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Research Article

Ethical leadership: Early childhood center directors' perspectives and practices in a migrant community

Tunde Szecsi[1], Melissa Rodriguez-Meehan[2], Jessica Essary[3], Eija Hanhimäki[4], Raisa Carpelan[5], Juan Cruz Dall'Asta[6], Isabel Fernandez[7], Elina Fonsén[8]

Abstract: This study explores dimensions of ethical leadership within the context of early childhood education (ECE) centers that serve families with migration experience in Florida, USA. The purpose is to understand what values and ethical principles are prioritized by the ECE center directors and how these principles are implemented. The datasets included interviews with six leaders at three centers about the directors' leadership, observations of the center's daily practices and reviews of policy documents. The data in this case study were analyzed by reflective thematic analysis. The findings indicated the directors' commitment and values regarding quality education to eliminate poverty, and their awareness of the cultural and experiential background of children in migration. However, some misalignments surfaced between the expressed values, ethical principles and the centers' daily operations, such as the limited presence of culturally responsive teaching. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how ECE directors balance systemic policies with the holistic understanding of children in migration.

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Ethical leadership; Early childhood education; Migrant community; Culturally responsive teaching

Introduction

Ethical Leadership in Early Childhood Education

Leadership has a significant impact on the quality of early childhood education (ECE) and the implementation of pedagogy (Cheung et al., 2018; Fonsén & Lahtero, 2024; Fonsén et al., 2022). Ethical leadership can be seen as a core of leadership, as values and moral beliefs underpin all action and decision-making of leaders (Ballangrud & Aas, 2022; Sergiovanni, 1992). Various value demands challenge decision-making processes between organizational levels, which may hinder value transmission between levels of practices and administration (Fonsén et al., 2021; Leinonen & Syväjärvi, 2022).

The ethical dimension is integral to educational leadership and with this emphasis on ethics, ethical leadership can be seen as a value-based activity with a moral purpose. In practice, educational leaders are expected to adhere to ethical and moral standards in their leadership (Fullan, 2003; Murphy et al., 2017; Shazia et al., 2020). A leader's actions and values cannot be separated in ethical leadership (Goddard, 2003) which can create effective and cooperative educational communities (Strike, 2007). Therefore, it is important to consider ethical aspects at the administrative level of ECE (Fonsén et al., 2021). The centrality of leadership values and moral purpose promote the well-being and success of educational organizations (Day, 2005; Hanhimäki, 2011, 2024; Merchant et al., 2012). Ethical leadership has the same goal as educational leadership: to promote moral behavior among employees (Shazia et al., 2020). Considering the connection between ethical leadership and moral education, it is important to acknowledge that moral and

[1] Florida Gulf Coast University, College of Education, Fort Myers, United States, e-mail: tszecsi@fgcu.edu; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1712-8954
[2] State University of New York, Brockport College, Brockport, United States, e-mail: mrodriguezmeehan@brockport.edu; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1477-2111
[3] Florida Gulf Coast University, College of Education, Fort Myers, United States,e-mail: jessary@fgcu.edu; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1258-1477
[4] University of Jyväskylä, Department of Education, Jyväskyl, Finland, e-mail: eija.h.hanhimaki@jyu.fi; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0982-7288
[5] University of Helsinki, Department of Education, Helsinki, Finland, e-mail: raisa.carpelan@helsinki.fi; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1925-6578
[6] University of Jyväskylä, Department of Education, Jyväskylä, Finland, e-mail: juancruz.da@gmail.com; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8897-9796
[7] Florida Gulf Coast University, College of Education, Fort Myers, United States, e-mail: iafernandez2403@eagle.fgcu.edu: ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5803-6424
[8] University of Jyväskylä, Department of Education, Jyväskylä, Finland, e-mail: elina.k.fonsen@jyu.fi; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2547-905X

Corresponding author: Tunde Szecsi

character education have existed since people started to think about the characteristics of the next generation and its education because "societies need moral members and children to develop into moral adults" (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006, p.496)

