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## The Radical Refuge: Reconceptualizing Teacher Quality Liberated from the Historical Commodification of Latina and Black Women in Early Childhood Education

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# The Radical Refuge: Reconceptualizing Teacher Quality Liberated from the Historical Commodification of Latina and Black Women in Early Childhood Education

## Cover Page Footnote

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# The Radical Refuge: Reconceptualizing Teacher Quality Liberated From the Historical Commodification of Latina and Black Women in Early Childhood Education

Vanessa Rodriguez

Current models for defining teacher quality derive their meaning from attributes measured from observable behaviors, without regard for teachers' internal experiences, and are externally constructed and applied. Teachers are judged according to these models, which do not value what the teacher intrinsically feels, thinks, or processes to achieve the observable teaching behaviors; these domains are deemed irrelevant to the evaluation of teacher quality. This phenomenon reflects broader societal values whereby White men have set the terms for what constitutes a "quality" woman in current settings and historically. In education, this means that a teacher's quality is constructed according to and in support of White, male, Eurocentric values, based on characteristics that are consistent with the perspective on women those values reflect.

This endogeneity systematically shifts constructs of teacher quality to reflect what White males expect a female teacher to visibly exhibit. Over time, this bias has led to a reality where educational leaders (including female leaders) have used historical expectations for women to enshrine familiar observable behaviors to define teacher quality in our almost exclusively female teaching workforce. These expectations manifest in quality metrics based on how the teacher looks, presents herself, and maintains their classroom: on simple, reproducible, observable behaviors rather than on more complex evaluations of the teacher's internal cognitions, inherent intelligence, or complexity of thought (Rodriguez & Mascio, 2018)—characteristics traditionally reserved for more prestigious male-dominated spheres of society. The evaluations of quality center on teaching, not on the teacher. Teaching and teachers are often conflated. Anchoring definitions of teacher quality on White male expectations reinforces a teacher's lack of trust in their own inherent "value" and encourages teachers to rely on these White male externally derived definitions of quality to prove even to themselves that they have value as educators.

This dynamic is most harmful among women teachers of color, who have to work harder to conform to these externally observable behaviors and who become even more reliant on them to continuously establish their self-worth, value, and quality as educators. My personal educational journey has made me acutely aware of this insidious dependency on the White male definition of quality and its dominance over my internal indicators of being a quality educator.

In my first year of teaching, as the only Latina teacher on the faculty at an elite suburban public school, I was called into my White male principal's office and asked to prove that I knew the difference between *their*, *there*, and *they're*. He held in his hand a quiz I had given in class that a White male student had refused to take: instead, the student had marked my spelling errors in red to report them to the principal. In my next school, the White female principal walked around my room with a clipboard during a mandated classroom observation, scanning each wall, shelf, book, and corner, inspecting them as if to determine whether the room was up to the school's standards. Rather than judging the thoughtfulness of my lesson and curriculum, the developmental complexity of my approach to teaching, or the interest and joy of students in the classroom, the only feedback she provided was "you don't have enough chart paper on the walls. This needs to be a print-rich environment."

Over my years in teaching, rather than being valued for my internal attributes as a thinker, I've been told that my clothes should be more professional or less professional; that I should smile more or be sterner; sit more or stand more; or "just follow the scripted curriculum" instead of using my own, because the scripted one was created by "really smart people"—who, by default, wasn't someone who looks like me. Ironically, only when I was under the halo effect afforded by my partnership with a White male university professor (who had never taught in the classroom) was I seen as a complex, thoughtful educator, suddenly deemed of quality, who warranted being shown as an exemplar to district visitors, in front of cameras, and in videos and newspapers. Ultimately, as a brown-skinned educator and researcher, I am faced with a constant struggle to meet these external, reductive definitions of teacher quality, to resist the insidious, inexorable way that those supersede my internal definitions of my quality as a teacher, and to counter the exhausting explicit and implicit messaging of inadequacy, anxiety, and inferiority that relying on the White male definitions of teacher quality perpetuates.

