

“I’m a Teacher, Not a Babysitter:” Workers’ Strategies for Managing Identity-Related Denials of Dignity in the Early Childhood Workplace

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Abstract

Through in-depth interviews and fieldwork with early childhood educators, we build upon previous research that examines how workers in devalued occupations transform structural conditions that threaten their dignity into resources with which to protect themselves. We examine the work experiences of teachers in four distinct work contexts: daycare centers and within elementary schools, each in either the public or private sector. We find that different school organizational contexts shape what kinds of identity challenges early childhood teachers experience on the job and what kinds of identity strategies they develop to recover their dignity at work. Different organizational contexts not only subject teachers to different threats to their work-related identity but also have different potential identity resources embedded within them that teachers can use on their own behalf. Thus while all the early childhood educators struggle with being employed within a devalued occupation, the identity strategies they develop to protect their self-worth varied across employment contexts. We show that the strategies these interactive service workers use to solve identity-related problems of dignity at work involve the creative conversion of constraints they face at work into resources that help them achieve valued work identities.

Keywords: work identity, dignity at work, organization and work studies

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Introduction

“The teachers are all Black or foreign. Not many of the students are. Sometimes I feel like [the parents] think -- and I don't know if this is about race, or they just know what income we make -- it's almost like ‘Aww, we know [that you don't make much].’ A lot of the teachers will say, ‘Oh yeah, my parent took me out to such-and-such restaurant.’ And I'm like, ‘Okay. I don't need anybody to take me out to a restaurant.’ But to me, that's not your job. You're a teacher, and if you want to be respected like a teacher and not a babysitter ... unless you say, ‘I'm a teacher. I'm not a babysitter,’ it can be like we're the help.”

-- Rachel, early childhood teacher in a private daycare facility

How people in particular jobs react to, resolve dilemmas within, and shape the boundaries of their work is an integral part of supporting motivation, meaning, and feelings of self-worth in the subjective experience of a job. As Rachel articulates above, as a teacher of young children she may understand herself as a *teacher*, but is often treated like something else by her “customers.” This is a dilemma of identity that is not necessarily unique to Rachel and other early childhood educators but one that workers in stigmatizing or devalued positions face often as they carry out their jobs. Problems of identity at work can take several forms: when workers must follow routines that suppress their selves; when workers must be someone at work that they do not want to be; or when workers must cope with the low public regard for the work they do (Leidner 1993). This study focuses on the third kind of identity problem, one that Hodson (2001) has described as a denial of dignity at work.

As Hodson (2001) explains, the pursuit of dignity at work conceptually represents an antidote to Marx, Durkheim, and Weber's fears about the damage that work and workplaces can do to people and society. Dignity – defined as a feeling of self-worth or self-respect (Snow and Anderson 1987) – can mitigate alienation from meaningless work, protect against anomie from dehumanizing work, and transcend rigidities of over-bureaucratized work. All jobs carried out in organizational structures contain challenges and opportunities to restoring one's dignity, though the challenges and opportunities vary by kind and degree (Hodson 2001; see also Hughes 1971). Workers navigate challenges to their dignity in order to survive, persist in, and ideally, find ways to enjoy their jobs.

Historically, two broad schools of thought have shaped scholarly approaches to understanding how and how much workers are able to navigate and resolve the identity problems named above. First is research which tends to focus on organizational constraints in working conditions; second is a group of studies that focuses more on workers' agency or behavioral adaptations to identity challenges. The first approach contends that in settings where workers lack control over their working conditions, the inevitable result is low job satisfaction, low motivation, and the experience of alienation (Hackman and Oldman 1980; Seeman 1959). This approach focuses on the institutional conditions that generate identity challenges and in most of these formulations, there is little or no latitude for workers to remedy identity problems of stigma and powerlessness. The second approach focuses on worker agency in navigating occupational challenges. This research examines workers' behaviors that actively shape their own identities, often in ways that defend themselves against uncertainty or devaluation at work (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Dutton, Debebe, and Wrzesniewski 2014; Pratt et al. 2006; Rogers 2000). In the behavior approach, for example, some empirical studies find that workers engage in the creative re-appropriation of environmental constraints into resources, sometimes by engaging in small-scale resistance to control (Hodson 1995; Roy 1959; Burawoy 1979; Scott 2008).

In this study, we build upon the latter tradition, empirical work that examines workers' strategies to transform structural constraints into resources for recovering or safeguarding their dignity at work. We ask, how do workers employed in a devalued occupation resolve job-related identity problems, and how and why do identity strategies differ between workers in different kinds of settings within a single industry? As we will show below using data from our interviews with and observations of early childhood teachers, regardless of particular context, in an occupation involving care work, there are numerous and regular challenges to workers' sense of worth. Within different contexts, however, the conditions of work vary significantly and lead to different kinds of "identity violations" (Pratt et al. 2006: 246) and different possibilities for workers to recover or "achieve" dignity (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001:185; Chen 1999:585; Cerulo 1997: 391).

Background

In this study we examine how workers employed in a devalued profession attempt to protect or recover their dignity at work. Below, we outline several bodies of literature. We start with research on structural constraints in the workplace then move to literature that focuses on workers' re-appropriation of these constraints for their own use. Actors' awareness of both constraints and opportunities in their workplaces is critical to identity construction (see Boden 1994:32 for a similar approach). We conclude with a review of the literature on identity processes in the workplace and an overview of the early childhood context.

Structural Constraints. Scholars who have studied structural constraints in the workplace often focus on questions of control: how much say do workers have over what work they do? While the struggles over control manifest differently across occupations, as Hughes (1970 in Hughes and Coser 1994:70) puts it, "if a certain problem turn[s] up in one occupation, it [i]s nearly certain to turn up in them all."

Historically, many classic social theorists such as Marx conceptualized the structure of control as a *bilateral* struggle between worker and manager (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Kunda 2006). The bilateral framing, however, misses the nature of the *trilateral* struggle for control involved in many interactive service professions (Leidner 1993; see also Freidson 2001). In these occupations, there are workers, managers, and service-recipients. Early childhood teachers are positioned within an even more complicated *quadrilateral* struggle for control. This complex configuration breeds unique relational tensions, as the teachers must balance the wants, needs, and demands of their fellow (sometimes co-) teachers, the management, the parents, and the students (e.g., Wrigley 1995; Lareau 1989; Lewis and Forman 2002; Uttal 2002). While parents are a key constituent exerting influence over their child's care, they are not the true "service-recipients;" students are. Relationships with clients (here, students) can either be a source of enjoyment or dismay for early childhood educators depending on how much control workers have over those relations (Cohen and Sutton 1998; VanAusdale and Feagin 2001).

Workers' Agency: Behaviors that transform constraints into resources. While workers find themselves enfolded in structural constraints at work, they usually retain some ability to move within them, respond to them, and even use them to create and defend for themselves “spheres of autonomous activity” (Hodson 1991:61). In fact, worker responses to control are the starting point for any pursuit of dignity at work (Hodson 2001). For example, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) show that while work contexts exert regulation over workers’ identities, workers respond to these demands quasi-autonomously, by engaging in identity work. Worker responses of compliance and refusal to comply each qualify as different forms of identity work. Similarly, in his interview study of manual, clerical, semi-professional, and professional workers, Hodson (1991: 47) finds that across these occupational groups, “active workers” engage in behaviors that advance their own agendas (in resistance to competing managerial or coworker agendas) and protect their identities as autonomous adults. Forms of resistance include gossip, sabotage, withdrawal, foot-dragging, “making out,” and brown-nosing.

