Exploring the Challenge of Teachers’ Emotional Labor in Early Childhood Settings

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Abstract
One challenging aspect of working in early childhood education settings is engagement in emotional labor. Research suggests that emotional labor is associated with emotional exhaustion and burnout in early childhood teachers, but there is limited research available on this issue. Research focusing on early childhood contexts in the United States is especially limited. This paper explores the concept of emotional labor by early childhood teachers and reviews some of the research on teachers’ experience of emotional labor in the classroom. Implications of the current research are discussed and suggestions for future research are provided. Possible solutions to the challenges of emotional labor are presented, focusing on mindfulness strategies.

Keywords Early childhood · Emotional labor · Mindfulness

The development of a sustainable workforce of early childhood educators in the United States is a growing challenge. The turnover rate for early childhood educators is high, and the causes for this are numerous: low pay and job prestige, inadequate training, and stressful working conditions are just a few. A significant number of teachers report experiencing stress and depression related to their work, with 8 to 11% of the respondents reporting clinically significant symptoms of depression (Roberts et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these burdens on the early childhood workforce, with many centers closing or struggling to stay afloat, and early educators—who are often from historically marginalized groups—dealing with their own personal as well as professional COVID related challenges (Payton, 2021). In our work coaching and supporting early educators, we have directly observed these rising levels of stress and exhaustion. In fact, in the past year so many of the educators we work with have reported feeling emotionally overwhelmed that we have begun to regularly help teachers set goals for stress management as part of their professional development plans.

One aspect of the work performed by early educators that has received relatively little attention by researchers is emotional labor. The term emotional labor was coined by Hochschild (1983) and is defined as work that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind of others” (2012, p. 7). Engagement in emotional labor is often required from service employees like nurses and teachers, who need to restrict or limit their emotional displays in order to provide an expected high level of customer service. Early childhood educators engage daily in work that is physical, mental, and highly emotional. The need for early educators to engage in emotional labor is significant as they provide supervision and care, respond to behavioral challenges, resolve conflict, and work in tandem with other professionals and parents. Several studies have established a link between preschool teachers’ engagement in emotional labor and emotional exhaustion and the quality of their interactions with children (Ansari et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2018). Since teacher–child interactions have been demonstrated to be especially important for children’s development and learning gains, this is of critical importance (Burchinal et al., 2010; Curby et al., 2009). Research focusing on supporting the work of early childhood educators is not only important for strengthening the profession as a whole but is an essential step towards the goal of enriching the lives of young children.

Recent research has also documented a connection between burnout and engagement in emotional labor in
helping and service professions like teaching (Tiwari et al., 2020; Yilmaz et al., 2015; Zaretsky & Katz, 2019). However, relatively few studies focus specifically on the issue of emotional labor and burnout within the context of early childhood settings, and few of these have been conducted in the United States. Although research in other educational settings may be helpful for understanding the nature, challenge, and consequences of emotional labor for early childhood educators, more attention to the unique experiences of early childhood educators is necessary. The purpose of this paper is to discuss important issues related to emotional labor in early childhood settings in the United States. The focus will be on understanding what emotional labor is and how it can impact educators based on the limited available research. The implications of the current research and areas for future research will be discussed. Possible solutions to the challenges of engagement in emotional labor, including the use of mindfulness techniques for early childhood teachers, will be explored.

Understanding Emotional Labor and Burnout

To understand how early educators experience emotional labor, it is important to first understand how emotional labor is defined. Based on her observations of flight attendants, Hochschild asserted that there are “feeling rules” or societal norms about the appropriate type and amount of feeling that should be experienced and expressed in a particular situation (Wharton, 2009). When emotions become regulated due to other people’s expectations or organizations in public as required by work, it is then known as emotional labor. Emotional labor is essentially the act of expressing socially desired emotions during work-related transactions despite one’s authentic experience in those moments. Early childhood workers are called upon to continuously engage in emotional labor during their working hours. Ideally, in interactions with parents, other teachers, and children, early educators remain positive, calm, and encouraging, in addition to performing a multitude of other caregiving and instructional tasks.