The basis of educational leaders' professional ethics lies in their values (Hanhimäki & Tirri, 2009; Hanhimäki, 2011; Heilala et al., 2024; Husu & Tirri, 2007). However, educational leaders' practices, often contradict the values and principles they seem to hold, and this contradiction in value demands impacts decision making processes and actual organizational behavior (e.g. Castner, 2021; Fonsén et al., 2021; Hanhimäki & Risku, 2021; Leinonen & Syväjärvi, 2022). In addition, leadership in ECE predicts turnovers, many of them caused by moral stress (Heilala et al., 2024). At the same time, well-functioning leadership enables timely recognition and handling of morally stressful situations and supports the wellbeing of the whole community. Thus, both preservice and in-service ECE leaders should receive preparation for handling morally stressful situations through developing their awareness of their values and value-based leadership work (Eisenschmidt et al., 2019; Hanhimäki & Risku, 2021; Heilala et al., 2024).

Early childhood education can be perceived as a part of a wider societal and educational context where children are educated for future democratic citizenship according to global ethical guidelines and values. For example, since 2015 United Nations' Member States have followed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2023). These goals aim to promote prosperity and protection of the planet by ending poverty, building economic growth and addressing social needs through education. One of the 17 goals is *quality education* that can contribute to ending poverty in a peaceful sustainable society. However, there are still many challenges to tackle before this goal is reached (United Nations, 2023). Ultimately, inclusive and equitable education calls for ethical leadership concerning the creation of an ethical educational community in which people "live well together and in which children learn how to live well together in the larger community" (Strike, 2007, p. 146).

Young Children in Migation[*] and ECE Service

Children in migration are defined as individuals who have moved across the country due to their caregiver's work in their childhood. In North America, many children in migration live in various rural, agricultural communities for the parents' seasonal work, and may experience poverty, language barriers, and limited access to services (Fakhari et al., 2023). For example, approximately 49% of the U.S. agricultural workforce, equating to approximately 2.5 million farmworkers, are undocumented (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022) which hinders their access to certain services due to lack of trust and fear of deportation. Common life experiences in these families and communities include a variety of familial, material, educational, cultural, mental health, and legal challenges. Research had extensively documented the needs and burdens of these families (Pulgar et al., 2016); however, less attention is given to the cultural and experiential wealth, the inner strength that these families hold (Smith & Johnson, 2022). Migrant families often exhibit a robust work ethic and high educational aspirations, imparting values of resilience and determination to their children, aiming to elevate their children's educational and career achievements (Smith, 2019).

To mitigate the challenges that families in migration face, quality ECE programs can promote sustainable societal peace and social cohesion by enhancing children's health, education, mental health, resilience to stress, and pro-social skills, with benefits extending into adulthood (ECPC, 2025). Historically, ECE for children in migration in the U.S. evolved from isolated practices (e.g. religious programs) to offer more opportunities for access (García & Frede, 2019). Research suggests that programs that build on families' cultural and experiential backgrounds have potential to contribute to children's development and well-being more effectively (Smith & Johnson, 2022). Thus, children in migration who have another tongue different from the country's main language benefit from quality multilingual programs which enhance

[*]Children living in migration contexts are human individuals living through childhood experience, first and foremost. Therefore, person-first language in this article acknowledges humanity above migration status (i.e. referring to *children in migration* instead of the common misnomer, *migrant children*).

children's cognitive flexibility and school readiness (Giambo & Szecsi, 2015; OECD, 2017). These program characteristics are aligned with UNICEF's *Agenda for Action* six priorities: protecting children from harm, ensuring access to essential services, keeping families together, preventing detention related to migration, combating discrimination, and promoting rights-based solutions (UNICEF, n.d.). Ethical educational leaders can mitigate the challenges families in migration face by providing quality programs that employ culturally responsive teaching which honors children's cultural and linguistic diversity.