## **BLACK AND LATINA EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) WORKFORCE**

These disparities are particularly salient in our current context, as there is compelling evidence that the United States public education system contributes to academic inequities due to students' race and ethnicity (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Valencia, 2015). Women make up 97 percent of the ECE workforce, with Black women accounting for 16.7 percent and Latina women for 13.5 percent (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Other reports suggest the latter number is higher, with Latina women accounting for up to 16.4 percent of the ECE workforce if teachers who identified themselves as Latina—regardless of race—are included in that group (Coffey, 2022). Studies have also established that Black and Latine teachers' racial and ethnic affinity with students of color has a positive impact on the academic performance of those students (Gershenson et al., 2022) and benefits their social-emotional experience (Egalite & Kisida, 2018). However, Black and Latine teachers are dramatically underrepresented (~15 percent) in US schools relative to the proportion of students of color nationally (>50 percent). Persistent disparities in recruitment and retention of Black and Latine teachers in comparison with White teachers continues to thwart this potential disruptor of inequities in academic and socioemotional outcomes based on students' race and ethnicity (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

Research has documented key institutional obstacles to Black and Latine teacher retention (Dixon et al., 2019), including structural racism manifest as financial, regulatory, and educational barriers. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the problem of the exodus of Black teachers (Carr, 2022). To date, several effective policy and practice reforms have been implemented that partially mitigate these obstacles, but the disparities remain large. However, these reforms rely on White male definitions of teacher quality, reinforcing the structural sexism and racism that have been clearly documented as drivers of the high turnover rates among women teachers of color. We must reimagine how we have historically defined teacher quality in order to develop new levers for improving recruitment and retention, especially for Latina and Black women.

## **HISTORICAL EVALUATIONS OF QUALITY FOR LATINA AND BLACK WOMEN**

Evaluation of the human quality of women has existed since the beginning of time. In sexist societies, women have always been evaluated with regard to labor, child bearing, child care, homemaking, and providing male pleasure. One of the most grotesque examples of this was the enslavement of Africans. Quality checks of enslaved women were inherently dehumanizing and aimed at objectifying those women as commodities to be sold. The criteria used to assess whether they were of quality were based on the exploitative and discriminatory mindsets of the slaveholders. As they were showcased at the slave market, enslaved women were evaluated for qualities that would fetch higher prices. The women were expected to be obedient and submissive, producing more enslaved laborers, while enduring grueling working conditions.

There are no examples of the evaluation of quality as dehumanizing as the history of the enslavement of Black women.

However, there are other examples in our history of dehumanizing, sexist evaluations of women across countries and cultures. Cotillions, debutante balls, and quinceañeras, for instance, introduce young girls into society. As they approach menarche (the start of menstruation, signaling fertility), young girls are trained in behaviors that exhibit purity and good breeding, in order to secure marriage contracts. Historically, young women were not considered worthy of being in the presence of men if they hadn't been showcased. Even today, the obligation of the woman's family to pay for her wedding stems from the tradition of paying a dowry, where women were offered to men's families as a commodity.

In this cycle of commodities exchange, women are indoctrinated into believing that their quality is to be earned, proven, and maintained through continued external evaluations set by White, male-dominant values. Women spend years preparing to be showcased and the rest of their lives trying to demonstrate they are of quality. For Latina and Black women, this is particularly harmful, as it also often requires the silencing or erasure of their cultural norms and practices.

While traditions like cotillions, debutante balls, and quinceañeras have become festive parties of cultural pride, their influence on the ways women are indoctrinated within society nonetheless demands a call for reconceptualizing quality (and evaluation). Evaluation practices, deeply rooted in colonialism, are based on seeing women as being in service to a male-dominant agenda. They assess women to see if they are of quality and worth the investment. Women themselves, as humans, are not seen to have inherent quality. It is common to hear language describing this expectation in education as well.

## ECE'S SYSTEMIC COMMODIFICATION OF QUALITY

Conceptions of quality are value laden and intimately tied to societal conventions. Under capitalism and a free market economy, disparities in socioeconomic status and access to education systems have encouraged a commodification of teacher quality. In a capitalist society, consumers strive to showcase their discriminating tastes by choosing "quality" goods, that prove they are resourceful (Dahlberg, et al. 1999). Viewing consumer goods in this way makes us feel good and may not be seen as problematic, but it should not be how we define an ECE teacher—a human being. Yet quality in education is endlessly commodified and evaluated, without questioning—*whose definition of quality is it?*

In ECE, several frameworks and procedures have been developed to evaluate quality at the program level. Many states use Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to support continued development and quality performance. Programs can also choose to undergo an accreditation process in order to communicate to consumers (families) a higher standard of quality than that demonstrated by meeting the requirements of state regulations. National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is one of the most well recognized and respected accrediting organizations. Their standards include **10 domains**, ranging broadly from relationships to curriculum.

