# The Forgotten Ones: An exploration of women pre-Kindergarten teachers' mental health and wellness during COVID-19 and beyond

FOUNDATION FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

center for early childhood health and development

NYU Langone Health

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# Whole child at the center

**COVID-19 Pandemic**

**~99%**

of Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers are women.

# Research Methods

Originally part of a large RCT with 80 schools

42 schools signed up to the study

Interviews conducted March 2020 - June 2020

16 teachers came from 12 schools!

# Research Methods: Recruitment
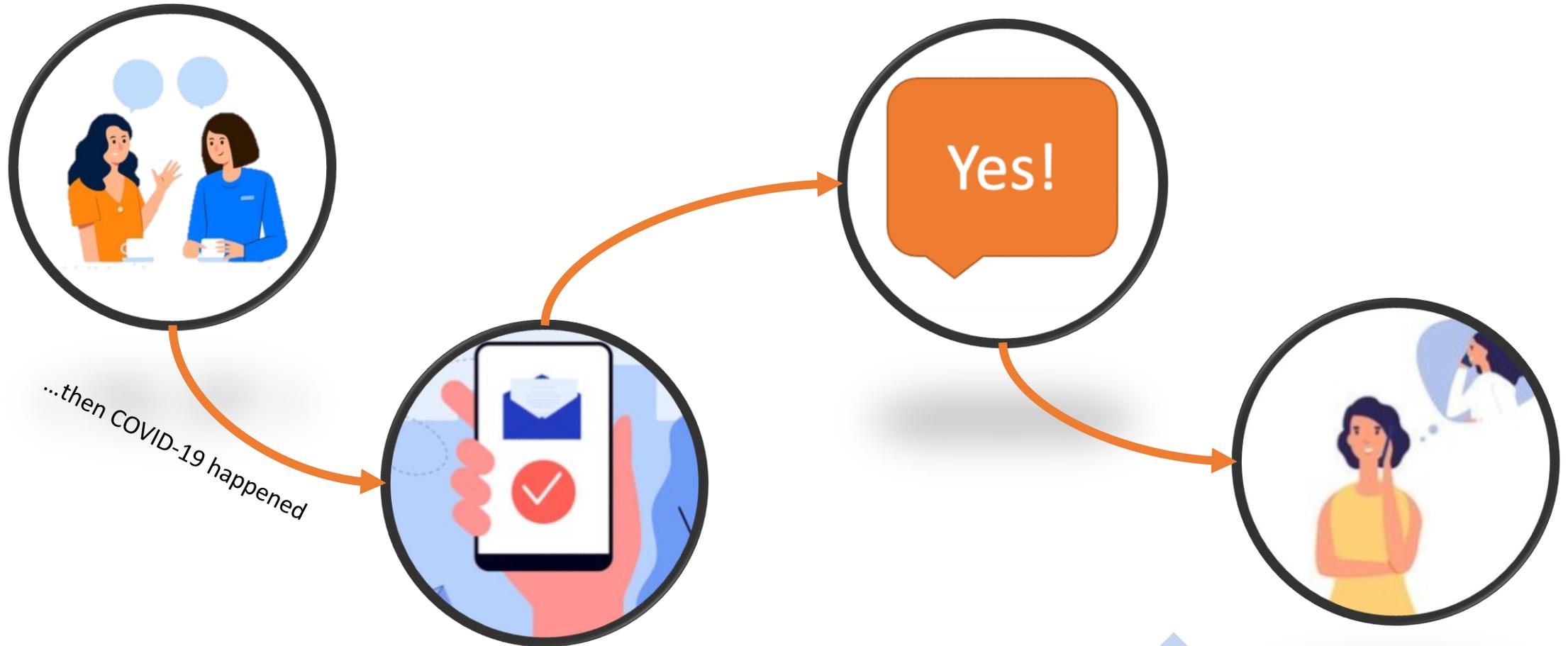
# Sociodemographic Characteristics of all Lead/Head Pre-K Teachers Interviewed