Scholars have identified the large and small ways workers respond to the structural constraints they experience in their day-to-day work that create identity challenges. By crafting strategies of control, resistance, compliance, or creativity, workers can derive self-efficacy and protect their identities (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983; see also Gengler 2012; Wilkins 2008). For example, in Rogers’ (2000) study of temp workers, she finds that these workers enhance their esteem by using strategies such as telling coworkers cover stories about how they are not really a temp, or comparing themselves favorably to other, poorer-quality workers. One important strategy workers use is to transform identity challenges within the workplace into resources that help them recover their dignity. For example, in Maroto’s (2011) study of people apprenticing to become body piercers and tattoo artists, these workers cope with odious tasks by justifying them as a means to an end: professionalization. These strategies show how devalued workers strategically reconstitute a valued identity for themselves.

While interactive service work provides many challenges to workers’ identities, complicated power dynamics between constituents may also enable transformations of constraints into resources, giving workers leverage in protecting their own sphere of autonomous activity. For example, if the

primary struggle for power is between workers and service-recipients (i.e., customers), then workers can ally with managers and accept managers' rules if these protect workers and give them leverage in their interactions with service-recipients. This is what Leidner (1993) found in her ethnographic and interview study of insurance agents and McDonald's workers.

Identity Processes in the Workplace. Exploring work identities is important as it gives us information about workers' experiences on the job, their satisfaction and turnover, and the employing organization's performance (Ashforth et al. 2008; Pratt et al. 2006; Hochschild 1983; Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001; Elsbach 2004). These work-related identities can be nested at multiple levels of analysis: occupational, organizational, institutional (Walsh and Gordon 2008; Selznick 1957; Friedland and Alford 1991; Albert and Whetten 1985; Glynn 2008). Here we focus on the individual level. An occupational identity, according to Ashcraft (2007:13), is a repertoire of narratives that defines "what counts as legitimate work, what tasks matter more and why, [and] who 'naturally' belongs in particular jobs." Identity construction is the activities (including talk) that people use to create, present, or sustain personal identities (Snow and Anderson 1987). While identity construction goes on regularly, it can be activated by encountering an identity problem (e.g., a challenge to their dignity, or threats to the value of their work) in the workplace (Stets and Burke 2000). When this happens, we broadly conceptualize efforts by workers to recover or safeguard dignity at work – when the preceding denial of dignity pertains to an identity-related problem¹ – as *identity strategies* (see Figure 1).

We aim to shed light on identity formation processes in the workplace through our investigation of the influence of context-specific factors (such as proximate resources and sources of validation) on identity strategies. Specifically through a close examination of our respondents' narrations and interpretations of their workplace experiences, we uncover the different challenges teachers face and the different strategies they undertake for managing denials of dignity through identity processes.

¹ In Hodson's (2001) theory of dignity, there are also denials of dignity that are unrelated to identity. For example, mismanagement is one type of denial of dignity, and can include the absence of on-the-job training or poor scheduling skills, which have less direct implications for a worker's identity than managers criticizing an employee publicly. Each type of denial of dignity can take identity-related and identity-unrelated forms.

ECE as an Occupation and the Institutional Context of Preschools. The occupation of Early Childhood Education (ECE) makes an ideal subject for the study of identity processes at work because it is an example of extreme contrast to Pratt et al.'s (2006) study of identity among medical residents and Blair-Loy's (2009) study of executive women. Unlike these high-status professions, the low-status of care work involving young children is due both to the kind of work being done but also about who typically is doing the work. Not only do feminized occupations earn less net of skill demands for both men and women, but for occupations involving nurturance wages are even lower; England et al. (1994) identify this as sex discrimination in wage setting. The skills themselves are devalued because they are associated with a female's role. But there is a further intersectional wage penalty: in her historical analysis of the shift of care work from private settings to the public sector, Glenn (1992) finds that race-segregation within care occupations leads to differential valuation of care occupations/workers. The pecuniary devaluation of care work by gender (Reskin 1988; England 1992; England et al. 1994) is exacerbated by the tracking of women of color into this type of service work (Glenn 1992). While the shift from domestic work in others' homes to doing similar work in public arenas is beneficial to these workers in many ways (e.g., by finding a social support group in the workplace), the mostly minority female workforce in many care work sectors still work long hours for low pay and few or no benefits.

In addition to the salience of both gender and race to care work, another characteristic that distinguishes ECE teachers from non-care work occupations and professions is that the worker's authority in relationship to the service-recipient is not taken for granted (Etzione 1966). That is, the service-recipient and even those external to the worker/service-recipient relationship feel justified to question the worker's decisions and skills. Teachers as a semi-professional group are uniquely exposed to public scrutiny and external control of their performance (Lortie 2002). This exposure is potentially more extreme for ECE teachers whose work with young children can be perceived as low-skill no matter what credentials and expertise teachers bring to their work.

A further advantage to studying identity processes among ECE workers pertains to the wide variation of institutional contexts in which they work. This study takes advantage of the expansive

preschool/childcare market, in terms of different facilities' cost to parents, accreditation, clientele population, and workplace culture (Fuller et al. 2004; Davies and Quirke 2007). At least four general types of facilities exist in this market. Each of these four sectors is included in our sample, and each represents a different kind of workplace, with a greater or lesser degree of conformity to isomorphic pressures, coupling of policy and practice, and formal markers of legitimacy, such as accreditation (e.g., see Davies and Quirke 2007). First, publicly-subsidized daycare centers with programs such as Head Start provide preschool for children at a reduced cost. Started under federal social-welfare programs of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, Head Start still serves low-income families, uses a comprehensive cognitive and social curriculum, and today employs a 50:50 ratio of teachers with Bachelor's degrees and Associate's degrees (Entwistle et al. 1997; see also Head Start Act Section 648A 2007). Second, private daycare centers include local organizations or national chains of childcare providers that are often contracted by corporations as part of employee benefit packages. They provide childcare for long days, longer than a typical school day, some centers being open from 7:30 A.M. to 6:15 P.M. Third, public preschools are usually housed within k-5 elementary schools and are free of charge (though often optional, limited in number, and not guaranteed to all). Fourth, high-end private preschools are costly, have difficult admission standards, and are housed within upscale prek-6, prek-8, or prek-12th grade private schools.²

These contexts vary across a number of organizational and experiential dimensions as well. For example, unlike ECE teachers housed in *schools*, pre-primary teachers working in daycare *centers* are often especially marginalized as belonging to para-school, care-work organizations (Kim 2013).

Organizationally, daycare centers and schools operate under different bureaucratic rules. Centers are

² We do not include any license-exempt child care programs in our sample. While the U.S. Department of Human Services estimates that 15% of children receive care in settings legally operating without regulation, in Georgia, only one percent fall into this category (Administration of Children and Families 2013). We did, however, have a couple teachers in our sample who worked in what sounds like unregulated facilities earlier in their early childhood careers. In both cases, the teachers described strenuous, stressful working conditions and mismanagement (e.g., out-of-ratio classrooms or dishonest communications with parents at the organizational level). From their responses, we predict that teachers from these settings may respond to identity challenges by resisting management and allying with parents, drawing upon parents' resources to meet classroom needs.

governed by mandates that tightly regulate their accreditation whereas schools often operate with more flexibility and different rules. “Bright from the Start” is the name of a state-based license that assures that the daycare or dayschool facility meets adequate safety regulations and that its teachers have basic training in childcare. Another, more selective accreditation, not required but a marker of a higher-status facility, is the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). NAEYC is a professional organization that requires the facility and teachers to keep extensive documentation of quality teaching. Schools may seek out NAEYC accreditation or may be accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). SACS accreditation is held only by some public, prek-5 schools and by higher-end, private schools, which generally do not hold NAEYC accreditation. See Table 1 for a listing of schools in each sector and their accreditations.