The evaluation of ECE teacher quality often occurs through observations and the use of assessment tools designed by researchers and implemented by evaluators. Teacher "quality" is typically evaluated through measures of interactions between teachers and children (such as CLASS®). Teacher evaluation also occurs through licensing or certification requirements, which include a combination of education, experience, and professional development.

## SHIFTING THE DEFINITION OF TEACHER QUALITY FROM EXTERNAL TO INTERNAL

Whether in the classroom or at the university, I often hear “we train teachers to serve children and families, and we observe their effectiveness.” *Train-serve-observe*. This behaviorist language is rooted in sexist, White male values (Rodriguez, 2023); for Latina and Black women in particular, this value model is consistent with that of the slave trade, debutante balls, and quinceañeras, as discussed above. As women in general have throughout history, teachers spend their time proving that they are *trained well, worth the investment, yield dividends*, and fit to inhabit spaces designed and controlled by men.

This dehumanization impacts the outer and inner worlds of the teacher. Quality standards become internalized as part of a teacher’s self-concept. Standards are reinforced and attached to her worth through interactions with evaluators observing and judging her. Under the unrelenting watch of evaluators, her quality isn’t considered inherent: it is negotiable, up for debate, and outwardly, subjectively defined by someone who has never lived the life she has. Her humanity is reduced to what an evaluator chooses to see of what she does; it does not encompass who she is.

As a veteran classroom teacher and current researcher supporting teacher mental health and wellness, I have long thought of teachers and quality quite differently. If you believe the teacher is quality, rather than needing to prove that she is *of* quality, then you will build a system to take care of her. Rather than having the mindset and language of imprisonment in recruiting and retaining teachers or asking *how do we train the teacher to be, and to prove that they are “of quality” for male-dominant spaces?* we [re]imagine a humanizing approach and instead ask:

*How do we treat a quality human being? How do we support quality women? What would their schools look like? What would their professional development programming feel like? **How could we create a space that is worthy of a quality teacher?***

## CRITICAL RACE SPATIAL ANALYSIS

Shifting our view of teacher quality so that it is seen through a humanizing lens that centers internal attributes is a multidimensional challenge. One dimension of this reconceptualization of quality is to consider how space impacts teachers and their internalized self-assessment of quality. This constitutes a more culturally and linguistically affirming way to support women teachers who identify as Black and Latina (and their quality). One approach is to use methods such as Critical Race Spatial Analysis (CRSA), which posits that identity and positionality shape our socio-spatial experiences and perceptions and that space is not neutral (Morrison et al., 2017). CRSA sheds light on the harm that Latina and Black women have suffered from toxic spaces of schooling. They arrive at teaching careers through pathways of personal and ancestral educational trauma. In fact, Latina and Black women educators find professional purpose in trying to ensure that Black and Latine children do not have to experience the same trauma they themselves did (Souto-Manning, 2022).

Having navigated White male-dominated spaces since birth, Latina and Black women operate as *visitors* or *imposters* in those spaces, always having to shrink and contort for self-protection. At the same time, Black and Latina women operate as visual symbols of support and acceptance for Black and Latine students. In affinity with those students, their presence creates spaces of cultural intimacy to offer micro-affirmations (that counter microaggressions) and positively impacts the well-being of Black and Latine students (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Yet, Latina and Black women educators are not valued as having quality. They are often viewed as inferior to other teachers or *only* beneficial for Black and Latine students. Latina and Black women teachers also report criticism from colleagues and school leaders when they embed culturally affirming materials into their curricula or welcome Spanish in the classroom (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Black

teachers report being assigned disciplinary roles instead of other leadership roles they might be more interested in, such as those recognizing their content expertise. They also face criticism from school leaders or colleagues if they do not embody the disciplinarian persona expected of them, and feel obligated to take on additional responsibilities to support their Black students (who might not otherwise receive the support they need) (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

The impact of COVID-19 increased these challenges (Rodriguez et al., 2022). For example, remote teaching prompted deeper recognition of how physical schooling spaces are White male-dominant and require energy for Latina and Black women to navigate—energy and capacities that were further depleted by challenges due to COVID-19 and racial violence. These realities likely contributed to the wave of teachers leaving the profession (Goldhaber & Theobald, 2023). However, some Latina and Black women educators reported that one positive by-product of remote teaching was that it allowed them distance and shelter from the toxicity of their physical school environments (Carver-Thomas, 2018). When space was restricted, it became clear how central it was to their social-emotional wellness (Rodriguez et al., 2022).