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Income | Parent | Languages Spoken | Skin Color | Race/Ethnicity | Years Teaching | Highest Degree |
|-----------|--------|-----|--------|--------|------------------|------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| **Elaine** | Female | 50-55 | $60,000-$69,000 | Yes | English | Very Light | White | 15 | Master's |
| **Elizabeth** | Female | 50-54 | $110,000-$119,00 | Yes | English, Greek | Very Light | White/Greek | 28 | Master's* |
| **Nancy** | Female | 50-55 | $100,000-$109,000 | No | English | Light | White/Irish | 28 | Master's* |
| **Monica** | Female | 45-50 | $110,000-$119,000 | Yes | English | Light | White | 23 | Master's* |
| **Jessica** | Female | 50-55 | NC | Yes | English | Medium | White/Jewish | 30 | Master's |
| **Anne** | Female | 60-65 | $80,000-$89,999 | No | English, Spanish | Very Light | White | 32 | Master's |

Note. According to New York City Department of Housing and Preservation Development in 2017, the median household income for one individual is 79,600 ("Area median income," n.d.).
Area median income. (n.d.) Retrieved from https://www1.nyc.gov/site/hpd/services-and-information/area-median-income.page
Poverty categories. (n.d.) Retrieved from https://www1.nyc.gov/site/opportunity/poverty-in-nyc/poverty-measure.page

Asterisk (*) indicates teachers with 30+ credits
NC indicates data was not collected due to teacher preference

# Process Establishing Trustworthiness in Thematic Analysis

| Thematic Analysis Stage | Strategy Used to Establish Trustworthiness |
|---|---|
| **Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with the data** | • Extended analysis of the data<br>• Documentation of theoretical and reflective thoughts, potential codes and themes<br>• Data stored in well-organized electronic archive with records of all notes and transcripts<br>• Audio recorded interviews and verbatim transcriptions |
| **Phase 2: Generating initial codes** | • Use of a coding framework<br>• Audit trial of code generation<br>• Documentation of team meetings |
| **Phase 3: Searching for themes** | • Identified counter examples<br>• Kept detailed notes of theme development<br>• Selection of six representative interviews |
| **Phase 4: Reviewing themes** | • Researcher triangulation<br>• Themes vetted by team members<br>• Tested for referential adequacy by returning to the raw data |
| **Phase 5: Defining and naming themes** | • Researcher triangulation<br>• Peer debriefing<br>• Team consensus on themes |
| **Phase 6: Producing the report** | • Peer Debriefing<br>• Extended analysis of the data<br>• Documentation of theoretical and reflective thoughts, potential codes and themes<br>• Data stored in well-organized electronic archive with records of all notes and transcripts<br>• Audio recorded interviews and verbatim transcriptions |

Note. Strategies for establishing trustworthiness adapted from Nowell (2017)

# SiR2T Interview

**Protocol**

- *Telephone Interview*
- *~1.5 hours*
- *Open ended, concentric circles, word list*

**Method**

- *Cognitive interview (Bekerian & Dennet, 1993)*
- *Self-in-Relation-to-Teaching Interview Method (Rodriguez, 2016)*
  - *SiR method*
  - *Trauma informed method*