The Study: Methods and Data

We conducted 27 in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews of early childhood care workers in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Henceforth, we label this whole group of workers “teachers” for the sake of simplicity but also because all of them identify themselves as either lead, co-, or assistant teachers, rather than as child care providers. All interviews but one took place in the teacher’s classroom or facility, and generally lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, with an average length of 66 minutes. Almost all were audio-recorded and transcribed,³ and twelve were supplemented with fieldwork in the form of one or two informal classroom visits and workplace observations (e.g., of conversations and interactions between coworkers).⁴ Twenty-five of the interviews took place over a 12-month period; two additional, targeted interviews took place a year and a half later.

As Tables 1 and 2 show, the sample is stratified and includes teachers of 2- to 5-year-olds (i.e., both preschool and preK teachers) across the four ECE work sectors in the metropolitan Atlanta area. The sample is 93% female, 63% black, 70% have BAs or above, and 67% have ten or more years of

³ Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, except for three of the interviews, when the teacher declined to be recorded (two teachers) or the recorder failed (one teacher). In these cases copious notes were taken.

⁴ Although the authors did not conduct interviews and field work together, we use the pronoun “we” throughout this paper for the sake of consistency. All participant names are pseudonyms.

experience in ECE. Fifteen informants teach preK (i.e., four-year-olds as the average age), while the rest teach the group immediately below that (i.e., two- to three- year-olds). Twenty teachers (74%) have moved centers/schools; of the seven who haven't, three have taught children of other ages within their same center/school.

Teachers were recruited through two primary means. First we accessed social networks to recruit teachers in settings where we had contacts (often because we knew someone who had a child in the setting). We also used snowball sampling to access additional teachers through these initial contacts. Second, we also recruited through in-person visits by the first author to schools where we had no prior connections. In these cases center directors were typically very helpful in informing employees about the study and putting us in touch with potential participants.

The interview protocol asked questions about the preschool program's working conditions (including the teacher's work schedule, daily tasks and duties, access to professional development opportunities) and the teacher's reflections on his/her work (choice of vocation, the hiring process, relationship with colleagues and parents, and work experiences at other facilities). Field notes supplementing the interviews focused on teacher dispositions during the interview, a description of the physical school setting and the spatial set up of the classroom, and in the case of classroom observations, teaching behaviors, such as the nature of teacher-student interaction and conversation, and the interaction of and division of labor between lead and assistant teachers. Thus, almost half of our interviews were ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979), which allowed for the interviewer to ask informal follow-up and verification questions based on previous observations of the teacher's practices and interactions with others.

Analysis. Research memos were written throughout the interviewing stage, which documented the initial patterns we noticed emerging from the interviews (Lofland et al. 2006). For systematic analysis, interviews and field notes were coded in MAXQDA using a progressive, two-stage coding technique. In the first cycle of coding, initial codes were done in a line-by-line fashion, resulting in an elaborate coding scheme that identified several major areas that could have taken this grounded-theoretical project in

different directions. The nine main codes and 315 subcodes were used to generate 3,773 coded segments. Major code categories included teacher identity and occupational beliefs; workplace environment; working conditions (including student, parent, and colleague interactions and daily work tasks involving paperwork); curriculum and pedagogy; issues of diversity in the school; work satisfaction/dissatisfaction; and turnover and mobility between schools. For the teacher identity code, we used Sell et al.'s (2013) educator/custodian indicators as a starting point, and extended the concept to form two subcodes for the "workplace environment" category: daycare-oriented environment and school-oriented environment. These were initial codes and coding was done by the first author.

In the second cycle of coding (Miles et al. 2013), codes were focused and consolidated (Charmaz 1983). The focusing of codes for the purpose of making comparisons was guided by the two categories of teacher identity and working conditions emerging as predominant in the first cycle of codes, which was consistent with the themes emerging in our research memos. We then noticed that identity problems, resources, and validation mechanisms similar to those conceptualized by the identity literature were present in these codes, and set out to examine whether identity problems, resources, and validation mechanisms varied systematically by school context. We selectively "activated" the transcripts in MAXQDA from each of the four school sectors, one set at a time (see Table 1). Identity strategy types emerged as we compared and contrasted components of the identity process across sets (i.e., school contexts). We noticed discernable patterns in how teachers within different contexts narrated the school-specific bureaucratic demands (e.g., paperwork requirements, procedures for getting certified, rules about what to teach) and parent interaction dynamics (e.g., gift-giving, challenging of expertise, requesting special accommodations for their child) they faced. These consolidated theoretical categories capture what are, for these educators, both challenges and resources: Parental Dynamics (good and bad); Bureaucratic Elements (paperwork, credentialing, curriculum regulations); Organizational Identities (faith in/criticism of); and Validation Mechanisms (e.g., professional accomplishments, licenses, parent or colleague support).

[TABLE 1 HERE.]

Findings

Because this study compares the structure of identity processes among teachers of young children across different work contexts, we organize our analysis by organizational type in which our teachers work: public daycares, private daycares, public dayschools, and private dayschools. Of course, these categories are not exact, but we use the term “daycare” to refer to facilities where the facility provides childcare for ages infant to preK. We use the term “dayschool” to refer to facilities where preK and/or preschools are part of prek-5, prek-6, or prek-8th school. “Public” refers to free or subsidized childcare; “private” refers to facilities requiring tuition.⁵

Initially, we had thought of these sectors differently, such that the distinction between a daycare and school context was more qualitative and subjective – e.g., does this place look like a school? Does this worker sound like a k-12 teacher? But in the data collection process, it became clear to us that the divide between daycare and school settings as they impacted teachers’ work experiences was much more objective in nature: a school, in workers’ eyes, was always about being in proximity to higher grades by sharing the same physical facility. We decided that an organizational level analysis was more fitting than a classroom level of analysis, because even if a teacher structured her/his classroom to look “schoolish,” s/he could not escape the organizational norms, expectations, and influence of the facility at large on her/his identity processes. For example, workers’ interview responses evidenced that their experiences with parents were influenced by parents’ fundamental orientation to the facility as being a “real school” or a para-school organization, not to the teacher’s classroom and practices in particular.

In the sections that follow, for each school context, we first explore how teachers describe the identity-related denials of dignity they experience at work. To capture the nature of these denials of dignity in each organizational context we focus on a single teacher as a prototypical representative teachers in that setting. We also integrate quotes from other informants in similar settings, and we report the frequency with which teachers in that group convey similar experiences. Second, we identify the setting-specific “identity resources” teachers draw on in the dignity-recovery process (Stets and Burke

⁵ Though some of the private dayschools do provide limited financial aid to families.

2000; see also Alvesson and Wilmott). Thirdly, we examine the pattern of what we call “identity strategies” (efforts by workers to recover or safeguard dignity at work) the teachers deploy within each setting. An overview of identity strategies is summarized in Table 2 below.

[TABLE 2 HERE.]

Public Daycares.

The three public daycare facilities included in our sample, Strong Oaks Child Care, Little Flower Learning Center, and the Family Community Center, share some basic contextual similarities.⁶ They each serve an almost exclusively black and Latina/o student and parent population, and are located in the lowest-income neighborhoods of any of the preschool facility types. Two of the facilities are NAEYC accredited. Family Community Center, the center we focus on here, is in a large, new, two-story facility that stands out from its surroundings, which are industrial, littered, with many abandoned buildings.