### THE RADICAL REFUGE: RECONCEPTUALIZING PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMMING

In 2021, we<sup>1</sup> reimagined professional development programming with Latina and Black women educators and developed the Radical Refuge. Our intention was to co-create a space worthy of *them*. I recalled the restaurant pods in my neighborhood that had begun to pop up as New York City COVID restrictions lightened. People clamored for the chance to commune with trusted friends and family within the safety of the pod. Inside this physical plastic bubble, they could escape the toxicity of the virus and heal emotionally through social connections. While the pandemic pods were convenient, I also recognized that authentic support for ECE educators would require more than a one-off visit to a pod. Support needs to be ongoing and cyclical. Support that acknowledges the lived experiences of Latina and Black women, in particular, must consider how racialized physical space supports or hinders our ability to engage socially and emotionally within it.

The overall **Physical, Social, and Emotional** space of the Radical Refuge is one where Latina and Black women are welcomed in to shelter, heal, and replenish their capacity to reenter their toxic school environments (see Figure 1). The model is an ongoing program design that engages women with an array of collective resources. Over the course of a year<sup>2</sup>, two licensed clinical social workers facilitated a virtual support group for either one or two semesters of sessions, according to the educators' preferences. This was followed by a full-day, in-person healing retreat offering whole-group and small-group sessions.

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1 Throughout this section, “we” and “our” refers to the first author and the women who made the Radical Refuge retreat possible (i.e., teacher advisory board, facilitators, and volunteers.)

2 The proposed design suggests that the program should occur annually in order to continue building upon teachers' skill development. We implemented the program for one year.

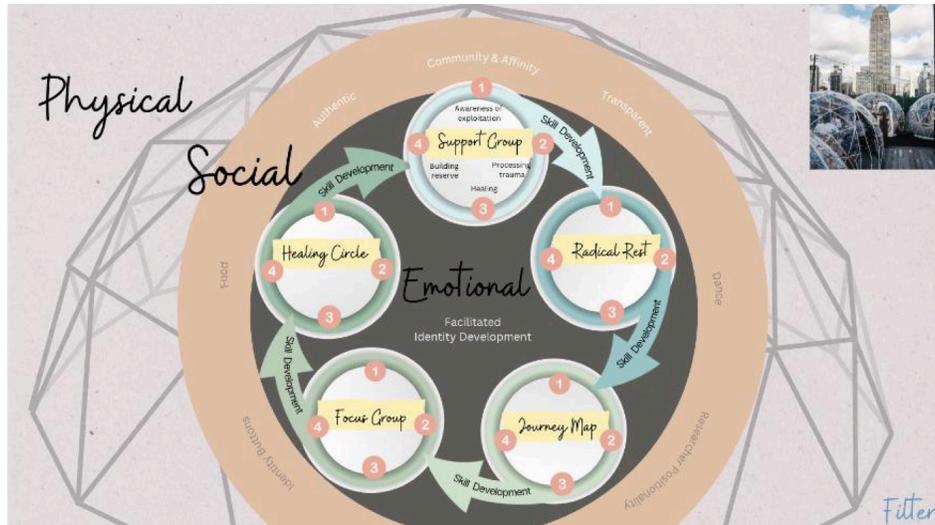


Figure 1. The Radical Refuge

Educators cycle through all the sessions. Essential to the design is that each small group is facilitated by mental health professionals, veteran teachers, and education researchers devoted to the mental health and wellness of Latina and Black women in education. The process feels authentic and natural, with facilitators guiding teachers through this developmental approach. This **Emotional** work is done through a four-phase process of deep Facilitated Identity Development. Rather than functioning as independent coping strategies, each experience engages with that process. It begins with (1) an awareness of the exploitation endured, followed by (2) processing of the traumas, in order to (3) heal and (4) build reserve. This process occurs within the **Social** context of community and affinity with other Latina and Black women educators.

Facilitators pull back the curtain, transparently teaching educators how to engage in the process of healing. We suspect that the authentic (culturally affirming) virtual and in-person **Physical** space acts as a filter, cleaning out the toxins teachers ingest from the external environment; the concept is that teachers then leave and engage in healthier relationships with students in their classroom. With the Radical Refuge, teachers, in a sense, become filters and healers for the broader education system.

