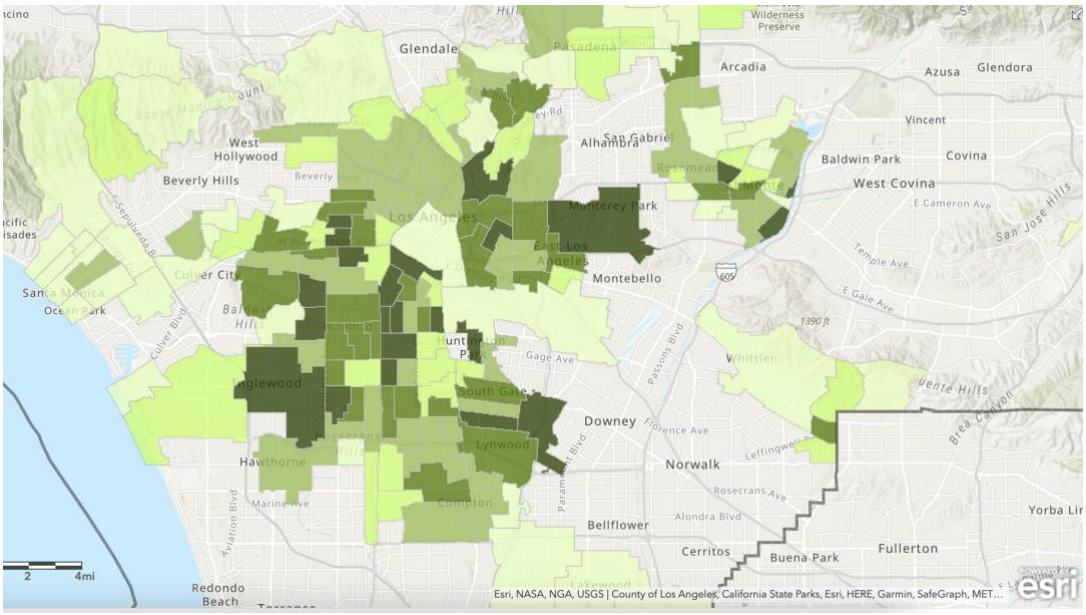


Note. (Cortright, 2020)

The geographic distribution of poverty in Los Angeles reflects the distribution of various health and well-being outcomes within Los Angeles, with areas of higher poverty correlated with poorer health outcomes. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Early Development Instrument (EDI) assesses developmental vulnerability at a population level. The map in Image 5, which is scaled to focus more on Los Angeles city and basin due to the lack of EDI data in the Antelope Valley, underscores a similar pattern mirroring poverty within the city. In this map, darker areas indicate higher vulnerability.

Image 5

EDI Outcomes Maps, Los Angeles

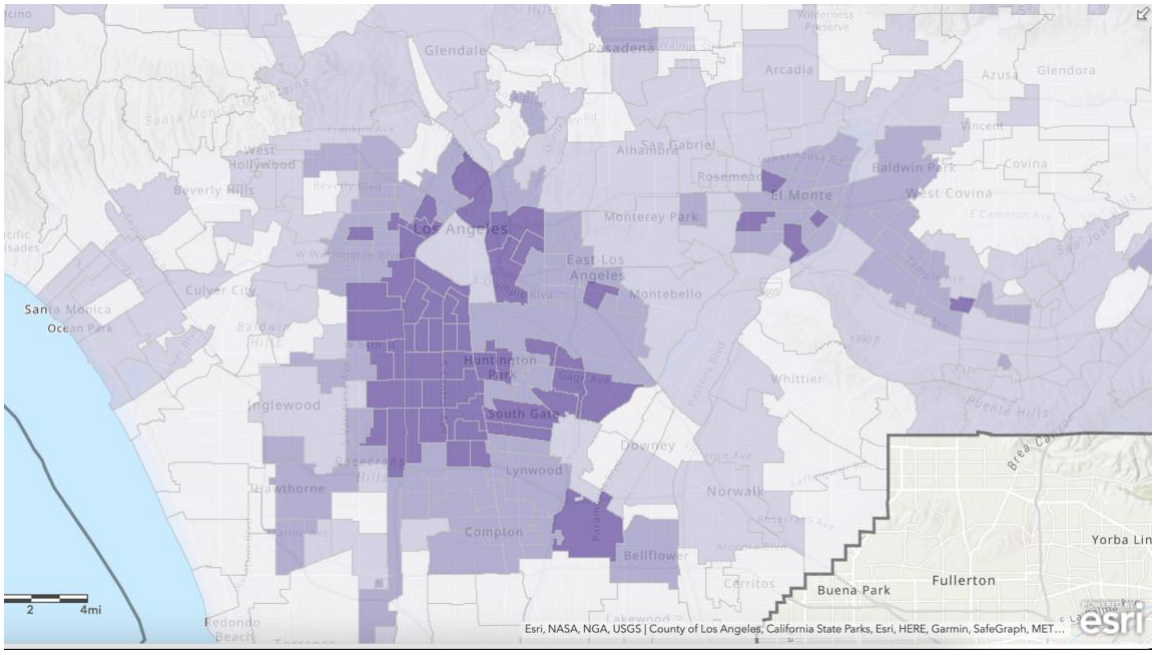


Note. The above map portrays information from EDI data from Center for Healthier Children, Families & Communities.

Introduced in Chapter 4, the Neighborhood Equity Index (NEI) (see Image 6) exposes potential barriers to equity at the census level. It unveils a spatial pattern like that of poverty rates, with deeper purple areas indicating higher levels of inequity.

Image 6

Neighborhood Equity Index (NEI), Los Angeles County



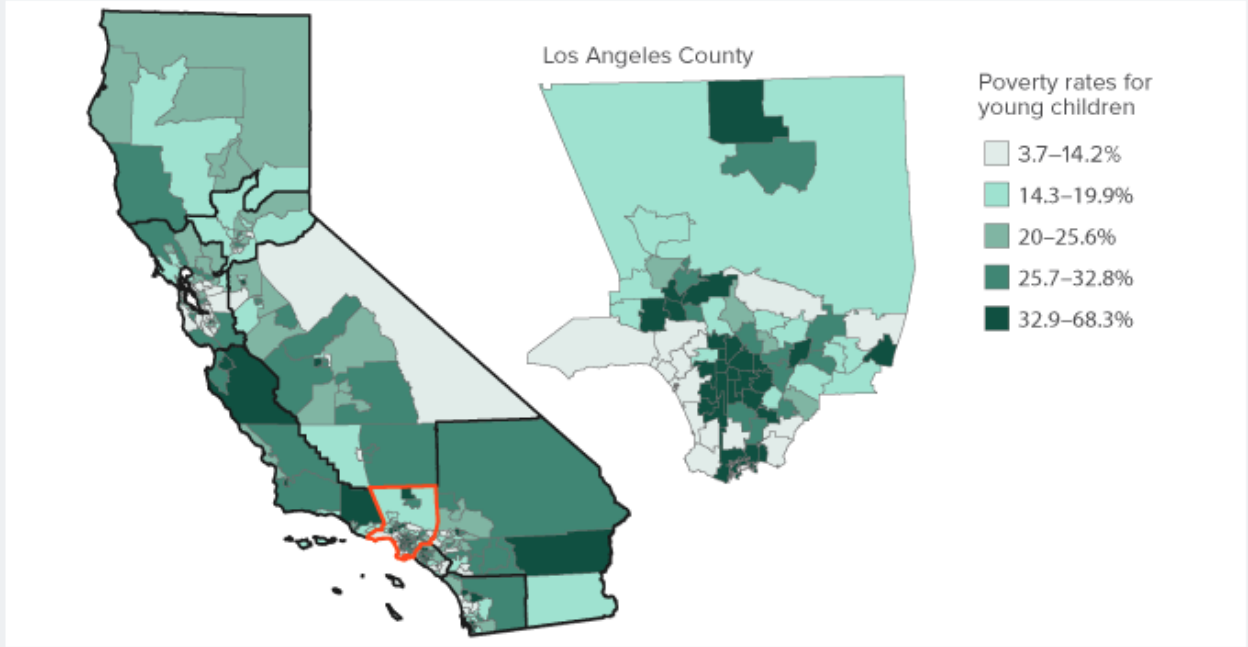
Note. Neighborhood Equity Index (2021).

The map in Image 7 below, sourced from the Public Policy Center of California, demonstrates that Los Angeles county includes both the lowest and highest rates of child poverty by zip code in the state of California, ranging from 4 to 68 percent, with the county's average poverty rate being 26 percent (Bohn & Danielson, 2017). Los Angeles is the story of *childhoods* rather than a single childhood. Its economic context is one of wealth and poverty combined into

a single geography that is patterned yet stable over time. As noted by Sampson (2012), despite the flux of cities and neighborhoods, there exists a persistent cycle of social reproduction that disproportionately impacts minority communities. He explains, "Most neighborhoods remained stable in their relative economic standing despite the inflow and outflow of individual residents…thus there is an enduring vulnerability to certain neighborhoods that is not simply a result of the current income of residents" (p. 119).

Image 7

Child Poverty Rates for California and Los Angeles



Note. Child Poverty Rates (see Bohn & Danielson, 2017).

These maps provide further evidence supporting the notion of socio-economic status as a pivotal driver of health, referred to as a "social determinant of health" or "the conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide

range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risk" (Chetty et al., 2016, 2020; Jr. & Adelman, 2019; Khullar & Chokshi, 2018; Phelan et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, n.d.) The correlation between social factors and geographical location underscores that poverty is place-based and intergenerational (Chetty et al., 2016; Adelman, 2019; Khullar & Chokshi, 2018). While the social determinants themselves do not constitute the ecosystem, they serve as indicators of the ecosystem. This data validates the participants' perspectives, who assert that poverty and its spatial and temporal distribution significantly influence the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles.

Gentrification and Housing

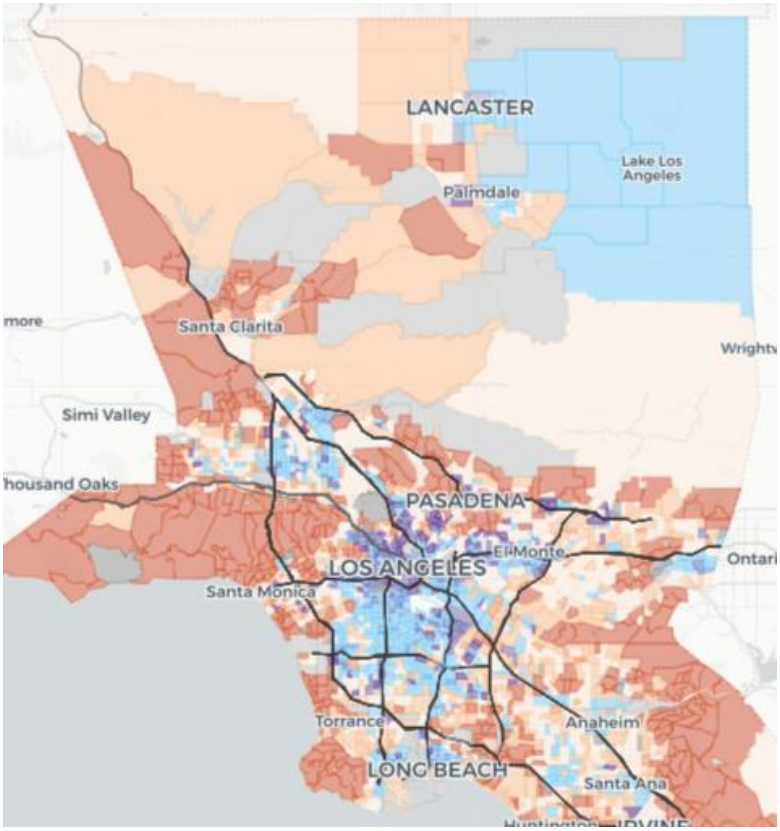
In addition to poverty, gentrification and housing dynamics are prominent features of Los Angeles's economic context (Sampson, 2012, p. 118). Gentrification is defined as a process of neighborhood change where lower-income residents are displaced by higher income residents resulting in a noticeable change in the culture and context of the neighborhood (Watkins et al., 2021). Gentrification causes ecosystems-level change. Generally it is viewed as divisive with some viewing it as improving economic conditions, while others perceive it as mass displacement that disproportionately impacts minority communities defined by socio-economic status.

The key distinction lies in determining whether the displacement is voluntary or involuntary. Involuntary displacement may result from evictions, rent increases, and rising property taxes, making it financially challenging for individuals to remain in their locations. According to the *Urban Displacement Project* (2020), Los Angeles County has the highest rates of gentrification in Southern California, with nearly 15 percent of tracts classified as

"gentrifying, at risk of gentrification, or places where ongoing displacement of low-income households is occurring." The map below (Image 8) highlights the geographical distribution of displacement and gentrification within Los Angeles. Areas shaded in blue and darker blue indicate higher levels of gentrification and displacement. In these blue areas, low-income families face greater vulnerability, insecurity, and poverty rates.

Image 8

Gentrification and Displacement in Los Angeles County



Note. See Urban Displacement Project (2020).

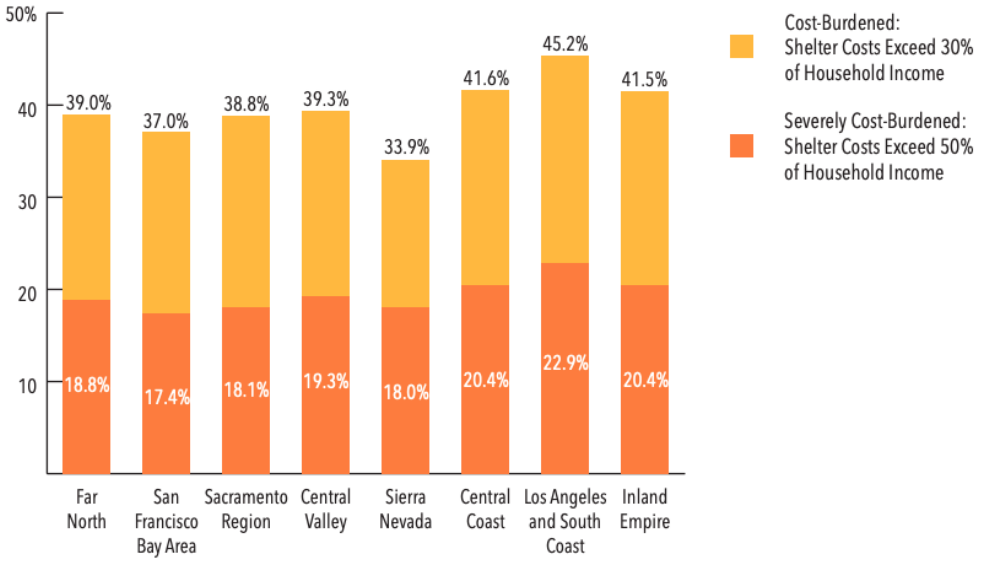
PM_005 extensively discussed the influence of gentrification and economic policies on Los Angeles. This included an in-depth exploration of housing prices, availability, and the accelerated pace of gentrification, which is driving the rapid displacement of families.

The economic context exacerbates challenges for low-income families, particularly with soaring housing prices that surpass inflation and income growth. PM_008 highlighted instances of grandmothers facing displacement due to rising property taxes exceeding their fixed income. Summarizing the situation, PM_008 emphasized, “So, now we've got a generational curse. So, I'm trying to help a 70-year-old grandmother, and five-year-old [grandchild], and they're not wrapped in family support and [the program] has morphed into their safety net.”

Gentrification increasingly burdens families as a larger share of their income is allocated to housing expenses, whether for rent or mortgage. Los Angeles exhibits the third highest income-to-housing ratio in the county, with nearly 45.2 percent of residents experiencing housing costs exceeding 30 percent of their income, and almost 22.9 percent facing shelter costs surpassing 50 percent of household income (Kimberlin, 2019). Figure 6 illustrates Los Angeles’ comparison to other regions in the state, highlighting the disproportionate housing burden placed on families in the county.

Figure 6

Cost Burden of Shelter Costs



Note. See Kimberlin (2019).

The burden of unaffordable housing disproportionately affects Latino and Hispanic families, with nearly 45 percent of those experiencing housing unaffordability identifying as Hispanic or Latino. In total, 70 percent of individuals experiencing housing insecurity are people of color, significantly impacting Black, Pacific Islander, and Latino and Hispanic families the most.

The economic context of Los Angeles County directly influences the early childhood ecosystem both county-wide and at a hyper-local level across various neighborhoods and cities. Building upon the discussion of the political context, two important narratives emerge. First, Los Angeles is molded by contextual factors, resulting in different patterns of *childhoods*. These various political and economic factors shape outcomes and family experiences. Second, there exists a clear intersection between political and economic factors, connected by historical and current social contexts. It is to that social contextual history, frequently referenced in the interviews for this study, that we will now delve into.

Social Context

The following section outlines critical components of Los Angeles County's social context relevant to this study, including (1) historical processes of othering and belonging, and (2) the cultural community wealth thriving across the city.

Los Angeles comprises multiple vibrant communities, with no single race or ethnicity dominating the population. Whites and Hispanics/Latinos collectively constitute over 70 percent of the population, with significant representation from African American or Black and Asian communities as well (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020b). This diversity fosters a rich preservation of culture in ethnic enclaves scattered throughout the city, such as Koreatown.

However, structural inequalities persist along lines of race, ethnicity, immigration status, and income. Combined with the aforementioned political and economic context, these inequalities in Los Angeles County underscore the significant role of socio-economic status in perpetuating unequal early childhood opportunities and shaping patterned *childhoods*. Merely observing the various cities, some bordering each other, illustrates how neighborhoods, schools, and other crucial early childhood resources and infrastructure are influenced by factors like race, income, and immigration status. Discriminatory housing policies, limitations on public transportation, and other structural barriers dramatically impact child development across Los Angeles.

Despite this inequality, cultural community wealth alleviates some of its adverse effects (Yosso, 2005). As Chapter 4 elucidated, children in certain low-income and racialized communities exhibit better-than-expected emotional, cognitive, and social development. The rich history of community and resilience in these neighborhoods may account for some of these outcomes.

Historical Legacies of Othering and Belonging

Most interviewees referenced two pivotal historical incidents that significantly shaped the social fabric of Los Angeles. The first was the 1992 civil unrest that swept across the city and county in response to the arrest and subsequent acquittal of the police officers involved in the beating of Rodney King. Interviewees pointed to this unrest as emblematic of the deep-seated issues of poverty, racism, racial tension, and inequality that had long been simmering beneath the surface of the city's social landscape.

The second historical event frequently mentioned was the COVID-19 pandemic and the social justice movements that gained momentum following the death of George Floyd in 2020. Interviewees likened these events to the 1992 social unrest, noting that they exposed the persistence and depth of social struggles that had long been assumed to being improving since 1992. References to the COVID-19 pandemic were consistently related to (1) the pressure it placed on minority families and (2) how it brought out additional inequalities.

These incidents highlighted underlying aspects of the social context of Los Angeles, such as inequality, discrimination, and segregation—or what has been termed "othering and belonging." As Baldwin (2021) opined, "if there was a single story, I uncovered in all my traversing and interviewing, talking to social workers, salsa makers, luxury concierges—listening for a single narrative to connect the ten-million-plus together…the story was inequality." (pp. 207–209). The following section identifies several of the legal, institutional, and social practices that have contributed to the inequalities within Los Angeles.

