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## Reconceptualizing Quality Early Care and Education with Equity at the Center

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# Reconceptualizing Quality Early Care and Education with Equity at the Center

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# Reconceptualizing Quality Early Care and Education with Equity at the Center

Mark Nagasawa and Cristina Medellin-Paz

## THERE CAN BE NO QUALITY IN ECE WITHOUT RESPECTING EDUCATORS

Issue 51 of the Bank Street *Occasional Papers Series* is a response to Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence's 25-year interrogation of the concept of quality in early childhood education (ECE) (Dahlberg et al., 1999, 2013, 2023). Their groundbreaking work has called early childhood educators to question deeply held assumptions about the universality of childhood and how these shape the standardization of practices in early childhood settings around the world. They have argued that the homogenization of ECE practices is a *factory-ization* of early childhood that undermines cultural pluralism and the field's equity aspirations. This raises an imperative to explore ideas and practices that go "beyond quality," particularly through what Dahlberg and colleagues have called the "ethics of an encounter." In essence, these ethical encounters are instances where early childhood educators practice democracy, including navigating conflicts, thereby creating equity-centered change through their *small*, day-to-day interactions and meaning-making with others (Dahlberg et al., 2013). However, while quality is typically conceived of as existing primarily in classrooms, the authors in Issue 51 remind us that the small world of ECE exists within oppressive systems imbued with intersecting racism, classism, sexism, and ableism, and that, therefore, a *beyond quality praxis* requires nurturing and supporting educators through partnerships (recognizing that resilience is social), developing political commitments and orientations through relationships, and mobilizing these relationships for collective action towards liberatory alternatives.

The idea for this issue, which is a part of a broader project to identify and analyze promising, equity-committed early childhood policies and practices, emerged over the past few years. In the meetings and conversations we had with other researchers, policymakers, and educators, a general theme emerged—a dissatisfaction with how ideas about early childhood program quality are being operationalized. This reminded us of questions raised by Dahlberg and colleagues (2013):

- Who has been involved in the process of defining quality? Who has not?
- Might there be multiple perspectives or understandings of the idea?
- What is the context in which the idea has been formed?

Reflecting on these questions inspired us to submit a proposal to the Spencer Foundation to support a research conference, which although funded, was interrupted by the COVID-19 tragedy.<sup>1</sup> In light of the pandemic, we reconceptualized a more inclusive and wide-ranging mobilization, spread across seven meetings in 2022-23 (six online, one in person). We drew upon professional networks to engage 125 early childhood teachers and administrators, state and local early childhood policymakers, program officers from philanthropic foundations, graduate students, and early childhood researchers from across the United States in action-oriented dialogue about:

- How does an equity lens change how quality is defined, documented, and supported, and who must be involved in these decisions?
- What does genuine partnership between educators, policymakers, and researchers mean?
- How can "we" (this group, as well as others) advance an equity-centered ECE quality agenda?

1 Spencer Foundation #202200120.



Those meetings resulted in an agenda focused on:

1. illuminating systemic barriers and opportunities to equity (deeply structured oppressions in ECE administrative systems and how they are expressed and resisted in practice);
2. investigating ECE constituencies' voice and participation in policy decisions that concern them;
3. documenting and analyzing existing equity efforts vis-à-vis dominant definitions of quality; and
4. drawing upon multi-positional knowledge and expertise to advocate for equity-committed approaches ("We are more powerful together").

This issue is a first step toward this agenda by valuing and amplifying "beyond quality" stories, which are foundational to building critical movements in ECE (Dahlberg et al., 2023, p. 10). Before introducing contributors to this issue, it is important to reflect on the concept of quality and why it needs to be reconsidered.

## DECONSTRUCTING QUALITY

As a preschool teacher, you know that the work you do impacts children's whole lives. High-quality early learning leads to many positive outcomes in life, including increased educational attainment, healthier lifestyles, and more successful careers. – *Defining and Recognizing High-Quality Early Learning Programs: NAEYC'S 10 Accreditation Standards* (2019)

There was a time where neither of us would have thought twice about this statement from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). It outlines some of the *whys* for many early childhood educators: why persist through the long hours, low pay, and lack of respect? However, NAEYC's statement places the weight of righting *social* injustices squarely on the backs of early childhood educators, when systemic problems require systemic solutions. That means involving everyone at all *layers* of systems, from classrooms to legislatures and everywhere in between, in striving together to impact children's lives (Urban, 2014). But what does *quality* in ECE mean?

The word quality is so frequently used in ECE that it is often assumed to refer to an objective, universally agreed-upon set of ideas and practices. However, as is usually the case, the realities are more complex. At one level of complication, quality can be placed into four categories: *structural*, *global*, *process*, and *positional* (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002). Notions of structural quality see their expression in policies defining requirements like group/class sizes, adult/child ratios, and staff qualifications/levels of experience. Global quality refers to classroom and programmatic set up, such as materials, organization, and scheduling. These have been measured by states' child care program licensors using compliance checklists and by Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) quality assurance specialists using ubiquitous environmental rating scales (ERS), such as the *Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale* (ITERS) or Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms et al., 1988; Harms & Clifford, 1989; Harms et al., 1990). Ideas of process quality, which are gaining prominence, focus on the *qualities* of adult-child and peer-to-peer interaction, such as what is measured with age-specific versions of the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS) (Pianta et al., 2008). The final category, which tends to be the least-considered aspect of quality, can be thought of as positional because it involves considering children's, parents', and teachers' differing perspectives on quality programming (for notable examples see Barbarin et al., 2006; da Silva & Wise, 2006; Hallam et al., 2009; Tobin, 2005a; 2005b). Considering deeper aspects of positionality (race, culture, language, disability, and social class), as this issue's contributors do, opens up numerous dimensions of complexity that must be encountered and reflected upon as a part of pursuing equity goals.

### **Why [Re]Considering Quality is Important**

Quality in ECE, across all of these various definitions, as NAEYC (2019) points out, has great importance to public policy, local practice, and children's life chances, for there is sound research linking ECE

program quality with both short-term outcomes in elementary school (for instance, social, language/communication and cognition/executive functioning), and longer-term indicators of (modestly) improved life chances, such as high school graduation rates and increased earnings (Berrueta-Clement et al., 1984; Burchinal et al., 2008; Campbell et al., 2001; Niles et al., 2006; Helburn et al., 1995; Heckman, 2008; McCoy et al., 2017; Perlman et al., 2016). This, in combination with emerging evidence about young children’s neurodevelopmental sensitivities, women’s shifting workforce participation, and pluralization of national demographics, has contributed to organized advocacy linking high-quality ECE, school readiness, and broader education reforms (Olson, 2005; Child Trends, 2016; National Education Goals Panel, 1991).

This advocacy has led to efforts to “scale up” ECE program quality through what are called Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) (Tout et al., 2009). By 2017, all but one US state had either established or was working towards a QRIS, with an estimated annual national outlay of \$456,316,208—a crude calculation because the state of the available data is poor (Quality Compendium, 2021, 2024). While the amount of funding being directed towards QRIS is small compared to overall spending on ECE in the US (between \$29 and \$31.3 billion in 2016), it is a substantial amount that is likely to grow as public funding for ECE begins to increase toward projections of what is needed for “high-quality” ECE. This is estimated at \$140 billion per year (Allen & Backes, 2018, pp. 6-30; White House, 2021). What is key for this discussion is that QRIS implementation is variable across states (Tout et al., 2009) but shares an underlying theory of change that measuring, incentivizing (for example, through enhanced child care subsidy rates), supporting, and publicizing quality will lead to overall improvement in levels of quality driven by parental choice. This should ultimately lead to the kinds of promising *school readiness*-oriented child outcomes seen in earlier studies. While logical, is this change theory sound?

### ***A Dangerous Road***

There are several interrelated considerations about this logic. First, there are the underlying assumptions about ECE as a product to be consumed, with quality driven by consumers’ choices (Dahlberg et al., 2013, 2023). Related to this are questions about the commitment to incorporating the realities of social and cultural pluralism: children’s, families’, and educators’ lived realities within the intersections of race, culture, language, class, gender, and dis/ability. Dahlberg and colleagues ask, “[Can] the concept and practice of quality welcome and include context and values, subjectivity and multiple perspectives, complexity and uncertainty, participation and argumentation? And if so, how?” In the absence of answers to these, they conclude that pursuing quality is a “dangerous road” (2013, p. xiii).

Their questions are particularly salient, given the convergence of four trends in the US and potentially in other national contexts. First, young children are increasingly cared for outside of their homes (Child Trends, 2016). Second, the US is undergoing considerable cultural and linguistic pluralization (Pew Research Center, 2015). Third, prevailing ways of measuring quality in ECE fail to account for inclusive, racially and linguistically affirming practices that could help interrupt racial- and disability-related disproportionalities in preschool expulsion (Office of Civil Rights, 2014; Zeng et al., 2021). And finally, there is growing recognition of systemic obligations to support teachers’ holistic well-being (Dearani, this issue; Gallagher & Roberts, 2022; McDevitt & Sween, this issue; Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020; Rodriguez, this issue).

This third set of issues also connects to evidence that the widespread use of the ERS and CLASS measures rests upon an emerging, slippery knowledge base, making their widespread use in QRIS problematic. Evidence to date suggests that no single measure of quality has shown consistent or strong associations with children’s developmental and learning outcomes, and yet policy decisions are being made based upon information they provide (Burchinal et al., 2010; Burchinal et al., 2011; Burchinal, 2018; Gordon et al., 2015; Gordon & Peng, 2020; Guerrero-Rosada et al., 2021; Zaslow et al., 2011). That

there are serious concerns with these measurements is not to say that measurement is automatically bad, for there are important efforts such as the *Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale* (Curenton et al., 2020), *Classroom Assessment of Supports for Emergent Bilingual Acquisition* (Figueras-Daniel & Li, 2021), the *Inclusive Classroom Profile* (Soukakou, 2012), and a planned 2026 revision of the ECERS (Teachers College Press, 2024). More important than *what* measures to use is *how* any resulting data is used and who is involved in making these curricular and policy decisions.

Going beyond quality includes moving away from narrow definitions based upon crude measurements that can contribute to early childhood educators feeling judged and undervalued (Sloan, 2022). Going beyond also means resisting binary, good-versus-bad thinking (e.g., that positional quality is good and process quality is bad; pedagogical documentation is good, measurement is bad). It means seeking to combine many forms of information from various perspectives on quality: What is important to children, family members, community leaders, educators, administrators, and policymakers? Where are the spaces for negotiating these perspectives? If they do not exist, how do we create them? (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Moss, 2007; Nagasawa & Swadener, 2015). These are real-world, everyday discussions and debates between colleagues, teachers and children, teachers and administrators, educators and parents—and it is hoped, with policymakers—that are central to democratic, equity-focused decision-making about ECE.

## THE CONTRIBUTORS' BEYOND QUALITY STORIES

Reconsidering quality in ECE raises some large, complicated issues, so much so that knowing what to do can feel overwhelming. While our colleagues cannot take on all of these issues, they do provide hopeful examples of the type of equity-committed meaning-making Dahlberg et al. (2023) argue are central to going beyond quality. Our collection begins with Helen Frazier's "Learning Stories as Assessment for Liberation," which draws upon a year's worth of classroom experimentation to illustrate an alternative to "industrial authentic assessment systems" (e.g., Teaching Strategies GOLD, Work Sampling System), which are "very rarely meaningful to teachers and [are] often so flawed as to be useless to policymakers" (this issue). This narrative approach to assessment is relational, pedagogical, focused on making teaching and learning visible (both reflective and communicative), and draws upon early childhood educators' capacities and aspirations for the children they teach.

In the second essay, "Be A Tree: Reconceptualizing Early Education through the Roots and Fruits Methodology of Teaching and Learning," Virginia Dearani reflects on her school's attempts to create a "post-human" school. By this, she means a place that seeks to recontextualize humans as a part of nature, rather than separate from it. She describes how Roots and Fruits sought to foster deep connections between younger and older people at the school, their histories, and the land (for related work, see *Occasional Paper Series* #48: "Learning Within Socio-Political Landscapes: (Re)Imagining Children's Geographies," #49: "Indigenous Pedagogies: Land, Water, and Kinship," and #50: "Learning With Treescapes in Environmentally Endangered Times").

Themes raised by Dearani are extended in "Stories from Three Native Hawaiian Alaka'i About the Education of Young Children" by Charis-Ann F. Sole, M. Nālani Mattox-Primacio, and Shin Ae Han. This contribution draws upon mo'olelo (stories) from alaka'i wahine (women leaders) who are educator-administrators in Native Hawaiian early learning settings. Their piece highlights that "context and values, subjectivity and multiple perspectives" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. xiii) are not abstract words but instead are central to transforming early childhood programs from colonizing institutions into liberatory, culturally, and linguistically sustaining ones (see OPS #49).

Soyoung Park, Sunmin Lee, Nnenna Odim, and Jennifer Keys Adair take up the often-problematic

relationship between dominant ideas of quality and control in their partnership approach to supporting professional learning in their paper, “Dynamic Innovation for Young Children.” At its core this work involves university-based researchers joining with their colleagues in a school district to “counter the push towards conformity” (this issue) with a focus on noticing children’s capacities—akin to the examples shared by Frazier and Dearani in their essays. While seemingly small, this practice is an act of resistance to top-down, dehumanizing systems, leading to the discovery of children’s and teachers’ intertwined agency.

In “I Want to Say the Right Thing: Toward Translingual Literacy Practices Through Early Care Educator and University Researcher Partnerships,” Angie Zapata, Mary Adu-Gyamfi, and Adrianna Ybarra González build upon the preceding articles’ illustrations of what can happen within the ethics of an encounter (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Terms like coaching and mentoring have become increasingly popular in ECE, but their inter-subjective aspects are rarely discussed. Zapata, Adu-Gyamfi, and Ybarra González provide useful insights into how teachers develop appreciation for the richness of translingual literacies, “the ways people shuttle across languages and language varieties, utilize hybrid language practices, and are multilingual” (this issue), through snowballing—a kind of dynamic exchange that allows partners to accomplish more together than they could alone (Vygotsky, 1978).

The final two essays in this collection take up the critically under-considered issue of where early childhood educators’ well-being fits within quality. Seung Eun McDevitt and Louella Sween, in “Pour Into the Teachers: Learning From Immigrant Women of Color Through Conversations on ‘Quality’ in Urban Early Education,” quote their colleague, Esther, who says, “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.” Teachers, rather than any particular assessment, lie at the heart of quality.

This disregard for teachers’ well-being in systematized quality is no accident, since the field is overwhelmingly woman-identifying, with a long history of brutally coerced caring for *other people’s children* by Black, Indigenous, Latina, and other Women of Color (Delpit, 1995; Lloyd et al., 2021). These realities shaped Vanessa Rodriguez’s facilitation of “radical refuges,” designed by and for Black and Latina early childhood educators, which she describes in “The Radical Refuge: Reconceptualizing Teacher Quality Liberated From the Historical Commodification of Latina and Black Women in Early Childhood Education,” which punctuates this collection.

## WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Our colleagues in this issue have taken on some of the deepest issues affecting ECE in the US and elsewhere: educators as intellectuals and cultural workers, resisting the forces of capitalism, misogyny, racism, assimilation, and linguisticide. By sharing their stories, they offer hopeful examples of possibility that we believe are suggestive of the many unrecognized acts of creative resistance happening in schools, classrooms, and communities across the globe. However, this is a *hypothesis* that needs to be tested *and*, so, there is much work to do in terms of finding, illuminating, and connecting these efforts.