Lauren works at the Family Community Center. An African-American woman in her 50s, she spent the majority of her career before ECE as a flight attendant. She graduated from college with a Bachelor’s in Early Childhood Education but thereafter choose to go into what she described as “higher-paid” work. She returned to teaching after her hours and benefits at the airline were reduced. When we arrive in Lauren’s classroom one day for our interview, she is sweeping the linoleum floor after the school day is over. Meanwhile, her assistant, a black female in her early twenties, is replacing the cotton coverings that go over the students’ naptime cots with fresh ones that have just been laundered. Cleaning is one of Lauren’s daily work activities. Her work with toddlers (two- and three-year-olds) means her day is filled with managing bodily fluids (she must facilitate and document four potty breaks a day for each child). In addition to having days filled with cleaning and having potty breaks, Lauren also must contend with significant oversight of her classroom and many bureaucratic challenges to her autonomy. As she put it, “Anyone who comes in and sees you’re not doing your lesson plan, you’ll get in trouble. But sometimes you want to deviate and you can. It seems like someone’s coming in almost everyday.”

⁶ The fourth facility, Bainbrook, is different because only a portion of its programming is non-tuition based, which is less typical of public early childhood settings.

Despite these identity challenges, Lauren views herself as a teacher first and foremost and as one of the best teachers in the school. As we illustrate below, her ability to achieve a positive personal identity at work is in large part because of her success in transforming challenges into identity resources.

For example, heavy paperwork requirements are a central part of Lauren's daily work, and she uses these requirements as identity resources for recovering her dignity. Lauren goes above and beyond when it comes to fulfilling what she calls her "all consuming" paperwork tasks. She gives more time to filling out paperwork, in fact, than the workday will allow. She types up the documentation on what children do everyday – as part of Head Start and NAEYC requirements – every weekend at home. To illustrate, she waves a fat folder in the air, which she says is 200 pages worth of documentation of child assessments and daily behavior reports, on one of her students. "I am very good at it. I am very organized. I was up for teacher of the year last year," she says. Her skill and commitment to completing required documentation is, for her, evidence of competence. While Lauren was not uncritical of "all the double-dotting and double-crossing," she does not resist it. This sense of competence she achieves from doing paperwork well is not without costs as it requires lots of extra legitimating work. This is consistent with worker behavior theories which posit that employees engaging in job crafting may be creating more work for themselves, even if their choice to execute it that way is voluntarily (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001).

A second denial of dignity Lauren described in her work pertained to her interactions with parents, which she described as devaluing.

JN: Do you feel that parents value your work? How do you know?

Lauren: No. Some parents verbalize their appreciation, but for me, appreciation is one that's not just about being nice to the teacher. I would appreciate if a parent acknowledges how I am teaching their child, not just taking care of their child. A parent can appreciate that I take care of her child, but not about how I teach her child.

Lauren sees her relationship with parents as problematic, mostly because they view her work exclusively as being about care and supervision, rather than education. Many of the parents are young, and, in Lauren's view, not competent parents themselves. While past research in elementary schools has found that teachers who work with working-class and poor families are often treated as professionals or experts

(Lewis and Forman 2002; Lareau 2000), Lauren does not enjoy this relative regard; even as parents “appreciate” her, according to her, they fundamentally misunderstand what is valuable about her work. This is an identity problem particular to this context that a majority of teachers in public daycare settings experienced.

Lauren responds to challenging interactions with parents by positioning herself as an expert vis-à-vis unappreciative parents and the organization itself. For example, she sees the Family Community Center as working against itself by having policies that enable parent irresponsibility, such as providing diapers so parents do not have to bring any in, and by having unstructured before- and after-care services. In this way she actually partly forms a work identity that is in opposition to the organizational identity of her employer. She furthers this by contrasting herself with incompetent parents and teachers’ assistants (though not her own—she is careful to select and demand to work with an assistant of whom she approves). For example, Lauren contrasts herself from young assistant teachers in her workplace who lack professional behaviors, such as proper dress and diligence.

The chosen way in which Lauren takes pride in her achievements at work requires careful attention to documentation. In this way, daycare teachers aim in their relationship with students not so much to satisfy their students, but to fulfill bureaucratic requirements. What teachers like Lauren aim for is to do their instructional work correctly; they refer less often to having fun with interacting with the students than teachers in other contexts do. It is in the paperwork that teachers verify the quantity and quality of work they have done. While Lauren expressed great exasperation when she waved the fat folder of student files around, she was also *showcasing* her good work. *Showcasing* is the identity strategy she and teachers in her context used to transform the structural conditions in their work, which threaten their dignity, into resources with which to protect themselves. Lauren recovered a sense of dignity from overwork and low autonomy by taking pride in a job well done (Hodson 2001). Four of the seven teachers in our public daycare sample expressed something similar. These teachers use paperwork requirements in their work as ritual classifications (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio 1987) to establish the legitimacy of their work. By using the strategy of showcasing, Lauren safeguards dignity in her work through the

creative re-appropriation of her structural conditions. She deflects demeaning treatment from unappreciative parents and meaningless overwork by engaging in organizational citizenship. The conditions that create identity problems in her work are transformed into the resources she uses to restore dignity to her personal identity. In this way, identity processes are structured by the work context.

Private Daycares.

Littleton Preschool is tucked inside a middle-class neighborhood, sandwiched between a church and shops and restaurants which many pedestrians frequent. Well-maintained homes line the narrow surrounding residential streets. Walking up to the door of the preschool, we pass by a large, colorful flowerbed. The building is secure; we must be buzzed in. Entering Gabrielle's spacious and sunny classroom, its walls teeming with handmade posters and framed pictures of students and their families on the wall, and plenty of toys and books on display and materials organized throughout the room, we note how different this is from the minimalistic classrooms in the public daycares.

Gabrielle has been working in ECE for more than 25 years, first working as a "floater" to fill in in many classrooms, then with infants for 12 years, and now as a lead teacher in her preK classroom. An African-American woman in her 40s, she has an Associate's degree in Early Childhood Education.⁷ At Littleton Preschool, her student demographics are approximately 75% White, and 25% Asian, African, and Hispanic. She wears khakis and a polo shirt, a uniform worn by all teachers in the building. At first, she resisted being interviewed and took issue with the lack of a payment incentive and being called a research subject on the consent form, but decided to participate at the last minute because she said, "My daughter is in college, and she might need to do an interview too, so that's why I decided to do it for you." She asked if, after visiting her classroom, we would write her an informal evaluation for her to put in her teacher portfolio. Gabrielle's reaction to our request to be interviewed is indicative of how teachers in private daycares handle identity problems in general: at first self-protecting but ultimately

⁷ We contend that Gabrielle's work experiences are par for the course among private daycare teachers, as Rachel and Riley, teachers with less experience but who have their Bachelor's degrees, expressed mostly similar identity problems, resources and strategies as Gabrielle.

accommodating, using regulations for teacher evaluation in her workplace as leverage in the pursuit of dignity.

Gabrielle's daily work activities are similar to Lauren's, except that she does not do cleaning tasks (e.g., a staff person comes into the classroom and serves the children breakfast and lunch). How Gabrielle does the documentation of student behavior and activities is also different from Lauren's daily behavior logs. Firstly, Gabrielle finishes the documentation during workday hours. Gabrielle spends an hour every morning compiling student portfolios, which includes sorting photos of students from the previous day's activities, notes she and her assistant wrote on students, and filing samples of student work in seven different domains of learning. She has this time organizationally set aside for this purpose, including coverage from a paraprofessional who meanwhile supervises the children outside the classroom and handles check-in and greeting parents.