Culturally Responsive Leadership and Teaching and in ECE

Culturally responsive school leadership refers to the act of school leaders engaging in and creating meaningful, valuable relationships with the learning community (Khalifa et al., 2016; Salazar Rivera, 2024). This approach suggests that family members and other actors in the community contribute to the education of children in a reciprocal and collaborative manner with schools. To achieve it, school leaders must engage in critical self-reflection to create culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy (Khalifa et al., 2016). In addition, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) emphasizes the importance of building teaching and learning on students' cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives (Gay, 2002; 2015; Howrey, 2020; Jantunen et al., 2025). From a pedagogical perspective, cultural responsiveness needs to be achieved not only by considering language and culture, but also by consideration for migration, and societal and economic status (Gay, 2015).

Early childhood professionals holding high ethical values play a vital role in supporting migrant families and their children's education in a culturally sustainable manner. While implementing the curriculum, ECE professionals can prioritize children's interests, previous knowledge and experience, and they can also integrate individuals from the local culture and actively collaborate with the community (Shih, 2022). Overall, the ethical stand which perceives diversity as an asset rather than a deficit is a key to enhancing sustainable, culturally appropriate action-oriented pedagogical practices. These pedagogical approaches consider social justice as a value that connects ethical leadership with culturally responsive school leadership and culturally responsive teaching, because ethical leadership has the potential for promoting social justice within organizations, such as early childhood centers (Chen et al., 2022; Gay, 2002; 2015, Khalifa et al., 2016; Lárusdóttir et al., 2021).

Leveraging the frameworks of ethical leadership and culturally responsive teaching in the context of education of children in migration, this study investigates ethical leadership in ECE centers in a rural migrant community in Florida. These centers serve predominantly children and families who immigrated from Latin American and who are mainly engaged in agricultural labor. To understand the ECE center directors' ethical values and practices with culturally and linguistically diverse children in migration, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the directors' views about the values and ethical principles that drive their leadership and decision-making processes in ECE centers in a migrant community?
2. How do the ECE center directors' values and ethical principles align with centers' daily practices and the documents that regulate the centers?

Method

Participants and Context

This case study took place in three ECE centers which belonged to one non-profit organization offering education to young children in this migrant town. The three centers served 443 children aged between six-weeks and five-years old. Almost all children in these centers were Spanish-speaking children from Latin America whose parents were farmworkers. Two of the centers (Center 2 and 3) achieved national accreditation, and the third center (Center 1) which served children of teenage mothers maintained the state accreditation. Requirements for ECE in Florida are determined and enforced by the Division of Early Learning (Florida Department of Education, 2024). The town where the study took place experiences significant socio-economic challenges, including poverty rates which exceed twice the national average,

and limited infrastructure and services (e.g. no hospital in the town), and a high reliance on financial aid for ECE services (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Convenience sampling was used to include professionals in leadership positions including directors, assistant directors, and curriculum directors in the three ECE centers. The participants included six ECE leaders: three center directors (Carmen, Fernanda, and Yesenia), two assistant directors (Carla, and Isabel), and one curriculum director (Jennifer) who worked with all three centers. All names are pseudonyms. Their experience as ECE leaders ranged from 6 months to 15 years. They were all Latina, bilingual in Spanish and English, except for the curriculum director (Jennifer) who was a Caucasian monolingual English speaker. All participants held bachelor's degrees in different areas including ECE, elementary education, and other fields. Two (Carmen and Fernanda - had master's degrees, and all had required credentials for a leadership position. In Florida, ECE directors must hold a current leadership credential, which requires the completion of the following: a high school diploma, a 30-hour training which includes Part 1 Department of Children and Families (DCF, 2025), Introductory Child Care Training, and eight hours of in-service training regarding children with disabilities. In addition, ECE directors must complete an approved childcare management course and possess additional experience and/or education courses focused on leadership and center management. A bachelor's degree is not mandatory but may be used to meet requirements (DCF, 2025).