Moving forward, we believe this work must rest upon partnerships among researchers, educators, children, parents, family members, and community alaka’i (leaders). Once again, Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss, and Alan Pence (2013, 2023) offer constructive guidance for this project, which involves:

- Deepening understanding of ECE institutions by contextualizing them and unearthing differing positional perspectives on their objectives and purposes;
- Striving to create transformative ECE institutions by struggling and debating across these positional perspectives to seek shared meaning, some degree of agreement, about the whats,

whys, and so-whats of ECE (i.e., the connections between cherished practices and equitable results for children, families, communities, educators, and society);

- Drawing contextualized illustrations of this praxis, in all of its messiness and complexities; and
- Teaching others about and inviting them into these praxes.

Importantly, our colleagues in this issue have suggested that this occurs within local-national-global frameworks and systems—what Dahlberg and colleagues (2013) call “frameworks of normalization.” Their concept helps clarify connections between guidance documents issued by organizations like the NAEYC, state early learning standards, health and safety reviews, QRIS ratings, top-down research, and what Helen Frazier calls “industrial authentic assessment systems” (this issue). Each of these things has a rationale but, when viewed together, bring us back to the questions that initiated this project:

- Who has been involved in the process of defining quality? Who has not?
- Might there be multiple perspectives or understandings of the idea?
- What is the context in which the idea has been formed? (Dahlberg et al., 2013)

When addressing these questions, we strongly urge that the educator-child-family-community-researcher partnerships we advocate for attend to how the small (interpersonal and local) interacts with the big (societal and political)—a focus on what Mathias Urban (2014) has called “competent systems.” In essence, his argument is that a hyper-focus on individual teachers’ competence distracts from the ways systems need to be supporting teachers themselves. Such support involves reciprocity between people, within institutions, and throughout administrative networks—all of which are nested within socio-cultural-political contexts. While this might seem very abstract, each of this issue’s authors is enacting this idea.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

Earlier in the global COVID-19 pandemic, there was a rising chorus calling for reimagining education (*Occasional Paper Series #46: “The Pandemic as a Portal: On Transformative Ruptures and Possible Futures for Education;”* International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). In a widely circulated piece, Arundhati Roy (2020) reminded us that,

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (para. 48-49)

Amidst 2024’s return to *normal*, it may feel like this portal has closed, but our colleagues show us that it remains open.

### ***We are More Powerful Together***

At the beginning of our essay, we said that this issue is one result of a series of gatherings held in 2022 and 2023. Another result of those conversations were three guiding metaphors: the portal, the hive, and the constellation. As Roy (2020) explains, the portal is the gateway to a new world. Our hopeful stance is that one barrier to crossing through the portal is our lack of imagination—not because imaginative examples do not exist, but because we may not know that alternatives exist. Inspired by Dahlberg and colleagues’ (2013) challenge of cross-positional debate and dreaming, it became clear that these meetings were hives of creative snowballing, generating new ideas and perspectives (Zapata et al., this issue). Finally, constellations remind us that people find patterns of meaning in complexity. We



believe that the tasks moving forward are to keep drawing upon hive energy; keep striving to create constellations of related ideas, actions, and people; and keep helping each other develop the hope and courage to cross through the portal.

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# Learning Stories as Assessment for Liberation

Helen Frazier

I wrote the following letter to a child named Cecilia and her family. Letters such as this are central to the assessment approach called Learning Stories that I use in my pre-K class. Because these letters are used to inform families and children about the connection between the activities the child is doing and their ongoing learning, they include three parts: a description of their activity, a connection to what is being learned, and an idea about future growth.

*Dear Cecilia,*

*Today in the block area you built a camera. You used the nesting boxes that have different magnifications and put one in front of the other. You put the toy people on the other side of your camera and looked through your lens at them. You said they look funny!*



Figure 1. Cecilia looking through nesting boxes

*You reached around with your hand to take them and said, “My hand surprised me!” It looked bigger than usual through your camera. Then you lined up the red cylinders in front of the camera lens. You said that you wanted to see what they looked like. I looked through your camera. They looked amazing!*



Figure 2. Cecilia with cylinders



Figure 3. View through the camera

### ***What Learning is Happening Here?***

*Cecilia, this is such a creative use of our classroom materials. You thought like a scientist and experimented with putting different materials in front of your camera. You showed curiosity and focus.*

### ***What's Next?***

*I wonder if you might like to invite other children to look through your camera. What does it look like if you put the boxes in a different order? What objects might you like to see through your camera?*

*From,  
Helen*

Learning Stories is a narrative approach to assessment that acknowledges and welcomes teacher, child, and family perspectives; it is done for, not on, the child. This approach was developed in New Zealand, where it is currently the primary form of early childhood assessment. As an educator and professional development provider working in New York City, I became interested in Learning Stories because of my frustration with widely used “authentic assessment” systems. In this paper, I will illustrate my steps toward unlearning exclusionary assessment practices, and I will share my exploration of Learning Stories as a liberatory assessment approach. Through sharing this reflection, I hope to provide the “engaged practitioner” with a “thickly described example” that then can be “adapted in ways that change practice” (Tobin, 2005, p. 31).

For 20 years, I used standard industry tools, such as Teaching Strategies GOLD, HighScopeCOR, and WorkSamplingSystem, for assessing children’s development, and I supported practitioners in using them. I have looked at these tools from every angle and tried to see them as feasible and constructive—but I have long been troubled by my impression that they are doing more harm than good. Early care and education providers, whose work is already taxing, have the additional (unpaid) responsibility of uploading observations and comparing children’s skills to the dominant culture’s developmental norms. The implication of this process, as well as the reports that the ratings lead to, is that childhood, even infancy, is a race—a competition to exceed expectations. The data that the commercial early childhood assessment systems produce, which they misleadingly label “authentic,” is very rarely meaningful to teachers and is often so flawed as to be useless to policy makers, although it is perhaps of value to the corporations and private equity firms that own the systems.

I decided to put aside the “data banks and dead ideas” (Roy, 2020, n.p.) and consider, through practice, how to assess children in a way that is “socially just by design and . . . aims to promote greater social justice within society as a whole” (Hanesworth et al., 2018, p. 9). As an experienced White teacher, I was able to leverage my privilege to try an alternative form of assessment within a publicly funded early childhood program. My reflections are new and process-oriented; I have only been using Learning Stories for one year. The dimensions of my unlearning include embracing emotion: assessment for attachment; enactment of asset-based pedagogies: assessment for pluralism; and awakening of creativity: assessment as art. In this paper, I will describe the shifts in my practice and present examples of Learning Stories to illustrate each of these dimensions.

## **EMBRACING EMOTION: ASSESSMENT FOR ATTACHMENT**

I will never forget the Head Start training I attended in 2014. Exhausted educators sat at tables in the basement of a community-based organization in Bushwick, Brooklyn. An orange was set in the middle of each table. We were asked to objectively describe it as an object. Our responses included, “It is round,” “It is orangish-yellow in color,” and “It has a stem.” We were then asked to describe the way a child’s face looked when she was happy and responded that “Her mouth turns up at the corners.” The trainers

impressed upon us that authentic assessment documentation should contain no trace of emotion, interpretation, investment, or connection.

The pseudo-scientific gaze is a kind of power, and that may be reassuring to a profession insecure about its professionalism. But as a caregiver, I found removing love from my gaze painful. Attempting to become more “scientific,” I became more estranged from the children—and from myself. My co-teachers were dispirited by the relentless work of data collection and entry. What was it for? Multiple studies demonstrate the value of responsive interactions during early childhood (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Early childhood teachers do not need child outcome data to prove that their work is important.

If, as I believe, a central goal of early care and education providers is to build children’s capacity for healthy attachment, it is counterproductive to treat children as objects for study. Love is at the heart of learning (Carr & Lee, 2021). The more reciprocal our interactions with children are, the more children will learn. What, I wondered, would assessing for the child and the family—rather than for the state, policy makers, or corporations—look like?

A learning story includes a letter to the child, a description of what the child is doing, and some ideas about next steps in learning. In their helpful book, *Learning Stories and Teacher Inquiry Groups: Re-imagining Teaching and Assessment in Early Childhood Education*, Escamilla, Kroll, Meier, and White (2021) explain the role of emotion in Learning Stories:

The teacher begins the story with his or her own interest in what the child has taken the initiative to do, describing what the child does and says. The teacher writes in the first person using “I,” which brings a personal perspective that is essential to the tale, writing directly to the child. For example, “Miguel, yesterday I noticed that you ...” or “Gaby, today I heard you say ...” or “Nathan, this morning I saw you ...” The teacher describes what the child does and says from the perspective of someone who deeply cares and is listening closely to discover what is actually happening and the learning that is taking place. It is important to note that, quite often, this description is not totally objective. The teacher is present with his or her own feelings. Usually, the teacher includes his or her first name so the child and the family will know who wrote the story. (p. 23)

Interpretation that includes emotion is often gendered as feminine, and “perhaps as a result of internalized patriarchy, a less valid way of knowing” (Hayter, 2021, p. 86). Learning stories acknowledge our subjectivity and welcome ambiguity. They might be a way of reclaiming (affective, embodied) feminist discourse in a feminized profession. The inclusion of emotional expression is also consistent with what I know about how children learn: identifying and expressing authentic emotions strengthens relationships and builds trust, and it is in the context of trusting attachments that children flourish.

Unlike online authentic assessment systems, which often act as repositories for reams of decontextualized observations, Learning Stories are shared with families the day that they are written. The family then reads the learning story at home to their child. As a teacher, I began to see my assessments as gifts I was creating for each child. Here is another learning story that I wrote for Cecilia, who delighted in creating presents of her own:



Figure 4. Cecilia with beads

*Dear Cecilia,*

*During the Tuesday afternoon work time, you chose to go to the cozy loft. As you were looking out at the children from the loft, you noticed some cardboard, beads, and pipe cleaners in the art area. You came down and asked if you could join the activity. First, you sorted out the beads with the letters on them and strung them on to a pipe cleaner. Then, you made your pipe cleaner stick into the cardboard like a rainbow. Next, you decided to make bracelets for the children in the class. Children were so happy to receive your gifts. They each asked me to help them fasten the bracelet on their wrists. You were so thoughtful to use our materials to make gifts for the children. You have such a kind, generous, and joyful spirit, Cecilia. Thank you for being a loving member of the Hawthorn community.*

***What Learning is Happening Here?***

*As you strung the beads onto the pipe cleaner, you exercised the muscles in your hands. This will help you with your writing and drawing. The stronger your hand muscles get, the easier it will be for you to draw shapes and write letters. Cecilia, when you were doing this activity, you also focused for a long time—over 30 minutes! You kept on stringing beads to make bracelets. Developing the ability to focus and pay attention is an important part of becoming a student. Most of all, when you were doing this work, you showed that you care for your friends.*

***What's Next?***

*Cecilia, after they received your bracelets, many children became excited about stringing beads. I think I will look for more beads to add to our art area so we can continue to make jewelry and sculptures. I am also wondering if you might like to draw pictures or make cards for your friends and family.*

*From,  
Helen*



Her mother read the learning story to Cecilia that night and responded, “This is too adorable. She is such a thoughtful child and finds it easy to appreciate all of her peers for who they are.” When Cecilia entered the class the next morning, her eyes were shining with recognition and pride. It was just October; the children were new to the class. Cecilia had taken chances in coming down from the loft, in creating, and in giving. She had been seen in her courage and kindness. The gift of the learning story strengthened Cecilia’s attachment to us as her teachers and affirmed her unfolding self to her family.

Learning Stories are a collaborative form of assessment. Cecilia’s mother’s observation that Cecilia “finds it easy to appreciate her peers for who they are” was so true—specific and beautiful. As the year progressed, Cecilia thoughtfully connected to each child in the class, paying special attention to children who were sometimes unhappy. She noticed what children liked and brought them gifts—a coloring page from home, a pine cone, a ladybug. Her mother’s observation helped me to see Cecilia and join in a loving appreciation of her.

If I had created this observation for a traditional authentic assessment system, as I had done for 20 years, I might have written “C sorted out the beads and strung them on pipe cleaners. She said they were bracelets and carried them to her peers.” I would then have used a standardized time line to assign a numerical rating to her fine motor and expressive language skills.

The commercial authentic assessment system might also ask me to rate Cecilia’s emotional development. Where to begin? Not everything that we value can be quantified. The system seems to assume that Cecilia’s awareness and generosity need to be measured and improved, but I would argue that she is already offering a full expression of a powerful disposition that should simply be noticed and appreciated. Writing Learning Stories helped me to shift my gaze from one of power and domination to one of genuine respect.

## ENACTMENT OF ASSET-BASED PEDAGOGIES: ASSESSMENT FOR PLURALISM

At the heart of rating systems is the myth of the normal child (Baglieri et al., 2011). Teaching Strategies GOLD asks educators to determine if children’s skills are below, consistent with, or exceeding “widely held expectations” (MyTeachingStrategies, 2023). Whose expectations are these? In the Core Considerations to Inform Decision Making section of the *Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) Position Statement*, **The National Association for the Education of Young Children** (2020) asserts that normative schedules can reinforce “systems of power and privilege” by excluding the developmental expectations of marginalized families:

When considering commonalities in development and learning, it is important to acknowledge that much of the research and the principal theories that have historically guided early childhood professional preparation and practice have primarily reflected norms based on a Western scientific-cultural model. Little research has considered a normative perspective based on other groups. As a result, differences from this Western (typically White, middle-class, monolingual English-speaking) norm have been viewed as deficits, helping to perpetuate systems of power and privilege and to maintain structural inequities. (p. 6)

When educators complete ratings such as those in Teaching Strategies, they are measuring each child against cultural, economic, and linguistic norms; when they use these ratings to inform instruction, they are planning to move each child closer to that norm. Sen (2007, pp. 16–17), as cited in McArthur (2016), notes that “Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when our differences are narrowed into one devised system of uniquely powerful categorization.”

A culturally responsive and sustaining approach to assessment, by contrast, supports students in

order to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016, p. 6). In their seminal article “[Re]claiming ‘Inclusive Education’ Toward Cohesion in Educational Reform: Disability Studies Unravels the Myth of the Normal Child,” Baglieri et al. (2011) state that “an authentically inclusive education invites the denaturalization of ‘normalcy’ to arrive at a ground zero point from which we banish idealizations of center” (p. 2142). Learning Stories may be part of an asset-based approach to assessment that works within culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy as well as within authentic inclusion.

As an experienced early care and education provider, I deeply internalized the developmental continuum that defines normalcy. I am just beginning to undo my “idealizations of center.” The “What learning is happening here?” section of the learning story did not include checkboxes, but it may as well have, given how hard I found it to think outside those lines.

Carr (2021), who contributed to the development of the Learning Stories approach, acknowledges the importance of powerful frameworks such as New Zealand’s national Te Whāriki curriculum that define the values and goals of education. She also notes what is lost when educators connect their stories to normative developmental ratings:

These diminish the professional role of the teacher as a thoughtful and knowledgeable analyst of the learning. They can deny the vital opportunity for the teacher to tentatively and collaboratively enable the learner to recognize some possible next steps and how to take them. (p.131)

While the measurement procedures of commercial assessment systems falsely promise certainty and accuracy, Learning Stories encourage the educator to be “tentative.” The “next steps” section is written as a question (“perhaps we might?”) that the family or student themselves are invited to answer.

Carr (2021) encourages educators to focus on children’s learning dispositions, which might include creativity, curiosity, persistence, and generosity, rather than to connect observations to normative skills. Learning dispositions “reflect the emerging values of children and the values and beliefs of teachers, families, schools, and even the larger community” (Escamilla, 2021). Who is this unique person? What are their interests and ways of being?