Teachers describe their interactions with students as nurturing and fun, with few discipline problems, and their individual interactions with parents as fairly cordial. But parents as a collective can play an ominous role; for teachers, the specter always exists of getting on parents' bad side. Out on the playground one day during recess while we supervised the students, Gabrielle tells us how this year, the students were split across the two preK classrooms instead of all in one, and that hers filled up first. Parents had requested to have her, based on her good reputation among other parents and their word-of-mouth to one another. "The parents are close here," she said, "which can be good...or, it can be dangerous." We asked her to clarify, and she said that a mass of parents can support a teacher, or be a nightmare to the teacher. At this center, the parent's way goes. When parents complain about a teacher, they often skip discussion with the teachers and bring their gripes to the director. Working in a different private daycare, Riley also discussed the challenge of parental limits to teacher power. Parents in her center went to the administrators and asked to have teacher workdays removed from the school calendar, so that parents would not have to make other childcare arrangements. Through these experiences, teachers in private daycare contexts often came to see parents as adversaries.

Gabrielle's "dangerous" comment illuminates both a problem and a resource for teacher identity. The problem is that parents exert managerial-type control over teachers' work. This problem can function as a resource when teachers in these settings develop consensus with one another about defining parents as an out-group. They can then collectively determine appropriate levels of relationship with parents. Gabrielle appears to be a leader in her school (via her tenure and her nickname as "queen") who socializes her coworkers to be cautious of parents. She contributes to coworker relations that encourage benign (in their view) ways to resist parental control. Because active parents who regularly intervene with school administration pose a unique threat to teacher autonomy, dignity, and identity, teachers in the private daycare contexts see organizational standards and on-site certifications as giving them access to a feeling of vocational expertise. As Rachel in the opening quote of this paper says, "I am a teacher." She articulates her occupational membership in order to differentiate herself from a lower group – "not a babysitter." For teachers who moved from first working in a lesser-accredited facility to one with better working conditions, they were also prone to embrace accreditation requirements (such as licenses, certification requirements, and curricula guidelines) as status-boosters rather than view them as constraints. Riley tended to take *an uncritical view* of the accountability systems circumscribing her work; for her, regulations in her work aided her self-image as a competent teacher doing important work, as well as provided job security, lower student ratios, and more interesting work tasks. This posture of faith in the organizational structure was true for eight of the nine teachers in this context.

To recover status losses incurred by their relational work with parents (and less often, students), Gabrielle, Riley, and Rachel (altogether 6 of the 9 teachers in this context) use the identity strategy of *subscribing* to aspects of their organization's structure as evidence of their own personal occupational legitimacy. *Subscribing* is the identity strategy these teachers used to transform the structural conditions in their work, which threaten their dignity, into resources with which to protect themselves. Teachers express buy-in to their school's accreditation (described above) as well as its particular curriculum/pedagogy. Tangibly, these elements refer to documentation procedures (i.e., paperwork), rules, and regulations to which teachers must adhere.

Public Dayschool.

Crestridge Elementary is a large elementary school surrounded by soccer fields in a mixed-income, gentrifying neighborhood. It houses three classes each of preK through 5th grade, and has a good reputation in the neighborhood and better accountability rankings than the elementary school about a mile away. The preK classes, which are filled by lottery, are always full. The demographics of these classrooms are approximately 60% Black and 30% White.

We meet Ilene, a White 34-year-old woman wearing a youthful blue dress with cowboy boots, for the first time in the cafeteria. She is there with her class. When we approach her, she engages us in conversation about the topic of our research, and she invites us to her classroom before we even ask. Ilene, who has a Bachelor's degree in psychology, has been teaching pre-kindergarteners (i.e., 3- to 5-year-olds) for 12 years. Ilene's daily, academic work tasks are similar to teachers in both sectors of daycare, except that she also keeps grades for each student. She uses the same student portfolio assessment system as Gabrielle, but Ilene submits it electronically and takes her documentation work home with her. Ilene explains the documentation process meticulously, describing student work as *data*. While Ilene does not complain about the heavy paperwork load that comes with the job, she does express frustration with the institutional ways her work is devalued in the school – being less compensated than other teachers, being the only group of teachers in the building who have to clock out or else be written up, and being treated as paraprofessionals. Rita, also a long-time, lead preK and kindergarten teacher in a public elementary school, shares a similar annoyance with school regulations that isolate ECE teachers from the rest of the teaching faculty:

Bright from the Start stuff was a bother. After so long, as a teacher, you really can teach the kids. ... Because according to the regulations, you can do this, not that. Which meant that it had to be operated separate from the rest of the school. This impacted us as teachers too because we felt cut off from the rest of the school, but we wanted to be incorporated.

As an unintended consequence, the regulations relegate early childhood teachers who work in public elementary school settings into a separate and low-status bureaucratic space, an experience shared by

three of the five teachers in public school settings. The regulations mark the teachers' work as separate from what is seen as the "real school," which has its own separate regulations for student learning benchmarks. Unlike the helpful, status-boosting role of paperwork, accreditation rules, certification requirements, and curriculum guidelines in daycare contexts, for ECE teachers in public school settings, school regulations negatively separate them from the larger school faculty and present work-related identity challenges which must be overcome.

Whereas curriculum refers to what is taught, pedagogy refers to how it is taught. Ilene does not subscribe to the types of pedagogies that teachers in private daycare do. Rather, she uses teaching methods that elementary teachers use, including differentiated instruction and pre- and post-testing to monitor student growth. She uses traditional teaching resources such as her school's subscription to Pearson textbooks for early literacy. She constructs lessons in small units that follow the textbooks, rather than by student- or teacher-selected themes that stretch across many months (the norm in the daycare contexts). In her work practices, she prefers to emulate those of teachers of higher grade levels. She finds a way to do so, "as long as [she is] meeting the standards" (i.e., school regulations for preK). However, since this audience of upper-grades teachers do not validate her performance, she turns to another resource who can: parents.

Ilene describes her interactions with students in the classroom as "fun," which was representative for teachers in this context as a group. Perhaps unconsciously, teachers' successful affective bonds with students created an advantage for them in their interactions with parents. Teachers spoke of how in earning their students' love, teachers gained the parents' respect. In Ilene's daily work, she interacts with parents heavily, as parents must drop off and pick up their children from her personally, twice daily. About half of the parents are what she describes as over-involved, middle-class stay-at-home-moms, some of them anxious first-time parents; the other half of parents are low-income stay-at-home-moms. Ilene is highly regarded by parents in the community. She derives a sense of occupational competence from the fact that parents request for their children to have her, and when parents of students in other classrooms see the projects she does posted outside her room, they ask, "How come my kid's class isn't

doing that?” Parents provide the positive feedback that Ilene esteems, through which her teacher identity is socially validated. While she cannot change the bureaucratic differentness (different rules and regulations) she has from the rest of the school, she can build a teacher identity based on a foundation of parental respect, just as the teachers of higher grade levels in her school can.

Parental respect provides Ilene with leverage to make demands of parents, which will enhance her own professional self-respect and sense of relational control. She describes refusing to fulfill parental requests for traditional care work, which are not part of her daily tasks.

We get that at the beginning of Pre-K. When they get to Pre-K, if you can say to [parents], ‘This is your kid’s school. Next year, you’re going to drop your kid off at the front door, and they’re going to walk all the way to the classroom [by themselves]. You don’t get a nap schedule. When you get the lunch box back home, whatever food is in there, that’s what your child did not eat. Whatever you packed, if it’s gone, your child ate it. I’m not going to have a whiteboard to keep track.’ I don’t want to deal with that.

