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“Pour Into the Teachers”: Learning From Immigrant Women of Color Through Conversations on “Quality” in Urban Early Education and Care

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Cover Page Footnote

1. All names of individuals and places are pseudonyms. 2. Note. Photo is blurred to protect the identities of the children and families.

“Pour Into the Teachers:” Learning From Immigrant Women of Color Through Conversations on “Quality” in Urban Early Education and Care

Seung Eun McDevitt and Louella Sween

In New York City, public pre-kindergarten (pre-K) is universally available in early education centers, child care centers, and Head Start programs, as well as in public and charter schools (Ryan & Li, 2020). The expansion of universal pre-K (UPK) programs to community-based centers enabled increased access to early education and care, resulting in 70 percent of 4-year-olds attending pre-K throughout the city boroughs (Barnett et al., 2016). Starting in 2017, schools and centers also started serving 3-year-olds in the 3-K for All program as part of the UPK programs (New York City Public Schools, n.d.). To support these neighborhood programs and community-based child care centers in meeting the pre-K quality standards, the New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) provides instructional coordinators and social workers for curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and family engagement and communication (Ryan & Li, 2020). Despite these efforts and the benefits young children and families reap from the citywide programs, research studies have reported significantly lower assessments of quality at sites that are situated in the city’s poorest neighborhoods and that serve mostly children of color and immigrant children (Fuller & Leibovitz, 2021; Fuller et al., 2020; Latham et al., 2020).

In this paper, we share stories from one of these early childhood education (ECE) centers located in a low-income immigrant community. The stories that follow are part of a larger research project inquiring into the narratives of immigrant women of color and their inclusive pedagogical and care practices for immigrant children and families in ECE centers in low-income communities around New York City. Here we focus on one immigrant woman of color, Esther (all names of individuals and places are pseudonyms), who used to be a teacher and is now a center director at one of the sites included in the larger study. We employed three semi-structured in-depth interviews which lasted one to two hours each, as well as one in-person observational visit to the center, to contextualize Esther’s narratives about leading her team of teachers and staff and interacting with children and families at the center. We selected Esther because her narratives and practices offer unique and deep insights into “quality” in early education and care for marginalized Others; in particular, they highlight an expanded definition of quality that she has demonstrated as a leader of the center. In sharing Esther’s accounts, we offer alternative ways of creating quality and equitable ECE practices with and for immigrant children, families, and teachers, and detail the challenges that come with resisting the status quo.

ESTHER AND THE RESILIENCE EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER

Esther, a Black West Indian woman who was born in Trinidad and immigrated to the United States at the age of 18, is the education director at the Resilience Early Childhood Center (Resilience). The center is located in the southwestern portion of the New York City borough of Queens and serves approximately 60 children and their families of various backgrounds: West Indian, Spanish, African, Bengali, and African American. The neighborhood is a mixture of working-class and low-income families. It has low-income housing and single-family homes, and both single-parent and two-parent households. According to Esther, the parents participate in the activities of the school throughout the school year and show genuine care for what and how their child is learning. The teachers at the center also come from diverse countries of origin, including Ecuador, Trinidad, Jamaica, Nigeria, and Bangladesh, reflecting the cultures, languages, and backgrounds of the children and families. Many of the teachers have higher

education degrees in subject areas such as psychology from their countries of origin, and experiences of teaching older students before immigrating to the United States.

The center has one infant and toddler classroom, three 3-K classrooms, and one pre-K (4-K) classroom, contracted and funded under the NYCPS for 3-K and 4-K students. To ensure the center follows UPK guidelines, an instructional coordinator and social worker are assigned to support teaching staff in their engagement with students, both behaviorally and instructionally. They also support Esther in her role as the director with teacher development and support strategies.

WHAT DOES “QUALITY” MEAN?

“The Word ‘Quality’ Was Driving Me Crazy”

In our conversations with Esther, she discussed feeling that, despite the support system provided by the NYCPS, there was something missing in their support. She said the instructional coordinator and social worker from the NYCPS came to the Resilience with “a different lens,” particularly in regard to raising the quality of the pre-K programs at the center. Esther said,

So, the DOE walks in, we have to take this [teaching materials/projects] down ... It was so confusing ... And the classrooms, they would talk, “Oh, that’s not quality education. You have to [do this], we need [that].” The word “quality” was driving me crazy ... You keep hearing “top ten quality,” “automating quality,” the language, and the back-and-forth exchanges. And it was just driving me crazy, talking about quality education. Then I noticed that teachers began to suffer because they were doing the best they could with what we had.