After participating in the virtual support group sessions, educators convened as a whole group for a free full-day in-person healing retreat, **Fostering Emotional Engagement for Learning and Liberation** (FEELL). Unlike traditional professional development trainings, FEELL was held in a space of gratitude. The **Physical** environment embodied joy, love, and acceptance. The **Social** environment offered racial, gender, and professional affinity and thereby encouraged community, authenticity, and transparency. The **Emotional** environment was supported through a series of four whole-group sessions and four small-group sessions throughout the day. Whole-group sessions included discussions about the history of Latina and Black women in education and their future in the workforce; liberation dancing; and breaks for a culturally affirming breakfast, lunch, and snacks. Small-group sessions included radical rest (Hersey, 2022), focus groups (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006), education journey mapping (Morrison et al., 2017), and a healing circle (Richardson, 2018).

At the FEELL retreat, qualitative data was collected during the education journey mapping session and focus groups, as well as through a real-time video feedback booth. Following the retreat, feedback surveys and Self-in-Relation-to-Teaching (Rodriguez et al., 2020; 2022) cognitive interviews were completed. Our novel approach was facilitated by expert licensed clinical social workers, mental health

and wellness qualitative education researchers, and veteran teachers. They engaged in the practice of communal healing as a means to developing educators' mental health and wellness skills. This supported teachers in processing ongoing systemic traumas such as racism and sexism, as well as situational traumas like COVID-19 and the events following the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Our Radical Refuge is likely one of the first ongoing, yearlong professional development programs grounded in humanizing research to document the processes and journeys through which space affects Latina and Black women's personal and occupational identity development in relation to their race and gender.

## EDUCATION JOURNEY MAPPING

A particularly powerful tool for helping teachers shift their perceptions of quality from external to internal is education journey mapping: a humanizing, qualitative tool used to explore the lived experiences of women and reveal critical counternarratives missed by big data. This is one way of documenting the quality of each woman's life leading up to, and through, her teaching career. The maps reveal the critical role of space in Latina and Black women's life trajectories. Through visual "elevations" and "depressions," teachers depicted how space promoted or harmed their mental health and wellness, contributed to their motivation to become teachers, and influenced the precarious paths they've navigated—paths they often had to forge themselves (Morrison et al., 2017).

It is crucial that women have the opportunity to represent their journeys themselves, instead of submissively following dominant scripted paths that often reduce their complexity. The lived experiences marked by trauma and (d)evaluation of Latina and Black women must be expressed authentically. Their lives in particular—lives marked by experiences of violence and erasure, such as slavery and genocide—cannot be sufficiently captured in a neat, linear narrative. Attempting to speak for Latina and Black women leaves their lived experiences vulnerable to the continued violation, objectification, and silencing by those who attempt to *study* them (Fuentes, 2016). By learning from these women's authentic counternarratives, we may disrupt the oppressive White male hegemonic discourse around teacher quality (Souto-Manning, 2019).

Utilizing education journey mapping to facilitate this process, the session began with the facilitator vulnerably sharing her own education journey and how she chose to represent it graphically (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Facilitator describing her journey map and working with educators

Then teachers had the freedom to choose from a variety of supplies to create their own journey maps (Figure 3). Independently and collectively, women accessed their wholeness. They remembered who they are, where they came from, and how they arrived at the present moment. The process of remembering and documenting honored the multitudes within each of them individually and within all those sitting around them.



Figure 3. Educators creating their journey maps

Finally, the facilitator welcomed the educators to share their maps and discuss connections across all of their journeys, a process (Figure 4) called the Cartographer’s Clinic (Morrison et al., 2017).



Figure 4. Educators engage in Cartographer’s Clinic

Education journey mapping was therapeutic and transformative for the women. In an individual interview after the retreat, Takima<sup>3</sup> said that the process helped her “take stock of [her] own world as an educator.” Through this process, she was supported to see and resist the negative evaluations of quality that she endured—finally experiencing validation and affirmation.

3 The names of all participants in this article are pseudonyms, and any information that would identify the schools in the article has been changed.

She realized, “I actually had really done a lot, had done enough.” She reflected on the physical retreat space, “I could show up as myself from the second I arrived [...] I didn’t have to hold my breath.” Takima, like all the teachers at the retreat, was treated like she was already of quality; she had nothing to prove. As the organizers, it was on us to create a space that was worthy of Takima. In that space, she reached a profound insight into her personal journey: “I felt like [the retreat] was saying that I’m enough in this space and always was.” This is what is possible when educators are supported with our Radical Refuge;

this is what can happen when Physical, Social, and Emotional spaces reflect the educators’ inherent, immutable quality.

We now showcase three education journey maps that were created during these sessions.