Measures and Procedures

To answer the research questions, we used three sets of data: (1) focus interviews, (2) observation data, and (3) center-specific and state-required documents. The data collection took place between January and March of 2024. After the participants signed the Informed Consent forms, which were issued by the first author's university, we conducted one focus interview in each of the three daycare centers with the center directors for a total of three focus interviews. The curriculum director, Jennifer, was present for each interview. The structured interviews which lasted 45-50 minutes included seven demographic questions and 14 open-ended questions such as "What are the values you consider most important in ECE?", "To what extent and how are the pedagogical approaches that you utilize aligned with the pedagogies expected/regulated by the governing body(ies)?", "Are the expectations set by the state/governing body competing/misaligning to your values? If so, describe them." We also asked various follow-up questions, as were needed.

In addition, four weeks after the interviews, two members of the research team conducted a three-hour observation in each of the three daycare centers. This structured observation was guided by the categories and topics of the Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS) (Harms et al., 2017) and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms et al., 2014), such as (1) Space and physical environment, (2) Health and safety, (3) Activities, (4) Interaction, and (5) Program structure. These ratings scales are the most current, comprehensive and validated assessment tools which are frequently used both in the USA and other countries (Betancur et al., 2021; Bjørnestad & Os, 2018). In addition, the items on the rating scales addressed areas which aligned with the interview questions regarding the participants' views on ethical values. Therefore, the interviews that focused on the participants' view regarding ethical leadership and the rating scale items allowed us to understand the relationship and alignment between their views and their practices. We did not score the specific items of ITERS and ECERS, but we used the expected features in an ECE program and took holistic descriptive notes on the features. Then, we synthesized the observation notes independently, discussed them with the other research team members, and audio-recorded the negotiated meaning of the observation notes. The focus interviews, the observation notes, and the synthesized conversations by the researchers were audiotaped and transcribed. To triangulate these datasets, we compiled documents that these centers used for operations which were handbooks for parents, daily center schedules, centers' newsletters for parents, a curriculum, and state regulations for early childhood centers and state-required learning standards.

Table 1
Summary of Data Sources

Focus interviews	Observation data	Documents
Focus interviews (N=3): Center 1: 2 directors* (Yesenia, Jennifer) Center 2: 3 directors* (Carmen, Carla, Jennifer) Center 3: 3 directors* (Fernanda, Isabel, Jennifer) *The curriculum director attended each interview Length: 45-50 minutes each and 20,450 words of the total transcript	*Three-hour observation notes in each center (N=3):* Total length of observation was 9 hours and 9,789 words, and 115 minutes of audio recording of the synthesis conversation based on the observation notes	*Center-specific documents:* Handbooks for parents Daily center schedules (N=3) Centers' Newsletters (N=3) Creative Curriculum 6th Ed. (Dodge et al., 2016) *State-required documents:* Florida regulations/ legislation for Early Childhood Centers (REF)

Research Design

In this single instrumental case study, we examined the ECE directors' views on ethical leadership and practices. ECE centers in a migrant town in Florida. This study design is meaningful to gain a deep insight into the research questions by studying the case of these three ECE centers' directors' views, and practices related to ethical leadership with three different datasets (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Stake, 1995).

For data analysis, we used reflexive thematic analysis that involves engaging with the dataset in a reflexive, recursive way to produce a robust analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Usually, thematic analysis includes six stages: the creation of transcripts and familiarization with the data, identification of keywords, selection of codes, development of themes, conceptualization through the interpretation of keywords, codes, and themes, and finally, the development of a conceptual model (Naeem et al., 2023). The stages are guided by a systematic examination, interpretation, and reporting of a pattern-based analysis derived from a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, we analyzed the focus interview data to understand the directors' views about the values and ethical principles that drive their decision-making processes in ECE centers. After reading the interviews several times, we identified seven theory-informed codes such as physical environment, interaction, activities, expected outcomes, language, culture, and decision-making which we organized into themes after interpretation of the codes. To understand the directors' views on values in practices, we cross-examined these codes and themes in the observational data. This comparative analysis between the ECE director's views and practices related to the centers' everyday operations was used to uncover both alignments and contradictions. Then, to contextualize and validate the themes from the interviews and the observational data, documents such as state regulations, center operational documents, and handbooks were examined. The robust data analysis of the three data sources resulted in three main themes as responses to the research questions: (1) Importance of a safe, nurturing, and welcoming environment, (2) Commitment to the community with limited cultural congruence, and (3) Roadblocks leading toward value contradiction. The results of this study are presented according to these main themes.