As early educators and other service workers attempt to manage their emotions, they can engage in surface acting or deep acting. These two strategies are used by employees when they cannot express their true emotions, which allows them to perform the emotional labor that is required of them on the job (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2003). Whereas surface acting only changes the expression of emotion, deep acting transforms our emotional state (Larson & Yao, 2005). Surface acting involves simulating emotions that are not actually felt by changing outward appearances (i.e., facial expression, posture, gestures, or voice tone) to exhibit the required emotions. In this way, the service worker feigns and conveys emotions that are not experienced. For teachers, surface acting can occur when they alter their emotional expression to conform with social expectations by expressing an emotion they do not really feel (Grandey et al., 2013). For example, when dealing with a challenging student a teacher may smile and appear calm; however, this may not mean they are feeling these emotions, but are instead acting to conform with expected emotional display rules.

Deep acting, on the other hand, occurs when one attempts to actually experience or feel the emotions that one wishes to display. Here the early educator would attempt to induce herself to actually experience the authentic emotions (Ashford & Humphrey, 1993). Unlike surface acting, deep acting involves changing one’s inner feelings by altering more than the outward appearance. Rather than expressing unfelt feelings, individuals actively alter their inner feelings to express the emotion they wish to display or that is required by a job (Mann & Cowburn, 2005). Employees may put forth significant effort to stimulate memories, images, or thoughts to feel or suppress specific emotions at the workplace in order to express organizationally desired emotions (Schirmer & Adolphs, 2017). For example, teachers may try to induce positive memories or reframe their thoughts in a more positive way in order to alter their feelings of irritation when faced with a stressful situation or interaction in the classroom. In sum, surface acting occurs when feelings are changed from the “outside in”, whereas in deep acting, feelings are changed from the “inside out” (Hochschild, 1983).

Not surprisingly, there can be consequences of both surface acting and deep acting on early educators and other service workers. Portraying emotions that are not felt through surface acting creates a sense of strain that Hochschild (1983) terms “emotive dissonance”. This dissonance can lead to personal and work-related maladjustment, resulting in poor self-esteem, depression, and cynicism. Hochschild also argued that because emotional reactions help us to make sense of situations, deep acting may distort these reactions and impair the sense of authentic self, possibly impairing well-being. Deep acting may lead to self-alienation as the individual loses touch with the authentic self, which can impair the ability to recognize or experience real emotion (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). The root problem is the discrepancy between the feeling(s) one is expected to outwardly express and what is actually experienced in private.

Research suggests that the demands of emotional labor can result in negative outcomes. Generally, the most consistent findings from research focus on the relationship between surface acting and the emotional exhaustion dimension of burnout. Maslach et al. describe emotional exhaustion as “feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one’s work” (1996, p. 10). According to Wharton (2009), numerous studies show that workers who report having to
display emotions that conflict with their own feelings on a regular basis are more likely than others to experience emotional exhaustion. Interaction with people, besides leading to fatigue, requires the regulation of emotions and is thought to trigger burnout (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). For example, a study conducted with early educators in the Philippines completed since the pandemic found that burnout was dependent on teachers’ emotional stability (Dela Cruz, 2020).

Workers employed in the categories of “high emotional labor” jobs (Hochschild, 1983) and “high burnout jobs” (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993) report significantly higher levels of employee stress than do other workers. Specifically, occupants of health care, social service, teaching, and other “caring” professions are more likely to experience burnout (Cherniss, 1993; Jackson et al., 1986; Leiter & Maslach, 1988).

Understanding and acknowledging the connection between emotional labor and burnout is important for understanding the impact and implications of emotional labor on the profession of early childhood education. This is especially critical in the face a global pandemic due to COVID-19, in which early childhood educators were challenged with how to remain operating and how to teach remotely as well. Burnout is traditionally conceptualized as a chronic stress response due to long-term emotional and interpersonal job stressors (Maslach et al., 2001). The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is the most popular tool for assessing burnout and has been used widely in many occupations and nations. The MBI consists of three dimensions. The first dimension of burnout, exhaustion, is characterized by feeling emotionally overextended, exhausted, and being unable to psychologically or physically recover from the various demands placed on the individual to complete work related tasks. Exhaustion is often used to describe the emotional experience of burnout and is the most robust of all the burnout dimensions. In a recent study of 273 early childhood teachers, researchers found that teachers’ emotional exhaustion was related to a lack of work control, a lack of collegial relationships, and difficulty in responding to children’s challenging behaviors (Schraack et al., 2020).