The New York State Education Department’s *Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework* (2019) provides guidance on how to “build rapport and develop positive relationships with students, and their families, by learning about their interests and inviting them to share their opinions and concerns” (p. 26). Through listening, educators can identify and connect the culturally accumulated “funds of knowledge” that children bring to school with them. Here is a learning story about a child whose pretend play revealed his fund of knowledge about child care:

*Dear David,*

*On Tuesday, at Forest School, you found two big smooth rocks and carried them over to me. You said, “These are my babies.” You sang them a little song, “Babies, babies, babies ....” You told me to come with you because “We have to put them to bed.” You laid the rocks down under a tree and patted them a bit. Then you said that they were waking up. “Let’s check in the fridge for milk.” You carried them carefully to a different part of the Forest School area. Sometimes it was hard to carry them both at once and you asked me to hold one for a bit. You handed it to me so gently. You said, “I am the daddy. We will give them some oatmeal. We need to go to the store to buy milk.” You pretended to use leaves as money to buy milk. Then you said, “There you go babies.” Amy was interested in what you were doing and you took her over to the place where you found the rocks.*



*Once you got over there you told the babies, “It’s time to leave the playground.” You said that the babies were crying about leaving the playground. They had to go back to bed. When you brought them back to the bed by the tree, you and Amy arranged some leaves over them to make blankets.*

*David, you played the game with your rock babies for over 30 minutes. You really knew all about what babies need and how to take care of them! Maybe you were thinking of your little sister. You may be a parent one day, and you will know just what to do.*



Figure 5. David with rock babies



Figure 6. David carrying rock babies

### ***What Learning is Happening Here?***

*David, you are learning how to act out a story in play. This is an important skill that will help you learn to be a good writer when you get older. You thought about what daddies say, where they go, and what happens in a baby’s day. You used a lot of language to communicate your ideas to us. You were so creative about how to use the rocks, leaves, and trees as part of your story.*

### ***What’s Next?***

*David, you know so much about how to care for a baby, and I’m sure that many of the other children in the Hawthorn class would like to play rock babies with you. Maybe next time we go to Forest School, you can try playing it again, and you can teach another child how to care for a little one.*

*From,  
Helen*

David’s mothers responded, “This is the sweetest. Thank you so much for sharing. He does love taking care of his little sister and he has a baby doll that he always hugs and took care of prior to his sister’s birth. I love it.”

Looking through the lens of learning dispositions, rather than of skills, I see how responsible David was, not just for his rock babies in his pretend play, but also in the classroom. He conscientiously made sure all the chairs were pushed in and swept up the sand from under the sand table. Responsibility was a strong value in David’s family and one that I was able to notice and connect to through the Learning Stories process.

For children whose functional skills make classroom participation difficult and whose families have concerns about their development, we provide referrals to the norm-referenced evaluation process through our district's Committee for Preschool Special Education. This process, with its opaque language and itinerant experts, is often confusing and dehumanizing for families, but it can ultimately allow children access to services to which they are entitled by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. I hope that asset-based Learning Stories may help these families maintain their image of their child as they navigate an ableist system.

## AWAKENING OF CREATIVITY: ASSESSMENT AS ART

Early childhood education is a creative field of work. We are creative in the construction of the classroom environment, in the modulation of the rhythms of the day, in our singing and in our storytelling, in our curation of art materials, and in our documentation. Learning Stories honor the educator as an artist and offer a new mode of expression.

While commercial assessment data sits in the cloud, inaccessible to children and families and deleted at the end of each year, our Learning Stories are a tangible creation. We collect our stories in booklets that have a special place in the library area. Children read their Learning Stories with their parents during arrival times, side by side with one another during work times, and on their mats at nap time. Sometimes we read them out loud to the class during story time and talk about our memories.

Assessment has become community work. We honor one another's emerging selves. Late in the year, Cecilia was sitting at the art table talking to her friends. She said, "This is us on the swings, and this is Helen watching us play." Although it is expected that children will imitate the behavior of their teachers, I felt moved that a child had documented my work. Assessment had become accessible, public, and democratic.

I found that the Learning Stories process provided a new kind of accountability. Writing for the child themselves and for their family, I took time to see them and strove to be as true to their actions and words as possible. If I got the story wrong, the child would almost always correct me! One day, a child named Ben was reading his learning story book with me. He wanted to add onto a story about a block building he had made. He began to draw what the character in his block building should have looked like.



*Figure 7. Ben revising his learning story*

This spontaneous action made me wonder if we could expand our Learning Stories books to include the co-teachers', families', and children's contributions, clarifications, and reinterpretations. As we journey further away from the confines of commercial assessment, the learning story collection might become a kind of scrapbook.

Perhaps thinking of Learning Stories as a form of scrapbooking might be an invitation to educators who are less comfortable with traditional literacies. In *Cutting and Pasting: The Rhetorical Promise of Scrapbooking as Feminist Inventiveness and Agency from the Margins*, Hayter (2021) writes, "I feel connected to women and others who engage in scrapbooking as a means to assert agency when the circulation of print and electronic textual materials is overwhelming or dominated by a system that largely privileges a patriarchal or otherwise oppressive framework" (p. 3). Like a collection of Learning Stories, a scrapbook is a personal record—and often a gift. Scrapbooking offers a form of reflective practice and multimodal approach to meaning-making. It might also be an approach to early childhood assessment that is "socially just by design and that aims to promote greater social justice within society as a whole" (Park, 2020, p.1).

## CONCLUSION

I've had a happy year of unlearning. I feel more human. As with any offering, the act of giving a learning story is at least as emotionally rewarding as the experience of receiving one. The stories invite the teacher to see a more complete version of the child. Each child is leaving for kindergarten with a strong sense of self and a joyful understanding of how to be in a community. Commercial assessment systems look violent in comparison.

The Call for Papers for this issue of Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* asks authors to offer recommendations for how to remake systems. At the heart of the effort is trust. The early care and education *field* recognizes the importance that trusting relationships have for human learning, but, sadly, early care and education quality improvement systems are centered on mistrust. They offer a mechanistic intervention—rating and improvement—to remediate the imagined deficits of children, families, and teachers. People of all ages don't like to be rated; why should we trust the rater, especially if they do not know us or share the values of our communities? Lacking the element of trust, the anxious, monetized, deficit-based processes of commercial assessment systems cannot lead to learning. Recognizing this essential flaw, educators are putting aside these broken tools.

Teachers who would like to change assessment practices are not alone. There are groups of engaged educators in Head Start programs, state-funded pre-K programs, and family child care networks developing the Learning Stories practice all around the United States (Escamilla, 2021). Teachers might begin by considering what it would look and feel like to make assessments *for*, not *of*, the child. They might then think with the families in their communities about what values, skills, or dispositions they would like to reflect on together. Write a letter. Read it to a child.

Trust, so long broken, can only be repaired bit by bit. Small programs, or even individual classrooms in local communities, can look for ways to hold a protective space for children. Art cannot be scaled, so each person's approach to Learning Stories, as well as each communities' valued learning dispositions, will look different. The stories might be decorative, digital, or verbal. The important thing is that they are gifts.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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# Be a Tree: Reconceptualizing Early Education Through the Roots and Fruits Methodology of Teaching and Learning

Virginia Dearani

*It was Fall 2015 and our annual curriculum design was beginning to take shape organically, as children and teachers came together to explore the dominant themes present in the children's imaginative play in the first six weeks of school. Our Reggio Emilia-inspired projects at Roots and Fruits Preschool evolved from the collective, where children and teachers share observations and ideas on our annual year-long project. Home, family, and community were the dominant words on our newsprint brainstorm as we explored our imaginations and centered in on the play that brought us the most joy.*

*The dramatic play area was very popular this year. All the children, boys, girls, and nonbinary, gathered to create meals, share stories, and dress up in worldly clothing from their linguistically and culturally diverse families. Through investigations on the meaning of "home," we explored the different places we resided—an apartment, a trailer park, a duplex, a white picket-fenced house, the distant homelands that some had fled because of war or natural disasters. Coming together, we shared a collective understanding on the power of home as a place of gathering, storytelling, celebration—and for some, safety, while for others, moments of danger.*

*Over the course of many months, children engaged in stories and artistic re-creations of buildings transformed into homes, creating a communal village that depicted the many sources of support we each experienced inside our humble walls. As we went deeper into our exploration of this topic, a tragic event took place with one of our families. A mom entered the school one morning in tears, and shared the devastating news that a fire had destroyed their house and all of their belongings. The family moved to a hotel while beginning the stages of rebuilding and healing as they looked for a new place to call home. Their focus was on keeping their daughter in a routine during this extraordinary transition and seeking support to meet their basic needs for clothing, furniture, and household goods.*

*As we shared the news with the school community, everyone—young and old—came together, gathering supplies, offering child care, resources, and using their networks to help these members of our community find a new home. Donations were stored in a corner of my office until the family were resettled; children supported their classmate through practices of Radical Love (see Figure 1), where they created many magical moments of hugs, laughter, and hope. We practiced communal meditation, where we envisioned this family in a new home.*

*Our project originated as a topic centered around our homes, their special meaning to each of us as individuals, and was transformed into a Village of Hope as each child and teacher gave a piece of their own home to someone in their community who needed it. As we each came together, in service of our own, we activated the powerful light within the darkness, by putting love into action.*

As the founder and a teacher/leader of the Roots and Fruits Early Childhood Program, I conceptualized our classrooms in relation to lessons we can take from trees, including practicing loving kindness and service within the larger forest of which we are part. This is inspired by Jay Shetty's (2020) assertion:

We are nature, and if we look at and observe nature carefully, nature is always serving. The sun provides heat and light. Trees give oxygen and shade. Water quenches our thirst.... The only way to be one with nature is to serve. It follows that the only way to align properly with the universe is to serve because that's what the universe does. (p. 257)

Through Roots and Fruits, I modeled practices of *being a tree*, providing oxygen and shade so my colleagues could be whole teachers, teaching whole children, all of us cultivating a whole community. This essay is a eulogy to Roots and Fruits, which had to close as a result of the pandemic's impact on Maine's child care system, but its practices continue to live on through alumni in their new schools and former teachers in their new pre-K, elementary, middle, and secondary classrooms.

Roots and Fruits is a place-based (Baker, 2012; Ellis, 2005), post-humanist (Barad, 2014) early childhood curriculum that was my response to American education's humanist, atomized conceptions of *the whole child* (i.e., decontextualized individuals parsed into "developmental domains," defined as a child's social, emotional, physical, mental, and aesthetic parts, that are operationalized by regulatory systems like Maine's Quality Rating System. Post-humanism may not be a familiar term to some, so for this essay's purpose, think of it as a perspective that recontextualizes people as a part of nature's systems, rather than central, separate from, or on top of, them (Barad, 2014, Shetty, 2020). Here, I share how we operationalized an alternative, "more-than-human" view of quality in early childhood education (ECE), in the hope that you, as the reader, can reflect on the applicability of this perspective on your own practice of teaching and learning with young children.

## MORE THAN A METAPHOR

As each child, staff member, and family member entered the Roots and Fruits program, they practiced deepening their own roots to grow strong trunks, branches, and fruits, learning the value of interdependence as the collective forest expanded in love and light through service to one another. How did we activate this approach to wholeness?

Using the tree as a metaphor was passed down to me from my Syrian father, in stories of the olive tree, as well as in the Celtic stories of the Tree of Life shared by my Irish mother. From childhood I was called to be in partnership with the trees in journeys through ancient stories from many lands. The tree's powerful metaphor of wholeness ripened in a rich, culturally and linguistically diverse community and became rooted in the Roots and Fruits methodology.

### Core Values

We invited each child, family, and teacher to become a part of a forest of learners, embodying eleven core values foundational to the communal program (Figure 1). These values were rooted in the philosophy of Radical Love, based upon ideas from a range of liberationist thinkers (Barad, 2007; Four Arrows, 2013; Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994, 2009; Kress, et al., 2022; Mika, 2018).

## Roots that Ground Us @“Roots & Fruits”

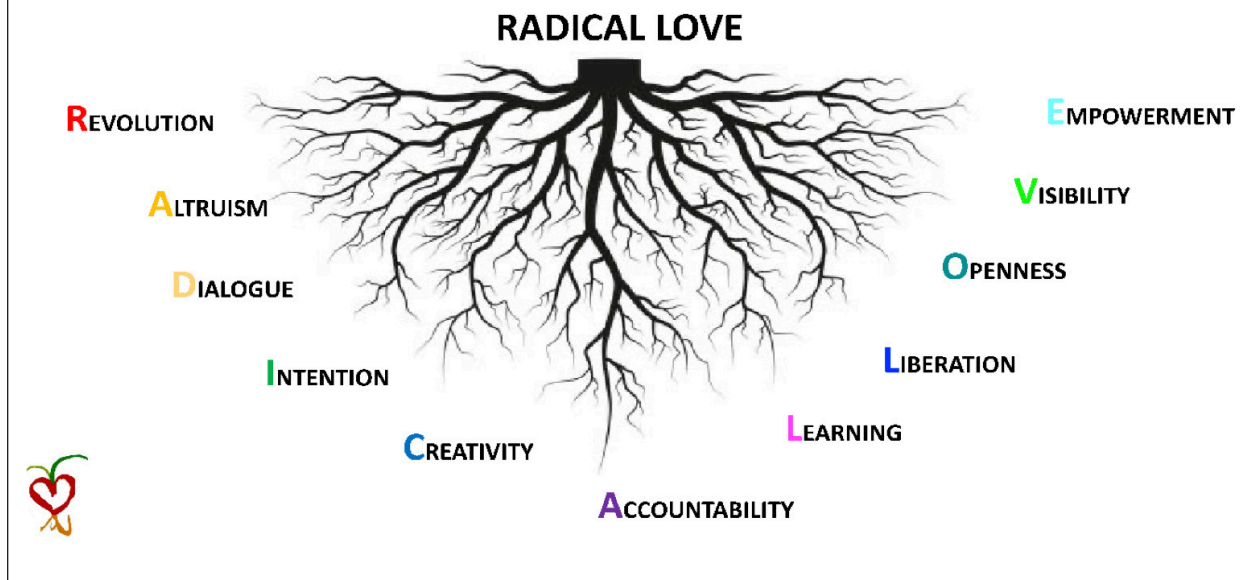


Figure 1. Core values of Radical Love

All members of the community, especially teachers, were encouraged to explore how their personal values contributed to our shared Radical Love values. Everything we did during our year-long project-based curriculum—school-wide policies, practices, family engagement, and leadership structure—was guided by the 11 values named in Figure 1.

This article’s opening vignette captured the Radical Love values in practice as each child’s and family’s roots sprouted into their own tree, serving the collective forest. Figure 2, created by a Roots and Fruits alumni, captures each of the tree’s 11 elements. The elements metaphorically describe the multidimensional and interconnected parts of a whole human and our entanglement (Barad, 2014) with each other’s trees and the natural world; the Radical Love values grounded our forest in our daily collective growth, by flowing through each tree’s elements.