Least Important

Less Important

Most Important
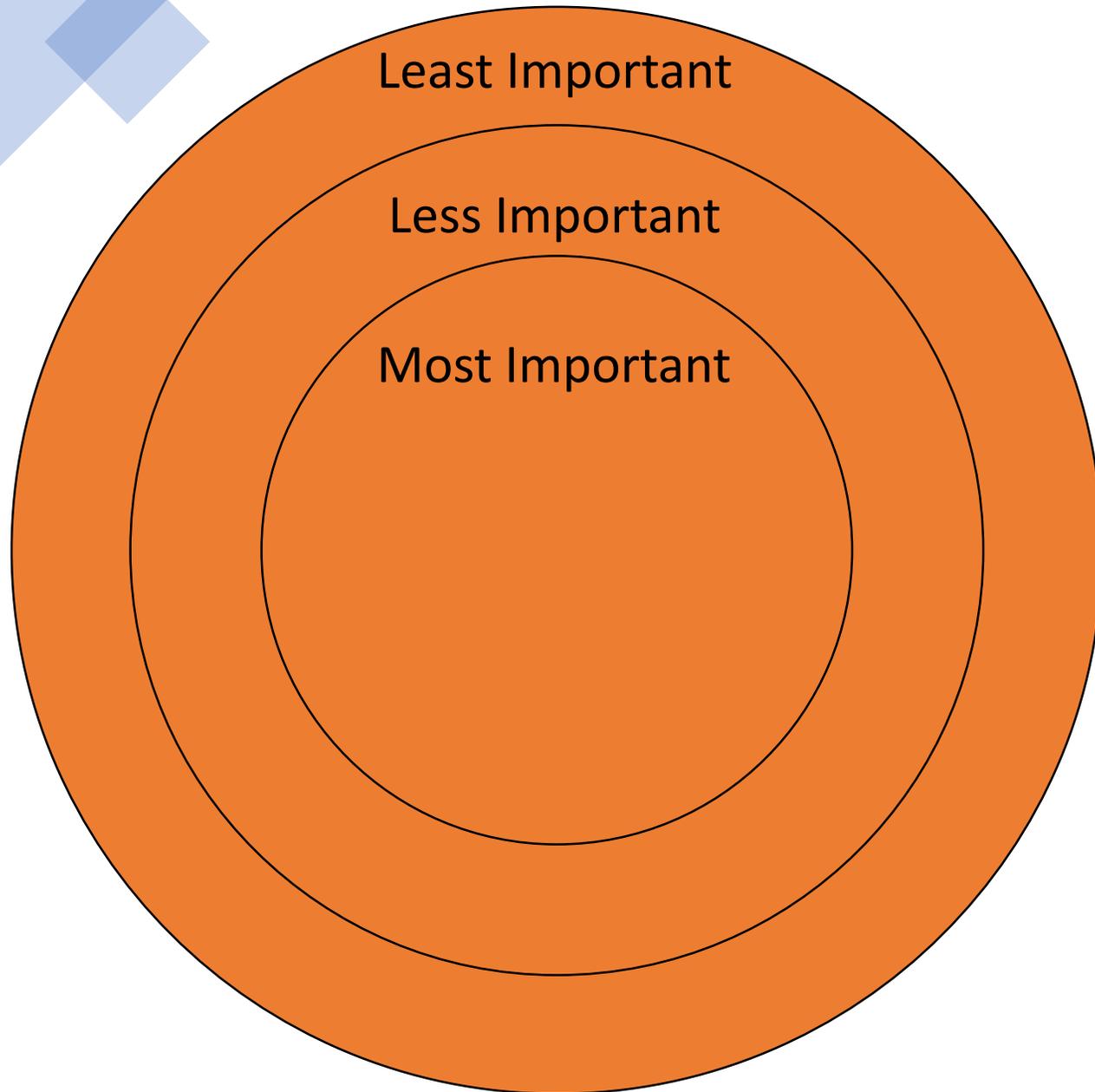
**Self**:

| | |
|---|---|
| Humor | Confidence |
| Sarcasm | Empathy |
| Ethnicity | "real" vs. "teacher" self |
| Race | Intellectual |

**Personal Context**:

| | |
|---|---|
| Income | Health |
| Life Plan | Culture |
| Family | |

**Skills**:

| | |
|---|---|
| Intuitive | Routines |
| Continued learning | Interactive decision |
| Rapid "real-time" | making |
| decision making | Info storage for later |
| Organizing | recall |
| | Time Management |

**External Influences**:

| | |
|---|---|
| Student | Organization/Institution |
| Student's family | Government |
| Principal/Director | Cultural Norms |
| Other teachers | Current Events |