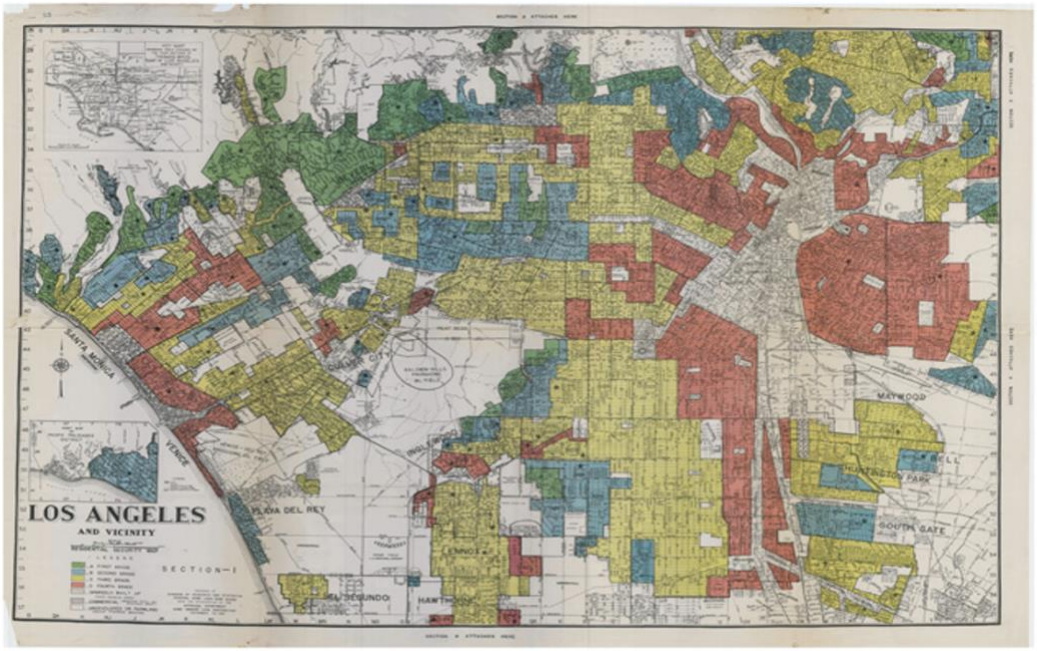
Los Angeles' Foundations of Othering and Belonging

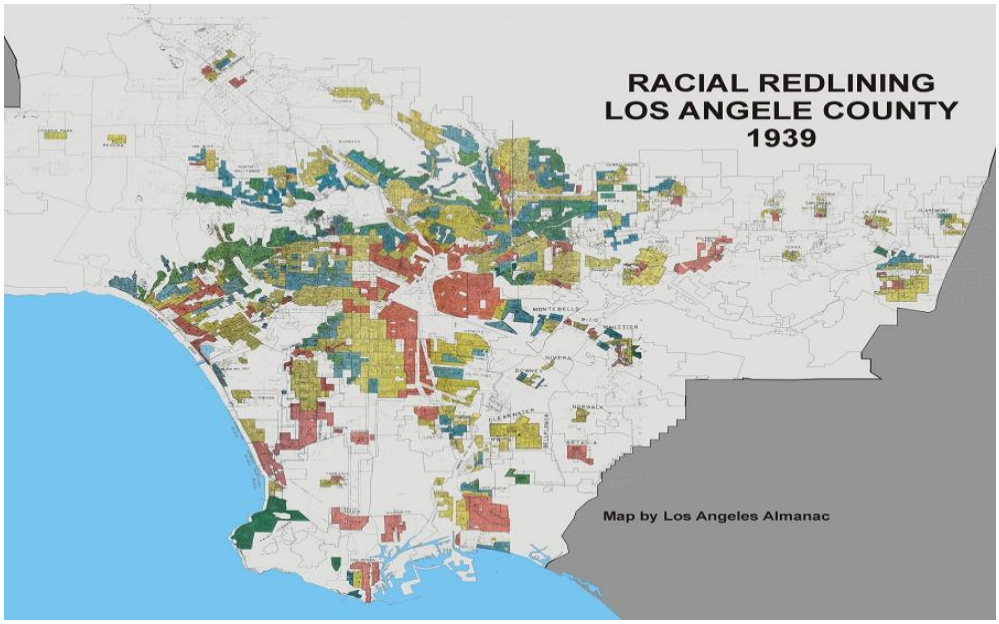
Social, class, cultural, racial, and ethnic boundaries segregate individuals across Los Angeles, impacting a child's development even before birth. Today, segregation and spatial inequalities predominantly revolve around a major theme of this study—housing and zoning. As Rothstein (2017) pointed out in *Color of Law*, both the public and private sectors have come together at various points in history to create the segregated housing we witness today in Los Angeles (p. 75). While not all actions were intentionally nefarious, as noted by Hise (2004), it was still the decisions of various actors through zoning, policy, and regulation that have shaped the Los Angeles we inhabit now (pp. 547-548). The process of othering and belonging began in the early 1900s when Los Angeles government officials, banks, business owners, and private citizens initiated an official campaign to segregate the city.

The maps displayed in Images 10 and 11 highlight the practice of redlining that emerged in the early 1900s. Redlining, conducted by both private and public actors, aimed to identify the "riskiness" of mortgages in specific neighborhoods. This practice proved detrimental as it labeled entire neighborhoods as "risky" based solely on racial and ethnic considerations. For example, sections highlighted in red and yellow on the maps in Images 9 and 10 were deemed "risky" due to their high concentrations of Black, Latino Hispanic, or Jewish populations. Such labeling often led to limited mortgage options, predatory lending practices, or elevated interest rates. These obstacles prevented the accumulation of intergenerational wealth, perpetuating cycles of poverty that negatively impacted child development and outcomes. Strikingly, the areas designated as "risky" exhibit a very similar geographical distribution to the various economic, developmental, and health indicators depicted in Images 4-10.

Images 9 and 10

Redlining Maps of Los Angeles, 1939





Note. Home Owners Loan Corporation original redlining map of Los Angeles

Zoning practices were also used to change the social and economic fabric of Los Angeles. Rothstein (2017) explains that South Center, LA, was largely Black by the 1940s (pp. 55-56). Over the next several decades, county and city officials used "spot" rezoning for commercial and industrial facilities to place junkyards, dangerous factories, and other heavy industries into almost every neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles.

The use of zoning laws and housing covenants, as noted by Davis (2006), functioned like "barbed wire social fencing," effectively maintaining racial segregation within the city. However, this racial segregation soon became intertwined with class dynamics, resulting in two centers of power: West LA and Downtown LA. The remaining areas of Los Angeles were relegated to disenfranchised status, left to grapple with the repercussions of underdevelopment and underinvestment (p. 148).

Interviewees in this study have indicated that both private and public actors persist to in perpetuating segregation through various tools and tactics, leading to inequitable child development outcomes. These include strategies such as using housing vouchers to relocate low-income families from the Los Angeles basin to the Antelope Valley, as well as gentrification, which forces individuals to move when they can no longer afford to reside in their current neighborhoods. While the explicit practice of redlining may be prohibited in present-day Los Angeles, the underlying processes of othering and belonging persist, albeit in more nuanced and less overt forms.

Other Processes of Othering and Belonging

Blatant social discrimination has also played a role in perpetuating inequalities in Los Angeles, which have subsequently impacted childhood outcomes across generations. This discrimination

is evident in various forms such as the "architectural policing of social boundaries," which is reflected in structures like private schools, private tutors, gated neighborhoods, and private security (Davis, 2006, pp. 200–201). Principles of "helping my child succeed" or "security" have become conduits for othering and belonging associated with income and class. Over time, these practices have contributed to the diminishing of public land and the erosion of a community mindset. Public spaces and organizations historically served as arenas for renegotiating social relationships by facilitating interactions among individuals from diverse socio-economic statuses (Klinenberg, 2018). In contemporary Los Angeles, there are few social institutions or physical spaces that fulfill this role (Davis, 2006, p. 203).

Demographic Shifts

Demographic shifts are a constant in Los Angeles, even though the geographical distributions of inequality remains stable. As Sampson (2012) argues, a unique aspect of the city is that spatial inequalities persist despite fluctuations in the population. Echoing this sentiment, PM_049 articulated, "Unlike New York that has a lot of enclaves and historically inhabited places, LA doesn't have that. It is an eclectic group of migrants who are frequently turning over." In addition to the present state, there have been multiple demographic shifts over the last 100 years that have left their mark on Los Angeles.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Black and African American families migrated to the Los Angeles area during the Great Migration from the Southern U.S. This influx became entangled with housing covenants and zoning policies, such as redlining, which established early patterns of inequality. Leovy (2015) notes that from the 1920s, Black people were relegated to the "swampy bottoms" of Watts, leaving a trend that has persisted, leaving the name "Watts" as

synonymous with crime and poverty (pp. 60-63). These patterns have remained largely unchanged. In comparison to Hispanics and Latinos, Black and African American segregation was more extensive, enduring, and intergenerational. Leovy identifies that "In the year 2000, decades after the courts struck down restrictive covenants, Black people in Los Angeles were no more likely to have white neighbors than they had been in 1970."

The Hispanic and Latino population also experienced growth during this time, but their settlement patterns were more transient. However, Hispanics and Latinos encountered fewer obstacles securing employment in Los Angeles and faced less racial or ethnic discrimination, allowing them the opportunity to work in different locations and capacities throughout the city (pp. 240–242).

In the 1990s, there was a notable rise in immigration from the Asian continent, particularly from Korea, and more recently China. Although migration from various populations Asian populations had been ongoing, the Asian stock market crash in the late 1990s prompted an influx of migrants to Los Angeles. This migration of middle-class families from Asia contributed to heightened gentrification in specific areas of Los Angeles, resulting in the displacement of Hispanic, Latino, Black, and African American families and individuals (pp. 240–242).

Demographic and social conditions are frequently influenced by economic policies. Factors such as housing and zoning covenants, wages, shifts in industry, and others all contribute to shaping the current landscape of Los Angeles. Presently, Black residents comprise less than nine percent of the overall population and this number continues to decline steadily. Most have relocated to the "exurbs" of Palmdale or the Antelope Valley" (pp. 316–317). Los Angeles ranks as the tenth most segregated metropolitan area, with substantial regions primarily inhabited by white residents (Baldwin, 2021, pp. 80–81).

Demographic shifts and associated segregation are some of the drivers for multiple childhoods in Los Angeles. This variability in childhood experiences is evident at the community level and reflects many of the geographic health and developmental patterns discussed in this chapter and Chapter 4. Chapter 6 will trace how the declining Black community in Los Angeles is a continuation of these historical policies. Both push and pull factors continue to drive demographic changes. In the most recent census, the only zip codes in Los Angeles to exhibit a decrease in overall population were those in historically Black and African American neighborhoods, including Compton and Watts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a, 2020b). Conversely, there were increases in populations in areas such as the Antelope Valley. The potential consequences of these shifts on childhood outcomes and families, including a lack of social and physical infrastructure necessary for healthy development, will be detailed further in Chapters 6 and 7.

Structural and Interpersonal Racism and Other Socioeconomic Inequalities

The relationship between economic and social conditions can often be intertwined and complex. For example, interviewees frequently discussed the interplay between racism and poverty. One interviewee (GT_008) described this tension, stating, “I think if we're, if we're realistic, we know, segregation, racism, it still is permeating through our communities, right. But I think it becomes secondary to poverty.” When asked about whether systematic racism lies at the core of poverty in Los Angeles, the same interviewee (GT_008) responded, “absolutely yes.” However, from the perspective of a program manager, clients were accessing services primarily due to resource limitations. This is not to say structural racism is not an issue or a root cause. In many cases, structural racism and inequalities lead to segregation and concentrations of poverty. For

many families, the acute need is related to poverty. Ultimately, the system is designed to address these more proximal needs, such as poverty, rather than mitigating more underlying issues like structural racism.

In addition to structural racism, interpersonal racism emerged as a recurring theme. Several interviewees discussed historical tensions between minority groups, especially African American as well as Latino and Hispanic communities that "began [when] the Latino population started to move in—the demographic shifts that took place in South LA [in the 1970s-80s], and all of a sudden you had this racial tension" (CM_045). Discussing this tension beyond Hispanic and Latino families, another interviewee remarked, "Know that when we [Koreans and African Americans] were in [name of town] we had a lot of [racial tension] initially…. that was a big issue" (GT_031). Research on the 1992 riots points to tensions between the African American and Korean communities as dry kindling in the social context of Los Angeles, waiting simply for a spark, such as the beating of Rodney King, to ignite the city aflame (Baldwin, 2021; Davis, 2006; Leovy, 2015). Many of these barriers persist today. Numerous individuals interviewed for this study suggested or identified ethnic and racial group tension as an underlying factor in perpetuating various problems across Los Angeles's social context. Chapter 6 will explore how these tensions continue to negatively impact child outcomes today.

Cultural Community Wealth

The social context of Los Angeles includes not only its challenges but also its cultural community wealth and robust social networks. One interviewee (CM_045), deeply rooted in the history of Los Angeles, suggested that some researchers have an overly pessimistic view of the county. While the interviewee openly admitted that Los Angeles was a terrible place to raise

children for many of the reasons mentioned above (i.e., poverty, inequality, segregation, etc.), he also acknowledged that Los Angeles is a unique city, with enclaves of resilience and beauty that have positive impacts on child development and family well-being. This argument was validated by several interviewees, underscoring the existence of community resilience within many neighborhoods that are creating hyper-local ecosystems of success for children and families. While there are immense barriers to equity, components of social cohesion, social reliance, and community strength exist (Baldwin, 2021; Davis, 2006; Hise, 2004; Krist, 2018; Leovy, 2015; Sides, 2006). Fundamentally, this strength and resilience manifests itself as networked communities who provide various forms of social capital when individuals and families need it. While it is sad to acknowledge that this strength exists largely because of oppression, it is nevertheless an important aspect of the ecosystem of early childhood in the county.

Baldwin (2021) reflects on this community strength by emphasizing the role of Hispanic and Latino communities in facilitating "social cohesion" across Los Angeles, evident in various neighborhoods (pp. 80-84). Similarly, Black and African Americans communities also personify a strong sense of community (Leovy, 2015, pp. 63–64). However, not all social capital is equal. As highlighted in interviewees conducted for this study, there are distinct patterns of community and social network within the African American community compared to the Hispanic and Latino communities. Understanding these nuances is crucial for comprehending how these communities "come together" and how this process influences children (Weisner, 2014b, p. 173). These nuances will be explored further in Chapters 6 and 7.

Conclusion: Race, Class, Place, and Power in Los Angeles

Davis concludes the preface of the 2006 edition of *City of Quartz* with a powerful statement concerning the future of Los Angeles, stating, "At the end of the day, the best measure of the humanity of any society is the life and happiness of its children. We live in a rich society with poor children, and that should be intolerable" (p. xxxvii).

It is simplistic to attribute the variation in early childhood outcomes in Los Angeles to one or two challenges alone. Rather, the intricate interplay of race, class, place, and power, both historically and presently, has engendered path dependencies that afford advantages to some children while impeding the progress of others. These patterns have remained stable over time. However, as outlined in Chapter 4 on methods, there are indications of resilience and instances of positive deviance that offer possible insights into reshaping this narrative for the benefit of children.

While this chapter has predominantly examined the macro-level contextual influences within Los Angeles county, Sampson (2012) suggests, "No matter how much our fate is determined by… "big" forces, it is experienced locally and shaped by contexts of shared meanings, collective efficacy, and organizational responses" (p. 409). Thus, the focus of this research now turns to these localized dynamics of "shared meanings, collective efficacy, and organizational responses." Chapter 6 will analyze how many of the contextual elements outlined in this chapter serve as the barriers and facilitators experienced by families. Consecutively, Chapter 7 will explore how early childhood systems operate within neighborhoods where children exhibit better-than-expected outcomes.

Chapter 6: Barriers and Facilitators Embedded in the Early Childhood Ecosystem of Los Angeles | Findings for Research Question 2

This chapter addresses the second research question: "What are the barriers and constraints as well as facilitators and enablers embedded in the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles County and how do they promote or inhibit overall development and well-being of children?" The discussion and analysis proceeds by covering the macro, meso, and micro levels of the ecological environment of early childhood in Los Angeles. Emphasis is placed on the barriers and facilitators as identified by families, program managers, and others. It will also discuss how these barriers and facilitators manifest themselves in the lives of families and the resulting impact. For each level of the early childhood developmental ecosystem, barriers are discussed as well as facilitators that enable families to cope with and transcend these obstacles and associated challenges.

Macro-Level

As mentioned in Chapter 2, from a socio-ecological perspective childhood development occurs within a nested ecological framework where forces beyond a child's immediate proximity can impact their development and life outcomes. This section discusses the macro-level forces that often are hidden or unseen to children and families but can exert immense impact (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The barriers considered include poverty, housing prices and gentrification, the COVID-19 pandemic, immigration, the criminal justice system, the South LA

to Antelope Valley pipeline, and regulation and professionalization of early childhood systems. Some of these barriers are so large and significant in individuals' lives, or impact such a large amount of people that the early childhood system is simply too overwhelmed to meaningfully mitigate their impact. For example, gentrification poses a unique challenge for housing low-income families which often leads to many having to move or be displaced rather than find affordable housing. Some of the facilitators include increased interest and funding, as well as the positive aspects interrelated with the regulation and professionalization of early childhood systems.

Barriers

Poverty

The barrier of poverty was mentioned throughout this research study. Child poverty is associated with structural differences in brain development that negatively impact school readiness skills and other cognitive functioning (Hair et al., 2015). Poverty also leads to fewer resources at home that promote healthy child development, including healthy foods and cognitively stimulating materials (Wagmiller, 2009).

While poverty is experienced at the micro-level, in the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles, parents, policy makers, and program managers all considered it to be a macro-level force that had population-level outcomes. An interviewee (GT_008) summed up the macro-level impact of poverty by saying that it was "the foundation" for the challenges of South LA. Another respondent (PM_008) similarly stated that poverty is "the underlying issue fueling" the other challenges families faced. While many barriers relate to poverty, several interviewees

emphasized that poverty itself is a major barrier to Los Angeles' early childhood ecosystem (GT_008; PM_012; PM_014; FM_019; FM_20; and PM_26).

For families, poverty was frequently discussed in terms of the layering of multiple challenges, particularly those that occur simultaneously. In this case, poverty was seen as a multiplier of other barriers. Families of all socio-economic statuses face unexpected challenges. However, high-income families draw on their extra resources to mitigate the effects of these challenges (Lareau, 2011). For example, if a car breaks down, high-income families can use their extra resources to fix the car, take an Uber, or rent a spare car. However, low-income families would be stuck walking, or unable to afford to repair the car for several weeks. One interviewee, (PM_042) articulated that on some days the "lack" is childcare, on other days it is a lack of self-confidence, whereas on other days it is a surprise bill.

Several interviewees (PM_026, PM_014, PM_012, FM_019, and FM_020) suggested that poverty worsened in Los Angeles over the last several years. They pointed to increased housing prices, stagnant wages, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic as factors affecting poverty. An interviewee (PM_049), who has worked in the early childhood sector in the Pico-Union neighborhood for several years suggested that poverty also exacerbated severe mental and emotional challenges which impacted a family's ability to function normally, a key component of a healthy childhood.

Poverty is a unique challenge for the early childhood system and ecosystem given that it is not easily addressed. The mitigation of this barrier requires several complex macro-level economic forces which are beyond the control of individuals. Additionally, as chapter 5 suggested, poverty is directly related to historic trends of othering and belonging, making it even more difficult to mitigate.