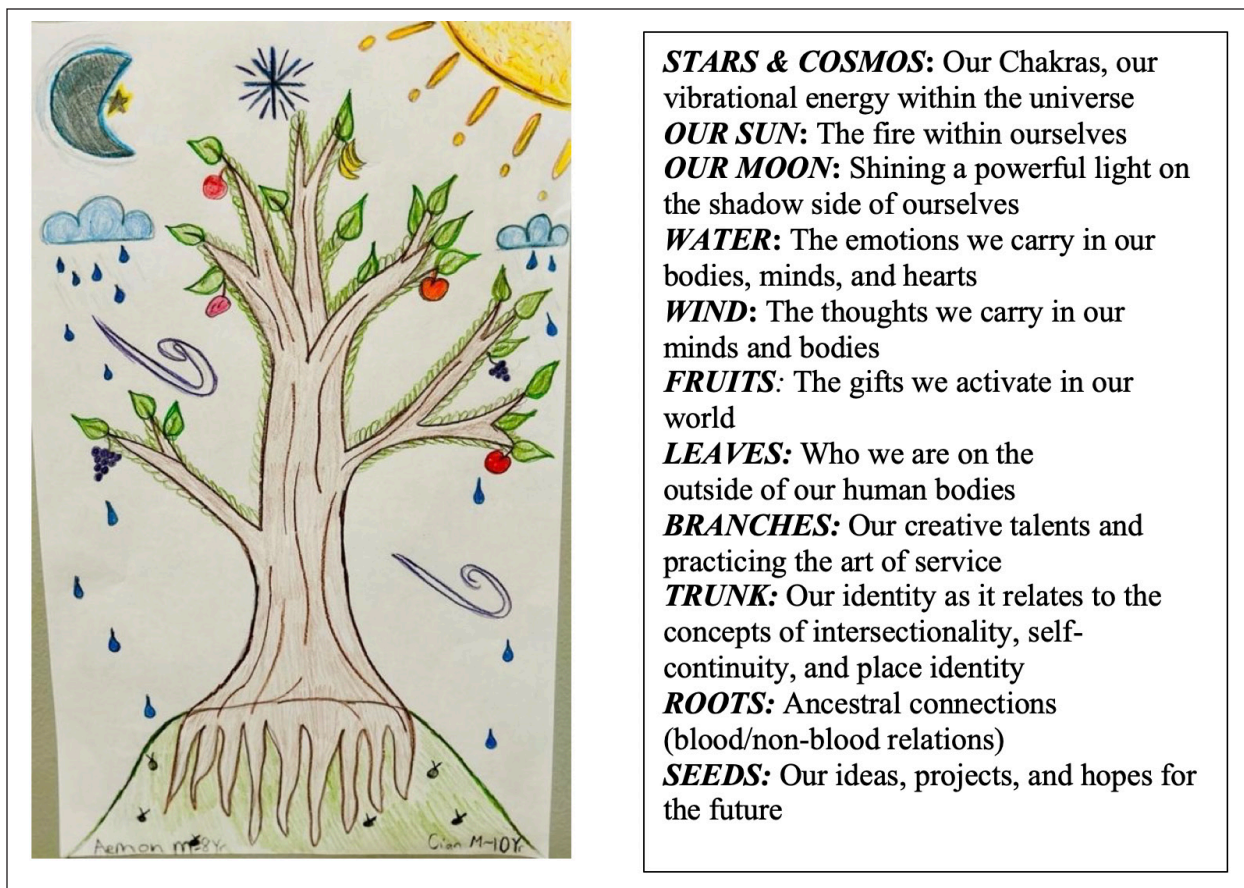


Figure 2. The Elements of Our Tree

As the children engaged in intentional dialogues and imaginative play on the theme of home, we explored ancestral root stories from our families and their homelands, and integrated these stories into our art and play, activating our inner sun. We explored the commonalities and differences across our stories, deepening our understanding of our many-colored *leaves and trunks*. While learning about the darkness one family faced in surviving a house fire, we discovered how to embrace one another's *branches* and extend them to serve and spread new seeds of hope. Throughout the journey, we created healing spaces where we expressed the fears in our minds and hearts when the *wind* shakes us to our core; and through yoga, dance, and song we moved through the *water* of our emotions with grace and care. We honored those who came before us, guiding us from the *cosmos*, and grew our individual *fruits*, while contributing to the larger fruit bowl as one community. This is how one project evolved from a simple "home project" into a Village of Hope. This is one of many projects that helped make Roots and Fruits a forest of learners.

### A Forest of Learners

All participants within the classroom—teachers, assistant teachers, students, administrators, and parents—were integral and interconnected parts of an educational system. As the leader, I hired teachers, volunteers, and staff from diverse backgrounds: intersecting gender, racial, ethnic, religious, socio-economic, and neurodivergent identities. Teachers worked in teams to nurture organic, project-based curriculum, portfolio assessments, and reflective practices. Parents, teachers, administrators, and children were teachers to one another, in relation to our environment. This collective approach to teaching and learning was the heart of the program.

## THE WHYS OF ROOTS AND FRUITS

The Roots and Fruits methodology organically developed and grew over 17 years, and is a philosophy of teaching and learning created in community with the parents, children, and teachers who moved in and out of our doors over the years. I birthed the methodology in 2003, after navigating identity wounds as a second-generation Arab American, post 9/11. As a violence prevention educator, I witnessed many stories of hate towards members of my community in Portland, Maine. It may surprise some to know that Portland is a destination city for immigrants and refugees from many lands, including Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, Syria, Congo, Haiti, and Ukraine. As the daughter of a first-generation Syrian man, I listened to my father's childhood stories of systemic racism as he went through the American education system with his Arab friends, avoiding humiliating comments and threats if they spoke Arabic or did not assimilate into White American society. Listening to his story of "othering" helped me to understand the harm from systems that cut apart children into developmental domains, erasing fundamental aspects of their wholeness.

The Roots and Fruits methodology was cultivated through close relationships within the linguistically and culturally diverse communities in Maine, including family and friends whose roots are from the Wabanaki Nations. I dove deep into my own spiritual and racial identity, not just as a Syrian/Irish American woman, but into other layers of myself. In particular, two special teachers collaborated with me for many years: Nadia Seduisante, a medicine woman who shared teachings from her roots from the African tribes of Cameroon and the Arapaho and Blackfoot tribes of North America; and Gina Forbes, who integrated her own multifaceted identity story as a multiethnic, queer woman and somatic healer. Our dialogues, reflections on identities, experiences with families, educational investigations, and daily observations were the source of many ideas in this essay.

## OUR APPROACH

The community used a diverse, shared toolbox, including: mindfulness, decolonized curriculum (Yellowhorn & Lowinger, 2022; Four Arrows, 2013; Cajete, 1994), honoring our historical roots and practicing critical geography (hooks, 2009; Ellis, 2005). Roots and Fruits teachers self-reflected on the topic of whole identities: their pasts, places, people/ancestors, and the role this knowledge played in teaching young children in the classroom (Jarvis, 2022; Moore, 2022). They were expected to think critically about the external world and how it has framed their perceptions and actions. They practiced undoing habits of mind, including implicit and explicit biases (Derman-Sparks, et. al. 2021; Freire, 2018; Gay & Kirkland, 2003), that were harmful to themselves and students. We reflected together on our ancestral journeys, researching family and communal stories of immigration and/or origins on Indigenous land, our tools of survival, and how this land impacted our identities (Aplin, 2021; Baker, 2012; hooks, 2009). These practices created space for dialogue about colonialism, slavery, and genocide.

Acknowledgment of family trauma and how it is passed down through the generations was critical, as many students had experienced war, poverty, domestic violence, natural calamities, and other traumatic events. Being trauma-informed teachers involved being aware of our own traumas, identifying our own pain bodies, and knowing how to keep ourselves safe in order to help create healing-centered classrooms for the children (Ginwright, 2018; Kolk, 2015). As a way of honoring the embodied stories of trauma in the Roots and Fruits community, we enacted "critical pedagogies for healing" and becoming whole (Kress, et al., 2022). This included practicing reiki, yoga, meditation, dance, visual arts, nature walks, and storytelling (both oral and written).

## STORIES TOWARDS WHOLENESS

Throughout our inquiries, both children and adults became more aware of our identities, the impact the social world has upon these identities, and how we continue to grow through relationships with each other and with the planet. Developing new stories of wholeness deepened our knowledge of the powerful role each of us plays in the world (Syed & Fish, 2018; Stryker & Burke, 2000). To illustrate, I share Cat, Mich, and Halim's stories.<sup>1</sup>

### Cat

Cat graduated from the Roots and Fruits Preschool Program in 2017. Their second-grade teacher shared this story with Cat's parents:

*I know you already know what an incredibly compassionate, kind human Cat is, but I wanted to share an amazing story that happened over the last two weeks. On Friday, I was out of the building at a training. From what I understand, a second grader pulled at Cat's friend's hijab, exposing her hair. Cat shielded their friend so that she could fix her hijab, and then Cat immediately went to get help from an adult, advocating for their friend. I was so awed by the cultural sensitivity that Catherine demonstrated, and what amazing leadership they demonstrated.*

Another teacher a year later shared another story with Cat's parents:

*I'm reaching out about the possibility of Catherine joining a small social group. Catherine has made a wonderful connection with a student in our classroom who often feels invisible and isn't always sure how to connect with other peers his age. Catherine greets this student every morning, invites him to join them and their friends during snack, offers support during work time, and just generally spreads joy and kindness to this student. It has been profoundly beautiful to watch Catherine's leadership.*

Cat (Figure 3) is one of many alumni whose parents have contacted the program over the years, remarking on the Radical Love and Peace Leader tools (Figure 4) their children learned.



Figure 3. Cat

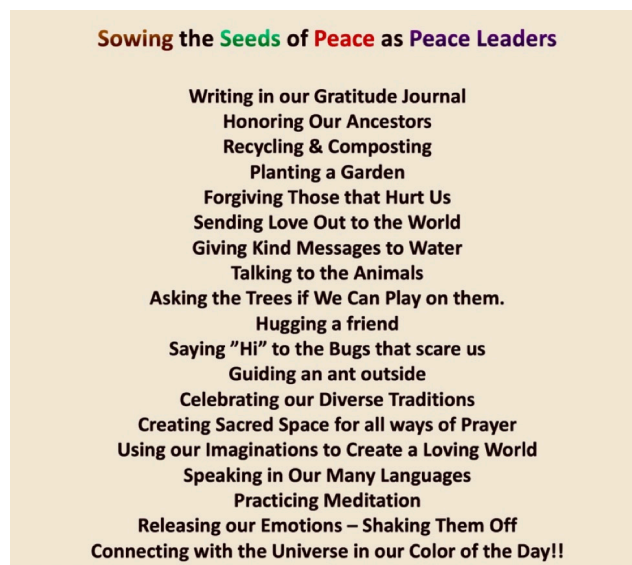


Figure 4. How peace leaders sow the Seeds of Peace

<sup>1</sup> I received permission from Cat and Halim to share their stories. Mich is a pseudonym for a student who graduated in 2005, whom I was unable to locate today, 20 years later.

## Mich

Mich is a student I taught in 2006, in the early years of Roots and Fruits. His story continues to be relevant:

*Mich was a 5-year-old with dark skin. He and his family were refugees from Congo. They arrived in southern Maine in 2003, at a time when it was not a welcoming environment for refugees and immigrants from other countries, especially from Africa and the Middle East. Schools were not prepared to serve linguistically and culturally diverse children and families, especially those fleeing war.<sup>2</sup> When Mich arrived in my pre-K classroom, he had been suspended from a variety of preschools and day cares because of “aggressive behavior.” Every day, he would enter the classroom with a bright beaming smile and shout loudly, “Hello everyone!” He was a brave, challenging student with many deep emotions, mostly anger and frustration, which, at times, resulted in him making unsafe choices in the classroom. We talked to his mom about our willingness to meet her son each day with openness and a belief in him.*

*After Mich had been in my classroom for five months, we had an especially hard day. As we laid down for nap, a time where children tend to share their deepest secrets, he said to me, “You know why I am a bad boy and make bad choices?” I replied, “I don’t see you as a bad boy, but want to understand why you see yourself as a bad boy. Please tell me.” He said, “I am bad because I have dark skin, which means I must have darkness inside of me, and you have light skin and so you must have light inside of you.” I asked, “Who told you this?” He replied, “I see it all the time on television, and in my neighborhood, the Black guys are put into the police officer’s cars. They are bad, so I must be bad.”*

*I knew that it was critical to reply to him, yet, what could I possibly say to counteract the media and lived reality he was bombarded with daily? I replied, “Yes, you are right, TV has lots of images of people with Black skin getting into police cars. Some may have made bad choices, but they are not a ‘bad’ person. Often, the police made the bad choice and identify the wrong person, making a huge mistake. Unfortunately, police are not always trained well, and are taught to go after Black people more than White people. This is a bad choice. All of us, including myself as a teacher, can and have made bad choices, but we all can make good choices too. You have been making fabulous choices, sharing the toys, taking turns playing ball, making new friends, and using your words to share your feelings. You also have a gigantic amount of light in your body as you enter each day with a welcoming message for everyone. Do not think your dark skin means you have darkness inside you! In fact, I believe it is just the opposite—your rich, dark skin radiates your inner beauty and a fire deep and bright just like the sun. Your beautiful Black skin is protecting your precious heart. A heart filled with so much light and love for all of us to see!”*

This story of systemic racism, through the lens of a child, highlights the harm continuing today in our criminal justice and education systems. For example, New York Police Department data for 2022 stated, “According to the data, Black and Hispanic drivers made up 55% of stops, but accounted for 86% of vehicles searched. White drivers made up 24% of stops, but accounted for 7% of arrests and 5% of vehicles searched” (CBS, 2023). School data shows Black preschool-aged children are suspended and disciplined at racially disproportionate rates (USA Facts, 2018). Maine has the second-highest suspension rate for children in early childhood programs (Maine Public, 2022). Mich’s self-perception as a “bad” child reflects of the pervasive messages of “otherness” he experienced. He witnessed the police disproportionately arresting Black men in his neighborhood and on television and was himself suspended and expelled from school. Both systems impacted his sense of Black identity as being bad and

<sup>2</sup> ([maine.gov/future/ona](https://maine.gov/future/ona)) 20 years later, Maine is continuing to be challenged in providing equitable and inclusive schooling for New American families. One step to address this issue is the development of the Office of New Americans in Maine State Government, which opened January 19, 2024.



unworthy of love. As his teacher, I was responsible for being a tree, providing oxygen and shade. This “small” naptime interaction illustrates the Roots and Fruits core values, and how my personal healing helped me see and respond to, but not fix, his inner wounds from racial trauma.

### Halim

One final story demonstrates this post-human view of children and the potential it provides in creating early childhood classrooms rooted in collective healing, critical and global thinking, and reimagining (Figure 5).

*Halim entered Roots and Fruits at the age of 3 and a half. He grew up in a Lebanese American home with his mom, who was a professional Middle Eastern belly dancer. He demonstrated his connection to the healing sounds of music as his hands rhythmically tapped the classroom tables, trees, and his own body. His love of nature found him always choosing to be outdoors in all the elements, and he would come alive when listening to the leaves sing in the wind or the birds chirp on the branches above. He started to claim music as one of his passionate fruits and at the age of 4 began to study the doumbek, the drum of his Lebanese ancestry.*

*Today, at the age of 21, he is studying Hip Hop and R&B at Loyola University in New Orleans, Louisiana. As Halim began his journey into music at a very young age, he was encouraged to be a teacher, showing his classmates the many rhythms he had learned as his mom danced alongside him. This opportunity to embrace and share his ancestry with his community was a gift he carries with him today, as he performs alongside his renowned teacher, Eric LaPerna, of 17+ years, in downtown Portland.*



Fruits We Cultivate @ Roots & Fruits  
Story of Halim

Figure 5. Halim playing drum as a young boy (left) and as a young man (right)

## THE PROBLEMS WITH QUALITY AND THE WHOLE CHILD

These stories indicate how we tried to promote wholeness for ourselves, our curriculum, and the children. This contrasts with observations over my career about how the early childhood field conceptualizes the “whole child” as involving various emphasis on the parts and the whole (Noddings, 2005). For instance, in 2007 the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) convened the Commission on the Whole Child, a collaborative group of leading thinkers, researchers, and practitioners, whose goal was to reframe the definition of a successful learner from one whose achievement is measured by academic tests to one who is knowledgeable, emotionally and physically healthy, civically active, engaged in the arts, prepared for work and economic self-sufficiency, and ready for the world beyond schooling (Garrett, 2006).