Findings

Importance of a Safe, Nurturing, and Welcoming Environment

The ECE center directors expressed the value and prioritization of a safe, nurturing, and welcoming environment to ensure quality education which would empower children and families to fight against poverty. Both the interviews and the observation data demonstrated an emphasis on physical and emotional safety in peaceful, age-appropriate spaces. The directors demonstrated care and respect towards the children, applying structured routines and procedures. "I think the most important, it's the safety of the children. I think that's a top priority", described Jennifer, the curriculum director. Similarly, Carmen reflected on how she, as the director of Center 2, had to prioritize the children first, ensuring a "healthy environment" where "everybody here is safe and prepared", including the teachers. Safety was also discussed in terms of addressing the concerns of the children and families alike and effectively managing the center. For example, Carmen described how the administrators need to ensure all children have

immunizations and their physical exams, and the overall organization of the center contributes to the safety of the children and staff. The directors reflected on treating children with respect emphasizing emotional safety as well. Carla, assistant director in Center 2 stated:

> For me, I think for the kids, my value is that we make this a positive experience, a nurturing experience, and that we help them reach their full potential in a loving, kind, you know, and helpful way for the teachers.

Fernanda and Carmen emphasized respect for children to support the relationship between the teacher and the children. Fernanda, director of Center 3, discussed

> I think that when you respect a child, you're able to engage them better…you create that bond and that connection between (the relationship).

Carla shared similar views about respect and integrity as essential values to her,

> Treat them with love, with everything they need, they know how to make a difference…

..she stated.

The interviews, observations, and document analyses revealed alignment of an emphasis and prioritization of safety and care within the classrooms and among the teachers, staff, and children. Most classrooms were welcoming environments with various age-appropriate activities and play areas, excellent organization, good lighting, and clean spaces as described by the directors. However, some observations conflicted with the emphasis on safety. For example, in Center 3 the researchers observed a cleaning solution with easy access to children and a high stack of chairs that was almost twice the size of the children. The emphasis on high-quality care, and safe, nurturing, and supportive environments was prevalent in parent handbooks, which included a specific section on health, safety, and emergency procedures. Information on physical and immunization records along with a sick child policy was also outlined with details. The daily schedules of the classrooms highlighted the importance of opportunities for children to interact with the environment in a variety of ways. For example, children in Centers 1 and 3 were given multiple "choice time" periods throughout the day that allowed for self-directed activities within the play areas. Overall, the directors' values aligned with the prioritization of safety and care as seen through some of the documents provided, and the importance of health and safety discussed during the interviews and described in the handbooks.

Commitment to the Community with Limited Cultural Congruence

The directors expressed a deep understanding of families in migration and a sincere commitment to serving the children and families of this community. All directors had lived in this town for many years, four of them grew up in a family which migrated as they harvested the crops. Some mentioned their values for education grew out of extensive direct life experiences with the reality of migrant life. Although only Jennifer, the curriculum director, could recall the mission statement which focused on eliminating poverty for children and families through education, all directors showed knowledge, empathy, and passion for serving this community. For example, Fernanda, who had been working in ECE centers for 17 years, emphasized her close connection to the children's parents:

> I grew up here in this community, so a lot of people recognize me. I run into parents…then we will start a conversation. I would probably say like 20 to 30% of my time, I am interacting with community members.

She often met with other community organizations to discuss the needs of the migrant families and collaborate on solutions, e.g. local housing, and available resources. Yesenia, who was the director of Center 1 that offered daycare for the babies of teenage mothers to allow them to graduate from high school, emphasized the importance of quality childcare programs, assistance, and education for these young mothers. Her priority was to meet children's and families' basic needs first and interact with them respectfully. Isabel, who was an assistant director in Center 3 for only 6 months, described the family's experience and her commitment to them:

> Seeing the needs with my two eyes, not on the TV, parents that work in the fields, and how they [children] probably have the last good meal… here. And knowing that probably mom or dad are going to get off from work at seven at night. And then they [children] have to go home with their Auntie or somebody else and then wait for mommy. …the

> parents are going home and keep on going, you know, just working so hard. And then seeing myself on the other side, I just felt that I had to work harder just for them, for those kids. Because the parents come from another country, they are working really hard to move forward. For the children to have a better life. So that's something that really encouraged me to continue growing.