Research conducted since the start of the pandemic suggests that the work of early educators has become more challenging and is taking a greater emotional toll on early educators. For instance, a study of early childhood educators in the United States found that educators were more likely to report that the pandemic had adverse impacts on their mental health and had caused moderate levels of stress (Hanno et al., 2020). In another study that surveyed early educators nationwide on their experiences since COVID, 91% of teachers surveyed indicated they were somewhat to very concerned about the increase in their overall stress levels (Jones, 2020). Based on prior research related to emotional labor and burnout, more investigation into how the emotional work required in early care and education settings contributes to burnout and impacts the profession as a whole is warranted, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. A greater understanding of these important elements of early childhood educators’ work could ultimately translate into the development of strategies intended to buffer early educators against burnout in the future (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

**Emotional Labor in Educational Settings**

As mentioned, very limited research on emotional labor has been conducted in early childhood settings, and most of the extant literature is a result of research that has been conducted in other countries, which may not necessarily speak to the experiences of early childhood educators in the United States. However, there is a significant amount of research on the impact that stress and burnout have on the emotional well-being of teachers working in K-12 environments. In a study of United States K-12 teachers, 100% of teachers surveyed reported engagement in emotional labor (Brown et al., 2014). Like the work of early childhood educators, the work K-12 teachers perform with students and families is emotional in nature, requiring them to navigate through a range of emotions daily, both their own and that of others. How well teachers successfully regulate their own emotions as they guide and facilitate others’ emotions can significantly impact the climate and culture of a classroom. According to Horner et al. (2020), unlike other emotional labor jobs, such as those within the service industry where interactions with others can be brief and random, teachers have prolonged and consistent engagements with students and families. Teachers are required to be both subject matter experts and emotional development facilitators in the classroom. Teachers are expected to regulate their emotions and respond to students and families in ways that fall within acceptable and professional rules and conduct guidelines. Horner et al. (2020) describe how teachers use the strategy of emotional acting to negotiate positive and negative encounters in the classroom. For example, teachers might engage in surface acting to regulate emotions in response to negative classroom situations such as student outbursts and disruptions, school crisis drills, and conflicts with parents. Teachers in this study described acting enthusiastically or responding positively to something in the classroom while concealing negative emotions. New teachers are often unprepared for the emotional demands of teaching as they enter the field. Historically, emotional practice has not been addressed in most teacher preparation programs, but some are working to change that.

Although research on emotional labor and burnout in K-12 settings does exist, more research specifically on emotional labor and burnout in early childhood settings is
necessary because of some important differences between K-12 and early childhood educators. Early childhood educators often have less training, preparation, and support than K-12 teachers, which may exacerbate the challenges of emotional labor. In a study of over 1600 early educators in Nebraska, it was found that many early educators did not earn livable wages, and between 20 and 30% of early childhood teachers utilized public assistance to make ends meet (Roberts et al., 2017). Phillips et al. (2016) describe early childhood teachers as “some of the most erratically trained and poorly paid professionals in the United States” (p. 140). The authors draw attention to the profound “contradiction inherent in this characterization of the early care and education workforce, and its implications for the well-being of the millions of young children in early childhood care” (p. 140). While training and compensation for early educators may be lacking in many cases, the skills required are significant. Meloy and Schachner (2019) identified a lengthy list of essential competencies as part of defining the work of early educators. This long list includes providing developmentally appropriate practice and environments, ongoing observations and assessment, individualized learning and inclusion practices, cultivating family support and partnerships, and participating in continuous improvement and professionalism. The role of the early educator also involves being a responsive caregiver, a good listener, observer, actor, and content expert. Fulfilling these roles and managing the associated emotions, especially without adequate training and support, create profound stressors on early educators.