Currently, Maine’s Early Childhood Education Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), The Rising Stars for ME, is aligned with the ASCD’s whole child definition. This standards-focused program encourages and supports ECE programs’ engagement in continuous quality improvement efforts. Programs are rated along a five-star continuum, with five stars being the highest level of quality (Rising Stars for ME, 2024). To receive a Star 3 rating, a program’s activities and experiences are guided by a general understanding of the developmental domains: Social/Emotional; Cognitive; Physical (gross and fine motor; self-help skills); Language/Communication Skills; and Approaches to Learning (Rising Stars for ME Standards, 2023, p. 1). While this system seems to rest on an expansive conceptualization of wholeness, it falls short in its manifestation in classrooms, discounting other facets that matter: racial identity, religion, gender identity, visibility, collective consciousness, and interconnectedness.

I argue that separating *the whole child* into areas of development encourages educators to distance themselves from the children around them, from themselves, and from the broader world (Murriss, 2018). Although education appears to be progressing towards wholeness, this is belied by the deep tendency in the US to splinter, as in development, but also in a tendency to think in binaries—mind/body; emotion/cognition; inner/outer; girl/boy; teacher/learner; humans/nature (Murriss, 2016). This dualistic thinking is an instrument for “othering” or separating: boys from girls; minorities from the dominant; and classes from each other, undermining wholeness (Murriss, 2016). Roots and Fruits encouraged educators to undo this “cut-up” dualistic view of children by witnessing with new eyes how all humans are interwoven within the web of the natural world and the cosmos at large.

## THE POWER OF TREES

A poem by philosopher and healer Thich Nhat Hanh (Thich & McLeod, 2012) captures the power of trees on the planet:

*The Cosmos in the Tree by Thich Nhat Hanh*

*Look at the tree. [It] is a wonderful thing, a tree. A tree is very beautiful. A tree to me is as beautiful as a cathedral, even more beautiful. I look[ed] into the tree and I saw the whole cosmos in it.*

*I saw the sunshine in the tree. Can you see the sunshine in the tree? Yes, because without the sunshine, no tree can grow.*

*I see a cloud in the tree. Can you see? Without a cloud, there can be no rain, no tree.*

*I see the earth in the tree.*

*I see everything in the tree.*

*So, the tree is where everything in the cosmos comes into, and the cosmos reveals itself to me through a tree. Therefore, a tree to me is a cathedral, and I can take refuge in the tree, and I can get nourished by the tree ...*

*I can get in touch with the tree only if I go back to the present moment, because the tree can only be found in the present moment.*

This interconnectedness of humans with nature and the cosmos at large is the inspiration and foundation of the Roots and Fruits teaching and learning methodology. In sharing one program's story of wholeness, my goal has been to show how to create post-human classrooms, where children see their oneness with each other and with the planet. This expanded perspective allows all humans, young and old, to see their unique strand in the web of life and the vibrational power we each hold to spread kindness, compassion, and service.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Virginia Dearani** will be joining Thomas College as an assistant professor of early childhood education in Fall 2024 and is currently an education consultant in the State of Maine. She is a doctoral candidate in Literacy Education from University of Maine, Orono. Throughout the past 25+ years, Virginia has centered her life's work in the areas of wholeness and healing in education for children 3 years old through adulthood. She emphasizes the joy of partnering with children and youth to create communities of belonging needed in our world today.

# Stories From Three Native Hawaiian Alaka'i About the Education of Young Children

*Charis-Ann Sole, M. Nālani Mattox-Primacio, and Shin Ae Han*

‘A’ohe pau ka ‘ike i ka hālau ho’okahi. #203  
All knowledge is not taught in the same school.  
[One can learn from many sources.]

There is waiwai (value) from all resources, and not all knowledge is the same.  
(Pukui, 1983, p. 24)

## HO’OLAUNA-TO INTRODUCE

Many Indigenous parents want their children to learn who they are, to know their relatives, to know about their ancestors who have passed on, to learn their Indigenous language(s), to know about the land they are from, and to develop a spiritual identity rooted in their Indigenous identity (Ball, 2012). Historically, educational systems in the United States have taken on the function of educating children separated from native knowledge. Instead, schools are still used to culturally assimilate, naturalize, and expand the Western mindset rather than to teach for success that includes ancestral language, traditions, practices, and cultural value systems (Kana’iaupuni et al., 2017). As this practice of erasure continues today, it confuses and contradicts what children know and learn to be true in their daily lives outside of school settings (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua et al., 2008).

The inherent right to their cultural identity, language, and values is one of children’s fundamental human rights (Battiste, 2013; United Nations General Assembly, 2007). Some in the early childhood field are accordingly exploring ways to shape programs that reflect the unique cultural knowledge and values of Indigenous populations (Smith-Gilman, 2015). Indigenous education aims to build on and enhance the linguistic, cultural, and cognitive strengths held within the native host culture, often by including efforts to revitalize languages, knowledge, practices, and beliefs lost through colonization or occupation (Demmert & Towner, 2003), and seeks to make learning more meaningful and relevant to students. Essential to this (re)education model is the integration of elders, families, and communities into everyday educational settings, which may lead to a more “holistic, community-oriented system” (Bang et al., 2019, p.15).

Recognizing the fundamental importance of preserving cultural identity and values, early childhood education (ECE) is gradually embracing Indigenous practices and ways of living (Lees & Bang, 2023). The approach of centering indigenous culture and language is accentuated as an integral part of ECE practices in Hawai‘i (Kaomea, 2005). In this endeavor, early childhood educators in Hawai‘i strive to honor indigenous traditions and heritage and seek to create an environment where young children develop while forging a strong connection to their indigenous roots. This commitment to Indigenous education in ECE settings aligns with broader efforts to revitalize languages, knowledge, and practices that have been lost, to foster a return that involves elders, families, and community voices in the educational journey of the younger generation.

In this research, we aim to describe how Native Hawaiian education practices are integrated, embedded, and brought forth into early childhood settings, thus contributing to the broader discourse on the intersection of Indigenous values and ECE. Through an examination of the implementation of Native Hawaiian educational approaches in an early childhood context in Hawai‘i, we aim to illuminate

Indigenous educational struggles, strategies, and perspectives and provide insights that can inform educational practices not only in Hawai‘i, but also in other diverse settings that aspire to honor and integrate Indigenous knowledge (Ho‘omanawanui, 2019).

## METHOD

### ***Mo‘olelo (Story, Narrative) Approach***

A mo‘olelo approach is employed in this research. In Native Hawaiian culture, mo‘olelo is a “way of knowing” based on experience; in this piece, it is used as a way to honor traditionally silenced voices to allow them to be heard (Denzin, et al., 2006, p. 774). Mo‘olelo can also be thought of as a sharing of words: sharing and listening to each other’s stories, experiences, and knowledge. (Lipe, 2014). Osorio (2001) underscores that mo‘olelo represents a fragment of a story, acknowledging that the storyteller does not convey every facet of the subject (p. 369). Osorio’s insight into the meaning of mo‘olelo adds depth to this narrative approach and frames our conscious decision not to interpret the participants’ mo‘olelo using our ideas or to add additional context to them. This deliberate choice is deeply rooted in Hawaiian culture (Kaomea, 2005; Smith, 1999) and reflects a profound acknowledgment of the significance placed on each individual’s voice and narrative (Kahakalau, 2019).

Instead, to honor the words, story, and voices of the three alaka‘i wahine (Native Hawaiian women leaders), we gave them the transcripts of their interviews and asked them to decide which parts they wanted to share with the public. This approach, which is grounded in Hawaiian cultural values, reflects an acknowledgment of the significance placed on each individual’s voice and narrative (Kahakalau, 2019). The regard for the participants’ autonomy honors their voices and cultural practices and empowers them to control their own mo‘olelo. By presenting the findings in collaboration with the participants, we aim to amplify their voices authentically without imposing external interpretations. While we recognize the inherent limitations of this approach, it is founded on the belief that delivering the participants’ stories and words exactly as the alaka‘i wahine expressed them is important, enabling the wahine (women) to contribute their unique perspectives directly to the broader discourse.

The participants tell their stories in a circular nature. Themes build upon each other and are interwoven, but are rarely presented linearly. As Lovern (2022) points out, this way of storytelling, which is often called a “spider web” approach of transmitting information, can be found in other Indigenous cultures. Stories and information are thought of as having a relationship with each other and can and should be understood from multiple perspectives, which are deconstructed, examined, and then reconstructed (Nu‘uhiwa, 2019). Due to this relationship, the information has the potential to expand infinitely as more stories are unearthed (Lovern, 2022). This can be disconcerting to those accustomed to a Western construct of how information is conveyed, with its emphasis on efficiency and directness, but is reflective of an Indigenous point of view in which knowledge, and indeed reality itself, is thought of as metaphoric, multilayered, and multidimensional (Meyer, 2016).

### ***Participants and Interviews***

This research was part of a bigger project focusing on the significance of incorporating ‘ohana (family) voices in early learning (EL) environments in Hawai‘i. The project involved interviews with administrators and kupuna (grandparents, elders). For this research, three alaka‘i wahine were asked to share mana‘o (thoughts, ideas, beliefs) they learned as administrators of programs that are aimed at serving Native Hawaiian families and have strong family engagement components. All of the administrators are Native Hawaiians who have worked within culture-based education settings in Hawai‘i. Two of the alaka‘i work in family-child interaction learning (FACIL) programs, one of four types of EL programs (center-based, home visiting, family child care, and FACIL) that currently operate in Hawai‘i (Executive Office on Early Learning, 2019). The other alaka‘i works in a Hawaiian language

immersion setting. The immersion program was created to combat the loss of the Hawaiian language and culture, and all its classes are conducted exclusively in the Hawaiian language.

The aim of this inquiry was to unravel and reveal the efforts of the wahine participants, and the thought processes involved in those efforts, in which they uplift and instill Native Hawaiian-embedded knowledge, practices, and beliefs in their unique programs. The alaka'i therefore addressed key questions focused on understanding the transfer of knowledge in a Hawaiian context, such as: How does the transfer of Native Hawaiian knowledge happen? What is the role of EL in this transfer of knowledge? What practices in educational environments help to develop relationships, build partnerships, and make contributions within Hawaiian communities?

Throughout this paper Hawaiian language is used. Translations are provided in text at the first instance. Additionally, an 'ōlelo no'ēau, a Hawaiian proverb, is used in the opening and closing which situates the content and context of the piece within the lens of a Native Hawaiian worldview.

## MO'OLELO-INTERWEAVING WORDS AND MEANING

The alaka'i responses were verbal and were purposely presented in a semi-transcriptional format for the reader to “hear” and “listen to” the actual words of the three wahine. The mo'olelo are presented one at a time, after which a summary paragraph follows each response. Additionally, their stories are divided with subheadings. Lani chose the subheadings for hers; the researchers created them for Lena's and Kaleilehua's stories. After this section, four common themes from the mo'olelo are presented.

### **Lena**

Lena lives on the island of Maui and works in a Hawaiian immersion program. Since joining the program as a parent with her own child, she has been involved in the Native Hawaiian ECE program she is currently employed by. She is and continues to be an alaka'i wahine within her organization, as well as in Hawai'i as a whole, helping to support the broader educational infrastructure throughout the state. She discusses her thoughts on the prioritization of relationships, community support, the handing down of culture through intergenerational cultural transmission, and the kuleana (responsibility and privilege) of the 'ohana in her program.

#### ***Relationships Are Prioritized***

What attracted me about this program was that it was very 'ohana, and relationships are very important here. Relationships are extremely important to me; they mean everything. They're gold. The relationships that we've created here are not only amongst our teachers and families, and the children who have graduated from here, but they are also within the community as a whole. We have excellent relationships with the community—they've always been very supportive. Whenever I reflect on the support systems that have sprung from these experiences, I think it's wonderful, very wonderful.

#### ***Community Support as an Outgrowth of Relationship Building***

It's pono (goodness, uprightness, morality) to support the people that are supporting you. We're an 'ohana, we're lokahi—together, united; we can do so much more. Aloha kekahi i kekahi (to love one another). Hō'ihi (to respect one another). It's alulike (to work together) to move forward for the cause. It's just what you're supposed to do; to mālama, to care for one another. The nature of Hawaiian culture teaches fundamental aspects that are embedded within the community, which then is reciprocated throughout the community.

When you're able to support people, they can be emotionally stronger. When they're strong and feel supported, they can be that way with the keiki (child/children). If I support my teachers,

they're going to be happy. When they're happy, they're going to be able to share that with the keiki. The keiki will know, they can feel it, they understand—and they will learn. It's super important to the people we serve and the community we live in and want to sustain. We have grown this school in our community to the point where it has a huge reputation and integrity on our island. Whatever we do, whatever we commit to, everyone knows that it will happen; and most importantly, it'll be excellent, culturally rich. This has become the nature of our program, because it is a family-based program. Our program is not just a drop-off-your-child-and-walk-away scenario. We get the entire family involved, not just the parents. This includes the extended family—the kupuna, as well as siblings and entire families.

### ***Handing Down of Culture***

How is culture passed down? Well, for us here, we live it and we do it. “Ma ka hana ka ‘ike”—“In the doing, the knowledge is there.” Observing, then doing. Those are things that we pass down to these keiki. “Nānā ka maka, ho‘olohe ka pepeiao, pa‘a ka waha,” so “Don’t say things, but watch, and listen, and observe.” The work we do is in the “doing,” “actions,” and “modeling.” The example that we set for the children and the values that we share with them are significant. Those are the things that they learn, that we pass down to the children. For the keiki, it's very easy because it is a part of their heritage. Obviously, language is a part of that. Within four months, they're understanding the Hawaiian language. Some keiki have only been here for two-and-a-half weeks and they're already picking up the language—understanding things, following us around, simply figuring it out.

### ***The Kuleana of the ‘Ohana***

Families have to be very committed; they have to participate on many levels. One kuleana they have is they have to go to language classes if they don't speak ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language) at home. We provide the classes, but they need to make that kind of commitment and try as best they can to facilitate Hawaiian speaking at home. Because of our commitment to the language, it's become a lifestyle for us. We're looking for families that are committed for the long run and the long haul to pretty much change their lifestyle; for them to make a lot of culture and language changes. We support those changes that need to be made at home.

### ***Intergenerational Cultural Transmission***

We invite the kupuna to come and join us in the learning environment. For example, last year, we had a Tūtū (grandparent) come and talk about fishing and the techniques that he uses for fishing. He's a lawai'a (fisherman) that uses traditional ways of fishing. For example, he throws the 'upena style net. He brought in different kinds of fish and talked about the fish with the kids. He made poke (cubed food, mostly fish), and the keiki ate the poke.

We had another kupuna come in and did lei (garland) making, who talked about the different kinds of plants involved in lei. We have kupuna that have some of these skills; we utilize them to come in and share with the keiki. We had another one that talked about medicinal kinds of plants. We obviously have kupuna that know how to grow kalo (taro), tend to the lo'i (taro patch), ku'i kalo (to strike or pound the kalo) and how to pound the poi (food made out of taro). They come in and they demonstrate the kinds of things that have been passed down to them. They're part of our class and they're part of the activities we do here. We found with our kupuna, they hold different types of knowledge and are cultural practitioners.

### ***The Embeddedness of Generations in ECE***

We emphasize the connection between generations in many different ways—in song, in hula (traditional dance)—and we talk about it all the time. We're constantly embedding the connection between generations in everything we do. When we share things with the children, we're always



talking about makua (parents), and kupuna, and akua (God/gods). And of course, aumakua (familial or personal gods). All of the 'ohana deities and ancestors. We're going beyond the kupuna that the children would know. Their kupuna are also visually in our classroom through photographs. We make books with the keiki and their families about their families because we're 'ohana-based. The interactions between the kupuna and the keiki are emphasized all the time because it is important to us.