Because the pre-K programs are under the NYCPS, the center is required to adapt to the set curriculum and adhere to its guidelines and standards. Esther said the city’s approach to supporting the center mostly focused on the classroom environment and children’s achievement rather than on support for teachers. Although the center received “good marks” from the city as they altered their environment, purchased more required learning materials, and continued teacher training, the teachers were stressed and did not feel they could authentically “be themselves” with their students in the classroom. Observing the teachers and talking with them, Esther knew that something had to change.

Esther firmly believes that quality in student learning begins with those who teach and care for the children—the teachers. She elaborated:

I got tired of it. I said to them [the NYCPS coordinator and social worker], “We talk about quality ... quality care for the kids ... What about the teachers?” Before you can get that, you have to get quality into *them*. Because they’re the ones who are going to make this happen. When they [the coordinator and social worker] come in, they look at the environment, they look at the toys, they look at the books if it’s got “quality.” I got so tired of that. For me, quality is when we pour into the teachers just the same way you want them to pour into the children. So, that is caring about listening to what they’re saying. They’re tired, they’re overworked, they’re underpaid. How can they function? You have a child who’s hungry, they’re not clothed, they’re homeless. It’s the same thing. It’s just on two different levels.

Esther knew the teachers at the Resilience were dedicated and doing their best to provide the best education and care possible. However, they were also seeking to make ends meet and carrying a significant number of stressors from trying to balance their finances and lives outside of work.

Esther expressed her frustration with the pressure to increase “quality” and her remorse for how the teachers at her center are treated by the system:

What about the teachers? What are you giving them to help the kids? ... Yes, we can speak well, we can have a great lesson. We can do all of that, but here you have a teacher who's burnt out because they don't have what they need. And all you're talking about, all we need is quality. [The coordinator says] teachers need to be more engaged, but they're exhausted because they're trying to come up and create something with what they don't really have to do it with. You see what I'm trying to say? So, I would like to see a balance where we're giving the teachers the support. That's where we need to start. And they have it backwards. That's why so many teachers are leaving. They feel like no one is listening. So, quality starts with them because if you don't pour into them, what are we doing? What are we really doing?

Esther was well aware of the circumstances the teachers faced because she was a teacher at the center before becoming the director. She understood that the teachers struggle to pay bills and feed their own children at home after caring for other people's children at the center, and that they are also under pressure to leave their funds of knowledge behind and adapt to teaching according to the given standards. She noted that there is added pressure for teachers to earn a bachelor's or master's degree in early childhood education within a certain time period, as well as a teaching certification required by the city's UPK program standard measures. Although the teachers want to pursue higher education, it is impossible to pay for it "because of the money they don't even earn." Esther continued, "[We need] to help the teachers learn ... to better themselves and not allow the people who they work for to take advantage of them."

An Expanded Definition of Quality

The early childhood teaching force has been historically marginalized and undervalued (Kagan et al., 2008). Still, it is shocking to see the statistics on what early educators earn for their important work of educating, nurturing, and caring daily for our nation's children: poverty-level wages in addition to poor working conditions with little access to employee benefits (Breen, 2023; McLean et al., 2021; Tobin et al., 2020). Women of color in the profession are compensated even less well than their White counterparts (Lloyd et al., 2021). For example, the recent early childhood workforce data analysis reported that African American educators earned \$1,622.40 less per year than White early educators (Austin et al., 2019). In the narratives, Esther points to the injustice of the persistently low compensation among women of color educators in the field of ECE (Jones, 2023). According to McLean and colleagues (2021), "For a single adult with one child, median child care worker wages do not meet a living wage in any state, yet many early educators are themselves also parents, with children at home" (p. 23). As Esther explained, the teachers at the Resilience, who struggle to take care of their own children due to the low wages they make while taking care of other people's children, are no exception.

There is a push to increase access to early education, as demonstrated in the rapid expansion of New York City's Pre-K for All programs, but there is little investment in equitable compensation for early educators, particularly those in community-based centers like the Resilience (Fuller et al., 2020). The well-intentioned standards for quality, such as requiring teachers to obtain higher education and teaching certificates, have been strictly implemented, without offering adequate financial support in terms of teachers' compensation (McDevitt, 2021a).

Considering this multidimensional context, Esther advocates for an expanded definition of quality that presupposes support for teachers in the form of fair compensation, financial support for professional learning, and access to higher education advancement, along with genuine acknowledgment of the importance of early education and care work. As Esther emphasized, teachers are the enactors of quality ECE for young children and their families. Therefore, quality measures must begin with the questions, "For whom?" and "By whom?" Only by dismantling the historically inequitable distribution of resources and intentionally redesigning economic and educational structures for early educators can we begin to answer how quality ECE can be achieved (Falk & Souto-Manning, n.d.).