Although these directors were aware and knowledgeable about this community's life and needs, the observations and the reviewed documents failed to indicate pedagogical approaches responsive to the nature and characteristics of this community. In this town, more than 95% of families are Spanish speaking, out of which a significant portion of the population is relatively new immigrants from Latin America and earns wages below the poverty line. Although the Creative Curriculum (Dodge et al., 2016) which all centers use as the guiding curriculum, emphasizes bilingualism and cultural diversity, the classrooms and the activities during the observation had no connection to the Spanish language or any Latin American cultures. Except for teachers in the Infant room, all teachers in other classrooms used only English for communicating with the children, though all teachers were Spanish English bilinguals.

In the interviews, Yesenia acknowledged the importance of hearing the home language at the center as a comfort for the children, but she also stated that English was the language of instruction. This showed conflict between her personal beliefs and professional practices which were mandated by higher administration. The Florida licensure documents (Department of Children and Families, 2019) which included the mandatory standards for operating a childcare program had no expectations regarding cultural or linguistic appropriateness in a program. In addition, the informational materials for the parents, such as the handbook, and the newsletters and the messages including the daily schedule on the classroom board were all in English only. During the observations, there were limited indications or references to cultures other than the mainstream American culture either in the physical environment or in the interactions and activities. Multilingual and multicultural materials, books, and activities that would harmonize with the culture of children in this community were absent. Although not observed, Carmen, the director in Center 1 narrated approaches for respecting the cultural values of the families:

> Hispanic families… love to have children with long jewelry, they are part of the culture, for example a long necklace with their names, because relatives give it to them. But we know… they can be a hazard when they go to the playground. Even if we tell the parents please take that they say no, that is that is part of the culture. The only way that we can address that, because it's also religious… We always keep the necklace inside; the teacher makes sure that the necklace doesn't go out when they go outside.

All directors expressed their strong and genuine commitment to the betterment of children and families in migration and made some attempts to navigate between the cultural contexts of the children and ECE program. However, it seemed the centers' organizational structure with the daily implementation of the mandated curriculum hindered the realization of ECE professionals' values toward a culturally and linguistically responsive approach.

Roadblocks Leading Toward Value Contradiction

A hierarchical structure with a top-down approach, which the directors described, seemed to dictate and impact their decision-making which hindered the overall alignment between the directors' values and classrooms, interactions, and activities. The directors mentioned how expectations and accreditation processes are set by outside entities, such as The Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Early Learning Coalition, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and the Florida Division of Early Learning. These mandates and standards in Florida force compliance. The directors supported the state standards because they felt these expectations ensured children's readiness for school. However, the mandated assessments and extensive testing procedures required by the state of Florida raised concerns among the directors. They understood that compliance with these assessment requirements were prerequisites to receive funding from the state; however, they all discussed the stress and loss of educational time they experienced. These directors expressed that their values, such as integrity, transparency, play-based learning, and respect and love for children and families were often jeopardized by the need for compliance with state regulations.

In addition, the upper administration - board members for the non-profit organization - made

curricular decisions which were passed to the center directors, as described by Yesenia's words:

> Every quarter our senior director meets with our board members and our administration, higher administrators, and they set some goals for the year, and we just try to stick by those and hope that we could not only achieve them, but you know, go above them.

Jennifer, the curriculum director, echoed a similar process, describing how the broader organization set the expectations for the centers, allowing for ECE center directors limited involvement. The directors seemed disconnected and excluded from the decision-making processes, which might explain why they were unable to recall the mission and vision of the organization. Jennifer shared a specific example of one board member who required the centers to use a certain alphabet book created by his/her friend. Jennifer elaborated on the inappropriateness of the book due to the lack of "real pictures of different cultures", but she added that they needed to adopt the book because their budget relied on the donor's contribution.