Housing Prices and Gentrification

Every family and program manager interviewed mentioned the high cost of housing as a significant barrier for families raising young children. Housing type, quality, and stability are foundational components of the early childhood ecosystem (Rollings et al., 2017). Most families suggested that high rental costs often left them housing insecure or compelled them to prioritize affordability over neighborhood safety or housing quality. Developmental research indicates that housing insecurity is linked to higher rates of childhood mental health concerns, lead poisoning, and other adverse health outcomes such as asthma, each of which has significant impacts on childhood health, development, and wellbeing across the life course (Rollings et al., 2017; Sandel et al., 2018).

One mother (FM_032) shared that housing costs had resulted in periods of homelessness and housing insecurity for her and her children. She recounted attempting to access emergency housing services but found the system complex and slow to respond. This forced her and her children to sleep in their car, something that is suboptimal for development.

The *USC Price Center for Social Innovation's* research reported alarming statistics regarding housing burden in Los Angeles. According to their findings, 73 percent of households are rent burdened, allocating more than 30 percent of their income to housing and utilities. Even more concerning, 48 percent of households experience severe rent burden, spending over half their income on rent and utilities. This study also highlighted disparities, indicating that Black and Latino or Hispanic families are disproportionately affected by housing burden, with households where Spanish is the dominant language facing particularly high rates. However, in

this research, immigration status did not prove to be statistically significant (Rosen & Angst, 2019).

This research also further found that when facing financial pressures, families will prioritize housing payments over food or other necessities. Rosen and Angst also identified a similar pattern. As parents described, this trade-off results in compromises such as purchasing less healthy food or opting for lower-quality daycare, placing vulnerable children at risk. The Nurturing Care Framework, as discussed previously, suggests the interconnectedness of various components in producing high-quality outcomes. Any reduction in the quality of one aspect of the ecosystem (i.e., food, safety, good medical care, early education, or nurturing care) can have significant impacts (Rosen & Angst, 2019; WHO & UNICEF, 2021a).

Pandemic

The pandemic presented a unique opportunity to gather insights from families, program managers, government officials, and others as the early childhood ecosystem experienced a massive shock. This period revealed patterns and behaviors that demonstrated the fragility of the early childhood ecosystem for low-income families. While the full extent of COVID-19's impact on the early childhood ecosystem in Los Angeles and on early childhood development is not yet fully understood, initial data suggests that education and health indicators remain low for low-income residents. While the influx of cash and resources temporarily pulled some children out of poverty, the social isolation led to cognitive declines and increased developmental vulnerability (Sato, 2023; Mulkey, 2023).

The macro-level barrier of the pandemic posed particular challenges for mothers and children at the micro-level, mostly due to the difficulty in accessing resources and the prolonged social isolation. As presented in the conceptual model, impacts at the macro-level, such as a

pandemic, manifest themselves in different forms across as socio-ecological levels. However, there was also evidence that the early childhood systems quickly responded by finding new ways to help families, such as dropping off items off at households or allowing individuals to collect them. In this sense, the early childhood system operated with greater flexibility, a key point raised in Chapter 7, which allowed family needs to be better met.

The pandemic required the early childhood system to adapt to new patterns and behaviors including:

- Adjustments to how services were delivered (online, less paperwork, etc.)
- Adjustments to birthing processes which often included greater social isolation during and after giving birth.
- Adjustments to the number of resources provided (often more)
- Mothers had to quit jobs due to lack of childcare (FM_021)
- Mothers had to work from home with children (FM_023)
- Mothers had to adjust modes of transportation to walk more and use public transportation less (FM_032)
- Mothers and children were forced to change housing and even sleep in cars for periods of time (FM_032)
- Several families also had reduced income during this time (FM_021; FM_023; FM_032)

For program managers and government officials, the pandemic largely resulted in a substantial influx of funding from federal, state, and local sources, along with additional resources and flexibility to adapt their services. PM_049 quickly noted that, in some cases, these changes improved the mechanism for service delivery. For example, providing food or other

resources became easier due to reduced requirements for government grants. However, certain programs or services experienced challenges and were less effective. Initially, conducting child welfare visits posed difficulty, raising concerns about the safety and security of vulnerable children. Additionally, despite increased flexibility, many families reported that social isolation at the micro-level emerged as their most significant emotional barrier as a result of the macro-level barrier of the pandemic. As articulated by one mother (FM_019), “I feel like [the pandemic] does affect me because I don't have [emotional or social] support.”

Immigration

Immigration and migration, as macro-level forces, can significantly impact a child’s development. The main drivers of impact include they want it manifest as the meso and micro-levels as discrimination, loss of access to governmental and educational resources, premigration trauma, loss of community, cultural distance and acculturation, the burden on the family unit, and socioeconomic difficulties (Andrade et al., 2023). These difficulties most often result in emotional and behavioral developmental delays. Evidence of these factors were found throughout this research.

The impact of macro-level immigration forces manifests in various forms throughout the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles, including across the socio-ecological levels. Within Los Angeles, immigration often leads to the formation of ethnic enclaves that largely influence early childhood outcomes at the community level, as seen in places like Koreatown. For many immigrants, the early childhood ecosystem becomes defined by these ethnic enclaves. As one program manager mentioned, even after moving away from Koreatown as a teenager, she

continued to return to that neighborhood for church and social events, and now works and lives there as an adult (PM_033).

The macro-level barrier also caused problems within the way it interacts with the early childhood system and sub-systems. This interaction between immigration policy and the early childhood system, some social services are denied to specific families making the system less effective at helping all children within this ecosystem. Specific programs, such as Medi-Cal, were not available to some families. One mother expressed that she didn't have health insurance, "because of my immigration status" (FM_004). The list of what programs a child does or does not qualify for can be inconsistent. For example, Head Start and Early Head Start are open to children regardless of their immigration status. However, programs such as Medi-Cal (Medicaid in California) are not open unless the mother is pregnant.

During this study, immigration emerged as a significant concern for many interviewees, particularly due to confusion surrounding Federal policies about "public charge." This policy implies that immigrants who utilized certain social services might risk deportation or citizenship denial. Many immigrants suggested a lack of clarity and transparency from program managers and government officials, especially regarding what information might be disclosed to U.S. immigration and customs officials, thus presenting a significant barrier to accessing resources for their children and families.

FM_004 illustrated the impact of this uncertainty, stating:

> We were getting food stamps…[but] those rumors, like people were saying if…you want to get your documents like your citizenship or something, you won't be able to use to because you were getting help from the government or something. So, we stopped getting food stamps.

This example highlights how the barrier of confusion surrounding immigration status primarily manifests as fear regarding potential consequences, such as deportation, if they were to use resources. Another individual expressed similar concerns, mentioning fear about providing information necessary to quality for services. FM_020 voiced worry about where that data goes and how it might be used against them in the future.

Fear surrounding immigration status also affected the ability of program managers to reach families. As one program manager said, “It's harder for us to engage the Latinx caregivers in accessing broader resources, mainly because some of them are undocumented, and there's some fear attached to it” (GT_008). PM_008 elaborated that recruitment and enrollment efforts have had to undergo dramatic shifts to reassure families that their immigration status would not be shared. Despite these efforts, hesitancy continued to pose a challenge. Many program managers found that they had to invest much more time and effort into building trust with families. The concept of “trust” with organizations plays a key role in mitigating this barrier and will be discussed at length in Chapter 7.

As evidenced by these quotes, the term “fear” was frequently linked to migrant utilization of early childhood services. It was this fear that posed a significant challenge for many program managers that they had to adjust to and overcome. While services remained available, this macro-level force of immigration and associated policies hindered their use. Additionally, this was enhanced by the perceived, and perhaps real fear, associated with the impact of one’s immigration status.

Criminal Justice System

Many families suggested that the criminal justice system played an important yet often overlooked role as a barrier within the early childhood ecosystem. Research has shown parental

incarceration can profoundly affect a child's emotional, social, and behavioral development (Beresford, et al, 2020; Martin, 2017). A study tracking a cohort of children throughout their lives found that the impact of parental incarceration on a child's overall health and well-being was more substantial than parental death or divorce (Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2020). In Los Angeles, GT_008 summarized the issue by stating that the loss of parents, especially fathers, to the criminal justice system created intergenerational difficulties. These incarcerated parents often had struggles to obtain jobs and "flourishing," leading to long-term economic challenges. Many families and program managers agreed with this sentiment.

Ultimately, parental involvement with the criminal justice system potentially impacts early childhood in several ways. First, many said incarceration disrupted African American or Black neighborhoods by changes to the social networks and environments of these families leading to less social capital and a lack of opportunity (see Chapter 7). Another potential pathway in which the criminal justice system impacts the early childhood ecosystem is the reduced financial stability of families. In many cases, when one parent is involved in the criminal justice system, or was previously within the system, the earnings for that family are reduced (Beresford, et al, 2020; Martin, 2017). PM_008 specifically discussed that many grandmothers who are left to raise these children are often on fixed incomes with less money available.

Many interviewees suggested that incarceration was linked to structural racism, drug policies that disproportionately impacted Black and African American families, and perceptions of the police as either being excessively harsh or not caring enough. As Levoy (2015) asserts in her book about crime in Los Angeles:

> Take a bunch of teenage boys from the whitest, safest suburb in America and plunk them down in a place where their friends are murdered, and they are constantly attacked and threatened. Signal that no one cares and fail to solve murders. Limit their options for escape. Then see what happens (p. 253).

South LA to Antelope Valley Pipeline

Population shifts in the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles were a consistent theme. As mentioned in the previous chapter, demographic changes are often the result of other macro and meso-level barriers and facilitators interacting with each other to cause demographic shifts. In Los Angeles these interactions play a significant role in how inequalities of early childhood outcomes are manifested. What this research suggests is that children and families in Los Angeles are experiencing another demographic transition.

The interactions between gentrification, housing policies, economic revitalization, and rehousing programs mentioned in Chapter 5 have created conditions and new barriers whereby low-income Black and African American families are moving from South Los Angeles to the Antelope Valley—a South LA to Antelope Valley Pipeline that moves poverty out of the basin and into the valley. PM_008 shared the following instructive vignette that highlights how many families are forced to relocated given current ecosystem conditions:

> So, one of my grandma's as an example…you've been living in South LA, maybe you even got to a point where you…own your home, you've been doing well, and then maybe life happens—because of poverty, and you fell into hardship, and maybe you're behind, and maybe you're facing eviction, and or maybe there's been some loss of income, it could be a lot of different things that played into it. It could be COVID that impacted it

> and now you're put in a position where you're about to lose your home. [Organizations] can't pay your rent indefinitely. So, there's a longer-term issue there. How do we help you with the longer-term issue…So, then what's the alternative? You lose your home? Okay, now, what happens to Grandma, what are we going to do put grandma in transitional housing for the rest of her life? Now she gets to move out to Antelope Valley, which is where everyone ends up.

This quote highlights that often the issue facing families is being overwhelmed by unexpected challenges. The combination of poverty, the reduced wages or increased financial costs related to the impact of criminal justice system, and a host of other potential disruptions can force a family to move in search of cheaper housing.

The 2020 U.S. Census demonstrates that the only cities in the county to see a net decrease in population during the last 10 years were those in South LA, while areas of Antelope Valley saw a net increase in population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019, 2020a). While this shift is impacting Hispanic and Latino families, it has also disproportionally impacted African American and Black families. It is unclear why this might be; however, GT_052 and PM_008 both independently suggested that it was driven by Black families being more mobile and finding jobs in other cities, whereas many Hispanic and Latino families are tied to employment in the basin area of the County.

The consequences of moving to the Antelope Valley for families, as identified by those interviewed, are twofold. First, there is a disruption to the ecosystem to which the family belongs. The social network of families is disrupted, leading to less social capital. As GT_044 says, “They’ve left their home, they’ve left relationships, they’ve left the places, the corner store they went to, the barber shop and all that and they left and moved to an unknown community.”

Second, families face a lack of an early childhood system and services in the Antelope Valley region. Several program managers who were interviewed described the Antelope Valley as "barren" or a "dumping ground" that leaves many families without the service infrastructure they need to ensure their children thrive. GT_0031 expressed their concerns by talking about families they have seen move up there only to return to the LA basin because their, "whole support system is gone" or they "don't have a support system…even their internal family structure starts crumbling…they have to come back down and start from the beginning, even further than where they were." In another conversation, GT_008, a prominent service provider in South LA, explained her frustration with policymakers who seemed to simply be "shifting the problem out of one community into another" rather than trying to solve issues of poverty and poor early childhood development.

Regulation and Professionalization

Several interviewees (PM_027, GT_046, GT_031, GT_025, CM_022) commented on the impact of increased governmental regulation and associated professionalization on the early childhood ecosystem. With increased interest in early childhood, there has been a call at the federal and state policy levels to ensure that early childhood education is "high quality" (The White House, 2021). Several program managers specifically mentioned this increased focus and the rise in professionalization and regulation (PM_027, GT_031). This increase in policy interest in professionalization has largely stemmed from inconsistent findings about the impact of early childhood education and the recognition that high-quality preschool pays off more significant dividends over a child's lifetime (Early et al., 2007; Elango et al., 2015). Teachers are the central contributor to children's experiences in early childhood education settings and thus what most

policymakers, parents, and researchers often intuitively default to when thinking about how to improve quality (Fuller, 2011).

Despite the central role that early childhood teachers play, these educators have typically worked long hours, received very low wages, and possessed lower levels of education. A 2015 National Academies report highlighted the incongruity between how early childhood educators are trained, supported, and compensated, and the importance of the work they do. This report emphasized professionalism as a potential solution—whereby professionalism included the development of credentialing and career pathways, providing on-the-job training, and establishing systems for enhanced compensation. However, much of the complexity of the recommendation for increased professionalization has been overlooked, with many focusing solely on the requirement that early childhood educators obtain a bachelor's degree. It might seem natural to prioritize the bachelor's requirement. The simplicity of this change makes it a tempting area of policy intervention. Some of the best examples of quality early childhood education have included individuals with bachelor's degrees. Nevertheless, there is inconclusive data on whether the attainment of a bachelor's degree will improve the early childhood ecosystem. What is clear is that no bachelor's requirement can sufficiently prop up a workforce and system that is underfunded and under-supported, lacking adequate training and fair compensation (National Research Council, 2015).

To put it simply, there is no research suggesting any causal relationship between the bachelor's requirement for teachers and improved outcomes for children, and some research even suggests that it might have other, more negative consequences (Fuller, 2011). While some research suggests that teacher education level is related to the social-emotional development of children, this research lacks any causal connection. Additionally, this data also only compares

education levels above or below a high-school degree (Burchinal et al., 2000; Frede et al., n.d.; Loeb et al., 2004) In a more comprehensive meta-analysis conducted by Early et al. (2007), which examined seven different nationally representative studies, the data suggests that having a bachelor's degree had no association with child outcomes. When looking at counties like Los Angeles or states, there is no evidence to suggest that the bachelor's requirement significantly impacts early childhood outcomes. Overall, the best research we have on "quality" fails to establish a bachelor's requirement as a meaningful factor in improving early childhood outcomes.

Some have speculated that the ideal pathway might be that a degree requirement will improve teacher behaviors and skills, yet we also do not see this connection (Fuller, 2011). What one should take from the research shared so far is that a bachelor's requirement will most likely not lead to quality outcomes in the early childhood system.

However, this dissertation also uncovered concerns regarding the professionalizing of the workforce. The first concern is the potential increase in teacher turnover. National Head Start data over several years indicates that as educational attainment increases, these highly credentialed teachers are more likely to seek out higher-paying jobs within the K-12 system, raising concerns regarding turnover (Bassok, 2013; Bassok et al., 2021). Requiring bachelor's degrees, coupled with the potential rise in turnover, could negate any benefits that come from having a more highly educated workforce. This is particularly concerning considering the severe shortages already seen in the early childhood education workforce (McLean, 2020). It is a concern shared by many, as evidence suggests that stability in a teacher-child relationship in early childhood settings is critical for quality and outcomes (Bassok et al., 2021; Doromal et al., 2021).

A second concern revolves around equity and the potential disruption to communities, particularly regarding race in early childhood education. An analysis of the nationwide Head Start program over several years by Bassok (2013) revealed that the educational requirements implemented in the 2000s resulted in a less diverse workforce and a greater racial disparity between educators and the children they served. Greenberg et al. (2018) also observed a similar trend in their nationally representative data. Children of color were less likely to have a teacher that matched their race or ethnicity after the educational requirement for Head Start was put into place. Using two nationally representative samples, Markowitz et al. (2020) have suggested that the racial mismatch between teacher on one hand and children and families on the other might impact negatively impact quality. This consideration is vital because some research indicates an unintended consequence of bachelor's degree requirements in early childhood could be a less diverse, predominantly white workforce that does not reflect the racial demographics of the children being served.

Furthermore, this potential shift towards a more white demographic in the early childhood system raises concerns regarding equity, particularly when considering the work of Gilliam and Downey (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Gilliam et al., 2016) in both localized and national data sets. Their research indicates that children of color in early childhood settings are more likely to face disciplinary actions from teachers of opposite races. Early discipline can significantly impact a child's experience and influence outcomes later in life (NAEYC, n.d.). Combined there should be concern raised about any attempt to increase pre-service education and the potential impacts on both teachers and students of color. If the quality of early childhood is actually found in the teacher-child interaction, and racial congruence between teacher and student matters, then clearly, we must be careful of any action that might disrupt that relationship

(Markowitz et al., 2020; Mims et al., 2008). This cautious is especially warranted considering the projected demographic shift towards a less white early childhood population in the coming years (Frey, 2021; Vespa et al., 2020).

Concerns about inequality within the early childhood teaching force were also expressed by many program managers and even parents interviewed in Los Angeles. In every center visited, mothers, often immigrants and undocumented, viewed the early childhood center to as a potential career pathway. They would begin by volunteering and often work their way up to become classroom teachers or even lead teachers. Although not originally intended, early childhood might be functioning as an organic pathway for undocumented immigrants to develop skills and enter the workforce, enabling them to better provide resources for their families and communities. Reflecting on her experience of over 15 years at one center, one mother (PM_009) expressed, “I love [this] center. They believed in me. I was able to take care of my family because they allowed me to work and now, I help other [mothers] who were like me—new to Los Angeles with no one to rely on.”

In validating this section of the dissertation, one individual (GT_025), who has direct policy control over this issue in Los Angeles County very energetically said, “I would love it not to be over professionalized. But I've got people living making poverty wages. So, I got to figure out how to do that.” This highlights the dilemma faced: on one side there is pressure to preserve the community-centered nature of early childhood education, while on the other, there is an increased call for professionalization.

Facilitators

The next section of this chapter explores the macro-level early childhood developmental ecosystem facilitators identified by those interviewed. In this research, facilitators are regarded as macro-level forces or processes that contribute to enhancing early childhood outcomes within an early childhood ecosystem. The interactions between these facilitators and other barriers and facilitators will also be explored. These facilitators are present throughout the ecosystem and operate in both obvious and hidden ways and impact early childhood outcomes through various pathways which will be explained below.

Expanding Policy Interest and Dollars in Early Childhood

Over the past several years, there has been a growing focus on early childhood policy interventions, accompanied by a rise in available funding (The White House, 2021). None of the interviewees in this research mentioned a shortage of funding. GT_025, a policy official with the county of Los Angeles, explicitly stated that "tens of millions" of dollars in early childhood program funds go unused each year in the county.

Most of early childhood funding is connected to early childhood education and children's health insurance. The other aspects of nurturing care (nutrition, nurturing caregiving, and safety and security) are not funded at the same levels. Additionally, the focus of many of these programs tends to be on the child rather than the family unit. This approach lacks an ecosystem perspective, as factors like a child's health are often intertwined with other social determinants such as stable housing or access to healthy food.