LIFTING UP IMMIGRANT WOMEN OF COLOR AND THEIR FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

“Pour Into the Teachers”

As the center director, Esther names her goal for the teachers as providing an experience they want to come to work for. She wants the families they serve to say, ‘We really enjoy this, and we really enjoy bringing our children to this place.’” Not only do the children and families come from the surrounding immigrant communities, the teachers and staff come from the same communities. Esther explained, “We attract people from our community ... [they] are not qualified [by the DOE standards] but they do bring something ... they are understanding the needs of the kids.” She said that the teachers from the community do not always have a teaching certificate or an education degree from the United States, but they are culturally responsive and sensitive to the children and families at the center.

Our kids are coming from various backgrounds. There’s hurt, homelessness, parents that are not always there, [they] are going to different people [and places]. So [challenging] behaviors are coming out ... some children need that extra support, some children have developmental delays in cognition, in physical, so many different things. And a lot of the children are telling you what’s wrong by the way they’re behaving ... [Challenging behavior in children] does not scare them ... [these] teachers meet the needs of the students by providing, for example, if a child comes in hungry but breakfast has finished, they will speak with the kitchen staff to prepare breakfast for the child. They understand that if the hungry children do not eat, [they] will not function well in the classroom. A child may come in soiled, and the teachers will take the child to the bathroom and change the child so that the child feels comfortable. Teachers will tell me what is transpiring in the classroom, and we will then communicate with the parents to ensure we work together to support their child in the best way possible.

Esther sees the manner and respect her teachers possess as not just invaluable to their teaching but also to their caring for the souls of their students. She believes in the strengths the immigrant teachers of color bring to the center and that they are the ones who will raise the quality of education and care the center provides. She stated, “[Teachers] are the ones who [are] going to make this happen ... It doesn’t matter to me if the teacher has to have everything [credentials], because I didn’t start with everything. Someone took the time to teach me in a loving way, and I want to give back.”

She discussed her journey of becoming an early childhood educator, from working as a nanny and group home camp leader when she first arrived in the United States as an immigrant, to eventually becoming a pre-K teacher, assistant director, and now the director of the Resilience. The journey was long and difficult, but Esther made clear the reason she kept pursuing a career in helping professions, eventually earning her doctorate in educational leadership:

I had people in my life that poured into me. I listened to them. I observed them, see what they did. I allowed them to help me. I let them know when I needed help ... [and now] I want to help teachers like me do this [teaching] well.

Reflecting on her journey, Esther mentioned the dilemma she faced early in her career, as an immigrant teacher with a Caribbean cultural background:

In the Caribbean, you were taught one way how to teach, and now I’m bringing my culture here and I’m lost ... This system is very different from how my system of learning at home was. Not that it’s bad, it’s just different ... Now I supervise teachers of color and of the Caribbean who are struggling with the same thing I struggled with. And now I have to encourage them, educate them, guide them ... So that’s where I am now. I’m constantly, constantly guiding, constantly working with them, constantly modeling how to do it.

According to Esther, the teachers at the Resilience are used to teacher-directed learning rather than following the children's lead. They are quicker to provide hands-on modeling than independent spaces for children to explore on their own. Esther knows the teachers are dedicated to teaching and want to do their best. Instead of asking them to forget what they bring with them, she asks them to find a balance. Repeating her earlier statement that "it has to start with the teachers," she highlighted her commitment to her teachers and to building on their funds of knowledge.

I know my teachers love what they do ... Once they come with [that] passion and share ideas, as long as it's developmentally appropriate ... I tell [them], "Share your ideas and we'll tweak it if it's not developmentally appropriate to support the vision," so that it still remains theirs, it was just tweaked a bit. You know what I mean? ... [And] I gave each of them a certificate because I pulled out the unique qualities each of them had, just to show them that I know what they're doing. I see [them]. If you want to teach, I'm here with you. And I reminded them of the qualities [they bring] as I spoke of them in front of all the staff.

Esther explained that pouring into the teachers means supporting them in culturally responsive ways and in a loving, affirming way. She mentioned her former director, a Haitian immigrant woman of color, who told Esther she "had a thirst and a knowledge to know" and encouraged her to further pursue her education and career. Esther is grateful for the "people in [her] life that poured into [her] ... and made [her] love teaching." Because of that she continues her work to lift up other immigrant women of color at the center and to support them in their love of teaching while allowing them to be themselves and not sacrifice who they are.