When roles or tasks don’t meet Ilene’s standards for respectable and worthwhile work activities, she responds proactively by creating more meaningful, helpful, and dignifying work experiences for herself (Hodson 2001). She limits caretaking tasks that would make her dissimilar from her k-5 colleagues. By mirroring the design of work that her k-5 colleagues experience, Ilene both engages in organizational citizenship behaviors and safeguards dignity in her work identity. She refocuses some parents’ role expectations of care onto her own occupational expectations of autonomy, where *she* determines the terms of her own work. Because she works in the same school building as where her students will attend when they are older, Ilene can defer to her work context as justification for her assertions, making her communications with parents more effective.

Ilene gets a sense of her occupational identity from the act of *asserting* her “*real teacher*” identity with parents, thereby forging more appreciative relationships with parents who have lower class positions than herself, and more egalitarian relationships with parents who share her class status position. These relationship dynamics differ from what daycare teachers experienced with parents. *Asserting* is the identity strategy Ilene and other teachers in her context used to transform the structural conditions in their work, which threaten their dignity – such as varied dynamics with a diverse parent population and being

seen as separate by their colleagues who teach upper grades– into resources with which to protect themselves.

Four of five teachers in our sample in public schools used this strategy to resolve identity problems they encountered at work.

Private Dayschool.

Sierra Ridge School serves two-year-olds through eighth graders and has a student body of about 300. Tuition is between ten to seventeen thousand dollars per year. It is in a large brick building set near a major city street in a university neighborhood. This school, like all the private day schools in our sample, does not have NAEYC accreditation, but is accredited by SACS and numerous associations of independent schools. Student demographics in the classroom we visited at the school were 60% White and 30% Asian.

Cathy is a White woman in her 40's who has been teaching in early childhood for about 10 years. Before that, she worked in the design industry and initially did not intend to return to teaching after she dropped out of college, with a major in Education that she never completed. She got into the field when she had her own children, first volunteering in their preschool program. At Sierra Ridge School, Cathy's daily work entails relatively little paperwork – no fat documentation folders were in sight and anecdotal notes are not required. Her daily interactions with parents generally do not include parents approaching her with complaints, as administrators intercept and handle many of parents' concerns. However, teachers in this group are accustomed to competitive, highly educated parents with high academic expectations. Teachers regularly encounter parent demands for providing accelerated learning for their children. For example, a father of one of Cathy's students wanted his preschool-aged child to know fractions; another mother wanted her 3-year-old daughter to read. While most settings with professional-class parent clientele must manage high expectations (including some private daycares), the private dayschool teachers we spoke to did not experience those expectations as undercutting or threatening to their authority. As another private dayschool teacher put it, the high levels of parent involvement in her school are not a burden or cause for distrust, but rather a community asset, even for the teachers (Margaret). Confident in

their position within high-status schools, teachers in this context creatively re-appropriate this potential identity challenge by getting parents on their side.

Rather than resolving parent-driven potential identity violations by distancing themselves from parents or relying on organizational rules, regulations, and documentation to bolster their legitimacy and authority, teachers engage with parents as fellow professionals, on an equal level.

- AL: So how would you describe the kinds of parents and families at this school?
 Margaret: Um, they're very intelligent. They're well-educated. They're um, very engaged and very, um, how can I put this? It's very important for them to do everything they possibly can for their children. ... Um, I think in this population especially, we're respected and really um, become much more than a place to just drop off a child. We've become a part of their lives and vise-versa. ... And you know, I think, pretty much in every case where there is an issue with the parent or the family, once you scratch the surface, you get it. If there's a problem with us and they figure out what we're up to, and we talk through it, they get it and they're all things that can be resolved, because we all want the same thing.

Private dayschool teachers, in instances when they do talk directly to parents about the parents' concerns, "talk through it" with parents. It isn't that private dayschool teachers never experience parents as pushy or as testing their authority. Margaret, for example, acknowledges that parents taking issue with teachers' teaching styles is a common frustration teachers experience in their work. But private dayschool teachers mostly easily resolve these potential conflicts by asserting their professional knowledge about developmentally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy. Directors of private dayschools advise their teachers to promote themselves, to be proactive in parent/teacher relations and as full members of their high-status school communities they are able to do this mostly seamlessly. For Patricia, who teaches in a school like Cathy's, this means engaging in "parent education:"

I think a lot of the parent education we do is around the value of play that's more child-initiated, that even at home if they set aside just 20 minutes to follow their children's leads—but I think what happens, Amanda, as they're in the classroom and they watch it happening, then it's like, 'oh, so this is what it could be like.' But we put an inordinate amount of time and energy into our initial parent-teacher meeting and we show in lots of different ways the value of play both for the cognitive growth but also for the development of ideas, learning how to describe what it is they're doing, what it is they're feeling, that sort of social emotional growth. That's so important because unless that has been given a solid foundation, then they're not really open for the rest.

As Patricia's comment makes clear, parent education requires administrative and collegial support. Trusted administrators and colleagues were part of the re-appropriation process, in that they encouraged it and validated one another. As Sherrell noted, despite her occasional trip to the principal's office when parents in her class have registered a complaint, she has walked away from those meetings with feedback that confirmed that engaging with parents was part of the job. The principal urged her to see the complaint as part of the process rather than as a threat to one's own occupational competence. Sherrell also finds validation from the peer group of teachers she belongs to, noting that she welcomes parent pop-in visits, "because I'm comfortable in myself and my team that we're doing a good job and we have nothing to hide." Thus teachers in private schools not only operate with high levels of institutional legitimacy but have supervisors and coworkers who back them up. The teachers do not experience the need to defensively assert their authority with parents, or engage in protective limiting in their relationships with parents.

Here we label private dayschool teachers' identity strategy as *broadening*. We adopt Wrzeskenewski and Dutton's (2001) terminology here, as it denotes a widening of relational boundaries teachers set around their work. This is similar to Pratt et al.'s (2006) concept of identity enriching, an identity construction process through which professionals gradually come to recognize what their job entails, and embrace it. Through deploying this identity strategy of *broadening*, private dayschool early childhood teachers come to view parents not as a threat to the job but as an important part of the job. The term *broadening* thus captures how teacher's work identity gets extended beyond the initial service population so that the understanding of the boundaries of one's work gets expanded. In the context of *broadening*, parent behavior that in other contexts often produces a sense of identity-related denials of dignity becomes expected, manageable, and potentially helpful.

Five of the six teachers in our private school sample use an identity strategy of *broadening*. *Broadening* involves teachers more fully identifying with their employing organization and the community it serves, and having a broader social engagement with both their colleagues and with parents in their school communities than do teachers in the other contexts. These teachers draw on one of the key

resources of their organizational contexts, the members of the organization they are embedded in (parents, administrators, and colleagues), to recover from any challenges they face to their occupational dignity. These teachers respond to the wider societal cultural conditions that potentially devalue their work (which a few teachers spoke of) by expanding the limits of their relational boundaries with service-recipients (here, parents), and more fully identifying with the high-status employing organization and its clientele. Also, because these teachers do not face the daily, local challenges other teachers face, and because their work is not characterized by heavy paperwork, accreditation rules, or school regulations (see Table 2), broadening is the only strategy they need. The threats to dignity they encounter are more vague and abstract than those faced by ECE teachers in other contexts.

Discussion

In this paper, we investigate how different school organizational contexts shape what kinds of identity challenges early childhood teachers experience on the job and what kinds of identity strategies they develop to recover their dignity at work. Different organizational contexts not only subject teachers to different threats to their work-related identity but also have different potential identity resources embedded within them that teachers can use on their own behalf. Thus while all the early childhood educators we interviewed at some level struggle with being employed within a devalued occupation, the identity strategies they develop to protect their self-worth varied across employment contexts. We show that the strategies these interactive service workers use to solve identity-related problems of dignity at work involve the creative conversion of constraints they face at work into resources that help them achieve valued work identities.