However, despite these statements about the large amount of funding available, there remained a significant tension. Even with investment in early childhood, every early childhood

education teacher or program manager interviewed specifically mentioned the low pay associated with working in the field. The drivers of this low pay are complex including societal value and fiscal compensation associated with working with children, grant and contract limitation, as well as lower pay associated with most social services work. Regardless of the driver, low pay is associated with a host of challenges that impact developmental outcomes such as teacher turnover and satisfaction which result in lower quality teaching.

Regulation and Professionalization

While initially described as a barrier, many of those interviewed also highlighted the increasing regulation and professionalization of the early childhood workforce as a facilitator. As mentioned earlier, GT_025 specifically linked professionalization to the ability to raise wages, which is critical for establishing a better and more stable workforce. However, interviewees often qualified their statements with some hesitancy on *what* professionalization should look like. As CM_022 explained, "So, I'm all for professionalizing early childhood education. I think we must do it so that it doesn't disrupt the communities. How do we do that? I have no idea." For many, professionalization was associated with changing the culture around early childhood from a nurturing vocation to an academic-focused school readiness environment. Many saw this shift as negative, and suggested it was not what children needed for their social-emotional development.

However, there was also a tension that frequently was raised. While many interviewees expressed hesitancy about over-professionalizing the workforce, several of these same individuals also suggested that professionalization is a key factor contributing to the quality of early childhood ecosystems. PM_027, PM_033, and PM_049, all early childhood center

directors, initially shared hesitancy about over-professionalizing, but later highlighted professionalization as integral to their quality standards. These perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. One interpretation could be an acknowledgment that while professionalization is important, the manner of *how* it is implemented and balanced within the ecosystem matters.

Meso Level (Community and Organizational)

This section focuses on the meso-level of the ecosystem. It will first interrogate the community level, addressing factors such as social isolation and neighborhood environment. Subsequently, it will explore the organizational aspects of the meso level, including administrative barriers and interpersonal bias or discrimination. Following this, the chapter will investigate facilitators at the community level. Facilitators at the organizational level will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Community Barriers

Social Isolation

Humans are inherently social creatures, and the absence of social interaction can significantly impact human wellbeing (Cohen, 2004). While the individual mental and emotional health effects of social isolation will be discussed in the "micro-level" section, social isolation demonstrated two clear pathways at the community level. Among all the meso-level barriers, social isolation proved to be one of the most subtle and challenging to detect. In the first analysis of the data, it did not surface until GT_044 raised concerns about individuals who were not represented in the dataset. Subsequent efforts were made to identify individuals who were

eligible for services but not utilizing them, revealing clear patterns of social isolation within this group.

PM_010 describes her experience of living in a suburban area that offered a pleasant environment but lacked a sense of "community" for her and her daughter, leaving them feeling "pretty isolated." Despite her efforts to provide various aspects of nurturing care, she faced challenges in accessing a broader range of services and resources. The social isolation within her community constrained her ability to be aware of available resources and navigate the most effective ways to access them. Here, micro-level factors inhibited accessing the early childhood system, and the early childhood system was not effective enough in being able to provide help and assistance.

For FM_032, another socially isolated parent, she easily and quickly gave up when she faced any barrier in accessing resources. She expressed not having the emotional or social support necessary to navigate the bureaucracy of programs. The few programs she did participate in were introduced to her by a community member who assisted her in learning about them and navigating the application process. This informal connection served as her primary connector to the larger early childhood system. As previously mentioned, the "strength" of "weak" social connections is important in early childhood ecosystems.

For the handful of other mothers who were identified as eligible but not currently using services, similar patterns emerged. They either lacked awareness about resources or services, or if they were aware, they did not know how to access them. This lack of knowledge or awareness became a critical barrier for those parents who were interviewed but were not accessing resources. It was one that the sub-systems and the early childhood system as a whole seemed unable to effectively address and respond to.

Neighborhood Environment, Safety, and Transportation

A key theme that was raised by several interviewees was the idea of "neighborhood." A "neighborhood" most often referred to the geographical area and its infrastructure, differentiated from the use of the word "community," which implied more of the social aspect of the neighborhood. Neighborhood and place matter for child development. As discussed in Chapter 3, place, or this idea of "neighborhood," has a significant impact on child development, but understanding how the various pathways intersect is the central focus of this research (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2023; Gieryn 2000).

The most common components of a neighborhood mentioned were parks, schools, and libraries. When asked about "safety" from the Nurturing Care Framework, families always defaulted to discussions about the safety of the neighborhood. For those interviewed, a lack of safety was defined by four different things: gangs, guns, drugs, and those experiencing homelessness. The most likely cause of injury or death for a child in Los Angeles is car accidents and accidents at home (drowning, falling, etc.); however, no parents mentioned anything related to these two items when discussing safety (California Health and Human Services, 2021; CDC, 2019). In this case, people's perceived connotations about safety change their behaviors and thus impact child outcomes. For example, FM_004 did not take her child to parks or let the child play outside in front of the house given safety concerns, despite a low crime rate in her neighborhood.

In addition to discussing the safety of a particular neighborhood, many individuals commonly talked about the built environment of their neighborhood. Most of those interviewed shop, eat, work, and live within a relatively small geographical area. However, this can be problematic for those who do not have good options or obtaining high-quality food nearby. For example, FM_017 and FM_021 highlighted that their shopping usually included Food for Less,

Smart and Final, and CVS. While Food for Less and Smart and Final offer options for healthy nutrition., shopping for household items at CVS is much more expensive compared to a place like Ralphs, which they mention as being further away.

FM_017 also highlights a significant limitation of services and their locations in the neighborhood. The type and quality of services can be location-dependent, often influenced by factors such as organizational culture or leadership. FM_017 has three children. She shared that her eldest is in 4th grade and her youngest son (3-year-old) has special needs and needed additional therapy and services. Initially, he was enrolled in the Early Head Start program he went to connected him to the school district. The school district enrolled him in a program, which connected him to services provided through the Regional Center. However, despite these services, the family observed little improvement in their son's development and encountered concerns such as lost clothing and biting marks. In a moment of desperation, this young mother called up her older son's school and asked if they had a preschool program. The school allowed her youngest son to enroll based on his brother's affiliation with the institution. It was at this school that they began to see a positive difference in his development. While both schools provided services, it was the qualitative nature of service delivery and the environment that made the difference for their son. Many parents interviewed elucidated a similar theme. Here we see that the individuals within the early childhood system matter significantly. As Chapter 3 suggests, systems are ultimately made up of people and thus people and individual interactions between families and individuals who make up the system can have significant impacts.

Organizational Barriers

Complicated Processes

At the organizational level, families regularly mentioned the burden of administrative and bureaucratic processes required to access resources. In *Unequal Ch*ildhoods, Lareau (2011) emphasizes that knowledge of navigating bureaucratic systems is a key differentiating factor between low and high-income families, with those from low-income backgrounds often facing challenges in understanding how to navigate early childhood systems. FM_001, who has used both private and public child well-being resources, exemplifies this struggle. Despite being a college graduate, she found it challenging to understand what documentation was required for some government services. She also highlighted the difficulty of the task, especially without access to the internet.

As Lareau (2011) suggests, it is possible that middle- and upper-class family and social culture inherently understand how to handle paperwork, make phone calls, and advocate for themselves—skills crucial for navigating organizations and bureaucracies. The cultural knowledge of navigation may perpetuate inequalities that favor the middle and upper classes. Most structures organizing the early childhood system are designed and managed by individuals from middle and upper-class backgrounds, making it culturally familiar to those with similar backgrounds. As Weisner (2014a) suggests, these are familiar social "scripts" for families from such backgrounds.

An additional theme regarding the challenging nature of accessing early childhood services was the necessity for persistence and extensive documentation throughout the process. FM_0032 expressed wanting to "pull her hair out" when maneuvering the system, underscoring the persistence required. For individuals who have little disposable time (i.e., single parents,

parents working multiple jobs, etc.), this type of persistence is a challenge. Interviewees noted that healthcare and medical insurance sub-systems were particularly complex. FM_021 described the intricacy of managing a high-risk pregnancy and needing to visit five separate doctors on any given day. Each doctor required a distinct process for making appointments, processing payments, and determining the frequency of follow-up. In contrast to low-income families, upper-class families often possess the knowledge and resources to navigate these bureaucracies more effectively, benefiting from greater flexibility such as access to sick days or the ability to work from home.

Language and Literacy

Language and literacy were common barriers mentioned by Hispanic and Latino interviewees. The English language still dominates the early childhood system's operations and processes. Research by Williams et al. (2013) supports this, indicating that even when services are offered in Spanish, families are less likely to access them compared to when requests are made in English. This disparity not only complicates families' navigation of the system but also negatively affects early childhood developmental outcomes.

According to structuration theory, language acts as a barrier through which families experience othering and belonging, ultimately influencing developmental outcomes based on language. Three different interviewees (FM_021, FM_024, and CM_039) shared similar experiences of relying on close family members to translate documents or having to serve as the translators themselves to access resources. This reliance on informal translation methods underscores the challenges faced by families with language barriers within the early childhood system. After completing an interview, a research assistant involved in this project reflected on her own experience in elementary school noting vivid memories in her research journal about

how she accompanied her aunt to parent-teacher conferences to serve as the translator. This personal anecdote highlights the persistent nature of language barriers in accessing early childhood services and resources.

When ground truthing this analysis about language, some interviewees suggested that language might pose barriers but could also serve as a protective factor within certain communities. They theorized that strong communities bound by Spanish-speaking individuals might offer benefits that, in some cases, could help mitigate barriers. However, this perspective proved to be problematic for families attempting to provide cognitive stimulation for development. Activities like reading to a child provide an important foundation for healthy development (Niklas, et al, 2016). Some parents were not able to read or write, which made it difficult to create a stimulating environment. PM_010 shared the story of a mother with seven children, including one with special needs, who did not know how to read or write in Spanish or English, and one day just cried, “I don't know how to read to [my] kids. How am I going to be part of the reading program?” The program manager was at a total loss for how to respond.

Cost Associated With Services

Cost has frequently emerged as a barrier for families seeking services to support their children (Rice et al., 2019). This often leads families to opt for lower-quality options that are more affordable but may not adequately meet their children’s needs (Helburn, 1995). In the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles, the costs of services and goods were discussed in two distinct patterns. First, middle-to-lower-income families faced significant challenges due to costs associated with accessing services. These families often found themselves in a financial grey area: they earned too much money to qualify for subsidies or free early childhood services provided by government systems; yet their income was insufficient to cover the expenses

without it becoming a burden. The interaction between macro-economic forces such as high rents and stagnant wages at the individual and family level were combining to create a new barrier of costs associated with services. FM_001 exemplified this dilemma, describing the cost-benefit analysis she conducted when considering preschool for her son. Despite recognizing the value of preschool, she ultimately chose to keep her son home due to the financial strain associated with enrollment.

The other distinct pattern by which costs manifested themselves emerging from the data was the general costs of goods and services for all families, including those receiving government assistance. This was particularly evident in discussions surrounding nutrition, a crucial aspect of the Nurturing Care Framework. Parents regularly described their desire for their children to have nutritious meals but struggled to afford healthy food options. FM_004, for instance, acknowledged that they were purchasing unhealthy food due to its lower cost.

The struggle to access healthy food is just one facet of rising macro-level inflation and its interaction with families in Los Angeles at the meso and micro levels. Many families noted that the type of work they engage in within the informal economy has not seen corresponding increase in wages. Consequently, the combination of rising household expenses and stagnant wages has resulted in less disposable income available to create a healthy and nurturing environment conducive to a child's development.

Lack of Dignity

A theme raised by those interviewed was the idea that the processes of accessing various early childhood systems felt "dehumanizing" and created feelings of guilt, shame, or frustration (FM_003 and FM_032). The direct interaction between individuals and meso-level sub-systems

was creating feelings that acted as a barrier for families. These feelings resulted in a lack of motivation and thus less resources for their families, even when they qualified for them. This lack of accessing resources leads to worse developmental outcomes for children (Wagmiller, 2019). The quality of resources is highly dependent on the experience that individuals have when accessing them. A common response from interviewees emphasized that disrespectful treatment from staff members at a certain location prevented them from using services. As mentioned previously and in Chapter 3, individuals make up organizations and system, and ultimately interactions within and between individuals, families, organizations and systems matters for early childhood outcomes. In some cases, it just created negative feelings. In other instances, they stopped going completely. FM_001 explained that she simply stopped going to a particular pediatrician because the visit often came with feelings of guilt and shame. She used words and phrases like, "fear" or "always being told what I am doing wrong," when describing her interaction. Several program managers (PM_008; GT_031) validated this concern saying that they had been told by numerous families that parents often felt like they were "a number" or were treated so poorly that they did not want to go back.

Fragmentation and Competition

System fragmentation is not a new concept in the discussion of the early childhood system and ecosystem. As mentioned in Chapter 2 and 3, it is one of the most mentioned attributes of a system, and many efforts around "systems building" are centered on trying to solve this problem (Scott, 2012; WHO & UNICEF, 2021d). This research confirmed that system fragmentation is also a significant problem within the Los Angeles early childhood developmental ecosystem. As

CM_011 said, “We have all these bits and pieces of things,” underscoring the disconnected and siloed nature of services available in the Los Angeles area.

CM_022 offered a similar view but emphasized the inequality that the system perpetuates when it operates in this fragmented way. Or in other words, the various components of the system that do not work together to improve outcomes. PM_005 further elaborated on this theme by emphasizing that fragmentation exists in non-profits and community-based organizations, discussing: “Navigating a county system or public services is hard enough. But I think nonprofits and navigating what nonprofits do is also very difficult.” When verifying this with another participant (GT_031), they suggested that the competitive funding for non-profits in Los Angeles is at the core of this fragmentation. Los Angeles is a complex ecosystem with limited funding for early childhood, resulting in competition for scarce resources for social services and a disincentive to fully cooperate and create synergies among partners (CM_045 and CM_047). Additionally, the approval procedures, regulations, and reporting requirements for funding often limit the ability to use money synergistically (PM_049). Therefore, the system design itself perpetuates fragmentation.

Accessibility and Information

Knowledge of where to access resources was a common barrier raised by interviewees. The lack of access to resources results in worse developmental outcomes for children (Wagmiller, 2019). For example, parenting classes are ubiquitous across Los Angeles County. From churches to WIC, there are several options available. However, FM_032’s lack of awareness prevented her from knowing who and where to start contacting. Accessing this resource would have saved years of stress, helped her build a social network, and navigate other parts of the system more easily. As research indicates, such barriers to accessing resources have significant implications

for early childhood outcomes. However, FM_032 was unable to join parenting classes because she simply did not know about it.

A lack of accessibility and information also manifested in other ways. FM_020 discussed that her limited knowledge about the internet and how to use a computer hindered her ability to learn about and access various resources. FM_032 highlighted that struggles with accessibility and information was due to not having things clearly explained to her. She described how confusing instructions from doctors or program managers regarding what she could or could not do make her feel. Even when attempting to provide her with information, doctors or program managers presented in a way that made it difficult for her to understand (using complex jargon, assuming she had access to the internet, etc.).

In addition to families, program managers also highlighted areas related to their work scope in which they perceived they were providing information and access ineffectively. PM_026 portrayed that her organization's choices about what languages to print materials in did not align with neighborhood demographics. PM_009 specifically mentioned that the most effective way for people to learn about resources is through their social network or word of mouth. However, as mentioned previously, socially isolated individuals, or people with their first child, often miss out on these opportunities (CM_047).

Throughout these interviews and observations, it was clear that for many families, there is no consistent pathways enter the early childhood system. Some enter through housing vouchers and others through early childhood education programs. High quality systems seem to find ways around this inconsistent point-of-entry by capitalizing on partnerships and navigators to extend more opportunities and services to the individual within the early childhood system (see Chapter 7 for a more in-depth discussion). There were also distinct class differences in how

families access information about programs or services. While middle-class mothers often talked about searching for information online or looking for resources through social media (i.e., Instagram), low-income Hispanic families discussed the information provided in printed pamphlets.

Discrimination and Racism

Discrimination has detrimental impacts on child development and wellbeing (Farago et al, 2015; Trent, et al, 2019; Shonkoff, 2021). This occurs due to both direct impacts on the child, but also impact on the child's ecosystem (Shonkoff, 2021). In some cases, discrimination creates a lack of resources needed (Farago et al., 2015). In other cases, it is driven by the toxic stress that racism can create in the life circumstances of a child (Shonkoff, 2015). In this research, discrimination was conveyed in terms of tension between Hispanic and Latino families and African American and Black families as well as discrimination from Hispanic program managers against African American and Black families. FM_042 described being asked to serve on an organization's Policy Council. She was half Latino and half African American, but faced complaints from African American mothers that she favored other Latino mothers. Multiple program managers, community members, and others validated this finding suggesting it was a significant, but an often rarely discussed issue (PM_014; GT_31; CM_037; GT_44; CM_048).

Discrimination also operated across the macro, meso, and micro levels of the socio-ecological model and manifested itself in various ways. Racism hindered interactions between individuals and sometimes made organizations and sub-systems slower in responding to parent needs. Like the conceptual model in Chapter 3 suggests, the early childhood system was unable to block barriers and facilitators when it allowed discriminatory principles to guide its processes.

Community Facilitators

Social networks

One of the most significant findings of this research was that social networks, meaning the number and nature of connections between individuals, are foundational to how the early childhood ecosystem operates. The importance of social networks and the social capital within a network has been well established in literature (Granovetter, 1973; Robert, 2000; Small, 2009). Even within early childhood, it has been found that social networks provide social support, parenting advice, emotional support, improve family functioning, and several other child development outcomes (Angley et al., 2015; Cochran & Brassard, 1979; Crittenden, 1985; Homel et al., 1987; Kaplan, 2021; Salzinger, 1990; Serrano-Villar et al., 2017). The Nurturing Care Framework highlights the value of social networks in child rearing by providing information and knowledge to individuals (WHO & UNICEF, 2021c, p. 9).

Mark Granovetter's (1973) *The Strength of Weak Ties*, found that loose social connections can be more important than strong social ties in finding resources, new jobs, and higher wages because loose connections (i.e., casual acquaintances) can increase the number of resources available to the individual outside of their usual social network. More recently, Mario Small (2009) asserts that a similar argument might be made for how middle-class mothers access network resources. Small found that loose social connections between parents facilitated by childcare centers provided additional network resources important for promoting parents' social positions. The data gathered in this research takes these arguments further by making two suggestions.

First, getting access to resources seems to be a better experience for those who have more "weak ties" or loose social connections. Latino and Hispanic families who primarily had only strong family social networks used a limited number of resources. These resources were generally WIC, or other very trusted resources that other aunties, cousins, or immediate family members used previously or were currently using. However, it was the families who had more community ties that were accessing more resources and services. FM_003 shared her experience with a weak tie by describing that a friend of her sister was able to help her get into a doctor months ahead of her initial appointment because this "weak tie" knew how to navigate the scheduling process.

Second, from a systems perspective, some early childhood service providers did a more effective job facilitating the creation of weak ties among participants. The care navigators and the relational approach that these centers employed facilitated additional resources for families (see Chapter 7). While the strength of weak ties matters, it still should not undermine the importance of close social networks. Granovetter (1973) articulates that strong close ties are still important for intense and immediate social and fiscal support. FM_019's experience elucidates the difference. She was able to get access to a wider set of resources and programs through a home visitor (weak tie) but relied on her family (strong tie) for the emotional and financial support that she needed to keep moving forward.