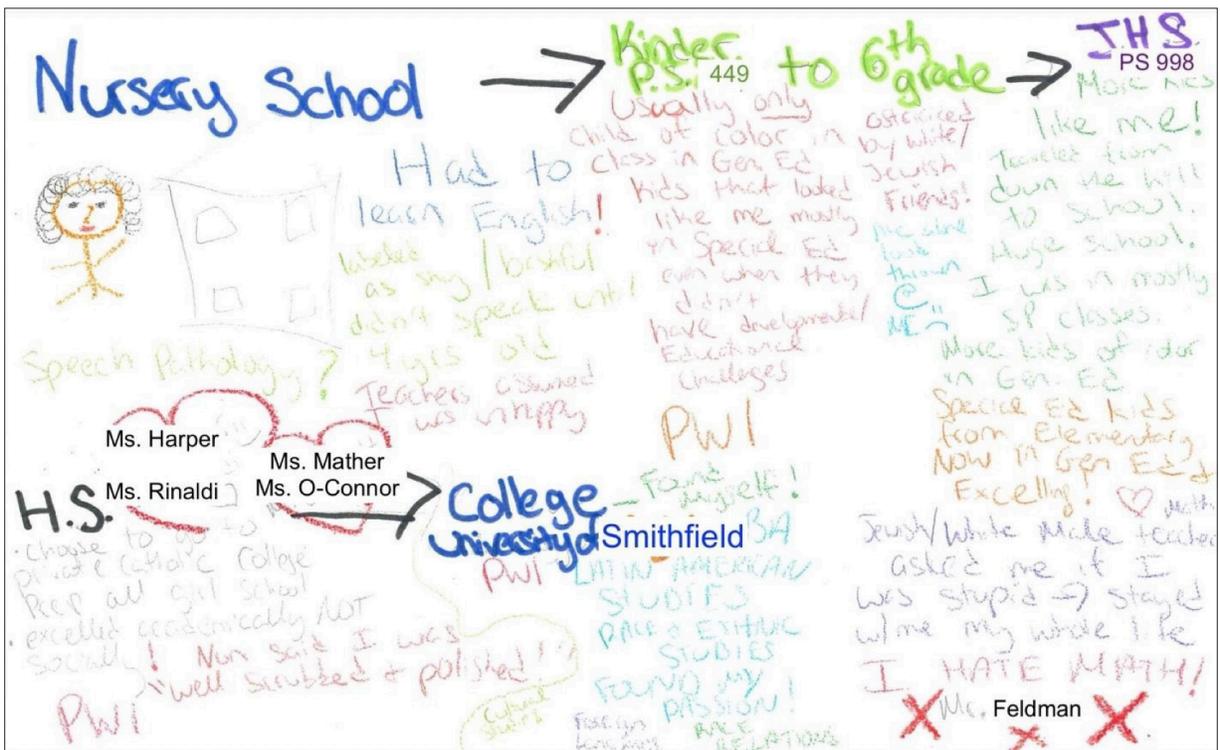


Figure 5. Imani’s journey map

Imani’s map documented her journey as a Black woman in predominantly White school environments, from nursery school through college (Figure 5). External evaluations clearly pervade the map. First, she noted how children of color were inappropriately referred to special education classes and how teachers had made assumptions about her. In one egregious example, her “White male teacher” asked her if she “was stupid,” which “stayed with her, her whole life.” She ended this section in red, capitalized letters: “I HATE MATH!” Her high school journey ended similarly. In red text, Imani wrote: “Nun said I was ‘well-scrubbed + polished!’” What was likely meant as a compliment from the nun demonstrated the derogatory external evaluations made of Imani’s quality and fitness to be presented to society, according to White male standards. This assessment of cleanliness would likely never have been made if Imani were a White male student.