Interestingly, while the nature of early childhood educators' interactive service work put them in relation to multiple groups (coworkers, managers, parents, students) on a daily basis, some were much more likely to be a source of identity challenge than others. For example, teachers in our full sample did not very often cite students as sources of either dignity protection or identity problems. Thus, students were not seen by teachers as a source of challenge or as identity resources to safeguard dignity in their work. A vast majority of teachers spoke affectionately of their students (89%), and rarely reported

students as a source of stress (22%). On the other hand, overall, teachers did not report very often that students themselves made their work interesting, meaningful, or enjoyable, with the exception of dayschool teachers (64% versus 25% of daycare teachers). Thus, while teachers routinely stated that they loved their students, this intrinsic reward did not appear to translate into a structural condition that teachers saw as an identity resource for safeguarding their dignity.

Neither did teachers very often cite abusive or incompetent management as a source of devaluation at work. Consistent with Hodson's study of administrative workers and waitresses (1991) and Leidner's study of insurance agents and McDonalds workers (1993), we find that struggles for control at work did not often play out as a direct clash between workers and managers, but as diffuse and symbolic (and sometimes concrete) struggles between workers and service-recipients (here, parents).⁸ To manage these challenges, we find that all teachers re-appropriated structural constraints in their working conditions into resources with which to protect themselves from assaults to their dignity. Specifically, teachers in public daycare settings use the strategy of *showcasing*, and those in private daycare settings use the strategy of *subscribing*, leveraging organizational structures such as paperwork, accreditation rules, certification procedures, or curriculum guidelines to restore status lost to them in their interactions with parents. On the other hand, teachers in public and private schools use strategies of *asserting* and *broadening*, respectively, in efforts to restore status lost to them by being excluded from the wider upper-grades teacher communities, or to leverage their authority and inclusion with parent communities, respectively.

We find that across the sample, teachers perceive the bureaucratic structures so rampant in the field of education – i.e., paperwork, documentation, accreditation, certification, and curriculum requirements – differently. We think this reveals something interesting about the relationship between workers' race/class match/mismatch with their service-recipients (i.e., both students and parents), and workers' attitudes about clerical aspects of work life. For daycare teachers, paperwork and accreditation-

⁸ An example of a diffuse and symbolic struggle for control can be seen in cases of private daycare teachers who engage in "making out" when they conceal information from parents (Hodson 1991).

related requirements functioned as tools of resistance, which meant that teachers neither had to withdraw from the organization's rules and management, nor directly challenge the parents. They could salvage pride in their work, by fulfilling paperwork or teacher evaluation requirements (sometimes to a "t") and by satisfying parents' demands without being completely controlled by them. In this way, the teachers remained "model citizens" in their workplaces, even when unappreciative parents, dangerous parents, or overwork (from the quantity of paperwork or numbers of children in their class) contended against a sense of control and dignity in their work. For school teachers, neither school-regulated paperwork nor accreditation- and certification-related requirements assisted in changing their work identity to be more valued; moreover, for the private school teachers, the presence of such requirements was virtually nonexistent. Teachers in school settings appeared to have more leverage with parents because of their shared class and/or race position with parents, possibly making their control strategies less noticeable and more effective than strategies that use a bureaucratic work-around to manage asymmetric status interactions (Gengler 2012).

In the course of analyzing transcripts by context, we also noticed that there were cases of teachers who did not fit the general identity strategies typical for their context. For exceptions like these, we explored what might account for variation within facilities. Space limitations have prevented us from presenting material on variations in identity strategies within each of the types of schools we have studied but it is important to note that we did indeed find variations. These variations often seemed to stem from a teacher's relative social class background diverging from their clientele's. This status gap led workers to perceive different challenges and employ slightly different variations on the strategies.

Implications for Theory and Future Research. Building upon literature that documents the strategies workers use to resist denials of dignity at work, our data illustrates how even within a single occupation, very different work settings lead to different work-related identity strategies. Future research should explore whether and how identity strategies are kept or changed when workers transition workplaces within an occupation, as well as the role of emotion in the strategies workers use to defend themselves against denials of dignity at work, or estrangement at work (see also Hochschild 2011).

More generally, our findings can be used to generate hypotheses for expected variation in worker responses to their experiences in other occupations and fields. The structural features underlying the variations in our observations included the presence of a “quadrilateral” model of control. This configuration includes a two-pronged service-recipient: one who makes the decisions about the service (which we will call the “service-decider”), and the other who receives the actual service (the “service-experiencer”). This arrangement produces something akin to a principal-agent problem between the service-decider and the worker, where the worker (agent) has asymmetric information about the service-experiencer and the service-decider (principal) gauges how much to trust the worker and, when necessary, takes steps to limit the worker’s power (such as by going over her/his head and complaining to the manager). Such tugs-of-war for control may result, in other occupations as in this one, in the actual receiver of the services not being focal to how the worker builds and protects her/his work identity. When the relational structures underlying one’s work are fraught with a principal-agent conflict, then we might expect other structural constraints in the work (such as paperwork or certification regulations, or even service-decider involvement itself) to become assets for workers, which they repurpose for the protection of themselves as valued workers. Based on our findings, conflict is higher where service-decidors and workers have dissimilar status backgrounds. Where the service-decider and the worker have more equivalent statuses (e.g., their social class and/or racial statuses), we expect principal-agent conflict to be lower in this case and for the service-decidors to be a vital resource for workers to reaffirm valued work identities for themselves.

Implications for Policy. One clear lesson from our data is that early childhood educators experience a number of challenges that stem from the general devaluation of their work. The group in our data who experienced the fewest threats to their identity were teachers in high status private schools who, while they recognized that there is general cultural disdain for teachers of very young children in the culture at large, personally derived relative status protection from their identities (and organizational experience) as teachers within a well-funded and highly-regarded school. Unlike public pre-k teachers whose working conditions were better than daycare workers but far worse than the k-6 teachers in their

schools (mirroring paraprofessionals), these private dayschool teachers operated as full members within their communities (including pay, benefits, support for the classroom, etc.). These teachers' experiences remind us that while it might be difficult to shift cultural dispositions towards education generally and teaching young children in particular, improving the conditions of work would go far to improving teacher's experiences, reducing their identity challenges on the job, and potentially drawing higher-skilled workers to the profession. Even if we are not concerned about the working conditions of these largely female teaching corps, growing scientific recognition about the importance of educational experiences during early childhood for long term brain development and educational success should challenge us to think differently about how this work is organized and rewarded. Widespread calls for universal pre-k will likely prove less effective than they might otherwise be if teachers in early childhood classrooms continue to be treated as care-workers rewarded with long hours, low pay, and significant challenges to dignity.

Limitations. As a cross-sectional, exploratory study, this study cannot make claims as to how the process of identity-formation strategies and the ensuing role enactments unfold over time. A longitudinal design may be better suited for this purpose. In addition, causal claims cannot be made as to what types of strategies for building work identities lead to the optimal performance outcomes (in terms of teacher work behaviors or organizational performance). Future research should attempt to strengthen the link between identity and practice by investigating a fuller range of worker narratives and behaviors within a work context with a larger sample and more fieldwork.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this is a study about how teachers who encounter challenges to their identity at work recover their dignity. Depending on the nature of the challenge and teachers' social position vis-à-vis their service-recipients, teachers will transform the identity problem they face into resources to resolve the problem. Drawing on interviews with early childhood teachers, we add to ongoing conversations in the occupational identity literature by showing how work identities are constructed within a single, devalued occupation across both high and low status work environments. By bringing in teachers'

perspectives on the organizational strains and supports they encounter in their workplaces, this study underscores that the work context influences identity strategies that Early Childhood Education workers use to build their work identities. We find that workers navigate their work identities by searching for the “open roads” for identity repair or enhancement that are possible within the constraints and available resources of a particular work environment.