Additionally, those with a weak support system were more inconsistent with their service usage. FM_019 discussed that she had similar resources for both children (therapist, parenting classes, etc.) but she made use of them more frequently during her second pregnancy because she had a stronger support system. Social networks play an important role in overcoming the mental and emotional challenges of social isolation. Several mothers detailed experiencing social

isolation during pregnancy and post-partum. Social isolation during pregnancy and into the earliest years of child development can be incredibly problematic. Mothers are less likely to bond with the child, provide nurturing care, and interact with their child, which are all important parts of child development (Cummings & Davies, 1994). This research also found that different racial or ethnic groups created social networks in varied ways. The following provides a summary of distinct differences between various groups.

Hispanic and Latin Social Networks

Hispanic and Latino families had four different types of social networks: family, community, organizational, and isolated. All of these social network patterns lead to different outcomes in accessing and knowing about early childhood resources.

"Family" networks were characterized by several strong nodes with close friends and family. This assists individuals with immediate and acute financial, social, and childcare needs. However, strong familial social networks also tended to have a smaller set of resources or services that they used. Generally, they only used the resources that other family members knew about, most often WIC. Without more "loose" or "weak" ties, they had less awareness and access to resources and services.

The second distinct pattern of social networks were those who had a larger set of "loose" or "weak" ties in their community. They may also have strong family and friend networks, but they made efforts to have more connections with a broader set of individuals. These families were aware and able to access more resources than those who only had close family and friend network patterns.

A third type of social network pattern was "organizational," in which Hispanic and Latino families' social networks were strongly associated with or tied to an early childhood

organization. For example, they received several services and had a strong connection to a church, an early childhood resource center, etc. Families with a strong organizational social network felt a deep sense of belonging and identity associated with the organization. This resulted in a high utilization of resources, a strong sense of identity, and all the same benefits that a "community" social network also offered. The organization acted as a facilitator to increase knowledge, access, and connections to services and people. See Chapter 7 for a more nuanced discussion about these types of networks.

The fourth type of social network design was an "isolated" social network. This network was the most difficult to locate. Families had a limited set of weak and strong ties and had a lot of fear regarding engaging in the community. The result of most isolated social network designs was that families accessed a very limited set of resources and services.

African American and Black Social Networks

African American or Black families who were interviewed had uniquely different patterns of social networks than Hispanic and Latino families. CM_037 referenced that much of this network was influenced by historical legacies of poverty and segregation. CM_037 ascertained that there is less "network vibrancy" within high poverty neighborhoods. In other words, "they essentially have less developed networks." When community members were asked to validate this finding, they all agreed. They denoted that much of this also has to do with "network hoarding," in which Black or African American families are less likely to share network resources.

This phenomenon, termed "defensive individualism," was coined by Sandra Susan Smith (2007) in her early book on employment and social networks in Chicago. She argues that Blacks and African Americans are afraid to share resources across their social networks usually out of

fear of their reputation being harmed or feeling that they might need the resource themselves later. African American and Black families interviewed for this research study revealed similar patterns. Grandmothers were hesitant to share early childhood resources either from a scarcity mindset ('if I refer others, I lose out') or based on not wanting to harm their reputation if the person they referred became problematic to the agency or service provider.

Several program managers said that disruptions to the social networks of African American and Black families were a barrier to them knowing about and accessing services. PM_008, a Black program manager said, "Black social networks are all out of whack." When asked to elaborate, she said that the criminal justice system, poverty, and community violence, resulted in many African American children being raised by a grandmother or another individual other than the parent. Most often it was a grandmother who was older than the other clients, and as a result did not connect socially and emotionally with other parents and families from the agency.

In some cases, it was a sibling or other family member who was helping raise the child, but they still struggled to build resilient social networks with "weak ties." FM_043 shared that her mother had died, and her dad had left the family. As the oldest sibling (at the time 17), she decided to gain legal emancipation from her abusive aunt and then when she turned 18, gain legal custody of her two younger siblings (14 and 11 at the time). She talked about the mistreatment from people at schools, doctor's offices, and other places who ignored her when she tried to seek help. This woman, now in her late 20s, had finally sent both siblings to college and had just had her own child. She spoke about the complexity around not connecting with others and having no family. The social isolation she experienced was only offset by the fact that

she belonged to a strong early childhood program who connected her with several services and a peer support group.

Most concerning regarding African American and Black social networks was the fact that they were being significantly disrupted by moves to Antelope Valley. With such a large increase in the number of Black and African American families relocating there, it seems that there are both "strong" and "weak" ties. Several families and program managers (PM_008; CM_013; GT_031; CM_037; GT_044) suggested that the largest concern for African American and Black families who moved to the Antelope Valley was the disruption to what were already small social networks. Additionally, there were very few organizations or services in the Antelope Valley to help facilitate new networks.

White Social Networks

For the small handful of white families who were interviewed for this study, the social network patterns were strong close ties, mainly family and friends, and strong organizational ties through various entities within the community. These organizational ties results in many 'weak" ties. These families experienced both the benefit of strong ties and weak ties. FM_001 talked about obtaining clothes, advice on government resources, and financial and emotional support from close family and friends. FM_001 also discussed membership in a local church which helped them learn about more resources in the community and provided social support.

Other Social Networks

Individuals from Korean, Chinese, and Polynesian families did not provide enough data or information to make any meaningful conclusion about nuances within their social network formation. However, many appeared to have strong family and organizational ties (church,

community center, school, etc.) which played an important role in knowing about and accessing services and resources.

Collective Efficacy

As discussed in Chapter 3, "collective efficacy" is a neighborhood-level phenomenon where a group of people, who do not necessarily share a close emotional or social connection, come together and (1) create a sense of community (collective) that includes (2) a feeling that a specific outcome or end can be improved by that community (efficacy) (Sampson, 2011). This research suggests that collective efficacy plays a foundational role in improving early childhood development outcomes at the neighborhood level.

Several individuals interviewed described the collective efficacy phenomenon in various ways. Many identified a set of loose social connections with neighbors and friends that were directed at helping children in the community be safe and succeed. Through their collective efficacy, these friends and neighbors facilitated an early childhood ecosystem—a neighborhood level effect in which individuals in a bound geographical area felt a keen interest in ensuring children could thrive. FM_021 described it as neighbors greeting them and engaging in "chit chat" frequently. They further suggested that because of these connections, the neighbors all watch out for each other by reporting crime or other things that might harm her and her children. She described it as neighbors, "look[ing] out for each other."

This phrase implies a community-level phenomenon in which individuals in a bounded, yet loosely defined geographical area feel and experience a combined, synergistic sense of efficacy to impact outcomes and events within their neighborhood. Fundamentally, the neighborhood believes that they can make their neighborhood safer. The mother identifies this

collective efficacy as a critical component of why she feels comfortable raising her child in this neighborhood.

However, in this study, collective efficacy was also manifested in how individuals referred to children. They were not just "kids in the neighborhood," they became *their* kids. As one mother put it (FM_023), "There was this sense that these are all *our* kids" referring to all the children in his son's childcare center. This parent saw the other children as her own. Her view became relational—focused on people—and not about the resources or services, a theme discussed in Chapter 7.

Parents noticed and appreciated when they experienced this relational approach from service providers. FM_021 explained her experience with collective efficacy as community members at the recreation center and local church knowing her and her kids, which helped her feel a part of the community and "homey." This sense of collective efficacy was found in all the neighborhoods investigated for this research. Families felt they were not just getting resources, rather, they were becoming part of a community that cared about their child's future. Program managers in these neighborhoods situated the development of collective efficacy in the forefront of their work. PM_044 mentioned that the success of their program occurred when mothers started inviting each other to baby showers. Deep down these parents and program managers developed a collective mindset that they could improve the lives of children.

Families who were interviewed in neighborhoods without a strong sense of collective efficacy revealed distinctly different experiences. When asked about the potential impact she could have on safety in her neighborhood, FM_032 responded that she would be totally lost on where to get help. These families were also less integrated in their communities and neighborhoods. Early childhood development outcomes in these areas were lower. These

neighborhoods also existed in both high and low-income zip codes, which suggests that collective efficacy might be a social process that is less connected with income than other social processes.

Organizational Facilitators

Organizational facilitators are addressed by the third research question. As such, they will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Micro Level

In this section, the barriers and facilitators are those which most directly influence the life of the child, including characteristics of the home and family environment. These micro-level forces are often experienced daily by children and families, which are often some of the most complex to address.

Barriers

Trauma

Individual and family trauma, meaning deeply distressing and disturbing experiences resulting in changed physiological responses, can have significant impacts on child health and wellbeing. Broadly, this occurs through toxic stress, in which the body's response to trauma becomes chronic and disrupts normal pathways for emotional and cognitive development (Shonkoff, 2015, 2021). For individuals, trauma presents a difficult challenge that often leads to issues of mental and emotional distress, but also intergenerational challenges that limit a person's ability to access resources.

PM_008 articulated that many parents or grandparents did not call it trauma, and instead called it “life.” They described that most caregivers do not understand the long-term impact of “life” on them or their children, resulting in intergenerational trauma. Program managers identified trauma as being the core issue for family dysfunction but seemed to do little to address it beyond providing resources. While program managers emphasized the complexity of dealing with trauma, many family members did not comprehend how to handle their own trauma. Both parties seemed at loss to know how to respond effectively and the interaction between the early childhood system, sub-systems, organizations and individuals created lots of tension and stress. Some of those interviewed suggested that to mitigate this challenge, they implemented “trauma informed” curriculum or processes. However, when asked to define or clarify what that meant, few were able to do so with clearly and practicality. In this sense, the early childhood system seemed fail to address a significant barrier. It has failed to find a reasonable solution, allowing trauma to continue to impact families. Trauma was a frequently mentioned theme that yielded more questions than answers in the minds of families and program managers.

Mental Health and Stigma

Parental mental and emotional health was a sensitive subject. It was frequently mentioned but parents and program managers never wanted to blame a child’s poor development on an issue that seemed beyond the parents’ control. Mental health significantly limited the quality and quantity of interactions between various individuals within the ecology of early childhood. It disrupts the family environment. It disrupts the individuals interactions with organizations and sub-systems as well. The data suggests that the mental and emotional health of parents is an important aspect of ensuring healthy and normal child development. An emotionally present parent engages more with a child and provides a more nurturing and stimulating environment.

Often an emotionally healthy parent is better equipped to navigate pursuing resources and services for their children (Cummings, 1994).

FM_032 was very open about the mental health difficulties she faced and how they inhibited her from being able to help her children. She mentioned that her depression led to her not attending health appointments for her or her baby, or not accessing available resources for child development. Several resources can help parents during times of mental and emotional distress. Like many resources within the early childhood ecosystem, these services are characterized by fragmentation, complex bureaucracies, and a lack of awareness. Despite these challenges, more can be done to help parents, especially as rates of depression and anxiety continue to rise globally.

Stigma and feelings of judgment regarding mental health were significant factors in some mothers not accessing resources when available. As mentioned in the section on racism and discrimination, feelings of stigma can impede childhood development either by the toxic stress it creates in a child's life which interrupts development, or in that it limits knowledge about or access to resources (Shonkoff, 2021). It seems that early childhood systems are often not equipped to handle this unique barrier. FM_042 explained her frustration about not being able to talk about some of her challenges, stating, "But then when you tell your family [about not feeling love for your child due to depression], they get critical, judging you and stuff, and they can say maybe more negative than positive things and they make you feel demoralized." This idea of stigma is also connected specifically with postpartum depression and other mental health concerns. FM_001 expressed that they feel this is a generational barrier, in that they are comfortable sharing parenting concerns, including mental health concerns with friends, but not with older family members such as a mother or a father.

Facilitators

Familial Motivation and Persistence

Familiar motivation and persistence have been linked with better childhood outcomes and access to services (Lareau, 2011). It is suggested that parents who are more insistent on receiving resources tend to find better access to them, resulting in more services of opportunities for their child. Both families and program managers articulated maternal and paternal motivation and persistence as a key facilitator for the early childhood ecosystem. Words used to describe these parents included “astute” and “persistent.” PM_034 explained, “I think that obviously every family that we work with is different. As you mentioned, some are easier to work with than others, whether that be ‘follow through’ or their drive versus lack of.” Families highlighted various ways in which they demonstrated motivation and persistence. For PM_010, it was a clear determination that the future should be different. FM_043 expressed her persistence as searching. When an individual or family was more prone towards persistence and motivation, it seems as if the early childhood system responded better to these individuals. A persistent interaction of an individual with an organization or sub-system generally leads to them getting the resources they needed while also blocking barriers. As mentioned previously, maternal, and paternal motivation is a sensitive subject. There are several confounding variables that need more exploration, but this was a key theme raised throughout this study.

Family Environment (Flexibility)

The last facilitator mentioned during the interview process was family flexibility. This manifested itself through various members of the family being “flexible” in how they managed various barriers or difficulties. This was best defined by FM_020 who mentioned raising a child

as “stressful” yet manageable because she had parents and a partner who were willing to take off work, adjust their schedules, or do other “flexible” things as needed. This flexibility provided individuals the ability to handle challenges and difficulties before they became more significant. The flexibility allowed families to manage challenges without becoming overwhelmed, especially emotionally. Flexibility is also an integral characteristic of organizations that meet family’s needs (see Chapter 7). It is a facilitating process that occurs across the macro, meso, and micro levels and aims to improve outcomes for children.

Conclusions

Families rarely experience only one of these barriers at a time. Often, the barriers build off each other and become additive. This interaction between various barriers or between individual and barriers created new or fundamentally unique barriers sometimes as well. All families, regardless of race or socio-economic status, face many of the challenges and barriers in this chapter (see Table 5). However, families hope to experience these challenges at a pace that will not overwhelm them and their capacity. Or they engaged with organizations and sub-systems that allow them to handle these challenges with greater ease. Extra income, flexibility, emotional health, and other facilitators across the macro, meso, and micro levels strive to prevent the feeling of being overwhelmed. These conditions also allow the early childhood system to be more responsive to individuals whose interactions include higher income, more persistence, and greater flexibility. Here the qualitative nature of interactions between agents and structures can dramatically change the outcomes one sees.

Table 5

Summary of Findings: Barriers and Constraints of the Early Childhood Ecosystem

Macro	
Barrier	***Facilitator***
Poverty	Expanding Policy Interest
Housing and Gentrification	Regulation and Professionalization
Pandemic	
Immigration	
Criminal Justice System	
South LA to Antelope Valley	
Regulation and Professionalization	
Meso-Community	
Barriers	***Facilitators***
Social Isolation	Social Networks
Neighborhood Environment, Safety and Transportation	Collective Efficacy
Meso-Organizational	
Barriers	***Facilitators***
Complicated Processes	Discussed in Chapter 7

Language and Literacy	
Costs	
Lack of Respect	
Fragmentation and Competition	
Accessibility and Information	
Discrimination and Racism	
Micro	
Barriers	***Facilitators***
Trauma	Familial Motivation and Persistence
Mental Health and Stigma	Family Environment (Flexibility)

For some families, the barriers become established structures that systematically make it difficult to access resources and services. While all families, low and high-income, must maneuver many of these barriers, high-income families use their income to prevent the barriers from becoming staggering. Without extra income, some low-income families rely on social networks and the capital that they contain to provide them a buffer against these barriers. However, early childhood service providers, organizations, systems, and ecosystems can also play an essential role. Chapter 7 will focus on understanding how these entities can operate to reduce the effects of various barriers and constraints.

Chapter 7: The Role of Early Childhood Systems in Mitigating Barriers and Facilitating Early Childhood Development | Findings for Research Question 3

This chapter answers the third research question: “What role can the early childhood system play in helping families navigate barriers and facilitators in the early childhood ecosystem?” It will provide an framework that was used to guide the analysis of the data related to the research question. The narrative then discusses an analysis of the data collected during the interviews.

Strategies for Reorienting Early Childhood Systems and Ecosystems

Traditional analyses of early childhood systems and early childhood outcomes often overlook the larger ecosystem in which the system operates. This oversight can lead to poor decision-making. For instance, while creating an extra program to help families might seem beneficial, when examined through an ecosystems lens, this program could contribute to the fragmentation of the early childhood system and diminish its effectiveness.

Shifting towards ecosystems requires a different set of analytical tools. For example, while most early childhood system designers are focused on concepts of efficiency and productivity, they often apply a short-term view tied to grant deadlines or political election cycles. However, when placed within an early childhood ecosystem, the emphasis becomes a life-course perspective, and this shift requires a new approach for funding, data procurement, and governance.

Additionally, prevailing child and family policy strategies allocate funds to address emergency issues—usually in inadequate amounts and often with burdensome requirements that lack flexibility to adapt to local context. This trend has led to a complex and challenging array of unscalable, and often niche, programs that struggle to meet the rapidly evolving and increasingly dynamic needs of families. Without a strategy for continuous innovation and improvement, even programs that were initially successful cam become entrenched in outmoded, unproductive, and unresponsive routines.

Given the limitations of a systems-based analytical framework, this chapter uses a framework developed by Neal Halfon with help from the dissertation's author, adapted for this work and referred to in this work as the framework for Transforming Early Childhood Ecosystems. This framework is made up of six different components or strategies that, when implemented together, provide insights into how to manage and transform early childhood ecosystems. These strategies are (1) governance and accountability, (2) financing, (3) data, (4) innovation and improvement, (5) human resources, and (6) programming. Below is a description of each strategy and how they are ecosystems focused.

- **Strategy 1 | Governance and Accountability |** ***Improved Governance for better Outcomes, and Accountability: Children's Shared Accountability Framework.*** By specifying key achievable outcomes and designating individuals and organizations who are accountable for delivering on those outcomes, this strategy aligns system transformation efforts at the national, state, and local levels and across health care, education, nutrition, family support and other public service sectors. By adopting an integrated outcome framework across federal and state children's offices and coordinating bodies, equity-based outcomes improvement efforts can be advanced via

budgets, strategies, metrics, and community-based learning. By using new tools like Kids Impact Assessments, Children's Budgets as well as dashboards and report cards, local communities can be empowered to align cross sector efforts, achieve common goals, create new incentives to effectively work together, advance more distributed and power shifting leadership, while also producing measurable new levels of accountability.

- **Strategy 2 | Finance |** ***A national investment in a 21st century infrastructure for success.*** Many well designed and successful innovations are currently unable to spread and scale due to limited financing options, administrative restrictions, and a lack of financial foresight and ingenuity. Ecosystems financing will use all the investment tools that the Federal government as well as state and local governments have at their disposable to strategically advance long-term funding of a national bridge from cradle to career. This will include leveraging the tools and strategies of the major funders of kid's services, like CMS, to shape state law as well as develop new alternative payment models to support effective child health and social service system innovations. However, that is not enough. Bold new approaches will be needed like creating a Kids Progress Administration at the Department of Treasury to anchor this long-term human capital investment strategy in the nation's strategic financial planning to develop innovative fiscal tools, and child-centered investment strategies that can be advanced over time.

- **Strategy 3 | Data |** ***"Cradle to Career" Population Outcomes Data, the information currency that communities can use to invest in their futures.*** Most other advanced democracies assure that their children, needs, and outcomes are visible, by creating

"cradle to career" data systems, effectively driving improvement, advancing outcomes, aligning sectors, and unifying approaches. By leveraging components of existing data systems, this new child-focused data systems infrastructure will provide the "nervous system" that will enable complex service and community systems to plan, learn, innovate, and improve. With children no longer invisible, their needs and equity concerns will not be easily negated. Following the adage that you manage what you measure, this new data infrastructure will enable higher levels of accountability for flourishing children, and equity from the start of life.

- **Strategy 4 | Innovation and Improvement |** ***Systematically improve services, systems, and environments by advancing a National Innovation and Learning Network of cities, counties, and states to drive breakthrough approaches and structural improvements.*** Catalyzing people-powered locally customizable solutions and meaningful collaborative innovation platforms will link cities and rural areas together, enabling them to co-learn and innovate rapidly and effectively. The time is right to generalize and rapidly advance this local impulse for city-led innovation and improvement, spreading and scaling approaches to innovation across the nation, using new networked learning and innovation processes to produce measurable gains.