Despite all these external pressures, the directors stated that the curricular decisions and pedagogical approaches that partially came from the upper administration reflected their values. Regarding these pedagogical approaches, Carla described integrating a "child-guided" approach, providing opportunities for the children's interests to guide instructional activities. She also emphasized how their "curriculum is play and exploration based". Yesenia also described hands-on, sensory, and playful activities which were guided by the Creative Curriculum (Dodge et al., 2016). In addition, Fernanda discussed how the curriculum mirrors her values when she could incorporate Conscious Discipline, a social-emotional learning program (Bailey, 2021) that used rituals and focused on children's feelings.

Although the directors described alignment in values with the curricular standards, expectations, and daily operations, the observations uncovered some contradictory events and behaviors. For example, in two centers (Center 1 and Center 3), there were neither music areas nor sensory tables (i.e., water, light, sand, etc.), which hindered children's participation in sensory and artistic explorations. Although books were displayed in each room, most were Disney princess books rather than more age-, culturally-, and linguistically appropriate books. In addition, literacy skills, e.g. writing, and letter recognition were encouraged and nurtured; however, the specific activities that we observed were scripted without allowing diverse responses, ways of expression, and creativity for the children. In certain rooms, e.g. in the infant room in Center 1, the interaction between caregivers and babies was warm, supportive, age-appropriate, and mainly in Spanish. On the other hand, in a room for 4-year-olds in Center 1, the lack of vivid, scaffolded interaction between teachers, staff, and children was noticeable. An emphasis on extreme structure, and scripted activities were often seen in several rooms in all centers versus an exploratory setting with flexibility and focus on children's interests. Overall, the everyday operation and the classroom environment often did not necessarily align to the values described by the directors.

Conclusion and Discussion

This case study offers new insights into ECE directors' ethical leadership principles and their alignments with practices in a specific cultural context. No prior empirical research examined ECE directors' views related to ethical leadership in a migrant community. This unique setting allowed us to consider the interconnection of ethical leadership and the culturally responsive teaching practices in a migrant community. Overall, this study calls attention to the critical examination of micro- and macro-environments in which ECE directors work and hold certain values and ethical principles. In addition, this study points to the timeliness of the topic of exploring values and ethical principles that determine pedagogical practices in a time of rapid political changes.

In this study, directors expressed strong commitments to culturally responsive teaching (CRT); however, systemic constraints limited their ability to implement these values fully. In ethical leadership, there must be interconnection between an individual's and communities' actions and the values they uphold (Goddard, 2003). Specifically, ethical leadership is closely tied to social justice (Gay, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016). The directors emphasized the importance of education for eliminating poverty for the families in this community. This moral principle aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and

the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which highlights quality education as a way eliminate the cycle of poverty (United Nations, 2023). Ethical leadership has a specific role promoting the well-being and success of educational organizations which ensure social justice and sustainability (Day, 2005; Hanhimäki, 2011, 2024). However, a conflict may emerge when leaders' values and values of external authorities such as governing boards differ, as was found in this study. This conflict between a leader's internal values and values from external sources has an impact on the whole organization's well-being (Heilala et al., 2024).