One major finding of this paper is that workers can transform constraints into resources, at least as they apply to their identity-related problems. Educators, like other workers, are creative in their efforts to protect their dignity at work. Ideally, however, we might push to reduce potential denials of dignity by valuing and rewarding the work of teachers generally and early childhood educators more highly. Not only is the work that teachers do critical, but there is a growing body of evidence that when teaching itself is highly regarded, the overall quality of teaching improves along with educational “outputs” – student success (see Sahlberg 2010 on the “Finnish miracle”). Current political and societal concerns about defining and evaluating teacher quality in schools at all levels could benefit from understanding that developing quality workers may depend on cultivating workplace environments that at minimum protect workers from identity challenges and facilitate development of a strong sense of self-worth on the job.

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FIGURE 1. A Conceptual Framework Relating Identity Problems, Resources, Validation, and Strategies as a Process

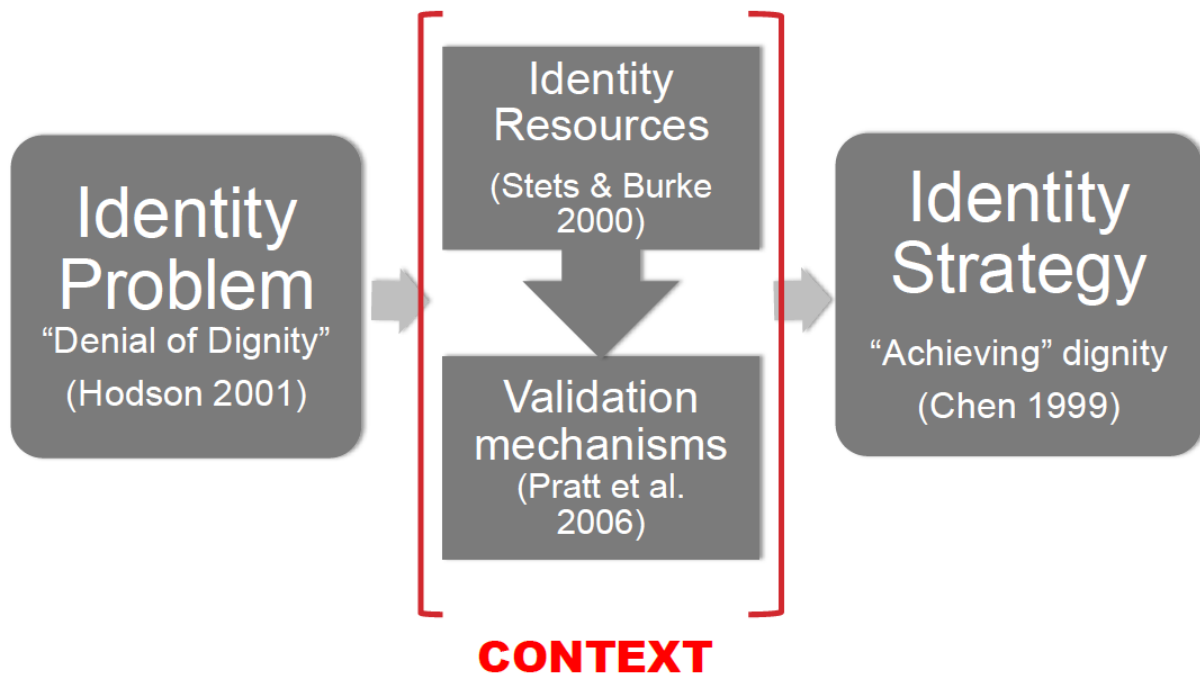


Table 1. *Interviewees' Demographics, Credentials, and Position, by Facility Type*

Teacher (pseudonym)	School (pseudonym)	Race	Age	Credentials	Age Group; Lead or Assistant
Public Daycare					
Lauren	Family Community*	Black	50's	BA, Elem. Ed	2s/3s lead teacher
Erica	Family Community*	Black	30's	BA	preK lead teacher
Monica	Strong Oaks*	Black	30's	CDA	preK assistant
Iris	Strong Oaks*	Black	40's	None	3s and 4s assistant
Natalie	Little Flower	Black	50's	CDA	2s/preK assistant
Renee	Little Flower	Black	30's	BA, Elem. Ed	3s lead teacher
Richard	Bainbrook Place [†]	White	40's	AA, Environmental Science	3's spec ed assistant
Private Daycare					
Rachel	Claiborne School*	Black	20's	BA, Marketing	Multi-age co-teacher
Yasmin	Claiborne School*	White	50's	BA, Economics	Multi-age lead teacher
Rebecca	Glenwood School	Black	50's	CDA	4's assistant teacher
Bethany	Glenwood School	Black	40's	MA, EC Ed.	4's lead teacher
Sarah	Littleton Preschool	Black	20's	CDA	2's lead teacher
Gabrielle	Littleton Preschool	Black	40's	CDA	pre-K lead teacher
Riley	Downtown Child*	Black	20's	BA, EC Ed.	pre-K lead teacher
Nancy	Quality Care	White	50's	MA, Ed. (C&I)	3-5's sole teacher
Natasha	Rising Stars	Black	30's	None	infants-6's sole teacher
Public Dayschool					
Rita	River Valley Elem. [†]	Black	50's	BA, Elem. Ed.	preK lead teacher
Ilene	Crestridge Elementary*	White	40's	BA, psychology	preK lead teacher
Allison	River Valley Elem. [†]	Black	40's	MA, counseling	preK assistant
Racine	Jonathan Walker Elem. [†]	Latina	40's	BA English, MA Ed.	preK lead teacher
Nigelle	Jonathan Walker Elem. [†]	Black	30's	BA and MA, Ed.	preK lead teacher
Private Dayschool					
Margaret	Yosemite School [†]	White	40's	BA	preK lead teacher
Sherell	Yosemite School [†]	Black	40's	BA	preK lead teacher
Celine	Yosemite School [†]	White	40's	MA, Special Ed.	3s-4s lead teacher
Patricia	Telluride School [†]	White	50's	BA	preK lead teacher
Gary	Telluride School [†]	White	40's	BA	preK lead teacher
Cathy	Sierra Ridge School [†]	White	40's	None	2-3's lead teacher

* NAEYC accredited schools

[†] SACS accredited schools

Table 2. *Identity Resources, Identity Validation, and Identity Strategies, by Context*

	Public Daycare	Private Daycare	Public Dayschool	Private Dayschool
Identity Resources				
<i>Parent Interactions</i>	Unappreciative 4/7	Dangerous, Patronizing 6/9	Helpful, Manageable 3/5	Academically demanding 4/6
<i>Paperwork, rules, and regulations</i>	Heavy 5/7	Moderate; Helpful 5/9	Heavy 4/5	None or few 4/6
<i>Organizational attributes</i>	Criticism 3/7	Faith 8/9	Exclusion 3/5	Identification 5/6
Identity Validation				
	Accolades, completed work 4/7	Institutional licenses, standards 7/9	Parent compliance 4/5	Collegial support and trust 4/6
Identity Strategy				
	Showcasing 4/7	Subscribing 6/9	Asserting 4/5	Broadening 5/6