- **Strategy 5 | Human Resources |** ***Build a diverse workforce who are adequately compensated and professionalized but also have the right skills to make early childhood a relational experience for everyone.*** People are what make an early childhood ecosystem. Building a workforce that is qualified and professionalized is a

critical aspect of ensuring children flourish. Aspects of this workforce include fair compensation that respects the reality of the impact that these professionals have on children, families, and communities. It also includes building a pipeline from the communities' children are coming from to ensure diversity of the workforce. This workforce also needs to recognize that much of this work is based on the relationships you foster with children, families, and the community.

- **Strategy 6 | Programing |** ***Create adaptive and flexible evidence-based programing that meets the needs for families and allows for continuous innovation.*** Closely tied with innovation is the need to ensure that the programs that are created are synergistic with each other, adaptive to changing contexts and ecosystems, and flexible to meet the variations of children and families. These programs need to be relational in their approach and rooted in improvement science which will allow for program implementation alongside rapid iteration. Additionally, evidence-based programs are critical to ensuring that best practices are implemented.

Table 6 highlights how each of these strategies compares to old paradigms of thinking about each of these issues:

Table 6

Old and New Paradigms to Systems and Ecosystems Management

Component	**Old/Current Paradigm**	**Transforming Early Childhood Ecosystems**
Governance and Accountability	No framework to set goals, guide investments, measure success and ensure accountability within and	Common equity-based national outcomes framework. Coordinating bodies at the local, state, and national

	across sectors. Separate, siloed and piecemeal strategies are the norm.	levels that align sectors and cut across silos.
Finance	Lack of funding for well-designed and successful innovations limit scalability. Lack of consistent funding for whole-child approaches incentivize siloed efforts and unproductive cross-sector competition. Short-term thinking approaches to return on investment leads to quickly changing efforts that never gain traction. No national investment strategy means no one is tasked with assuring optimal human capital development.	Long-term financing focused on incentivizing collaborative, whole-child systems improvement efforts. Innovation within health insurance, schooling, childcare, and other systems that focus on alternative payment models. Adapting and using fiscal tools from other sectors and capital markets to creatively advance funding opportunities, and continually innovate financing and investment strategies. Engaging local, state, and national fiscal entities in guiding and marshalling resources for sustainable long-term human capital infrastructure investment.
Data	Children are largely invisible, especially at the local level. Lacking early warning systems and the capacity to measure, monitoring and recognizing adverse trends until they are well entrenched and damaging occurs. Data follows funding and does not follow children making it difficult to know if we are on the right track.	Building on data collection systems already used in other countries, adopting, and implementing 21st-century measures for achieving wellbeing from cradle to career, focused on identifying where interventions are needed across the child's lifespan. This data becomes the basis to plan, learn, innovate, and improve to ensure all children adapt, advance, and thrive. This data also enables communities to drive their own decision-making and planning, monitoring progress and continuously learning, innovating, and improving on what they can offer.
Innovation and Improvement	Innovation is ad hoc, not strategic, not scalable, and not sustainable at the local level. The ingenuity and desire of local communities to improve the lives of their kids is unrealized.	State, county, and city level innovations are amplified, improved, and strategically shared across a learning network that is designed to enable effective programs to be shared and scaled rapidly. Building momentum, advancing a new narrative of hope and success.
Human Resources	Workforce is underpaid and lacks consistent professionalization across careers. Workforce is siloed by profession and lacks communication across various child serving entities. Regulation and credentialling is inconsistent. Employees view the work as	Using funds in creative ways, the workforce is fairly compensated for the work they do. They are given opportunities to advance in their knowledge and skills. They come highly trained and credentialed with diversity employment pipelines created to help ensure the workforce

	providing a service, rather than building meaningful relationships.	is equity-driven and inclusive. The workforce understands that purpose behind the work is fundamentally about cultivating relationships with children, families, and communities.
Programming	Outdated and often lacks a strong evidence-base. Driven by business interests, creating lots of programs that do not support or build off each other. Established programs at federal, state, and local levels are high levels of bureaucracy which comes with ridged rules and process standards that lack flexibility for context and families. Same programs exist for several years with little change to match changing contexts and environments.	Programs are evidence-based and focused on innovative practices that are adaptable to the child's needs and context. Innovation and rapid-cycle improvement are implemented to help improve the quality of the programs over time. Programs are relationally based and include trauma-informed approaches. Programs are synergistic in that they coordinate with and build off each other.

The rest of this chapter uses data from interviews and observations to understand if there is evidence of these ecosystem strategies being implemented and if so, their perceived impact. Those interviewed were asked to provide insights about why children within that area were thriving. It was hypothesized that strong evidence of these strategies in practice will be found in areas of positive deviance for early childhood outcomes. This hypothesis proved to be true. The evidence from the data contends that the early childhood system within the early childhood ecosystem of Los Angeles are indeed alleviating barriers while also facilitating stronger childhood outcomes.

There were four programs or organizations that represented different, yet similar early childhood systems that were having profound impacts on the broader ecosystem for families as measured by positive deviance with the EDI (See Chapter 4 for details). While these organizations will not be named to protect the confidentiality of those participating in this research, these organizations each provide deep insights into what works and does not work.

An Effective System

Governance and Accountability

The following are aspects of governance and accountability that were identified by parents and program managers as critical to successful systems; meaning, they shape the ecosystem in a positive way, leading to better early childhood outcomes.

Committed and Visionary Leadership

FM_023 identified "trust in leadership" and "commitment to the community" as the two primary factors in the success of their early childhood system. FM_023 highlighted an organizational culture of humility, service to families, and vision that "trickles down" to staff and informs the way an organization recruited and managed day-to-day operations. This organizational culture combined with visionary leadership was often referred to as "the secret sauce" to how their unique systems are meeting the needs of the population they are serving. FM_023 denoted strong leaders helped parents feel engaged and included they also commented that this same culture perpetuates the staff and employee culture. This sense of comradery between staff and parents also leads to parents befriending other parents. FM_023 described the connection between parents as being "organic." This type of governance was often referred to as "organic" or "natural" rather than forced or structured. This parent's distinction implies that "organic" approaches to unity, trust, and community would be preferred to manufactured experiences. The challenge become facilitating these organic connections while still maintaining accountability, which often requires a strong leader.

At all four locations there was a visionary leader at the head of the organization/system who set an "organic" or "natural" culture while still maintaining a high standard of "excellence"

or “quality.” In each case, this individual had decades of experience in early childhood or public health service. These individuals were held in high regard by outside community members, families, staff, and policymakers. When ground truthing this section, one community official (CM_025) commented, “Of course, those are the four organizations, they are all run by dynamic leaders.” Additionally, three of the organizations had preschool directors who were trusted and dynamic leaders. These leaders regularly interacted with the children and families and assisted in classrooms. These dynamic leaders facilitated two key processes through their interactions:

- Helping families feel like they belonged (See “Organizational Identity” in Chapter 6). This organizational identity was found in every family interviewed who belonged to these organizations. In each case, leaders saw it as their role to help build institutional trust and identity which helped create a community. Parents often used phrases like, “I am a [insert organization/preschool name] family.” This powerful sense of identity created a deeper sense of cultural capital for these families as well as collective efficacy. These connections facilitated “weak ties” between parents and staff. One leader commented that she viewed the organization “like a Church” that historically brought individuals together from multiple backgrounds and helped integrate and foster community.
- Helping families navigate complex bureaucracies and build social capital. When one mother (FM_018) was asked about the ease of accessing resources, she emphasized the leader from her organization as the main facilitator. These resources included receiving pamphlets about healthy eating, free diapers, meals, and other services. In most cases, these leaders went beyond the services they provided and helped families access services in the entire ecosystem, such as medical care or restraining orders. While middle and upper-middle-class individuals often have organizations they belong to (PTAs, churches,

etc.), in these organizations they navigated bureaucracies. However, for low-income families, it often was these organizations who helped families navigate the larger ecosystem (Lareau, 2011). These organizations helped build the social capital that families needed to support their children in reaching their potential (Klinenberg, 2018; Small, 2009).

Organizational Identity and Institutional Structure

Strong governance and accountability created confidence and trust between families and the organization. As one mother (FM_019) said, "I felt like [this location] was a second home to me. I feel like if my kid feels that way, it would be nice." When speaking of her experience with her community early childhood center, PM_028 shared similar sentiments of a "second home" and d noted that even when she grew up and moved away, she often came back to the organization obtain support. Families often were not looking for a place to get services. Rather, they were looking for somewhere that filled deeper emotional and social needs such as "belonging" or "home." The Nurturing Care Framework refers to this as "nurturing care" which is a key element in developing secure attachment and other crucial aspects of socio-emotional development.

For middle-class families, this organizational attachment and feeling of identity are common within their ecosystems (Lareau, 2011). Churches, sports teams, PTAs, and other organizations provide much of this social networking, community, and other aspects related to belonging and fulfillment. However, for low-income families, these early childhood institutions filled this role. PM_010 poignantly stated, "Kids belong to families, and families belong to the community." It is not enough to assume that taking care of children and their families is

sufficient. Families are part of a wider socio-ecological system which includes the need for belonging within their community for their family to thrive.

Adaptable and Flexible

Within leadership and governance, adaptability and flexibility manifested themselves through a leadership team or individual who targeted parents' needs. Even when context rapidly changed, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, these leaders did not administer programs within a structured bureaucracy. Instead, their leadership extended into the ecosystem, and by design, was flexible to meet the needs of families. As one program administrator (CM_011) described, “I had support from those above me to be flexible and do what I needed to do.” The result of this culture was that staff themselves wanted to become more flexible in how they did their jobs. In some cases, it included teaching additional courses, or in other cases, connecting families to resources beyond what they were expected to do (PM_023). Some organizations expanded this process of flexibility and adaptability into their evaluation process and ongoing organizational development. PM_008 recalled that each year, she would gather parents together to learn about their needs and dialogue about how they could adjust programming based on their concerns. This flexibility led to innovation in a rapidly changing ecosystem.

Continuous Community Presence and Accessibility

The analysis of the data for this research suggested that for low-income communities, locations, and institutions matter. Physical locations serve as an anchor to facilitate and enable social connection (Klinenberg, 2018; Small, 2009), which is necessary for building a sense of community and collective capacity. Early childhood center, family resource centers, and

preschools are unique places where this community can be created. Often, schools are seen as community institutions. However, as GT_044 pointed out, “Even at LAUSD you cannot go inside without permission.” Ironically, with an increase in safety at schools, we have also traded a sense of community and belonging that public schools used to create. Locked gates and doors do not always lend themselves to feelings of welcome and inclusion. Schools do not engender a sense of belonging for families and within the community, as they have largely become lockdown facilities. Thus, other spaces are needed to fulfill this role.

PM_026 discussed how their center tries to be part of the community by attending neighborhood functions, council, and community events. PM_028 and PM_029 talked about people feeling safe enough to just knock on their door when they needed help. They see this part of their work as “the “X” factor… that we're this reliable thing that's always in [the community], in times of need.” Even newer organizations that were seeing success found ways to be a presence in the community. PM_008, who oversees a system that has only been in place for a few years, highlighted that they attended many events in the community, networked through churches and other organizations, and focused on hiring staff from the community.

Community-based Accountability and Governance

A central feature of governance in all four locations was some form of community or parent-based accountability and governance. While this did not replace organizational leadership, it was a shared form of accountability and governance. This model was directly aligned with parents’ policy councils which were the trademark of Head Start programs (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992).

In the Los Angeles context, this was done in several ways. In the case of PM_049, her organization required that anyone hired at their center needed to have at least one interview with

the parents' advisory group who had to agree to their hire. Additionally, the parents' council met monthly to provide guidance and direction for center decisions. PM_027 made sure to hire staff who were parents in the area or who had been parents so that they could keep the organization "accountable" to the local community. PM_008 described including parents in forums, improvement conversations, and planning. However, she also asserted that this required building a strong sense of trust and transparency to make it effective. As mentioned in the *Nurturing Care Handbook*:

> In situations where people face many social disadvantages, stress, and insecurity, it is tempting to see only problems to be fixed. But all communities have hidden strengths, networks, and sources of resilience that can be found and built on. Taking a respectful and fully participatory approach empowers participants to be more active in shaping and contributing to interventions. (WHO & UNICEF, 2021d, p. 21)

The WHO and UNICEF have identified community participation as a central component of successful early childhood systems. Leadership at each of these organizations said that for any entity to thrive and effectively meet the needs of the complex ecosystem of their communities, they needed regular and frequent parent accountability and governance.

Tangible Theory of Change

Strong governance and accountability included a tangible theory of change that was actively being pursued. A vision or mission statement was inadequate. These organizations needed a roadmap of how to achieve their vision. The theories of change were sometimes written or could easily be recited and articulated (PM_008). However, others were more informal (PM_049). When referencing a site that used to play a significant role in changing the community (not one

of the four selected for this research), PM_005 said that over time the organization lost its way and what had been a clear theory of change became, "very hard for people to understand." PM_036 argued that having a "concrete" theory of change that is visible and familiar matters. When analyzing the theories of change of these organizations, there were two commonalities: (1) a focus on larger ecosystem impacts (neighborhood), and (2) on building partnerships and networking services.

Strong Partnerships and Shared Governance and Accountability

Strong partnership as well as shared governance and accountability were found at each site. Partnerships varied by location; however, the strongest organizations tended to include: (1) schools, (2) hospitals and health clinics, (3) families, (4) holistic service sector partners, (5) county and city governments. Strong school relationships were a natural and convenient place for children to access resources. However, as one mental health provider (PM_002) explained, school-based programs are also limited by the hours of operation, including holidays. PM_002 fields phone calls from parents and children during holidays because she knows that they have nowhere else to turn. While school partnerships are important, it was also noted that the organizations had to work to maintain these relationships with the schools, rather than the schools reaching out to them.

Two of the four organizations that were observed had close relationships with hospitals or health clinics. PM_008 and PM_049 both articulate that these were critical partnerships for effective ecosystems-level work. When asked why, they suggested that most families pass through the healthcare system at some point and so it is an important partnership. Ultimately, most families *enter* the early childhood ecosystem through the healthcare system when a mother

becomes pregnant, or the child is born. Families are vital to both governance and accountability. Ultimately, they help the system understand needs responsive to addressing parents' concerns and observations (PM_035).

Additionally, all four sites that were observed as having ecosystem impact had extensive and well-established holistic service sector partnerships and programs. In each case, they provided services across the Nurturing Care Framework including early learning, nutrition, healthcare, safety and security, and nurturing care. While the specific partners and service partners depended on the location, the types of services were very similar.

Lastly, each site had very close relationships and partnerships with city and county officials. While some relationships were political in nature, in most cases, it was a fiscal connection. These relationships with government officials provided steady funding, credibility, and opportunities. PM_008 delineated that she was approached by the county to take her work into the Antelope Valley because they trusted what she was doing and were familiar with it. Whether it was with parents, government officials, or other stakeholders, partnerships provided not only the sharing of resources but also elements of accountability and governance that would be impossible by a singular entity. It also connected the organization to the larger ecosystem.

Financing and Financing Model

Shifting from a systems-focus to ecosystems-focus requires different financing models. Sampson (2012) notes, “Properly done, intervening at the community level is not only feasible but more cost-effective in the long run than targeting individuals” (p. 424). The analysis of the data from this research suggests that organizations that were having an ecosystem impact were able to do so because their funding was sustainable and adaptable.

Sustainability and Core Operating Funding

All the research sites investigated had a significant amount of stable and consistent core funding. PM_015 explained that the early childhood space is no longer "a cottage industry" instead it is "big business." PM_015 further explained, "[We] don't have to beg each year for funding" which frees them up to focus on the work. PM_044 relied mostly on a combination of two federal programs which provided consistent money to operate effectively. This money was so stable that it had become practically hard money after several decades of investment. When observing a phone call that was supposed to be a check-in regarding one of the grants, the representative of the federal government said, "Oh, your money will be renewed, no need to ask any questions." The other two organizations received stable core funding through other types of long-term government grants.

While many of these sites received some form of philanthropic funds, those fiscal allocations never represented core operating dollars. Fiscal sustainability at every site was a result of government funding. As PM_015 said, "We have been able to do this by taking philanthropic money and then turning it into public dollars." PM_036 explained that they worked hard to secure one significant government grant, at which point, they were able to spend less time on fundraising for small grants and they could resume focus on their work. These organizations had a strong reputation as successful and trusted fiscal agents. As such, their funding and reputation brought in additional financial returns. Three of the four organizations observed mentioned that it was common for them to receive calls from local businesses or other donors wanting to provide more funding. This furthered their ability to be flexible and adaptable.

Adaptable and Flexible

While having core money is important, this can often come with significant administrative burdens which make flexibility difficult. As PM_027 contextualizes, “state funding has all these requirements, which does not allow us to do the program the way we believe.” However, fiscal flexibility was necessary to better meet families’ needs. Because of this tension, organizations either (1) focused on administering the program as is, or (2) found additional, more flexible financing to complement these programs and better adjust to a rapidly changing ecosystem.

Program managers, government officials, and community members referred to this as “braiding” or “blending” funds. Braiding and blending allowed for the most amount of flexibility. As PM_023 explained, when they wanted to expand a program to a new population not covered in the original outline of funds, they simply went and found a grant that would support that expansion. Within these areas of positive deviance, organizations used business acumen to legally, yet creatively, combine different types of funding to reach a larger portion of children within their ecosystem.

The pandemic provided unique insight into what could be done if additional restrictions were lifted on funding. PM_008, PM_15, CM_25, PM_028, PM_029, and PM_044 explained that during the pandemic, many philanthropies and government entities removed restrictions and reporting requirements on funds to best meet the needs of clients and families. Each person said that they felt they were able to do more and accomplish more as a result. While fiscal auditing is important, the pandemic demonstrated aspects of what is possible when requirements are loosened, extending evidence towards better approaches.

Data

Data was the least talked about strategy of the Transforming Early Childhood Ecosystems framework. When it was mentioned, it was within three contexts. First, PM_044 focused on collecting data to fill out reports. This data was process-based, not outcome-based, and provided very few insights beyond services being delivered. Second, PM_008 spoke frequently of their use of data to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. This data was also process-based and combined with parent feedback. Third, PM_034, PM_035, and PM_036 all discussed a unique data infrastructure that was used as an organizational backbone to keep track of cases and help partners share information to best meet client needs.

In this case, data sharing was the foundation of the system and what tied all the partners together. Thirty-nine organizations each had a common intake form and system. As the client's needs were put into the system, other organizations were alerted about high-risk families, and a "backbone" organization navigator would then help families obtain the needed resources. For most organizations, the data regarding the outcomes of families and children was largely provided through government reports or community assessments. No organization had any data system that was complex enough to understand the early childhood ecosystem holistically or report meaningfully about the outcomes of their program. Few used any quantitative data to make choices about programming. Most organizations relied on qualitative data (parent feedback) to determine how best to serve families.

Innovation and Improvement

Innovation and improvement within organizations centered on addressing family needs or ecosystem changes. Organizations either searched for new approaches to address an existing

problem or when a new issue arose, they looked for innovations responsive to these needs. The process of innovation required connections and partnerships which facilitated creativity and innovation very similar to the strength of weak ties at an organizational level. When combined, these processes of innovation and improvement created a more responsive organization to address rapidly changing ecosystem needs.