Differences in the ways in which the work of K-12 teachers and early childhood educators is valued are also important to acknowledge. Early educators are often viewed as babysitters or caregivers, and in spite of the body of research pointing to the important of high quality early care and education, “the perception that caring for young children is unimportant work persists” (Payton, 2021, p. 10). Early educators are sometimes paid less than half of teachers serving in K-12, and salaries for early childhood educators still lag well behind their counterparts in K-12 education, even with similar degree requirements. Training and access to professional development are other important issues. Phillips et al. (2016) point out that training, compensation and working conditions for K-12 teachers are relatively uniform, whereas these things are highly inconsistent for early childhood educators. In addition, professional development is often limited or unavailable to early educators. These gaps in wages, training, support, and access to professional development contribute to burnout and teacher turnover. They may also make early childhood educators more vulnerable to the challenges of coping with demands of emotional labor.

As mentioned, research focusing on emotional labor in early childhood settings is sparse and most of what currently exists has not been conducted in the United States. Research about engagement in emotional labor by early educators in other countries provides some interesting insights. For example, research by Vincent and Braun (2013) conducted in the United Kingdom explored the process in which early educators learn the emotional “rules” of working with children. They noted that early educators not only must manage their own emotions at work, but that they often consider themselves responsible for being role models for young children in the area of emotional recognition and management, helping them identify and appropriately express their emotions. The early educators interviewed generally believed that “they could and should be warm and positive towards all of the children all of the time, without getting too attached to individuals”, which is a monumental task (p. 765). Another study from China described the emotional labor of preschool teachers as being “characterized by its long duration, high intensity, and diversity in emotional interactions” (Zhang et al., 2020). A study conducted in New Zealand (Anuja, 2017) identified difficult interactions with parents and teachers, unsupportive management, and heavy workloads as contributors to early childhood teachers’ experience of emotional labor. Although additional research on the subject of emotional labor by early educators outside of the United States exists, a cross-cultural study on emotional labor in early education settings by Hong and Zhang (2019) underscores the need to be cautious about generalizing these findings because of issues related to the study of diverse populations. In a qualitative study comparing the emotional labor of early childhood teachers in Norway and China, researchers found that although both groups believed that engagement in emotional labor was important for their work, the group of teachers in Norway perceived and approached emotional labor differently than those in China. For this reason, care should be taken when generalizing findings from research completed in other countries, and additional research on emotional labor should be conducted in various early childhood settings within the United States.

Supporting Early Educators Response to Emotional Labor

Studies have found a relationship between an educator’s social and emotional competency, healthier and more authentic relationships with students, and greater success in the classroom. Research findings by Yilnaz et al. (2015) show that emotional labor plays a role in job satisfaction, rate of burnout, and teacher emotional health both inside and outside the classroom. A study by Wender and DeMille (2019) addresses the need for more focus on emotional practices in teacher education programs to help prepare pre-service teachers for their roles in managing the often-anticipated issues regarding emotional labor. This study
also suggests that a proactive approach would be to intentionally address emotional well-being strategies and talk about what to expect in the classroom. The study goes on to stress the importance of journaling as well as reflection as a way for pre-service educators to acknowledge and process their emotions. Strategies for addressing emotional well-being not only benefit the teacher but also contribute to a healthy classroom climate. "By carefully attending to various aspects of teachers' emotional practice, we will be better able to support them as they work to foster the academic success and emotional growth of their students" (Horner et al., 2020, p. 25).

Because of the growing understanding of the importance of teacher's emotional practice, professional development opportunities to help teachers learn about the role of emotional labor in their work while cultivating healthy emotional wellness practices are now being offered in school districts, workshops, and conferences. Jennings (2018) advocates for programs such as the Garrison Institute's Cultivating Awareness and Resilience for Educators (CARE). These programs are becoming more prevalent training for K-12 teachers as districts begin to invest in professional development opportunities targeting self-care. Baker (2020) suggests that self-care should be an integrated part of the day for first-year teachers. Unfortunately, these types of efforts are not yet being targeted on any scale to early childhood educators.