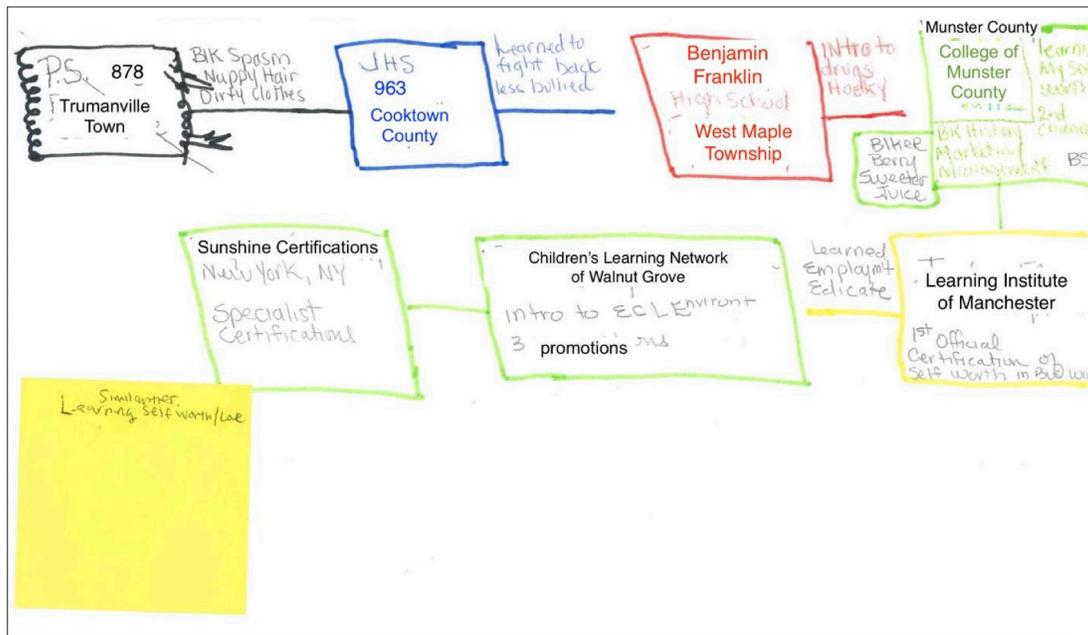


Figure 6. Rhonda's journey map

Rhonda placed the first three sites—elementary, middle, and high school—boxes connected by, negative, emotions and external evaluations outside each box. (Figure 6). In elementary school, Rhonda recalled external evaluations: Black spasm, nappy hair, and dirty clothes. Progressing, she noted bullying, getting into drugs, and playing hooky. Rhonda always placed school locations inside boxes, with negative experiences on the outside. However, during college, the physical location is on the inside, joined by a positive emotional milestone, “learned my self-worth,” and “2nd chance” with racially affirming schooling “Black History marketing management.” Rhonda wrote on the outside, typically given to negative emotions, “blacker the berry, sweeter the juice.” This saying has Southern roots tied to trauma and empowerment, both of which have historically been aspects of the experiences of many Black Americans. Darker blackberries are sweeter and softer, perhaps a description of Black women as kind and gentle. However, during the '80s and '90s the phrase was also used to sexualize Black women. Next, Rhonda showed how intimately external evaluations of quality have been tied to her internal sense of self-worth, writing “1st official certification of self-worth in the business world” inside the fifth box, while also writing “employment etiquette” on the outside of that box. A fellow teacher added a yellow sticky note on which she had written “Similarities learning self-worth/love.”