Qualities of an Effective and Culturally Responsive Leader

Although immigrant teachers are well-equipped to work with immigrant communities in ECE settings due to their cultural and linguistic wealth, research studies have documented the cultural dilemma they are often stuck in (Adair et al., 2012; Tobin et al., 2013). They experience difficulty applying their funds of knowledge because this knowledge is often seen as unprofessional by colleagues and parents (Adair, et al., 2012; McDevitt, 2021b). The Resilience teachers faced a similar struggle, one due to the strict administrative regulations around the NYCPS's measures of quality.

In places like New York City, where many early childhood educators come from diverse backgrounds (Falk & Souto-Manning, n.d.; Sugarman & Park, 2017), culturally responsive leadership is crucial in mitigating this dilemma. Esther's narratives illuminate the qualities of an effective leader who lifts up teachers and their diverse knowledges and who is able to provide tailored professional development opportunities based on their strengths and needs. Firmly believing that quality begins with teachers, Esther models what it means to carry out quality leadership by creating spaces for generative conversations on multiple ways quality can be achieved (Cannella, 2016). To retain the current workforce, which reflects the increasingly diverse children and families in early childhood programs citywide, more attention must be paid to reconceptualizing and restructuring the support system by understanding and appreciating immigrant teachers' funds of knowledge.

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION

"Educating the Mom"

The principle that Esther lives by as the center director is, "This is not my school, this is our school." She knows that providing quality education and care requires collaboration, not just among teachers and staff but also with families. Supporting the children at the Resilience often means meeting their basic needs and building trust with the families. Esther noted that children sometimes come to the center hungry and unbathed:

We have children [and] their basic needs are not met at all. Their basic needs, not clean hygiene, things on their skin. They're always hungry or itching and not bathing. If I was different, I could call that in but it's just communication. Mother is young, has a boyfriend who's young, not working, things of that nature. So, there's a lot of talking with them and I see why they trust [us] because I'm not quick to [say], "Okay, I have to call this in."

Instead of quickly judging the parents and families and reporting them to the Administration of Child Services (ACS), she takes on the responsibility of talking with them to figure out what is going on and how she can support them. Instead of calling ACS, she calls the mother first: "It's educating mom. Just even if it's for 15 minutes." With patience, gentleness, and creativity, Esther fights the system by working closely with the parents who might need more time and support to educate and care for their children. As quality education begins at home, Esther uses every opportunity to help and support parents in need.

Additionally, the Resilience is filled with parent-child-teacher collaborative work, beautifully displayed throughout the building. One such example arose from an event they held to create a diversity quilt to affirm and boast the diversity among the children, families, and teachers. This idea came from the teachers, who wanted to engage parents in creating a "masterpiece" with their children and celebrating who they are and where they came from. All of the families came together and assembled the quilt in time for Black History Month (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Diversity Quilt (The photo is blurred to protect the identities of the children and families)

Another event Esther planned with the teachers which she feels proud of is their cancer awareness event (Figure 2). It was an activity planned for children, families, and teachers to engage in together at the center. Esther felt her students were not too young to learn about cancer and, most importantly, she wanted to be transparent about her own cancer journey. When she discovered she had cancer, she thought all was lost and that she might be unable to pursue her passion as an early childhood educator. Her faith, family, and colleagues supported her immensely, and spurred her to continue to fight for health and justice. This season of fighting gave her the determination to encourage others with the message that nothing is impossible as long as we put our minds to accomplishing what we are passionate about. During the event, some of the parents and teachers shared their personal experience with cancer or with a loved one who had died from cancer, and they were able to encourage each other not to give up. The activity did not begin and end in the school, as the staff and students demonstrated outside arrayed in pink with banners chanting “Fight!” at the end of the event.

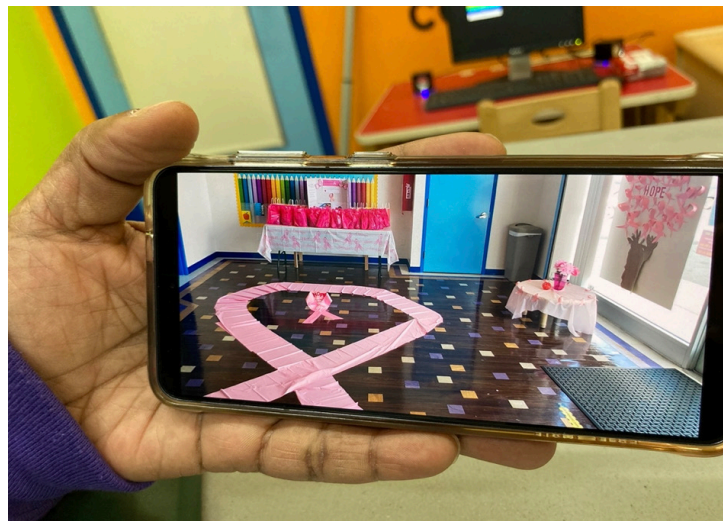


Figure 2. A photo taken on a phone of the Cancer Awareness Event

Esther is proud of the community she has been able to build with the children, families, and teachers.