Lena underlines the importance of relationships in multiple contexts: with the teachers, families, and children she works with daily, but also in the school's interactions with the local community. Because they are valued, relationships with the local community have been forged and maintained, and, as a result, the community is very supportive of the school as whole. In addition, a major aspect of this EL setting is the handing down of cultural knowledge and practices. Lena sees this as not only the kuleana of the program, but also of the 'ohana. If the 'ohana is not familiar with cultural knowledge or the language, they are expected to learn those alongside their keiki. Cultural transmission occurs through modeling and inviting others into the program's space who can share important experiences. It also occurs through acknowledging connections of those past generations who have come before. Lena views the symbiotic and reciprocal nature of these relationships as directly connected to Hawaiian culture and values.

### ***Kaleilehua***

Kaleilehua was born and raised on the island of O'ahu, but currently resides on the island of Hawai'i with her husband and family. She has been involved in the Native Hawaiian ECE community since joining as a parent with her own firstborn over 30 years ago. She is and continues to be an alaka'i wahine within her organization by raising up staff, keiki, and 'ohana in culturally grounded ways. In the discussion below, she speaks about her view of culture and its relationship to identity, the role in ECE that the community and kupuna play in passing down on knowledge, the role of staff in facilitating this, and the role of giving back.

### ***What Is Culture?***

I feel that culture is so complex and there are so many forms of culture. I cannot say culture is this or that—culture is all of it. Hawaiian culture is founded upon relationships. In my view, there are three main types of relationships: connection to the land, connection to the people, and connection to a higher being.

### ***Culture as Related to Identity***

**Connection to Land.** As a Hawaiian, knowing where you come from is foundational to knowing your identity. One of the first things we ask when we meet others is, "Where are you from?" We want to know where you come from as we connect to our 'aina, our land. When I think of these connections, it is about being connected to our land, our ocean, and all that dwell there. It is knowing your water, your rain, your mountains. It is deeper than just knowing the name of a place on a map. As Hawaiians, we are deeply connected to our land, and without that connection, a small part of us dies. As educators, we need to create spaces where children, kupuna, and parents can have opportunities to connect to the land.

**Connection to Genealogical Roots.** Culture is also rooted in our mo'okū'auhau, our genealogy. At the core of our genealogy is knowing our roots. When we know our roots, we have this foundation from which to grow. We have to understand traditional knowledge and the traditional ways of our kupuna. We cannot practice this if we do not know who they are. For me, I am a mother of four, a wife of one, and a grandmother of three, but there are generations that came before me that shaped who I am. My family are farmers, fishermen, lauhala (leaf) weavers, educators, and historians. Learning about them helps me to understand more about who I am.

**Connection to Values and a Higher Power.** Culture, for me, is also my connection to Akua, our God. It is about learning to respect a higher being. Culture is embedded in your daily practices and in the values that you teach to your children. When I think about culture, I think about the Hawaiian values that were taught to me by my ancestors. For me and my family, they are Christlike values. These values were taught within our home, and I have tried to pass this on to my children. The hope is that my children will teach them to their children and one day to their grandchildren.

**Connection to Native Language.** One thing that ties all of these connections is language. Three of my grandparents were Native Hawaiian, and they were punished for speaking their own language. When trauma like this happens, part of that language dies. Language then diminishes between the generations. In the last 30 to 40 years, people have worked hard to bring our language back. I've seen the joy that it brings when parents are able to communicate with their own children in their native tongue. I think language connects us to our culture. If we don't tell our own stories, someone will tell them for us. We need to share them with others and with our keiki—whatever part we can play, whether we're a native speaker or not.

### ***The Community and Kupuna Belong in ECE***

There's a proverb, "A'oha pau ka 'ike i ka hālau ho'okahi," which means "all knowledge is not taught in the same school—one can learn from many sources." When I learned this, it was powerful. I started to think about how our kupuna are incredible resources, full of knowledge, talents, and experiences. That knowledge doesn't come from an outside source, it comes from our own community. I thought about integrating the talent and resources they bring into my class. I decided I would invite them to share their knowledge in my classroom.

The first kupuna was a grandfather who was a retired firefighter, pig farmer, and beekeeper. He was excited to share all of his experiences with the children in our classroom. He taught us the importance of pigs, how to care for them, what they eat, and how they survive. He taught us about taking care of the land and what happens when we do not. He also taught us the importance of bees and the role they play in our ecosystem. He taught us to be safe and protect ourselves. He brought bees to the classroom, showed us how to extract the honey from the comb, and families were able to taste honey from the native lehua, coconut, and kiawe trees.

The second kupuna was a grandfather who was a fisherman. He brought a throw net (fishing net) into the classroom. He talked about the various parts of the net and their purposes. Children were able to hold the lead and feel the weight of the net. He took them outside and set items on the ground to represent fish. Then he threw the net and caught the fish. It was the most amazing curriculum that we've ever had.

We started to invite more kupuna to participate in our classroom. Not only did the kupuna enlighten the classroom, but they, in turn, were enlightened. They were so grateful to be asked to participate. I learned the importance of including kupuna in our work; different people have different things to teach to you. Again, if we don't share the stories, if they don't share their stories, the stories die with them.

### ***Giving Back (Reciprocity) and Passing Knowledge Forward***

Whatever we can do to give back we should; it's about reciprocity. We have to be able to learn from the kupuna and integrate them into our classrooms. We also have to ask, how can we give back to the kupuna who share with us?

Kupuna are a valuable educational resource. Our kupuna are valuable, irreplaceable resources in the community; they play a significant role. They have so much knowledge to share. We must value

it, respect it, and we must promote it in the classroom; then, our resources become limitless. We're not going to see it otherwise; it is sacred knowledge passed from generation to generation.

### ***Role of ECE Staff***

I have learned that we, as teaching staff, have to be quiet. That is the hardest thing—because we're bound by time, we're bound by a lesson plan, but we have to understand that Hawaiian culture was an oral culture. We have to be the facilitators. We have to know when to listen and when to ask questions. We need to understand that just as important as any college class, the richness and the values that kupuna bring with them to the classroom are priceless. I think the best part of belonging to a Native Hawaiian organization is understanding these beautiful relationships and being a part of something precious.

Kaleilehua outlines her view of Native Hawaiian culture as it relates to an individual's identity—connection to 'aina and mo'oku'auhau, a higher power and native language. She tells of the importance of connecting EL settings to community members and kupuna who hold stories, knowledge, and experiences, and she underscores the necessity of a reciprocal relationship between both of them. She sees that the role of staff in relation to the experience is to step back, relinquish control, and guide, rather than be directive. In this way, cultural knowledge that is held by the kupuna is passed directly down to the 'ohana and keiki in the program.

### ***Lani***

Lani is a Native Hawaiian educator who has been an executive director for a rural FACIL program on the eastern shoreline of O'ahu for 11 years. During that time, through community dialogue, she was exposed to ideas about the privilege of responsibility, multigenerational knowledge, and the community's understanding of the places surrounding them.

### ***Relationships Help Learning***

I think culture is passed down through relationships. That's why I talk about relationships all the time, because you can go someplace and learn from somebody at the head of a class or take a weaving workshop and learn. But unless someone is by your side, talking to you while you're working the materials, or talking to you while you're learning the language, or displaying characteristics of behavior expected of a Native Hawaiian, you're never really going to get the full experience. It really is not going to be a complete cycle until you have relationships with people who are there with you.

### ***Guided by Kupuna***

Most people say, "Oh, yeah, my grandmother gave this to me." I didn't have that option; instead, I had multiple people who shared with me. Some of them were older, some younger—but each one of them gave me something. Not all of us have the opportunity to be mentored by our family kupuna. So, we look for people to help us understand. The people who mentor you, they notice things in you and they try and help you move forward. The people I have learned from have always said, "Come sit down, bring a glass of water for me, and then we talk story." The older kupuna, they knew that it was about a relationship; you never scared someone or chastised them.

### ***Intention***

I'm not saying every kupuna is the same. Every line of Native Hawaiians is not the same. It's the transfer of knowledge they had from their life—it's the idea of how they treat other people with aloha (love, affection, compassion, kindness), how you treat the environment and the land. And especially how you treat the world around you, and that includes people.

### ***Family and Elders in ECE***

In family engagement, people add to the program in different ways. In early childhood in an American system, they don't see elders as being part of the family. They're like, "They've had their time." But if you go to Africa, Mexico, the Caribbean, South Pacific, or Indonesia, you'll see the elders are all included. I'm talking about the rights of children to have access to the elders in their family. For parents or early childhood systems to separate them from their grandparents is a real concern. It's a societal thing.

ECE underestimates the power of elders in a program. Just like they underestimate the power of men with young children. I'm not talking about staff. I am talking about family engagement and the different ways different people add to the program. I think that's what early childhood should look like—not like a mini third-grade classroom.

### ***Families Teach, Too***

How did we include families in our program? We would *ask for their ideas*. At the end of the day, we would ask the parents, "Can you go home and see if your child asks anything new?" We would also send activity ideas home with them on weekends or holidays for families to become involved in the teaching of their keiki. "Just try this one thing: go to the beach and look at the kinds of sand on the beach. See if your child can use words to identify it." We tried to arrange the instructions so that anybody in the family could do the activity and have the child experience it. We really encouraged it. In class, we would try it, sure, but then we would always send them home—either with something to do or something to achieve. This included having the elders take the kids to *their* favorite place and talk about it, no matter where it was. That encouraged some interaction. And of course, when they came back, we would hear all kinds of really neat stories, "Oh, there's Tutu-man's favorite beach!"

We also encouraged parents to bring other members of their family with the child. If they had grandparents available, then bring the grandparents with them to the program. A grandparent, a father, an aunt, or an uncle who just happened to be hanging out for the day.

### ***Observing in a Natural Environment***

At the same time, we were teaching about the land we lived on. We'd say, "Let's go outside and let's look at the mountain. What do you see that stands out?" We were doing kilo (to watch closely, examine, look around, observe). I wanted them to look at the mountains and be able to say, "I know that mountain's name." We would walk across to the beach park and go down to the water and let the kids get their feet wet. We would ask one of the parents or the kupuna to talk about this place. That was in preparation for them going home and asking their kupuna to take them to their favorite place.

Lani speaks of the importance of investing long term in relationships—of having people walk by your side and notice something within you. She explains that the process will not look the same for everyone, but that the intentionality of passing down cultural values is what is important. To her, a missing component in the modern ECE landscape is the inclusion of families and elders in formal teaching experiences and the richness that families and elders can bring to the classroom. Lani also highlights the importance of learning about the land the 'ohana live on and experience daily.

### ***Revealing Learning Through Child and Family Interactions***

Throughout the three interviews, the alaka'i repeatedly speak about the importance of embedding children and families in both the physical place of their inhabitation and in the social context of the host culture of Hawai'i, and in all the nuances, complexities, and splendor associated with each.

The deliberate intent of the programs in embedding and nesting children and families is to foster connections to the broader context within which children and families exist.

The wahine speak about ways their programs make connections that are rooted in lived experiences. From this, four themes emerged:

1. Pedagogy should be culturally grounded, which includes introducing and using Native Hawaiian language.
2. The building of strong, caring, reciprocal relationships between family, staff, and community is significant in ECE.
3. Embedding multigenerational relationships within EL programs is necessary for connecting children to their 'ohana and mo'okū'auhau.
4. Power and influence in the EL setting need to be shared. This shared power dynamic includes asking for community and 'ohana input in the education and teaching of the young keiki.

The four major themes that commonly appear throughout the three interviews are interwoven and build upon each other to form a foundation of family and community engagement.

### ***Reflections, Recommendations, and Questionings***

In listening to and reflecting on the shared mo'olelo, we found a strong emphasis on family and community engagement in ECE settings, both within the local context of Hawai'i and beyond. The wahine highlighted the importance of empowering families to express their voices and actively participate as partners in educational programs. This collaborative approach respects the cultural values embedded in Native Hawaiian past practices and serves as a cornerstone for fostering meaningful connections between educational institutions and the Native communities in the present. Embracing this approach, we propose the following as navigational tools for partnering with Native communities in meaningful and caring ways.

First, actively adhere to the principle of "A'o aku, a'o mai" (literally, "learn from you first, and then you can learn from me"), which means listen fully first, then share—that is, listen for understanding first and then share the knowledge you bring. In this connection, we can recognize the reciprocal nature of learning and emphasize the significance of relationship building to create a foundation that aligns with incorporating native language and culturally rooted pedagogy into an early-age educational framework.

Second, adhere to the guiding principles, highlighted in the responses of the three alaka'i wahine, that are rooted in a Native Hawaiian worldview and that connect to both the basics of Indigenous knowledge systems (Brayboy, 2023) and to ECE best practices, standards, and competencies (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020, 2022; National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement [NAFSCE], 2022). This aligns with the practices of other nations, most notably with Aotearoa, in New Zealand, which has engaged in, and even codified, EL programs that value child and family voices and connect children to the host Indigenous culture as a national model, e.g., Te Whāriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017). In the United States, shifts in standards and expected teacher practices are being made as there has been an updating of developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2022) and family engagement competencies (NAFSCE, 2022). However, there is still a lack of equity-driven EL programs that ask for, share power and influence with, and actively engage with and pursue family and community voices.

Third, to serve Indigenous communities in culturally congruent ways, ideas about passing down traditional knowledge and existential identity to children should be embedded within ECE programs by inviting Indigenous culture and Indigenous language into the classroom. This is especially pertinent for programs that function in Indigenous communities and wish to operate through an equity lens. These



two aims can only be accomplished by creating EL programs that operate with power-sharing dynamics in mind; i.e., that ask for and encourage family and community participation, then work in partnership with families and communities to make programmatic and pedagogical decisions on the institutional, as well as classroom, level.

A consideration of the second and third points above caused the authors to question whether all schools reflect the communities they serve. It seems the placement of publicly funded EL programs is based on state and national results. The emphasis in these programs seems to be on outcomes and service delivery with a failure to see how such outcomes are meaningful in children's lives versus sustaining learning environments that support student recognition and cultural norms. This trend is in direct opposition to the first principle, which asserts EL pedagogy (and/or schooling itself) should be grounded in the local culture and reflective of the keiki and 'ohana being served.

Other questions arose from these reflections: Is the universal EL program model threatened by other program models, especially by EL programs that emphasize the importance of an Indigenous knowledge base? Why are states pursuing center-based universal ECE programs instead of considering alternatives, such as a mixed-delivery EL system, that would assist in creating or maintaining diversity in the EL sphere? Discussing those questions helped us in thinking about currently favored curricula and the forced metaphor of "scaling up" in a pre-K system (Tobin, 2005).

Finally, the three stories provide lessons, which could inform teacher state licensure pathways, about the relevance of teacher candidates' learning about regional Indigenous cultures and implementing culturally relevant components in the "everyday" learning of the students they will teach, the importance of serving children and their families with humility in all the complexities a learning environment encompasses, and, most notably, the strength of family and community engagement in the classroom. It seems teacher licensure pathways in some areas are slowly adopting a changing of standards; however, for institutions that do not embrace these lessons, as their student-teachers move into the teaching profession, they will perpetuate old practices of what has always been done instead of re-imagining education as it could be—as what the alaka'i and authors posit needs to be done for our Indigenous children in EL settings.

## HO'OKU'U-TO RELEASE

Elders, families, and communities are an integral part of educating young people in Indigenous communities (Grace & Serna, 2013; Kaomea, 2005). Incorporating elders, families, and communities back into educational systems for all children leads to more holistic, community-oriented programs. The education system has been, and in many nations continues to be, a weapon of settler colonialism. Engaging families and communities in the education system in meaningful ways is a movement toward rematriating, a returning, of education. This requires collaborative design and decision-making regarding educational systems. (Bang, et al., 2019).