## 5 Awarenesses of Teaching Coding Schema by Category, Sub-category, and Code

| Category | Sub-category | Code |
|---|---|---|
| **Self-as-a-Teacher** | Private Self | Needs, Life Plan, Values, Identity, Experiences, Teacher Mom, Mental health/wellness |
| | Public Self | Authenticity, On display |
| | Perceived Self | Students, Parents, Colleagues Perception |
| **Teaching Process** | Tangible Practices | Routines, Organization, Planning, Decisions, Behaviors, Continued Learning |
| | Intangible Practices | Classroom culture, culture of practice |
| **Learner** | Feedback | Intentional, Unintentional feedback |
| | Needs | Emotional, Physical, Academic |
| | Development | Past, Present, Future |
| | Identity | Personality, Race, Ethnicity, Language |
| **Interaction** | Connection | Relationship, Bond, Love |
| | Working Together | Collaboration, Co-construction |
| | Mutual Effects | Reciprocity, Feedback loop, Teacher-student Impact, Effect on each other |
| | Synergy | Synchrony, flow |
| **Context** | External – student | Student's family, Weather |
| | External – Institution | Physical space, Philosophy |
| | External – large scale | Policy, Mandates, COVID-19 |

# Setting the Context

Monica: "That's the other part of the problem, I didn't know it was happening. And I know they didn't either."

Anne: "It just kind of happened overnight. Like overnight your whole world now has changed. You know, you had plans, whatever you were gonna do next week with the kids. And then it's like, OK. That's it. It's all over....I mean, their things were left like their blankets from napping. … It was like if somebody had to just evacuate their home.

# Findings

*I.* *Practice-based challenges*

*II.* *Mental health and wellness challenges*

*Overarching themes focus on:*

(1) societal and self-imposed expectations put on women,

(2) how the loss of classroom norms dismantled the teacher-student relationship and teacher's identity, and

(3) the actualities of the mental health and wellness impact on teachers

# Theme 1:

***Societal and self-imposed expectations put on women***

When asked if anyone within the DOE had asked how she was doing.

Nancy: "No, I don't think so. And it's that's the disheartening thing. You know, I think that we've become the *forgotten ones*."

- Anne: The [DOE] were not there at all. So, you just had, like, instructions of, kind of, "figure it out" from above. And then you kind of tried to figure it out.

- Interviewer: How did you feel about having to show up physically?

- Anne: It was a little strange because if you're closing the school because you're not supposed to be with people.

# Theme 1:

*Silent Expectations:*

Professional

Elizabeth: But I mentioned it, I remember, to my union rep, that I didn't feel that comfortable being in there with everybody, but she said we kind of had no choice. So, I did it, but I wasn't I wasn't totally comfortable with it and I wasn't totally happy. But I didn't want to cause waves either, you know, get my principal upset because like I said, she's really great. So, I didn't want to be difficult.

Personal:

Monica: I feel like all of our kids have been robbed. They need something tangible. And some of my parents don't have printers. They're not going to be able to print the certificate. I mean, those of their certificates don't mean much. I just wanted them to receive something from their teacher, so they know their teacher cares.

# Theme 2:

*Loss of classroom norms dismantled the teacher-student relationship and teacher's identity*

Virtual Platforms and physical loss:

- Anne: It's just a very different...very different feel from being there in person you're in a different world. It's like you're putting on a show for them, you know. It's like they'll be watching me up on the TV screen...it's you know that human interaction is lacking. You can't go over and touch them if they're, you know, redirect them. It's just a very cold type of way to interact.

Mutual Reciprocity: (co-dependency v. mutual empathy)

Jessica: I feel like, some people were angry that they had to work through their Easter break. I wasn't angry. I am so, I'm lonely without my kids. ... I'm sad on Friday because I'm losing my kids for two days... I fully believed that we were going to go back to school after the Easter break. [teacher pauses] "Hold, can you hold on one second?"