Few training programs, conferences, and preparation programs include targeted strategies for addressing emotional well-being or emotional practice in early childhood contexts, but some research supports their effectiveness. One study conducted with preschool teachers in China (Gu et al., 2019), for example, showed that recovery experiences protected teachers from the detrimental effects of work stress. While this study was not conducted in the United States and focused on the construct of “emotional dissonance” rather than emotional labor, it highlights the important question of the need to clearly understand what strategies might be effective to promote teachers’ emotional health. Beyond individual recovery strategies, there may also be programmatic ways that promote better responses to the demands of emotional labor. For example, work by Jeon and Ardeleanu (2020) using a large group of preschool teachers from across the United States found that when teachers had a more positive work climate and felt more supported by parents they were better able to utilize emotional regulation strategies. In other research exploring the emotional labor experiences of Early Head Start teachers conducting home visits, Lane (2011) proposes reflective supervision as a means of supporting early educators. Moreover, based on a national survey on early educators, Madill et al. (2018) concluded that both formal workforce supports, like supervision and mentoring, as well as informal supports such as a teamwork and a respectful work environment, were important contributors to teachers’ psychological well-being. Additional investigation into these areas could be very helpful for early childhood leaders, policy makers and developers of early childhood programs.

Recovery from emotional labor is an important process through which employees restore the resources that have been depleted during work (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). While deep and surface acting can cause more long term issues than they solve, recent research asserts that the effects experienced by the individual may vary depending on which emotional display rule is used. Xanthopoulou et al. (2017) argue that surface acting may be more harmful to employees as it is likely to exhaust employees’ resources in the short run and hinder the recovery process, whereas deep acting may allow employees to reserve or even gain resources at work that may facilitate recovery. Effective recovery involves emotional regulation strategies, which are critical for individuals to cope with negative experiences while engaging one’s work environment. These strategies are used to aid individuals in managing overwhelming experiences.

There are a myriad of strategies that can be used to regulate emotions and moods in the workplace. Gross (1998) classified these strategies into two main categories: preventative (antecedent-focused) and responsive (response-focused). When using preventative strategies, individuals try to modify how much or what type of emotion they experience before the onset of the emotion by: selecting situations, modifying situations, attention deployment, and cognitive change. For example, an early educator might employ a preventative strategy by practicing some calm verbal responses prior to meeting with an angry parent. Strategies like this are associated with deep acting. In contrast, responsive emotional regulation occurs after the emotion has been felt and it acts to “intensify, diminish, prolong, or curtail the ongoing emotional experiences, expression or physiological responding” (Gross, 1998, p. 225). Responsive approaches to emotional regulation, such as engaging in a few minutes of deep breathing after helping to calm a toddler who has been bitten by a peer, involve surface acting. Self-care techniques such as taking breaks, emotional distancing, relaxation, exercising, talking to peers, and sleep quality are other useful tools intended to improve emotional regulation (Diestel et al., 2015; Karing & Beelmann, 2019; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Sutton, 2004). For example, in a study of 50 female childcare workers in the southern United States, the use of strategies such as exercising and meditation for short periods daily, often less than 15 min, was associated with less work stress (Carson et al., 2017).

One prominent cognitive self-care technique to mitigate the effects of emotional labor is mindfulness. Mindfulness is both a preventative and a responsive way to deal with emotional labor and burnout. Mindfulness is a way to increase emotion regulation by applying specific meditation
practices (Hill & Updegraff, 2012). Meta-analyses on various types of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have shown an improvement in overall well-being (Blanck et al., 2018; Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012; Franca & Milbourn, 2015). MBIs have demonstrated the ability to improve negative personality traits, stress, and psychological distress (Querstret et al., 2020). One meta-analysis of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a specific type of mindfulness-based therapy, found that such treatments have the ability to reduce anxiety as well as increase empathy and self-compassion (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). Mindfulness has demonstrated great benefits in clinical and medical samples. For instance, mindfulness-based therapies (MBTs), such as Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal et al., 2018), have been repeatedly shown to alleviate depressive symptoms and prevent drug relapses (Barnhofer et al., 2015; Bowen et al., 2014; Kingston et al., 2007). These findings have been extended to schoolteachers coping with burnout (Flook et al., 2013; Tarrasch et al., 2020). In a recent study of 515 Kindergarten teachers in China, the use of mindfulness was associated with deep acting and more naturally felt emotions and negatively correlated with burnout (Ma et al., 2020).