'Ike i ke au nui me ke au iki. #1209  
To know the big currents and the little currents.  
[Be very well versed.]  
(Pukui, 1983, p. 131)

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# Redefining Quality to Center the Capabilities of Young Children

*Soyoung Park, Sunmin Lee, Nnenna Odim, and Jennifer Keys Adair*

We have standards we have to meet. We've got to get them ready. Kindergarten nowadays is structured. Very, very, very structured. (Teacher Interview)

I think teachers are afraid that if they let kids go, then they're going to have an increase of behavioral problems ... You see in all the rooms. It's very tightly managed ... because I'm like that. I mean, if I'm a leader that's like that, more than likely my teachers are going to be like that. (Leader Interview)

These two quotes speak to a common and troubling theme when it comes to measuring quality in early childhood: top-down control of children and educators. We became acutely aware of the tendency toward control when we implemented our Dynamic Innovation for Young Children (DIFYC) professional development, in which the teacher and leader quoted were participants. DIFYC was launched as part of a long-term partnership between one district and an institute of higher education. The partnership was centered on a common goal of enhancing agency for young children. When we asked the early childhood teachers and leaders in DIFYC to identify barriers to agentic experiences for young children, they described a culture of surveillance in their schools and programs. This surveillance culture existed in large part because “high-quality early childhood” had come to mean highly controlled environments that were dictated by externally imposed standards.

This conflation of *quality* with *control* is not new to early childhood, but has amplified in the years following President Barack Obama's early learning initiative. Launched in 2013, this initiative incentivized states to improve the quality of early care and education programs by developing standardized measurements of quality that would hold early childhood leaders and teachers accountable for improving the learning environments and achievement of young children (Jeon et al., 2014; Reinking, 2015). Many states developed Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to establish definitions of “quality” and determine metrics and procedures to support early care and education providers with enhancing their quality (Meek et al., 2022; Reinking, 2015). State-level educational policymakers decide what quality means, and early childhood providers must enact practices that fit these standards as evaluated through observation tools and achievement data (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014; Weiland & Rosada, 2022).

In our work with the DIFYC participants, we found that such high-stakes, evaluative approaches to measuring quality placed increased pressure on early childhood teachers and leaders. Participants reported experiencing burnout, strained relations between leaders and teachers, and classrooms where children are frequently managed and controlled because educators and children are constantly watched, evaluated, documented, and recorded. As the leader quoted above indicates, this culture of surveillance often starts with early childhood leaders, as they are the ones who set the culture for the program. When leaders are pressured to meet external measures of quality, they may start to control teachers (Cook, 2014; Oliveras-Ortiz, 2015), who then control their children. Early care and education providers are controlled through limits placed on their autonomy and regular evaluative observation of their practice (Schaak et al., 2020; Smith & Lawrence, 2019; Wells, 2015). Young children are controlled through limits placed on how they move, communicate, play, and learn (Park et al., 2021; Kim, 2016; Madrid & Dunn-Kenney, 2010).



Reinke and colleagues (2019) explain that measuring quality in positivistic, top-down ways advances “the hegemonies of standardization” (p. 192), where those in power use prescriptive, pseudo-objective “tactics of regulation and surveillance as a means of ensuring conformity” (p. 193). Along similar lines, Dahlberg and colleagues (2013) say that “‘Quality’ is a concept that is neither neutral nor natural. Rather, it is a constructed concept, inscribed with assumptions and values that make it a powerful tool for normalization and control, for governing at a distance and managing performance” (p. 3). What’s more, standard conceptualizations of educational quality are rooted in White Eurocentric and ableist notions of “goodness” (Beneke & Love, 2022; Souto-Manning, 2019), which do not reflect the cultural and community strengths, values, and assets of many children and educators in early childhood programs.

DIFYC was intended to counter the push toward conformity in the name of “quality.” The professional development was grounded in the team’s research on young children’s agency, which found that quality agentic learning environments only exist when young children can show many capabilities. Through a series of workshops and one-on-one coaching, we, as members of a large multi-racial-cultural-lingual professional development team, supported early childhood teachers and leaders to transform their understanding of high-quality early childhood. Collectively, we worked to shift our gazes away from an emphasis on top-down standards that fostered cultures of control, and toward a focus on what children were already doing. As our work with the teachers and leaders unfolded, all of us came to see that a justice-centered approach to measuring and documenting quality in early childhood had to begin with young children and their capabilities.

In this essay, we describe how shifting one’s gaze to observing the capabilities of young children can advance a humanizing, equitable, and socially just way of measuring quality in early childhood. Through the stories of two DIFYC participants—one teacher and one principal—we show how focusing on children’s capabilities serves to counter the reductionist, hierarchical, and dehumanizing approaches promoted through QRISs and other high-stakes evaluative approaches to defining quality. We argue that approaches to measuring quality in early childhood need to be revised to center young children and their capabilities.

## THE DYNAMIC INNOVATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### *How DIFYC Came to Be*

The DIFYC professional development was implemented in one southwestern school district. District education leaders recruited the participants, specifically targeting schools and centers that served predominantly children of color from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and whose leaders were open to shifting early childhood practice to enhance young children’s agency. We included both leaders and teachers in the professional development, as we knew that true transformation could only be possible if leaders and teachers worked together to collectively imagine what agentic practice would look like in their programs and classrooms. Each leader was asked to invite up to three teachers from their schools to participate in DIFYC. The leaders used different approaches to identify these teachers. For some, they asked the teachers of their youngest students (typically pre-K and kindergarten) if they wanted to participate. For others, they invited teachers whom the leaders felt demonstrated openness to thinking about young children’s agency. Regardless of how the teachers were selected, the teachers were invited to voluntarily participate in DIFYC.

For teachers, witnessing their school leaders participate alongside them in all DIFYC sessions was an assurance that this was an opportunity to work collaboratively with their leaders on improving students’ educational experiences. We did not want the teachers to see the professional development as another required top-down task. The teacher participants received full support from their school leaders to use their own agency to create classroom environments that are conducive to children’s agency.

Across the two years that DIFYC took place, nine schools/centers participated. Participating educators included 14 principals/assistant principals and 40 teachers, of whom 23 taught pre-K, eight taught kindergarten, seven taught first grade, and two taught third grade. The teachers worked in general education, bilingual education, and inclusion classrooms. More than half of the educators were Latinx (n=30), with the rest being White (n=12), Black (n=5), Multiracial (n=5), or Asian (n=2). They ranged in experience from one to 20 years of teaching experience for the teachers and one to 11 years of administrative experience for the school leaders. The schools served primarily Latinx and Black children, the majority of whom qualified for free and reduced-price lunch. In terms of grade level, there were 23 pre-K teachers, eight kindergarten teachers, seven first-grade teachers, and two third-grade teachers. The classroom types that teachers worked in include general education, bilingual education, and inclusion classrooms.

### ***What DIFYC Entailed***

In the first couple of DIFYC sessions, participants spent time learning about and discussing the concept of agency. Specifically, they focused on how young children show their agency, and how racism and other systems of oppression in early childhood manifest in who is often allowed to show agency in classrooms (White middle-class children) and who is not (young children of color with lower socioeconomic status). Participants looked at a list of different ways that young children might show their agency. Based on years of research that the DIFYC principal investigator had conducted, the list documented numerous capabilities that children show when they are in agentic classrooms. These capabilities were organized into the following categories: Children influence, make decisions about, or initiate their learning experience in terms of (1) what they learn, (2) how they learn, (3) where they learn, (4) with/from whom they learn, (5) how they demonstrate learning, and (6) how they incorporate identity and community assets, values, and knowledges. The DIFYC participants reviewed and offered feedback on the list. The DIFYC project team then revised the list based on participants' feedback.

In these early sessions, the DIFYC participants also developed action plans for themselves, reflecting on one particular area of their classroom practice that they wanted to focus on throughout the year. Each participant was then assigned a DIFYC coach, all of whom were members of the higher education team. There were 11 scholars on the higher education team, including faculty, a post-doctoral fellow, and graduate students. All worked in the field of early childhood with varying expertise in special education, educational psychology, bilingual education, and social studies. The racial and ethnic makeup of the team was comprised of Black (2), Asian (2), Latina (3), and White (4).

DIFYC coaches were assigned to educators based on their expertise and backgrounds. The primary consideration was around the type of classroom context the coach would be observing in. For example, the educators who taught in bilingual classrooms were assigned bilingual coaches with expertise in bilingual education. We also considered positions of power to try and ensure that pairs felt equitable and comfortable for all. For instance, faculty members were paired with school leaders while graduate students were paired with classroom teachers. These matches were intentionally developed by the higher education team to provide contextual support to educators throughout the sessions.

The coaches conducted two site visits with each participant, once in the fall and once in the spring. Each visit involved what we called "collective observations and reflective interviews." During the observations, the coach observed in the classroom for two hours. They wrote observation notes using the list of capabilities as a guide. Coaches also took photos or videos, which served as artifacts to discuss with the educators during the reflective interview. While their coach collected these data, the teacher was tasked with paying attention to the children's capabilities as they taught, keeping in mind the DIFYC capabilities list. For school leaders, they chose an early childhood classroom in their school/program to observe alongside their coaches and took notes just as the coaches did.

All educators practiced observing classroom videos using the list of capabilities as a guide before these visits took place. The timing of the observations was at the full discretion of the classroom teachers. They had complete decision-making power over when their coaches and leaders visited their classrooms. After the two-hour observation, the DIFYC coach and participant met for an hour-long reflective interview. In this interview, the two discussed all of the capabilities the children showed, identifying places where there could be further opportunity to expand children's capabilities in the classroom. These reflective interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Building trust between DIFYC coaches and participants was critical, especially given participants' wariness around classroom observations due to the climate of surveillance in early childhood. From the beginning, the coaches made it clear to the participants that the DIFYC observations were designed to focus on children and their capabilities. They were in no way evaluative of the teachers. When during the reflective interviews, participants saw that the coaches did indeed focus on the range of capabilities the children showed, this assured participants and made them less guarded. There were also many other points of connection between the coaches and participants. The coaches regularly communicated with participants over the phone or email to check in on participants' progress with their action plans and to provide resources and supports when they encountered difficulties. Coaches also engaged with their assigned participants in the same working group at every workshop session. Participants gathered their own evidence related to their action plans throughout the year by taking photos and videos of their classrooms. They would send these data to their coaches to share the exciting transformations taking place in their classrooms. Through these activities, coaches and participants built authentic, caring relationships that were rooted in the common goal of enhancing children's agency in early childhood settings.

What follows are the stories of two DIFYC participants and how their yearlong journey of focusing on children's capabilities led to transformational practices that enhanced quality as the teachers, leaders, and the children they worked with defined it. While all of our participants experienced some shift in their practice, we tell these particular stories because they represent common trends among our participants. The two narratives are told from the perspective of the coaches who worked with each participant (the first and second authors). We draw from field notes, interviews, photographs, and written reflections to help tell each story. Through these stories, we hope to demonstrate how a more humanizing, justice-centered approach to measuring quality in early childhood would better center the capabilities of young children than the evaluation of classrooms and teachers based on externally imposed standards.

## **PROMOTING QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD BY FOCUSING ON CHILDREN'S CAPABILITIES**

### ***One Teacher's Journey of Transforming Practice***

Megan was a second-year teacher in a pre-kindergarten classroom when she participated in DIFYC. At the beginning of DIFYC, Megan set a goal of creating a more collaborative learning environment rooted in children's inquiry. As her school espoused project-based learning, Megan believed that a high-quality early childhood classroom was one where young children worked together on emergent inquiries that became larger projects. She, however, found it difficult to see opportunities for emergent classroom projects because her attention often went to children's behaviors that felt challenging. Like all early childhood educators in the district, Megan was regularly observed for her classroom quality by external evaluators, which led to her feeling pressured to ensure her children behaved in compliant ways. Megan focused her energies on trying to manage and control children's behaviors, and could not enact the kinds of projects she had hoped to generate. She was trapped between two competing definitions of quality: quality as tied to children's compliant behavior, and quality as rooted in inquiry-based learning.

Because she was not accomplishing either metric of quality, Megan did not see her teaching practice or her classroom as being of high quality.

When Megan's DIFYC coach visited her for their fall observation and interview, the coach cited numerous ways that the children showed their capabilities. Of note to Megan was children's explorations with blocks. The coach noted:

There were three boys who were playing inside the block area building something. Then they started to build squares with the blocks. When they used the shorter blocks, one child pointed out, "That's too short," so he brought the longer one to cover the whole block area to build a building. He said, "We need to have a bigger one, the longer one." He put it on top. I think one boy started to use that foam block. He put it up front, and then let it go and then said, "It's raining, it's raining." It became like a storm. "It's raining, it's raining a storm." They threw the blocks, the foam blocks, and were pretending it's rain. (Interview)

This type of collaborative inquiry and problem-solving to create a building with the blocks, as well as the playful reaction to the blocks falling, were behaviors that Megan did not realize children in her classroom were capable of showing. After hearing her coach share all of the capabilities that she noticed, Megan reflected back,

As I heard you share, I felt encouraged because I feel like often, I notice more of when behaviors are not working in the classroom. To hear all of the stories that they're making, that's my hope for them. I often wonder, "When I send them to centers how productive is it?" ...That those things are all there in their play is really exciting. (Interview)

After hearing her DIFYC coach share all of the capabilities she noticed in the children, Megan also began to notice more of the children's capabilities. As she paid closer attention to her children in this strengths-based way, she became more attuned to the children's interests, seeing these as important gateways to maximizing children's demonstration of their capabilities. Megan started organizing opportunities for children to engage in inquiry around their interests.

One example was the pecan mini-study that emerged from her children's exploration outdoors. During outdoor play time, some of her students picked up pecans that had fallen from a tree in the schoolyard and gathered them in a container. Megan noticed her students' interest in the pecans, so instead of letting the moment pass, she brought the nuts into the classroom. Megan and the children wanted to crack the pecans but they couldn't because the shell was too hard. She shared the children's discovery with their families. A few days later, one of the students' parents sent in a tool that could crack pecans. The children used the tool to shell the pecans and engage in deeper exploration of both the nutcracker and the nuts themselves. Children shared observations about how the nuts were cracked open and asked questions about pecans as they engaged in this inquiry. Megan also came to realize that by sharing children's inquiries with families, she invited families to connect with the life of the classroom and bring in their knowledge and assets.





Figure 1. Gathering pecans



Figure 2. Cracking nuts

Another mini-study that emerged from the children's interests was an inquiry into spiders. In the fall, Megan's DIFYC coach noticed a child using string to make spider webs. Other children started making these webs as well. Megan decided to ask her students to observe a tarantula that they found in the school. This sparked the children's interest in launching a spider study. The children engaged in a series of experiences that deepened their knowledge of spiders: they collectively created a chart displaying what they already knew about spiders, and drawing them based on this, as well as on their observation of the tarantula. They watched video clips and digital read-alouds about spiders to gain additional information. Each child then chose one of three types of spiders to focus on—tarantulas, black widows, or wolf spiders—and created detailed drawings of their selected spider type that included captions with the facts they had learned about the spider. This culminated in a group share of what each child had learned about spiders.