The directors in this study prioritized safe, nurturing, and inclusive environments for children, aligning with research that positions value-based leadership as central to ethical decision-making (Fonsén et al., 2022). However, directors faced institutional constraints that limited the full implementation of pedagogy that is reflective of the community. While they recognized the importance of maintaining children's linguistic and cultural identities, external decision-makers and state policy mandates and standardized assessments prioritized Englishonly instruction, reinforcing assimilationist models (Brown, 2015; Giambo & Szecsi, 2015). Moreover, directors navigated hierarchical structures where policies, funding, and accreditation requirements restricted autonomy. These constraints shaped decision-making in ways that often conflicted with directors' ethical commitments. These families which were served by a non-profit organization were predominantly Spanish speaking families with limited financial resources. The directors' awareness of the needs of families in migration and their commitment to the community in general emerged, since several of them had similar backgrounds. This existing understanding of children and their own background which is an essential criterion for cultural appropriateness could have fostered an ECE program that is reflective of the community (Gay, 2015; Howrey, 2020; Jantunen et al., 2025; Kim & Connelly, 2019). Despite directors' culturally affirming values, observations revealed limited implementation of culturally responsive practices. Research suggests that aligning leadership values with pedagogical practices requires intentional strategies (Gay, 2015; Fonsén et al., 2022). In this study, while directors emphasized inclusive education, classrooms lacked Spanish-language books, bilingual materials, and culturally reflective activities. These elements, in addition to environmental print, multilingual greeting practices, would be essential for the implementation of CRT (Gay, 2002; Jantunen et al., 2025). This misalignment may be attributed to external pressures for compliance with state mandates, limiting flexibility in instruction. The participants emphasized the need to focus on essential elements which make the center function. When leadership prioritizes compliance over culturally responsive engagement, opportunities for meaningful inclusion are diminished (Fonsén et al., 2023). In addition, as academic demands increase in younger grades, the pressure placed on center directors may trickle down to the teachers, resulting in less developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive practices in classrooms which may be hyper focused on policymakers' reforms (Brown, 2015). From an even broader view, the current political climate, which includes recent attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion in addition to the immigration policies, parental rights bills, book bans, and censorship, may restrict educators' decision-making regarding curriculum selections, teaching approaches (Kuelzer-Eckhout et al., 2024). Overall, these factors might contribute to hidden curriculum of assimilation, reinforcing systemic inequities in education.

The limitation of the study is the inclusion of relatively few participants, although the rich data allowed us to answer the research questions in a comprehensive and meaningful way. In addition, more extensive observation might have yielded deeper insights; however, this does not undermine the validity of the current observational data. Although this case study does not offer generalizable findings due to its design, based on the findings we offer implications and recommendations that could be relevant to similar educational contexts.

The ECE directors and teachers should be given more freedom (i.e. not using a pre-packaged curriculum, less assessment through the district protocol) for making program-related pedagogical decisions based on their awareness and knowledge related to the cultural assets that migrant families possess. It is important to trust and utilize the director's cultural, linguistic and experiential backgrounds in the implementation of culturally responsive teaching, especially when they share the children's backgrounds. At the same time, limiting decision-making power in programmatic and curriculum decisions for external authorities who have no pedagogical background, might increase the quality and the

cultural responsiveness of the ECE programs. Consequently, a curriculum which is developed by the directors and teachers with consideration of the nature of the local community and population would be important. Instead of adopting a generic curriculum, a locally developed curriculum that reflects the specific community could foster children's growth and development through affirming their culture and language. Regarding changes in policy, we acknowledge that until top-down structures are in place for efficiency and accountability, it can feel daunting to revise these policies. However, small adjustments in practices, such as selecting curriculum which amplifies child participation/voices, encouraging directors to collaborate with their staff on how to personalize lessons or creating forums for parent input, can create meaningful progress without drastically changing current systems. By empowering grassroots stakeholders, it is possible to achieve compliance while also honoring the values of the communities served.

By encouraging input from the people closest to the children (i.e. parents, teachers, and directors), leaders can foster an environment of trust and shared leadership. This approach not only strengthens outcomes for children but also demonstrates a commitment to belonging and fairness. Therefore, culturally-embedded ethical leadership requires ongoing discussions and assessments which may be informal, formative and/or summative to achieve authentic ethical leadership.

For all these recommendations above, it is essential to empower directors and teachers with knowledge and competence to implement an ethical and culturally responsive program. A specific comprehensive preparation for understanding the intersection of values, ethical principles, culture, language, socio-economic status, immigration status and prior experiences could enable directors and teachers to feel confident to act according to the principle of social justice. It is vital to allow them to use these skills to advocate for culturally and linguistically responsive ECE programs. As a result of this advocacy ECE centers may be places where children feel seen, valued, and understood because of the bridge between home and school.

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