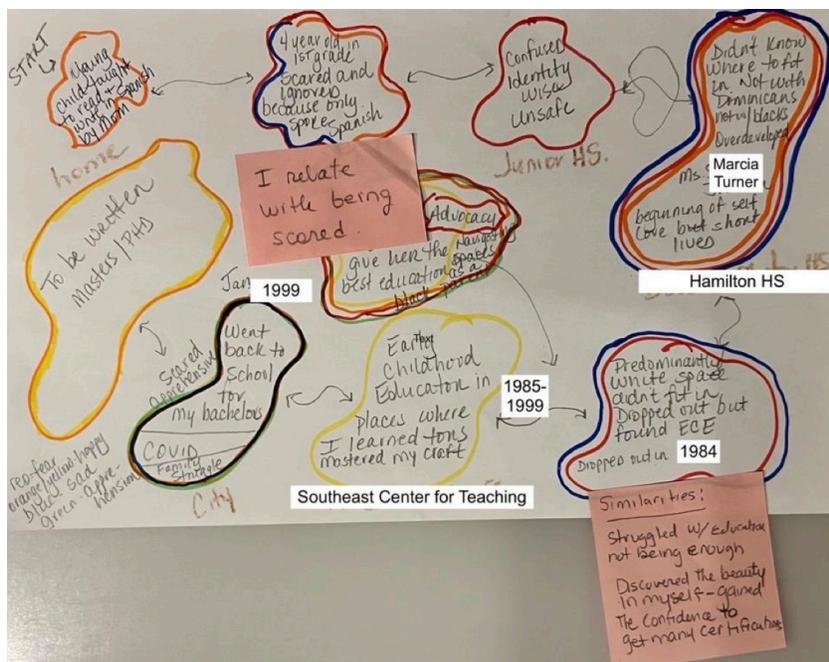


Figure 7. Responses to external quality measures

Using color<sup>4</sup> throughout, Doralis showed the occasions when external quality measures created fear and sadness (Figure 7). She was “scared and ignored because [she] only spoke Spanish,” and had a “confused identity.” Like others, Doralis, who identifies as Afro-Latina, “didn’t know where to fit in, not with Dominicans, not with Blacks.” In “predominantly White spaces” she also “didn’t fit in,” and “dropped out.” These negative experiences inspired her “advocacy” work trying to “give her daughter the best education” while “navigating spaces as a Black parent.” By contrast, her recollections of being “a young child taught to read and write in Spanish by mom” reflected happiness. Notably, her happy memories embodied positive racial and ethnic affinity, accompanied by self-awareness and affirmation. Doralis had a “short lived” positive experience of “self-love” and then gave birth to her daughter. Interestingly, later moments of happiness are connected to professional accomplishments, a “master’s/PhD.” These standards are aligned with White, male-dominant values of success. This perhaps signifies that women’s sense of self-worth becomes tied to the indoctrination they experience. Pink sticky notes indicated commonalities between her experiences and emotions and another teacher’s: “I relate with being scared” and “struggled with education not being enough.”

The journey maps of these Latina and Black women educators depicted the pervasiveness of evaluation and of questioning whether they are of quality throughout their entire lives. Colors, symbols, spacing, and descriptors shed light on the impact of their experiences, particularly on their mental health and wellness and sense of self-worth. Education journey mapping deepened our understanding of women’s experiences. It can now guide the reconceptualizing of how we define and document teacher quality in ECE.

4 In the lower left of her journey map, Doralis provided a key: red = fear, blue = sad, green = apprehension, orange/yellow = happy.

## CONCLUSION

The desire for quality in ECE will always exist. That is not necessarily problematic; of course, we all want what is best for our children. However, the current exodus of teachers (Carr, 2022), especially of those who are Latina and Black women (Dixon et al., 2019), compels us to break with the past and re-imagine how we have been defining quality in relation to ECE teachers. Women teachers enter a profession that is structured much the same way that our sexist society is structured; they are expected to showcase their training and fitness to exist in schools designed by White men for White children. Once these women have been acquired, the school district dictates how they will behave and how they will be externally evaluated for quality. When that dehumanizing performance becomes more than women can endure, they leave. We abandon the idea that the women teaching our children have to prove they are of quality. This premise allows education systems to get away with exploitation, harming and pushing out devoted, skilled women who love teaching. We must move forward with the belief that these women are *already* imbued with quality. To be sustainable, the system should contribute to, not detract from, teachers' mental health and wellness. If ECE were designed to support quality teachers, these women would gravitate toward the profession, choosing to stay because it would nurture their being.

Activities like education journey mapping revealed how the existing practices of measuring quality have negatively impacted the teachers' sense of self-worth. Most importantly, it is clear that our past experiences shape how we enter the classroom to teach and how we see and do our work with children. The literature about the ECE workforce does not appropriately account for the experiences of Latina and Black women teachers. The education journey maps highlight the brilliance and fortitude that teachers bring to their work—and yet also their fragility—and provide insight into how the system needs to support them moving forward.

Reconceptualizing quality in ECE requires that we understand the inherent value of women who comprise our teacher workforce. We must know and honor them for who they are, not just for what they can do for others. We must break with a long history of commodifying women, particularly Black women. Their quality is not to be earned, proven, showcased, and maintained through continued external evaluations designed to uphold White, male-dominant values and erase their culture and humanity. Commodification contributes to the erosion of teacher morale and to teachers' decisions to leave the classroom, regardless of the fulfilling relationships they have with their students. Therefore, we must ask ourselves, *how do we as a system recognize and support teachers' inherent quality?*

Our Radical Refuge professional development program is one approach to addressing this question. With teachers, we co-created **Physical, Social, and Emotional** virtual and in-person spaces where women's identity development was supported and their positionalities celebrated. The Radical Refuge was designed and implemented as one of the many reparations needed to begin healing Latina and Black women from the traumas of systemic racism and sexism. The Radical Refuge program design engaged women through facilitated identity development, awareness-building, healing, and replenishment. Within these affinity spaces designed to validate and support their inherent quality, teachers began to unlearn the lifelong practices of servitude and exploitation. We began to understand the complexity of the quality within these women educators, collectively and as individuals.

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