Responses to Family and Community Need

Responsiveness to changing family needs or ecosystem changes required continual innovation. PM_035 articulated their approach as listening to families and adding programs or resources to meet their changing and growing needs. PM_028 and PM_029 took this idea of responsiveness a step further saying that sustainability requires this adaptability and responsiveness, suggesting "we need to continue to evolve and grow and I think just be smarter [and] savvier." PM_028 and PM_029 also described their position as fragile. While they play a key role, have significant funding, and a strong reputation, they are also acutely aware that they cannot take those organizational assets for granted. They must continually improve to adjust to the ever-changing ecosystem of children's lives in Los Angeles.

Networks and Partnerships

Innovation at these sites was motivated by partnerships with "experts" or "other organizations" to find new ideas as needs emerged. Like the strength of weak ties for families, organizations that had partnerships with a broader network found more innovations faster. PM_044 mentioned on four separate occasions that their relationship with a university partner was a unique asset that facilitated innovation. She spoke about being "up to date" with the latest research through this

partnership. PM_029 said that they were "bringing experts from the outside to help us level up." PM_008 and PM_035 both mentioned relying on a network of partners as their key source for innovation. As PM_035 said, "So, we bring our partners together, twice a year just to get their feedback based on what we get from our evaluation and what we hear from families, I feel that [we do] a great job in that area." Regardless of the source, both having a network of individuals to learn from partnerships with "experts" played an important role in helping organizations address unexpected and often complex challenges that the early childhood ecosystem faced.

Human Resources

Ecosystem transformation requires the right people. As an organizational researcher suggested, "first who then what" (Collins, 2001). The right people can help navigate the complexity of an ever-changing ecosystem. Investments in the "right people" was at the center of each site that was interrogated for this research.

Employee Satisfaction and Organizational Culture

PM_030 and PM_044 both articulated an often overlooked, but critical facilitator for families—the employees. PM_030 said that passionate employees who "go out of their way" to support families is at the crux of successful organizations. Parents feel at home in these places. PM_049 also discussed that when trying to access government services within early childhood, who you get on the other side of the phone can dramatically change what resources the child might receive. Investing in employees and ensuring their satisfaction can have significant impacts on outcomes for families. Prioritizing fair compensation also helps recruit more

qualified individuals. PM_044 describes that as a director, they spent considerable time finding ways to recruit, retain, motivate, and empower staff.

At all the research sites, employees were also aware that they belonged somewhere unique. Just like an organizational identity for families, employees also adopted an organizational identity that became meaningful to them (PM_009; PM_010; PM_028; GT_044). The combination of employee satisfaction, with organizational values and culture helped employees engage with families in a highly respectful and productive way. The systems that tend to perform better each had employees who felt that the organization was invested in them. As PM_034 suggested, employee satisfaction resulted in better care for clients and families. This also led to employees who were willing to stay late, work longer hours, and work hard to find creative solutions for families.

Investment in Employees

Closely related to satisfaction was investing in employees. Often the investment was in the form of professionalization. This included additional training, workshops, and skill development for teachers, social workers, or other staff. In several cases, (PM_009; PM_010; PM_022; PM_042, GT_044), organizations-built employee development into their organizational culture, wherein a parent could gain more education to become a classroom assistant, teacher, social worker, or another type of high-skilled employee. In one case (PM_027), they partnered with a university to provide education and credits for parents seeking higher degrees (PM_042). Multiple mothers reported stories of first being a client and then becoming staff as they developed additional skills.

This investment had a significant impact on employees feeling that the organization invested in them. Employees used words such as “fun” and “trust” (FM_023); “safe” and “appreciated” (PM_049); “connected” (PM_009); as well as “growth” and “supported”

(PM_034). PM_028 echoed this when they described why they have stayed at their organization for so long, affirming “So it definitely has been growth within me personally.” This sense of investment, especially in parents from the community that is being served helped these organizations make ecosystems-level changes.

Programming

The final section of this chapter examines how the various research sites used programming to impact ecosystems-level change. An organization or agency is largely defined by the programs it runs. Whether they are preschool services or pediatric healthcare services, programs are the operating system.

Relational based

Relationally based programming, as compared to transactionally based programming, was a key distinction frequently made by those interviewed. The relationally based program included a focus on building relationships with families and then being empathetic and responsive to their needs. A relationally based program had people within the early childhood system to guide families navigating its complexity. These “navigators” took on various forms but were central to the organizational design for those systems which impacted the ecosystem in a positive way. As mentioned in the conceptual model in chapter 3, the relational approach, allows the system to be more responsive to family needs in the moment and thus help block barriers and facilitate enablers more effectively as it knows the families better.

Empathetic and Responsive by Design

Several of those interviewed at the research sites emphasized their programs were designed to be patient, understanding, and empathetic. CM_011 summarized it best when they said, "people need to feel cared for. They need to feel that someone has empathy for them and what they are going through. People need to be loved. If you just get a service and you don't have the care that goes with that service, it's kind of a cold kind of thing." Hiring people from the community, blending and braiding funding streams, and providing quality location-based services within the neighborhood are a few of the ways in which these agencies attempted to make the services as empathetic and responsible to families' needs.

Some families used the concept of "second home" to describe this empathetic and loving environment (FM_019; PM_028). Families were not searching for a place to only receive help. For many, it was about safety, security, validation, and empathy— the same emotional response a "home" might create. PM_009 said, "So I think that is a big factor too, feeling welcomed, feeling valued. We see them not only as a client, as a number in our files, but as a person, as family." PM_027 extended this by using words such as "extension of your family" or "there's a heart that opens up when people come here."

These systems and organizations provided emotional support and validation for parents. PM_007, FM_003, FM_001, and FM_016 all described various ways this happens including not feeling judged, feeling validated, being educated, or just feeling like you have support. PM_008 relied on a combination of technology and human interaction to better serve families. This relational integration with technology was an important innovation that overcame issues with fragmentation, while still enabling empathy and connection. The technology connected thirty-nine different partner organizations to each other through a data system. They complimented this

data system with navigators and support groups because they saw a need for mothers and grandmothers to feel like they belonged.

Navigators and Home Visitors

In *Unequal Childhoods*, Lareau (2011) makes the argument that middle and upper-class families embed different cultural patterns of communication than lower and lower-middle-income families. Lareau highlights the example of young people interacting with doctors at offices. While children from upper-middle and middle-income families tended to ask doctors questions, engage with them, and almost treat them as equals, children from lower-income families tended to be more compliant, respect the authority of the doctor, and ask fewer questions. This research revealed a similar pattern; low-income families fundamentally engaged with the early childhood system differently than those from upper-income families.

Upper-income families seemed more able to navigate the system, understand bureaucracies, and advocate for themselves (FM_001). They knew that they could push back on the system, and they frequently did. Lower-income families were often more reserved and compliant.

The sites that were investigated for this research designed processes to help families navigate the system. As PM_034 explained, “I think as they have someone to really hold their hand and walk them through each one of our service domains, I think that’s definitely helped our families feel more comfortable with coming…and really taking advantage of all our services.” When asked what makes a successful program, PM_034 said, “navigator, navigator, navigator.”

For families, this was a critical part of keeping up with their child’s needs. FM_003 emphasized, “my little clinic…does a really good job at calling me and keeping track of what days to go and stuff like that.” Later in the interview, she specifically mentioned a caseworker

from the clinic being the one to guide her through the process. FM_018 said, “they will help guide me where I can go” to describe this same concept of navigating the complex ecosystem. FM_018 asserted that having a navigator was not enough, they needed them to be someone who was “easy to get into contact with.”

Like navigators, home visits were also important for effective programing. Home visiting programs were used at all sites to supplement main programs and services. In each case, parents mentioned this home visitor as an important aspect of gaining access to resources. At times, this took the form of a social worker-type individual or navigator who actively worked with families and engaged in the bureaucracy on their behalf. In other cases, it was home visitors who provided encouragement and emotional support.

Multi-Generational and Parental Involvement

Several of those interviewed suggested that it was necessary to focus on the entire family. In some cases (PM_007; PM_023; PM_033) the approach was tri-generational, including the child, parents, and grandparents. As PM_010 explained, “I learned the key is not the kids, the key is the parents.” PM_014 described it similarly noting, “So… by working with parents directly we will impact children.” Organizations recognized that much of child development occurs in the home of the child, so if you can improve the family condition holistically, then you can improve overall outcomes for the child. The program that works to provide caregiver support alongside children support appeared to have a stronger impact.

For parents, it was networking, a sense of community, and a feeling of validation that helped them become better parents. This is important from a programmatic and policy standpoint—programs should target the whole family to become more effective. As PM_007

admits, “Our intention from our program, behind the scenes, it's mostly for [parents] to get that networking, the socialization, the attachment not really for the child itself. But with adults and children, both in a social context.”

FM_042 highlights this well. While she came in only using resources, she was quickly asked to help facilitate a social support group. She was also asked to sit-in her Head Start Policy Council. This investment helped her develop an organizational identity and learn more about the services and resources available, nourishing her desire to give back by reaching out to other mothers and investing in them through mentorship. This also demonstrates the groundwork of collective efficacy playing out as well as the strength of weak ties.

Early childhood ecosystems transformation includes programs that focus on building the skills of the whole family. It is not just about an extra pair of hands in the classroom. Rather, it is about extending the impact of the program into the homes of the children. PM_012 described how they used surveys, assessments, and home visits to tailor the help the center provides to parents. Parenting is stressful. For middle and high-income families, parents often have the tools and resources to get the help and support needed to mitigate stress and learn how to parent effectively. PM_007 explained that the rising cost of necessities caused increased stress on families; therefore, parents need more help than ever. By taking a multi-generational approach and focusing on the whole family, organizations and agencies can begin to shape not only what happens within their own walls, but also what happens in the entire ecosystem.

Co-Location of Multiple Services

Co-location of resources was a key facilitator that is embedded in all the sites that were investigated. Whether that co-location happens digitally or in a physical environment, the idea of

multiple resources being available to families in a centralized location was important to parents (FM_023). PM_026 mentioned that they must bring resources on site to be successful, otherwise the handoff is rarely effective. To use a business analogy, these organizations used a customer-centric model, in which the customer and their needs drive the business model rather than the product. Within early childhood services, the models that often work best for families are those that provide multiple resources to meet the plethora of families' needs.

By bringing resources to a centralized location, it made follow-up earlier. Parents were more likely to use the resources than if they were given a referral. Combining multiple resources also recognizes the complexity of an ecosystem that families live in. Preschool alone is good, but families also often need food, housing, and other resources. Programs that saw families through an ecosystem's lens, provided a more holistic repertoire of supports which was viewed positively by families.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter presented and discussed evidence found on basis of the research suggesting that within early childhood ecosystem, there are systems or organizations that are reorienting the early childhood ecosystem to better serve families. The result is population-level improvements in early childhood outcomes. At each site, the system or organization was working on behalf of families to better orient and navigate the complex adaptive ecosystem in which low-income families exist. When done well, it can buffer and facilitate various components of the ecosystem for children and families rather than just providing resources.

Parker, Van Alstyne, and Choudary (2016) suggested that systems must make this shift from a pipeline, transactional model to an ecosystem model. They further argue that

organizations or systems within that ecosystem can orchestrate the ecosystem—moving beyond delivering a pipeline of services. However, this requires a new focus on governance and accountability, financing, data, innovation and improvement, human resources, and programing.

When these components and there subprocesses (visionary leadership, relational approaches, investment in parents, etc.) come together, they help families develop social networks and organizational identity as well as trust and a sense of belonging. They are also provided knowledge and tools needed to be more effective parents and community members. These identities, skills, and attitudes eventually develop into collective efficacy within the community.

As implied by structuration theory, meso-level organizations and the early childhood system become actors to help families navigate the complex social structures that exist within their ecosystem. Adaptability and flexibility as design components of these systems and organizations enable the system to adjust to the rapidly changing and unpredictable ecosystem. These design components also allow families to maintain trust and collective efficacy as the ecosystem shifts. Ultimately, they help families overcome structural barriers including fragmentation and siloed services to ensure that families can get the services they need.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

Summary and Discussion

Macro, meso, and micro level forces that shape child development make Los Angeles an ever-increasing complex ecosystem. The result of this ecosystem is an array of *childhoods*, in which a family's socioeconomic status dramatically shapes early childhood outcomes. Individuals, institutions, organizations, sub-systems and the early childhood system itself, along with the resulting interactions amongst these various components, have been created and formed in an attempt to help families navigate these inequalities. However, this early childhood system within Los Angeles has been marred by fragmentation, silos, inconsistent funding, and other challenges that diminish their effectiveness.

In many ways, Los Angeles is falling short of helping all children thrive. Some of this is driven by historical trends and path dependencies. Much of this is simply due to processes of othering and belonging in which structures and agents interact with each other to produce lasting disparities, and patterns of inequalities in Los Angeles. Most attempts to intervene have been stymied by traditional systems thinking, which often fails to account for how structures and agents that comprise the entire ecosystem are operating for or against children and families in patterned ways. It has also failed to account for ecosystem processes, values, and assumptions.

Using an ecosystem lens, several barriers which families face within the early childhood ecosystems of Los Angeles were identified. Despite many of these barriers, there were also several facilitators that were operating within the same contexts. Using an ecosystems transformation framework of governance and accountability, financing, data, innovation and improvement, human resources, and programming, data collected from four research sites helped

to reveal several key characteristics, from visionary leadership to relational programming, which can help mitigate barriers and enable facilitators in the lives of families. The use of an ecosystem-level analysis for this research has been shown to be beneficial, demonstrating new approaches and insights to problems that have challenged early childhood systems for decades.

Understanding Ecosystems

Ecosystems are complex and it can feel like they are impossible to understand or influence in any meaningful way. However, new tools and frameworks are being developed to address these issues. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to go into depth about various tools and their use, below is a brief discussion on how some of these analytics emerged throughout this research. This analysis also extends possible directions for further research.

Polycentric Governance: Polycentric governance connotes, "a complex form of governance with multiple centers of decision making, each of which operates with some degree of autonomy" (Carlisle & Gruby, 2019, p. 928). Polycentric governance allows organizations or groups to strike the balance between centralized and fully decentralized governance structures. They also can effectively allow for community-based decision-making.

By definition, a collection of actors sharing decision-making is not polycentric. Carlisle and Gruby (2019) clarify that polycentric governance implies, "the decision-making centers take each other into account in competitive and cooperative relationships and are capable of resolving conflicts" (p. 928). The reason polycentric governance works within complex systems is that (1) they are loosely structured which allows for better adaptation, (2) the wide range of actors who can be involved allows them to fit into a complex system better, and (3) they "mitigate the risk of

institutional failure and resource losses on account of their redundant teams of decision makers…or redundant institutions" (p. 929). The siloed and fragmented state of many early childhood ecosystems would benefit from polycentric governance models, in which everything from education to nutrition can be regulated in a way that produces the optimal child well-being outcomes.

In each of the sites investigated for this study, there was evidence that while they had a strong visionary leader, there were still efforts to create shared governance with partners and other stakeholders. They were not making decisions on behalf of all their partners, rather they used their vision and leadership to bring stakeholders together within a shared governance framework. In only one case was this framework explicit. In other cases, it operated behind the scenes.

Networked Learning, Innovation, and Discovery: Networked learning communities are intended to "foster the development of…innovative knowledge…by linking…groups to their counterparts…and by facilitating the action of key enablers of learning communities for knowledge creation and sharing" (Katz & Earl, 2010, p. 29). When network learning communities function well, individuals share information and takeaways with the broader community who can use those ideas for their own needs. This "uploading" and "downloading" of information to and from the network is the core function of a learning network.

However, actors within that network also have a special role in creating new knowledge through this process. As has been described, "Individuals are the connectors…to networks…through active participation and through the construction of [knowledge] that serve as the link between the network…with a two-way flow" (pg. 29) In the case of the early

childhood system and ecosystem, it is almost impossible for any individual actor to be able to learn and manage all the information needed to effectively complete one's task. Networked learning becomes the only way for one to be able to understand and learn about what is happening within that ecosystem. Additionally, networked learning can speed up the learning process by allowing individuals and organizations to teach one another without having to experience everything personally. Evidence of network learning was found at all four sites suggesting that it is a critical component of any ecosystems' work.

Sustainable Funding: Perhaps the greatest challenge facing any early childhood system and ecosystem is sustainable and consistent funding. This is a particular area where much more research and innovation are needed. Each of the sites mentioned in this research discovered ways to leverage private funding to eventually acquire government funding that functioned as a sustainable funding source. This still involved grant or contract dependent funding; however, those grants and contracts were in place for so long that they functionally operated as hard money. Alternatively, there is evidence that there is growing private sector interest.

New sustainable fiscal models, tools, and strategies are needed to sustain a healthy early childhood ecosystem. Some of the main innovations in place include children's budgets or other tax-based approaches in which a small percentage (often 1 percent or less) of tax revenue is set aside specifically for early childhood. These innovations are growing in popularity, but more work is needed to understand what approaches work best.

Implications for Policy, Practice and Research

There are several potential implications for policymakers, practitioners, and academics from this research. Below is a brief discussion about some of the main considerations for these groups.

Policy

For policymakers and government officials, there are a few key points that are of particular interest.

- *From Systems to Ecosystems:* Policy makers most often think through a program lens. If astute, they might think through a systems lens which is natural given that often the system feels like the only place where they can make a difference. However, this research demonstrates that you can intervene through systems in a way that might shift the entire early childhood ecosystems. This includes using socio-ecological thinking, population-level measures, and some of the tools listed above to effectively manage an ecosystem. Much of this work is new; innovative policies will be needed to understand how to implement it in the early childhood space. Examples of ecosystem policy work in early childhood include some place-based initiatives such as All Children Thrive, Growing up Boulder, or Help Me Grow.

- *Family or Child Resource Centers:* Policymakers have largely focused on the early childhood system through two pathways, the healthcare system, and the early childhood education system. Neither of these has been sufficient by itself to create the ecosystems-level change that is necessary to create population-level impact. This research asserts that

family or child resources centers, for which there are multiple models, can reorient early childhood ecosystems. Policymakers should consider the best models and provide ample funding. However, over-professionalization also remains a concern. Policymakers must carefully explore the potential role of these centers, while still providing the space to allow them to be transformative and nimble.

- *Home Visiting and Navigators:* The importance of home visitors or care navigators has been known for a long time. Policies have lagged in making sure these are a central part of every early childhood ecosystem within the United States. In other countries, such as the UK, home visitors are standard for families across all socio-economic levels. While efforts are being undertaken to expand this work, policymakers must also really understand *why* home visiting and care navigators work.

Practice

- *Establishing Healthy Early Childhood Collaboratives:* Strong partnerships were mentioned several times as critical to ensuring effective early childhood ecosystems. Often, these partnerships take the form of early childhood collaboratives. However, while many collaboratives exist, not all are created equal or get the same results. This research suggests that there are critical and important aspects to healthy early childhood collaboratives. This might include (1) tangible MOUs and other contractual mechanisms that tie organizations together with more than just passion or interest, (2) fiscal sharing or responsibility, (3) data sharing and accountability, (4) common client tracking data systems, (5) partnerships with well-established organizations that do not have frequent

turnover, (6) co-location either physically or digitally. When done well, healthy collaboratives also have a clear and simple mission, are generally geographically bound logically, and usually can serve as a backbone for driving ecosystem transformation.

- *From Transactions to Relationships:* How services are provided to families matters almost as much as providing the resources themselves. Providing services in a relational way should be at the heart of most early childhood programs. This can include social workers or care navigators, providing culturally appropriate and trauma-informed training to staff, building a culture of empathy and responsiveness, and building into the organization responsive to parents' feedback and accountability. Building a workforce that helps facilitate this relational approach is essential.