[Our parents] love the center. And when we told them [the DOE] placed them with our center again for 4-K, they were ecstatic, they were so happy because we don't make the choice, the DOE does. So, they were so happy. So, I'm just looking forward because these parents were so engaged. Some are teachers and they are just ready to go another year with us.

Once trust was built, it became possible to improve family engagement, which is the cornerstone of quality education and care for the children who come to the Resilience. “It is TEAM work—Together Everyone Achieves More,” said Esther. Through teamwork among teachers, parents, and families who come together under her leadership, they work toward providing the best quality education and care possible for their children.

Recalibrating Family Partnerships

Achieving quality ECE is simply not possible without partnering with parents and families. In their research with immigrant parents, Adair and Barraza (2014) learned that the core of parent-school partnerships is recognizing and valuing the diverse funds of knowledge that immigrant parents and communities bring. They need to be welcomed to school spaces and to have their ideas taken seriously. Esther worked hard to fight against narratives that negatively depict immigrant parents from low-income communities as unfit to provide appropriate education for their children and lacking social and

cultural capital (Arzubiaga et al., 2009). By connecting with parents and families through relational and curricular opportunities that reflect their desires and goals, Esther created a community within the center where their presence and expertise were honored and celebrated. Instead of suspicion and judgment, she chose trust, based on her nuanced understanding of their backgrounds and potential. She supported parents who might be struggling in their personal lives, and therefore impacting their child's education and development. She listened to the teachers and their ideas for celebrating their various cultures at the Resilience and for bringing families together through a collaborative project. Esther, who shares a similar cultural background with many in the Resilience community, also opened up about her fight against cancer and brought awareness to the community about health justice.

Despite New York City's long history of immigration and as a gateway community, many schools and programs, particularly in low-income (immigrant) communities of color, similar to the Resilience, still report challenges in achieving quality through family and community partnerships (Arzubiaga et al., 2009; Fuller & Leibovitz, 2021; Park & McHugh, 2014). Recalibrating the practice of family partnership (Doucet, 2011), Esther put in a concerted effort to achieve quality through community-building events, illuminating the importance of community-based centers. Despite systemic issues and challenges, they have the potential to utilize the community's cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to be culturally and linguistically responsive and sustaining for the children they educate and care for (Falk & Souto-Manning, n.d.). Bringing together all who are involved, including teachers, parents, and families into what Esther calls a TEAM, she demonstrates alternative ways in which achievement of quality is possible.

EQUITY, ACCESS, AND BELONGING AS PREREQUISITES FOR QUALITY EDUCATION AND CARE

Esther's perspectives and practice as the education director at the Resilience Early Childhood Center prompt us to reconceptualize quality, and to think of an alternative way of looking at the meaning of quality. Although entrenched in many forms of inequity, the Resilience is leading the way toward reimagining how quality can be achieved for children by valuing the marginalized voices, experiences, and practices of teachers and families (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). As demonstrated in Esther's shared, relational, and collaborative leadership, which centers the community's knowledge funds (Heimer & Ramming, 2020), program leaders can learn to honor, cultivate, and sustain children's, families', and teachers' cultures, languages, histories, and community practices.

Teachers are the heart of quality early education and care programs, as demonstrated in Esther's narratives and practice. Just as affirming children's agency is important, it is critical to affirm and honor teachers' agency and provide support in culturally responsive, accessible ways with adequate compensation and working conditions (Austin, 2023). Esther stated, "The teachers at the Resilience are dedicated and the work they do is beautiful." She hears many times from parents and families who tell her how their child has changed and how their community has changed because of the work the Resilience teachers do.

It is clear that measures of quality must align with what is happening in the classroom, and with families and communities, and with their feedback. Only with an equity lens—combined with cultural responsiveness and intersectional understanding informed by the people in the field working with children, families, and teachers on a daily basis—can we truly examine what quality means for marginalized Others. To move beyond the norms currently being used, programs, leaders, and policymakers must collectively engage with the concept of "quality as multiple" (Cannella, 2016, p. 7), which reflects the reality of the current state of early childhood education. Further, they must make room at the center of the table for conversations with and for children, teachers, and families from marginalized communities.

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