# Theme 3:

***Mental Health and Wellness Impact on Teachers***

Wellness of Teachers:

- Anne: going back [7 or 8 years ago,]…I had a really very severe case of shingles on my face. On my forehead. So lately, these days, …when I get stressed or tired, I get that itch that I feel like I want to scratch my skin off because it's not the kind of itch that that can be relieved by scratching. You know, it's an internal thing and its right by my forehead, my eyebrow and my eye. And lately and even now that I'm talking to you like, it came up like a couple of days ago…it's very scary

Mental Health of teachers:

- Monica: I just want to crawl under my bed and just lay there because I have no purpose anymore. I have no purpose. I have no purpose of getting up. I have no purpose of living anymore [crying] …. God gives you what is expected, I guess. But like I said, the purpose of me saying this to you is the fact that it's almost like this quarantine for the children. They need their teacher. They need to know where they are. A computer screen doesn't hold justice.

# Discussion: Strengths & Implications

- Real time exploration and understanding of phenomena underexplored

- (Re)designing trauma-informed efforts and practices  to directly address teacher's trauma

- Invest in tools grounded in feminist theory

- Support and facilitate teacher SEL and identity development

**Natalia Rojas**
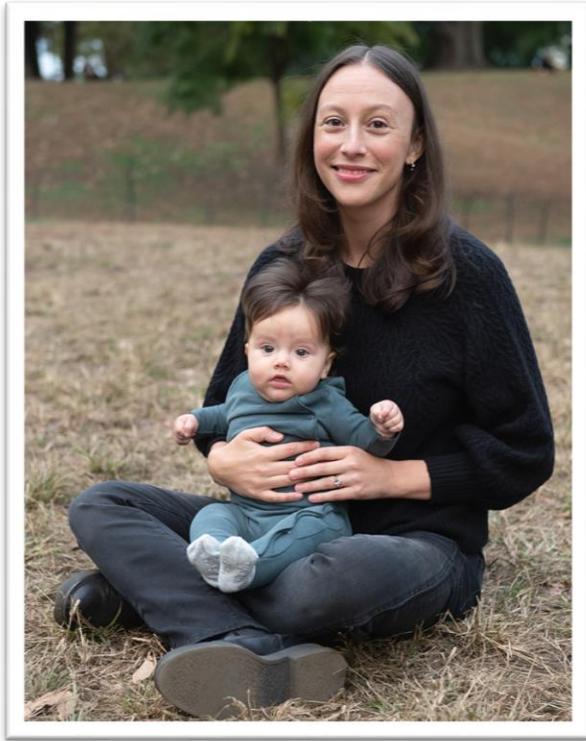
**Ayesha Rabadi-Raol**
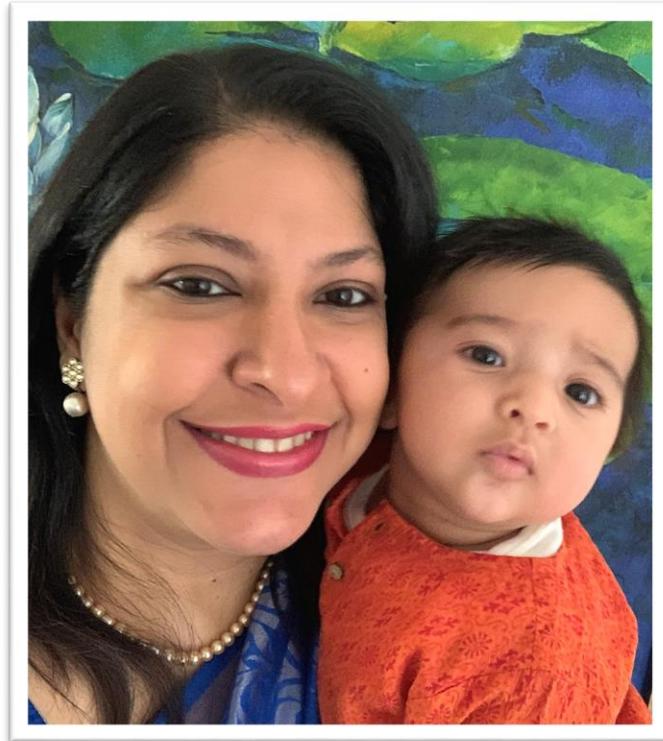
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# Thank you!

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Q&A