Mindfulness may be defined as awareness to the present moment. It is a shift from doing things to simply being with one’s self and observing what arises, such as thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and more (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The emphasis in mindfulness encourages paying attention without judgment and minimize identification with what arises (Bishop et al., 2004). Mindfulness entails bringing one’s attention to the present moment and how to bring acceptance and non-judgment into that experience (Orsillo & Roemer, 2005). The practice of mindfulness has been shown to provide relief and coping as a response to stressors. Mindfulness has robust support as a positive coping strategy in response to burnout and job stress (Frederick et al., 2018; Grover et al., 2017). Because the current research on mindfulness techniques is so promising, more work needs to be done to identify effective mindfulness techniques for teachers that translate well to working in the classroom, particularly in early childhood settings. Once these are identified, efforts should be made to incorporate this important information into teacher training programs and new teacher support systems.

**Implications**

Good teachers matter in the lives of children, and understanding and addressing the challenges associated with the work of early childhood educators has many potential benefits. The work of early childhood educators is important and complex, and their success and skill can translate into better outcomes for young children. Early educators’ engagement in emotional labor may be unavoidable, but research suggests that it may be possible to mitigate the burnout associated with this emotional labor through the use of appropriate strategies; however, more work must be done to uncover what strategies are effective. Ideally, future scholars in the area of early childhood education will focus on multiple domains in researching the consequences of emotional labor, job-related stress, and burnout. A concerted effort to understand the differences between early childhood educators and others in the experience of burnout would likely also be useful. Not only is the work of early educators unique, this work also occurs in many different contexts: infant/toddler centers, early intervention settings, preschools, faith-based programs, private programs, as well as government funded and regulated programs like state preschool, transitional kindergarten, and Head Start programs. Understanding more about the nuances of engagement in emotional labor in these various contexts would be helpful for finding tailored solutions.

In addition to conducting research in different settings, it is also important to investigate the experience of emotional labor in various demographic groups. In the United States, there has been less of an effort to track burnout and job stress among various careers and vocations compared with European nations. Within the United States, there is also reason to believe that some groups may be more vulnerable to the effects of emotional labor and other workplace stressors. For instance, in a study examining predictors of psychological distress for early educators, it was found that early educators belonging to certain demographic groups, including those with lower household income and those with lower levels of education, experienced greater distress (Madill, 2018). There are many areas for further investigation in order to truly understand enough about emotional labor in early education to begin to address this important challenge.

Some of the important questions to raise are related to the concept of burnout as a consequence of engagement in emotional labor. Do early childhood educators experience burnout along the lines of emotional exhaustion, indifference, and personal effectiveness as described by Maslach and colleagues, or are other nuances present (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Maslach et al., 1996)? What factors contribute most to the burnout and job stressors of early childhood educators? How does emotional exhaustion relate to emotional labor as described above? Researchers can also incorporate the literature on emotional labor strategies in investigating burnout and job stress for early childhood educators. Early childhood educators provide significant emotional labor for the children placed in their care, modeling and relating in emotionally healthy ways. To this end, an explicit focus on understanding how early educators use surface and deep acting in response to emotional labor (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Diefendorff et al., 2005) would allow scholars to measure the amount and effect of emotional labor for early.
childhood educators. Including emotional labor in studying burnout and job stress among early childhood educators would allow researchers to understand the relationship between burnout and surface and deep acting for individuals in this career.

The final dimension that scholars should incorporate in studying burnout and job stress among early childhood educators focuses on mindfulness. Based on the research presented above, mindfulness has been shown to be an excellent emotion regulation strategy. Further, mindfulness has been demonstrated to aid in coping with stress. Research on mindfulness for early childhood educators can begin by focusing on understanding the relationships between burnout, emotional labor strategies, mindfulness. One pressing question is: Does mindfulness mediate the relationship between emotional labor strategies and burnout for early childhood educators? Determining the nature of this relationship will form the basis of developing some interventions for early childhood educators. These strategies seem to hold great promise, but much more research is needed to understand the experience of emotional labor in United States early childhood settings so effective interventions can be developed and used to support teachers.

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