- *South L.A. to Antelope Valley Pipeline:* Unique to the Los Angeles context, but something that program managers found very insightful regarding this research, include the South L.A. to Antelope Valley Pipeline discussed in Chapter 6. This example has significant implications for programmatic choices made by various organizations that are seeking to spread their organizations and are looking to Antelope Valley. Many program managers who were interviewed for this research had either been approached by County officials or were already making plans to expand their work into the Antelope Valley. Of significant concern is the lack of infrastructure, social and physical, that could limit the impact of most programs. Program managers must consider the rapid change in social connections, the higher rates of poverty, the nature of a swift demographic change, and

other factors to ensure that the systems they create match the unique context and needs of families in those areas.

Research

Several questions were raised during this research that were beyond the scope of this study but warrant further investigation.

- *Defining Ambiguous Aspects of Systems Research:* There was a lack of definitions around many frequently used terms within systems work and research. For example, words like "fragmented" or "siloed" were commonly used but the exact definition that people intuitively associated with them was undiscernible. As this research continued across several months, it became increasingly obvious that more research was needed to clarify how several words are defined and operationalized.

- *Governing Complexity and Implementing Ecosystems Toolkits*: Another key area for research is the development and validation of methods and approaches for governing and managing complex ecosystems. While there is a limited yet growing set of literature in this field, what is missing are case studies and toolkits to operationalize these ideas into practice. Further research will be needed to apply this work.

- *Better Mapping of Ecosystems and Measuring Ecosystem-Level Impact:* More tools are needed to understand complex early childhood ecosystems. This would include ecosystems mapping and better ecosystems-level data. Ecosystems mapping could take

on many different forms including mapping ecosystem connections, networks, actors, structures, etc. Additionally, better measures of population outcomes are needed. While no single measure will ever be able to holistically illuminate child development and well-being, some combination of data points already collected might be able to provide us with better measures of well-being and development. If social networks and collective efficacy are as central to ecosystems functioning as suggested in this research, better measures are needed to understand their impact.

Conclusion

Ecosystems matter and are a better way of understanding child development in context. While the complexity of ecosystems thinking can lead one to assume that ecosystems cannot be understood or influenced, this is not the case. When using new frameworks and tools, ecosystems can be understood, governed, and improved. To see children thrive and reduce systematic inequalities, the duty falls on parents, researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and communities at large to do everything they can to improve the mechanism for change within the early childhood ecosystem, namely the early childhood system. The early childhood system, made up of its component parts, is a key component of the early childhood ecosystem that can be a target site of intervention. As a conclusion to this work, ecosystems analysis informs us that providing resources alone is not enough—how those resources are delivered matters almost as much and the environment and context in which they are provided matters even more. Thus, we must learn to create early childhood systems that can influence and shift the ecosystem so that all children thrive.

Appendix A: Components of Nurturing Care

When referencing health, the framework specifically refers to the physical and mental health of both the child and caregivers and includes both preventative and emergent care. It also speaks to preventing accidents for children and ensuring they get the required mental and emotional help as needed (World Health Organization, 2018). The framework suggests that young children need caregivers to do the following (see WHO & UNICEF, 2021): respond affectionately to daily needs; be hygienic and minimize infections; protect them from danger at home and outside; use health services, both promotive and preventive; give them the right treatment when they are ill; monitor how they are, physically and emotionally; make sure they get enough physical activity and sleep.

Regarding nutrition, the framework emphasizes maternal nutrition before and after delivery of the child and emphasizes exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months. The framework further suggests young children need caregivers to provide adequate amounts of food, support responsive feeding, provide needed micronutrients, and transition to whole foods effectively (Britto et al., 2017; WHO & UNICEF, 2021a).

For safety and security, children and families need to ensure that physical and emotional dangers are removed to limit emotional stress, environment risks and food insecurity. This includes providing children safe places to play and protection from mental, emotional, physical, sexual or any other form of abuse. Critical to this component is also limiting environmental harm from toxins and pollution. As part of safety and security financial hardship, including poverty, are recognized as serious concerns. Social protections, including financial and child welfare support, along with strong community social networks are thus critical in making sure children are able to thrive (Britto et al., 2017; WHO & UNICEF, 2021a; World Health Organization, 2018).

For a child to experience early learning opportunities, they must be allowed and encouraged to interact safely with people, places, and objects in their environment. Developmental science suggests that every interaction can be a learning experience and is important for a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Caregivers should help children develop these various skills by talking with their child, reading, engaging in playtime, telling stories, and other activities that engage children with all five of their senses (WHO & UNICEF, 2021a).

Lastly, responsive caregiving implies the ability for caregivers to understand and then respond to their developing child's communicative signals. This helps children develop the trust and emotional bond that is needed for healthy development. It is no surprise that this is found throughout the other four components, as it is a cornerstone of the entire *Nurturing Care* Framework. In this, caregivers are asked to respond to "children's movements, sounds, gestures, and verbal requests" as they seek to keep them safe, provide them adequate nutrition, keep them

healthy, provide consistent learning experiences, and help them build trusting, nurturing relationships (WHO & UNICEF, 2021a; World Health Organization, 2018).

Appendix B: Interview Protocol | Families

Interviewer: _____ **Consent Give (Date):**

Date/Time: _____ **Child (s) Age (s):**

Interviewee/Title/Role:

Other Contextual Notes:

Key:
Italics = Suggested text
Bold = instruction for interviewer

Interviewer should conduct the interview in a quiet, private place. Consent should be obtained before beginning. Once consent is obtained, the interview should begin. To avoid distractions, especially from children, the interview should take place at a time and location to ensure minimal disruption. This might include evening time or when a babysitter is present. The interviewer should remain true to the themes of the script but does not need to follow them word for word. Every effort should be made to ensure the interviewee is comfortable and understands what is being asked.

Thank you so much for letting me interview you today. I know how busy you are as a parent. It means a lot that you would take time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. As I mentioned before, the purpose of this study is to better understand how families in Los Angeles access and use various resources to help their young children. This interview will be no more than sixty minutes.

Before getting started, I just wanted to review the consent form and see if you had any questions.

Interviewer should highlight key aspects of the consent form.

Do you have any questions? Are you also okay if I begin recording this interview at this point?

Interview should check either "Yes" or "No"
_____ Yes _____ No

If Yes: *Thank you! Please know that I will transcribe this interview later and you will have a chance to review that transcription.*

If No: *Not a problem! Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes.*

Any last questions for me before we begin? (Discuss Questions)

Great, please stop me at any point if there is something that confuses you or you want me to clarify more. Don't hesitate to ask questions! You can also stop the interview at any point.

If there is nothing further, let's jump in!

Introduction (5 minutes)
Spend time getting to know the background of the participant. You might ask questions such as those listed below.

- *Tell me about your background.*
- *How did you end up here in Los Angeles?*

Early Childhood (20 minutes)
Spend time getting to know the children and understand any unique challenges they face. Explain the concept of early childhood development and make sure the participant understands it before moving on past this section. You might ask questions like those below.

- *Tell me about each of your children?*
- *How old are they?*
- *Do you worry about the development of any of them?*
- *What worries or concerns do you have for each of your children?*

Explain the various components of early childhood development to them. You might ask questions like those below.

- *Are you familiar with the term, early childhood development?*
- *What do you know about it?*
- *What does it mean to provide safety and security for your child?*
- *What does it mean to provide good nutrition for your child?* **(If child is under 6 months, ask about breastfeeding)**
- *What does it mean to help provide good health for your child?*
- *What does it mean to help provide early learning opportunities?*
- *What does it mean to help provide nurturing caregiving?*
- *What else do you do to help your child develop?*
- *What is the role of a teacher, caregiving, or early educator?*
- *What is your greatest hope for your child(ren)?*

The interviewer should ask follow-up questions to ascertain how the participant engages with each concept of the nurturing framework.

Accessing Resources (20 minutes)

In the last part of this interview, I want to focus on what resources you use in the community to help you ensure a healthy start to life for your child.

- *Do you rely on any community resources or services to help you with each of these?* **Ask about each one individually.**
  - *Safety and Security*
  - *Nutrition*
  - *Good Health*
  - *Early Learning Opportunities*
  - *Nurturing caregiving*
- *How did you learn about each of the resources you use?*
- *Was it easy or hard to access each of these resources?*
- *Why or why not?*
- *What makes it hard to access these resources?*
- *What helps you access these resources?*
- *Do you access multiple resources?*
- *How do these resources work together?*

Accessing Resources: Mapping (10 minutes)
At this point, the interviewer should pull out Google maps of the community on their phone, computer or device. The interviewer should then ask participants to map out the various resources and services mentioned above. As they map the services, the interviewer should ask questions like the following:

- *How long does it take to get from your location to the service location?*
- *What methods of transportation do you typically use?*
- *What makes it hard or easy to get to these places?*
- *Are there any resources you know of that you'd like to use that you are unable to? Why?*

Ending the Interview: (2 minutes)
As the interviewer ends the interview, they should ensure that the participant feels comfortable and doesn't have any additional questions or concerns. The interviewer should also remind the participant of the contact information should questions arise.

Again, thank you so much for your time.

My email and contact information are on the consent form. If you have any concerns or additional thoughts, please email, call, or text anytime.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol | Program Managers

Interviewer: _____ **Consent Give (Date):**

Date/Time: _____ **Child (s) Age (s):**

Interviewee/Title/Role:

Other Contextual Notes:

Key:
Italics = Suggested text
***Bold* =** *Instruction for interviewer*

Interviewer should conduct the interview in a quiet, private place. Consent should be obtained before beginning. Once consent is obtained, the interview should begin. To avoid distractions, the interview should take place at a time and location to ensure minimal disruption. The interviewer should remain true to the themes of the script but does not need to follow them word for word. Every effort should be made to ensure the interviewee is comfortable and understands what is being asked.

Thank you so much for letting me interview you today. I know how busy you are and the important work that you do. It means a lot that you would take time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. As I mentioned before, the purpose of this study is to better understand how early childhood policy in Los Angeles is envisioned by government officials and policy makers, implemented by program managers, and then experienced at the family-level. This interview will be no more than sixty minutes.

Before getting started, I just wanted to review the consent form and see if you had any questions.

Interviewer should highlight key aspects of the consent form.

Do you have any questions? Are you also okay if I begin recording this interview at this point?

Interview should check either "Yes" or "No"
_____ *Yes* _____ *No*

If Yes: *Thank you! Please know that I will transcribe this interview later and you will have a chance to review that transcription.*

If No: *Not a problem! Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes.*

Any last questions for me before we begin? (Discuss Questions)

Great, please stop me at any point if there is something that confuses you or you want me to clarify more.

Don't hesitate to ask questions! You can also stop the interview at any point.

If there is nothing further, let's jump in!

Introduction (5-8 minutes)
Spend time getting to know the background of the participant. You might ask questions such as those listed below.

- *Tell me about your background.*
- *How did you end up here in Los Angeles?*
- *What is your job and role?*
- *Why did you choose to work with young children?*

Conceptualizing Early Childhood (20-30 minutes)
Spend time coming to understand the individual's conception of early childhood and the perceived role that they play in providing early childhood services. Try to understand their definition of early childhood and what resources are needed for a child to thrive. You might ask questions like those below.

- *Are you familiar with the term, early childhood development?*
- *What do you know about it?*
- *What does it mean to provide safety and security for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What does it mean to provide good nutrition for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What does it mean to help provide good health for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What does it mean to help provide early learning opportunities for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What does it mean to help provide nurturing caregiving for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What worries do you have for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What community strengths do families have in Los Angeles when trying to raise a child?*

Implementing Policy (20-30 minutes)
In this last section of the interview, try to understand how the individual tries to implement early childhood policy. Try to understand the different pressures they face, both from above and below. Also spend time trying to understand how social, economic, and political forces shape their program. You might consider the following questions.

- *What services do you deliver?*
- *Why are these services important?*
- *What makes it difficult to deliver these services?*
- *What makes it easier to deliver these services?*
- *How do you try to meet the demands of policy makers and other top-down pressures like regulations, licensing, etc?*
- *How do you try to meet the needs and interests of families and children who are using your resources?*
- *Do government policies and family needs always align?*

    - *Why or why not?*
- *Do you feel the government has a clear, coherent early childhood policy?*
    - *Why or why not?*

Ending the Interview: (2 minutes)
Ensure that the participant feels comfortable and doesn't have any additional questions or concerns. The interviewer should also remind the participant of the contact information should questions arise.

Again, thank you so much for your time.

My email and contact information are on the consent form. If you have any concerns or additional thoughts, please email, call, or text anytime.

Appendix D: Interview Protocol | Government and Community

Interviewer: _____ **Consent Give (Date):**

Date/Time: _____

Interviewee/Title/Role:

Other Contextual Notes:

Key:
Italics = Suggested text
***Bold* =** *Instruction for interviewer*

Interviewer should conduct the interview in a quiet, private place. Consent should be obtained before beginning. Once consent is obtained, the interview should begin. To avoid distractions, the interview should take place at a time and location to ensure minimal disruption. The interviewer should remain true to the themes of the script but does not need to follow them word for word. Every effort should be made to ensure the interviewee is comfortable and understands what is being asked.

Thank you so much for letting me interview you today. I know how busy you are and the important work that you do. It means a lot that you would take time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. As I mentioned before, the purpose of this study is to better understand how early childhood policy in Los Angeles is envisioned by government officials and policy makers, implemented by program managers, and then experienced at the family-level. This interview will be no more than sixty minutes.

Before getting started, I just wanted to review the consent form and see if you had any questions.

Interviewer should highlight key aspects of the consent form.

Do you have any questions? Are you also okay if I begin recording this interview at this point?

Interview should check either "Yes" or "No"
_____ *Yes* _____ *No*

If Yes: *Thank you! Please know that I will transcribe this interview later and you will have a chance to review that transcription.*

If No: *Not a problem! Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes.*

Any last questions for me before we begin? (Discuss Questions)

Great, please stop me at any point if there is something that confuses you or you want me to clarify more. Don't hesitate to ask questions! You can also stop the interview at any point.

If there is nothing further, let's jump in!

Introduction (5-8 minutes)
Spend time getting to know the background of the participant. You might ask questions such as those listed below.

- *Tell me about your background.*
- *How did you end up here in Los Angeles?*
- *What is your job and role?*
- *How does your background intersect with early childhood within Los Angeles?*

Conceptualizing Early Childhood (20-30 minutes)
Spend time coming to understand the individual's conception of early childhood and the perceived role that they play in providing early childhood services. Try to understand their definition of early childhood and what resources are needed for a child to thrive. You might ask questions like those below.

- *Are you familiar with the term, early childhood development?*
- *What do you know about it?*
- *What does it mean to provide safety and security for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What does it mean to provide good nutrition for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What does it mean to help provide good health for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What does it mean to help provide early learning opportunities for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What does it mean to help provide nurturing caregiving for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What worries do you have for children in Los Angeles?*
- *What community strengths do families have in Los Angeles when trying to raise a child?*

Implementing Policy (20-30 minutes)
In this last section of the interview, try to understand the individuals perception on how early childhood policy works or is being implemented within Los Angeles. Try to understand the different pressures they face, both from above and below. Also spend time trying to understand how social, economic, and political forces shape their program. You might consider the following questions.

- *Do government policies and family needs always align?*
  - *Why or why not?*
- *Do you feel the government has a clear, coherent early childhood policy?*
  - *Why or why not?*

Ending the Interview: (2 minutes)
Ensure that the participant feels comfortable and doesn't have any additional questions or concerns.

The interviewer should also remind the participant of the contact information should questions arise.

Again, thank you so much for your time.

My email and contact information are on the consent form. If you have any concerns or additional thoughts, please email, call, or text anytime.

Appendix E: IRB Exemption Certification

University of California Los Angeles
10889 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 830
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406

http://ora.research.ucla.edu/ohrpp
General Campus IRB: (310) 825-7122
Medical IRB: (310) 825-5344

EXEMPTION CERTIFICATION
New Study

Conducting Research During the COVID-19 Public Health Outbreak: Please review the information provided on the UCLA Research Ramp Up website to determine whether any current Policy may affect this IRB approved or exempt study. https://www3.research.ucla.edu/research-ramp-up Information includes (a) an overview of the ramp-up process, (b) health and safety guidelines, and (c) appendices describing requirements for different types of research.

DATE:	9/2/2020
TO:	JOSEPH WRIGHT, Ph.D. EDUCATION
FROM:	WENDY BRUNT PRINCIPAL ANALYST
RE:	IRB#20-001696 Early Childhood Education and Development: Contextualizing Quality Services for Marginalized Families in Los Angeles County and Jordan

The UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP) has determined that the above-referenced study meets the criteria for an exemption from IRB review. UCLA's Federalwide Assurance (FWA) with Department of Health and Human Services is FWA00004642.

Any modifications to the research procedures must be submitted to the OHRPP for prospective review and certification of exemption prior to implementation.

Submission and Review Information:

Certification Date	9/2/2020

Regulatory Determinations

-- **Exempt Certification** - This research has been certified as exempt from IRB review per 45 CFR 46.104, category 2.

Appendix F: IRB Study Information Sheet

University of California, Los Angeles

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Early Childhood Development: Contextualizing Quality Services for Marginalized Families in Los Angeles County

INTRODUCTION

Joseph Wright, Ph.D. Candidate and Dr. Edith Omwami, Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Los Angeles are conducting a research study. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you have had experience in the area of early childhood development, either as a policy maker, a program manager, or a parent/guardian. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT A RESEARCH STUDY?

- *Someone will explain this research study to you.*
- *Whether or not you take part is up to you.*
- *You can choose not to take part.*
- *You can agree to take part and later change your mind.*
- *Your decision will not be held against you.*
- *You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.*

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING DONE?

This research is being done to better understand how early childhood programs and policies are developed and then implemented at the family level. This includes understanding how families access services and resources, how program managers deliver those services and resources, as well as how policy makers think about creating programs to help young children.

HOW LONG WILL THE RESEARCH LAST AND WHAT WILL I NEED TO DO?

Participation will take a total of about sixty minutes in a one-time interview. If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Sit for a sixty minute interview with the research staff.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS IF I PARTICIPATE?

While risks are minimal, there is the possibility of slight psychological discomfort as the researchers ask questions about policies impacting young children, especially those that might be marginalized. Participants are welcome to withdrawal at any point in the study.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS IF I PARTICIPATE?

As a government official or program manager you will not be directly benefited by this study. As a parent, you will be provided a list of early childhood resources in your area. The results of the research may be used in the future to better design early childhood programs that help all children thrive.

Your alternative to participating in this research study is to not participate.

HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME AND MY PARTICIPATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

The researchers will do their best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential. Information about you will be handled as confidentially as possible, but participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security.

Use of personal information that can identify you:
Your real name will never be associated with the research. You will be given an alternative name or pseudonym during the transcription and only this pseudonym and generic demographic information will be used in the final write up. Any quotes from you will only be used after you have had a chance to review them.

How information about you will be stored:
With your consent, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. These recordings and transcriptions will be stored on the researcher's password protected computer and will only be used with your approval.

People and agencies that will have access to your information:
Only the researchers associated with this research study will have access to your information.

The research team and authorized UCLA personnel may have access to study data and records to monitor the study. Research records provided to authorized, non-UCLA personnel will not contain identifiable information about you. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not identify you by name.

How long information from the study will be kept:
The information from this study will be kept for three years after the research has concluded.

USE OF DATA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Your data, including de-identified data, may be kept for use in future research.

WILL I BE PAID FOR MY PARTICIPATION?

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

WHO CAN I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

The research team:
If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to one of the researchers. Please contact: Joseph Wright; (801) 895-6971; josephhw@ucla.edu or Dr. Edith Omwami; (310) 825-1791; omwami@gseis.ucla.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS IF I TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

1. You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
2. Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
3. You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

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