Figure 3. Black Widow study



Figure 4. Tarantula study



Figure 5. Wolf Spider study



When Megan's coach returned for her second visit in the spring, the coach noticed a change in how she spoke about her children. The protocol was exactly the same as in the fall, but this time around, Megan seemed to have greater awareness of what the children were doing and learning. Rather than focusing on children's challenging behaviors, Megan was focusing on their capabilities. During the reflective interview with her coach, she used the phrase, "I don't know if you saw this" several times as she shared various scenes she had observed where the children showed their numerous capabilities (Interview). There was an enthusiasm and confidence in Megan that differed from her fall visit. In her end-of-year reflection, Megan wrote,

I was blown away by the learning [my coach] saw in my classroom. Her insights helped me to see their learning in a new way, beyond lessons and assessments but how they were authentically interacting with ideas presented, testing hypotheses, figuring out conflict etc.... this year has been a chance to not only notice students' interests but also act to provide kiddos opportunities to learn about a topic they independently identified. (End-of-Year Reflection)

It was through recognizing children's capabilities that Megan was able to enact her vision for quality instruction in her classroom. The more she saw their capabilities, the more she looked for opportunities to enhance these capabilities, building on children's interests to cultivate agentic, collaborative learning experiences. Megan was no longer hindered by fears related to children's behaviors. In fact, as she focused on children's capabilities and used these to enact projects, many of the behaviors that felt challenging to her stopped on their own. Moving away from trying to control children and instead paying attention to what they were already doing resulted in quality instruction as Megan defined it. This transformation in Megan's practice did not emerge from a top-down evaluation of Megan's teaching. All Megan's DIFYC coach did was point out the many capabilities that young children showed, and the rest followed.

### ***One Principal's Journey of Transforming Practice***

Like all of the leaders who participated in DIFYC, Zahra was interested in enhancing young children's agency, but letting go of the external measures and standards of quality that were imposed upon her program was a challenge. When she participated in DIFYC, Zahra was in her second year as a school principal. She had previously taught upper elementary and middle school for six years. At the beginning of DIFYC, Zahra shared that she had a rather top-down approach to leadership. Never having been an early childhood educator herself, Zahra relied on state standards for quality to guide her work with her teachers of young children. She and her assistant principal often walked into the early childhood classrooms with checklists and observational tools to evaluate the teachers and classrooms.

Zahra was, however, very receptive to the ideas she developed through the professional development. During her fall visit with her DIFYC coach, Zahra was enthusiastic about observing in a classroom with the aim of noticing children's capabilities—an orientation that was different from her typical observation tools. She and her coach observed in a kindergarten classroom. When reflecting on this observation during her interview, Zahra shared that two children on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) were given the freedom to move around as they wanted both during center time—which was a period of the day when children went to different centers around the room to engage in more playful activities—and during whole group instructional time. The rest of the children were expected to sit in their assigned spots and only speak when it was their turn or when a teacher asked them a question. As she looked over the DIFYC capabilities list, Zahra realized that the two children who could move around freely had the chance to demonstrate many more capabilities than the other children in the classroom.

To support her observation, Zahra described a moment when the children were in literacy centers. The teacher assigned the children to centers, where they were expected to stay for the duration of the literacy block. One of two students who were permitted to "bounce" from center to center left his

audiobook center and went to the consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) word center where children were building CVC words with letter magnets. He noticed that a peer had built a VC word. She explained,

The child told his peer, “No, that’s a VC word! That’s not a CVC word!” So, then they started arguing about it: “No. It’s a CVC word.” “Why is it a CVC word?” And then the child took the other child back to the board and they were talking about why those were CVC words as opposed to the VC words. So, I thought that was a really, really powerful example of when they were working collaboratively. (Fall Interview)

Zahra attributed this collaborative problem-solving to the first child’s sense of agency to travel around the room. Based on this observation, she wondered if giving children more freedom to move around the classroom as they chose would enhance their capabilities. As she put it,

If we opened it up, it would allow students to explore and learn about concepts that they want to learn about at a particular time. I believe that if we do that, then the learning outcome will be far greater than if we force them to sit in a particular center that they really don’t want to be in at the moment, especially if there are centers that are culturally...that they can relate to. It just provides them with a richer learning experience. Some students need to be able to explore and choose what they’re learning, when they’re learning. So that they’re developing those social and emotional skills. That agency is critical. (Interview)

Inspired by her own realizations about young children’s agency, Zahra made a plan to meet with the DIFYC teachers from her school one-on-one to discuss how they could implement the ideas that they were learning about in our DIFYC sessions. She planned to share what she was learning and to ask teachers what resources they would need to implement their own action plans. The kindergarten teacher whom Zahra observed was similarly interested in giving children the freedom to move around the classroom during literacy centers. After meeting with Zahra about this goal, she felt she had the agency to open up her classroom in this way. Prior to DIFYC, she would not have considered giving children more flexibility of movement, as order, structure, and control seemed to be expectations school leaders had of her classroom.

During Zahra’s spring visit, she and her coach observed significant changes in the kindergarten classroom. Children were no longer assigned a center but could choose which center to go to. They also noticed that when children felt a center was too crowded, they would simply take the materials they needed and move to a different part of the room. Zahra noted that the children were communicating more with each other than they had earlier. The children were also no longer going to the classroom teacher as much, but rather working things out on their own. Zahra explained that the teacher was finding greater joy in the classroom as well: “She’s very excited about it and she’s very proud. She comes by at least four times a week to share what’s happening in her class. She’s just super excited” (Interview).

Reflecting on her own growth over the course of DIFYC, Zahra shared the following:

Anybody that knows me knows that I am a very structured individual. I love communication and I love collaboration. But I’m very, very, very structured. That’s just who I am as a person ... so, just being able to let go as an administrator, and say it’s okay if you do these things in your classroom like have the kids go to different centers. That is something that I had to just wait and watch and see what happened. I think that’s just shifted my thinking...That we don’t have to be super structured and kids can still learn and they might even be, well they’re learning even more. (Interview)

Zahra’s ability to let go of her desire for structure and control came out of her paying attention to the capabilities of young children. Zahra realized that too much structure could actually hinder children’s

capability expansion. When her focus became on enhancing capabilities for all children, she was able to work more collaboratively with her teachers, enabling them to try out DIFYC practices that resonated with them. Zahra's desire for the teachers to let go of control with their children led to her letting go of control with the teachers. Quality for Zahra was no longer defined by externally imposed standards and observation tools. Instead, quality practices were those that Zahra and the teachers developed together based on the capabilities children showed.

## A CASE FOR REDEFINING QUALITY BY FOCUSING ON CHILDREN'S CAPABILITIES

What these two stories teach us is that defining and measuring quality in early childhood does not have to depend on top-down, pseudo-objective standards and evaluations. Current approaches to measuring quality tend to encourage cultures of surveillance and control that are rooted in racist, ableist, classist normalization and standardization (Beneke & Love, 2022; Kim, 2016; Madrid & Dunn-Kenney, 2010). A more justice-centered approach to measuring quality focuses on the capabilities of young children. By looking specifically for children's capabilities, educators can identify ways that they might change the environment—not the child—to further enhance and expand those capabilities. In this way, educators are able to determine what counts as quality early care and education in their specific contexts with their particular children.

We believe that shifting our understanding of quality in early childhood to an approach that centers the capabilities of young children improves the experiences of everyone involved, including teachers, children, families, coaches, and administrators. We found that focusing on the capabilities of the children also helped to lift participant DIFYC educators' own morale and their enthusiasm for their work. Leaders and teachers developed more trusting and collaborative relationships, which led to teachers also trusting their children more. Subsequently, as evident in the stories we shared, teachers, school leaders, and children all found greater joy in their work. When the educators could let go of control and make shifts that expanded children's capabilities, children's many assets, strengths, and knowledges became more evident. For Megan and Zahra, these shifts came about because of what they observed in children, not because of external measures imposed upon them.

Other DIFYC participants reported that the ability to focus on the children was in many ways freeing. Their DIFYC collective observations and reflective interviews were a radical shift from their typical experience with observers. Before participating in DIFYC, they frequently felt inundated with teacher evaluation systems and top-down pressures coming at them from district and school supervisors. In the DIFYC process, they could focus on the children's capabilities alongside their DIFYC coaches and trust that their coaches were not trying to judge or find mistakes in their practice. What followed was transformation rooted in the educators' own ideas about what high-quality early childhood looked like in their specific contexts. In this way, DIFYC allowed for a reclaiming of what Beneke and Love (2022) describe as the "wisdom of multiply-marginalized children, families, and teachers" (p. 203).

As coaches, we also had to let go of our own ideas about the kind of transformation we hoped to see in the classrooms. Although Zahra and Megan's experiences were emblematic of the types of changes we observed across all participants, not everyone made such significant shifts and a few were quite resistant to change. For example, one teacher shared in later workshops that she was resistant, even angry, in meetings at first because she did not feel a shift was necessary in her classroom. It was important that the DIFYC higher education team see value in each participant's way of seeing and expanding young children's capabilities. We did not want the educators to see DIFYC as another type of top-down professional development aimed at forcing very specific, administrator-driven changes in practice that adhered to state definitions of quality. As the DIFYC participants and coaches together practiced observing and reflecting on young children's capabilities, even the most initially resistant

educators saw that we were joining *with* teachers in reflection on environments that cultivate agency. At the same time, we learned to find value in the many ways that educators recognized children's capabilities and defined quality in their own contexts. As such, we as a team went through our own process of letting go.

While QRISs often create cultures of control, focusing on children's capabilities created cultures of freedom and joy. The DIFYC approach to measuring quality achieved the goal of improving children's educational experiences in ways that existing QRISs may not. We, therefore, call on the early childhood field to change how we think about measuring quality in early care and education. Rather than looking for educators' compliance to decontextualized, reductionist tools, look for all the ways that young children show their capabilities. Rather than controlling the objectives of teachers and leaders, give them freedom to lean on their own wisdom and define for themselves what feels like high-quality learning in their particular contexts. Rather than cultivating a culture of performance, cultivate a culture of curiosity, wonder, and experimentation, where educators get to try new things that further children's interests and expand capabilities. A model of quality measurement that centers the capabilities of children is one that we believe gives more agency to educators and children alike. This is what it means to have a justice-centered approach to measuring quality.

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# “I Want to Say the Right Thing”: Developing Translingual Literacy Practices Through Early Care Educator and University Researcher Partnerships

*Angie Zapata, Mary Adu-Gyamfi, and Adrianna González Ybarra*

A collaborative inquiry model of teacher learning offers a distinct departure from common top-down models of early care education teacher development. In the context of the teacher and researcher collaborative inquiry model presented in this paper, we encountered an intergenerational collective of early care educators (ECEs) and university partners as they mentored one another through classroom critical encounters with translingual picturebooks and took turns holding and loving their babies during afterschool gatherings. The learning was enlivened not only by talk, laughter, food, and reflections of instruction, but also was animated by the vibrant colors of the translingual picturebooks that flooded the room and served as essential socio-political art to read, discuss, and inform teaching. Entering this space of professional learning committed to collaborative inquiry and equity-focused instruction often elicited astonishment from those accustomed to tidy rows of teachers silently taking notes as a one-time speaker read from slides. At first glance, you might have been unsure who the “leader” or “expert” was, because everyone was participating in the discussion.

As predominantly White ECE teachers and predominantly Black and Brown university researchers, we turned to collaborative inquiry as an innovative and collaborative model of professional learning. In this essay, we feature the experience of Tamara, a White, middle-class teacher (all names are pseudonyms) in a midwestern rural suburban early childhood classroom. Nagasawa and colleagues (2023) note that “by humanizing these issues, our aim is to show that possibilities exist, even with difficulties and within complexities” (p. 170). By featuring Tamara’s experience to highlight the critical components of a collaborative inquiry model, we locate ECE professional development within the historical systems and socio-political issues shaping early care education and highlight how White, female teachers (the predominant ECE workforce demographic in the US) experience and take up professional learning that centers equity in racially, linguistically, and ethnically (RLE) complex classrooms. By identifying the critical components of a collaborative inquiry model in this way, we also offer direct implications for ECE learning, research, and practice.

## TURNING TO TEACHER-RESEARCHER PARTNERSHIPS IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

A history of inequities for RLE-diverse children and their families persists in early care education settings. As research has documented, early childhood school policies and initiatives have firmly entrenched systems and structures that protect White interests and perpetuate racism and inequities as the status quo (Adair, 2014; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019). As Souto-Manning (2021) explains, “The dysfunction of early schooling is illustrated by its strong attachment to ‘the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline’ (Harris, 1993, p. 1714), against which growth, development, and learning are scaled and rated” (p. 10). Indeed, RLE children and their families endure insidious harm in schools, which too often view RLE students through a deficit lens and treat them in prejudicial ways. By devaluing the linguistic and cultural practices of RLE communities, we fail to give due justice to the learning capacities and promising futures of RLE children and their families (Zapata, 2020; Bengochea et al., 2018; Osorio, 2018). To begin to address these disparities, we turn to ECE development that brings awareness of these issues through a model of collaborative professional learning that values the humanistic interactions that young RLE children and their families similarly deserve to experience in schools.

The early care education schooling disparities students and educators encounter are exacerbated by the current US socio-political landscape. Research highlights the additional physical and psychological labor endured by ECEs during the pandemic as they worked to keep young children safe and learning in their classrooms (e.g., Rodriguez et al., 2022). ECEs find themselves further constrained by one-size-fits-all approaches to language and literacy curriculum and instruction that were initiated in response to concerns of “learning loss” after the pandemic (Bomer, 2021). They are similarly negotiating political responses (e.g., book bans, fear of critical race theory in curriculum, anti-LGBTQ+ initiatives) to global racial reckoning movements that center RLE equity efforts as state legislators propose bills and instantiate “back to basics” mandates (Kissel, 2023). In the midst of these difficult times, ECEs seek opportunities for professional learning, guidance, and community, but the current professionalization of ECEs in many midwestern states (e.g., adopted curriculum trainings, narrow interpretations of data) rigidly positions ECEs as curriculum puppets rather than as responsive curriculum designers and fails to address the unique needs and assets of the profession in humanizing and equity-focused ways.

In response to these difficult working conditions for ECEs in one midwestern state, we reconceptualize relationships among ECEs and university partners (e.g., Coburn et al., 2013; Yelland & Franz Bentley, 2017) as a pathway for ECE development. We embrace the “pandemic as a portal” (Souto-Manning, 2021, p. 3) to reimagine what is possible for ECE professionalization through a teacher and researcher collaborative inquiry collective. We define our collective by our commitment to receive one another as critical social educators (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2021), each in a different place in our teaching journeys. We recognize there is more expertise distributed in communities than in any one person—however educated or schooled an individual may be (Souto-Manning, 2021)—and we engage one another as creative intellectuals and leaders. We ground our work in relationship- and strengths-based approaches as a way to resist harmful ECE conditions for teachers, children, and their families in schools. We value equity and humanizing ways of interaction and professionalization that view ECEs as capable, whole beings who are worthy of sustained care (Falchi & Medellin-Paz, 2023).

## METHODS OF DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS

We<sup>1</sup> characterize the research of the collaborative inquiry model as a Social Design-Based Experiment (SDBE) (Gutiérrez, 2018; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016), wherein teachers and university partners collaborate to examine and design instruction to address inequities in early childhood schooling. As Gutiérrez (2018) explains,

Animated by commitments that aim to make a possible, sustainable, and dignified life for all humans, scholars who engage in SDBEs seek to create and study change in partnership with a range of communities in which new practices and futures are codesigned... As educational experiments, like other design experiments, social design experiments are grounded in empirically derived hypotheses about learning and human development but are iterated, implemented, and continuously reflected upon, refined, and repaired over the course of the work; in other words, these are theoretical and experientially informed models of the future that are codesigned, studied, and corevised in the present. (p. 90)

Using a qualitative inquiry process designed to resist social inequality afforded in-the-moment refinements to the collaborative model. For example, in response to the ECEs’ narratives of their struggles during a difficult socio-political climate, we refined the model to include focused check-ins on well-being before each meeting. SDBE recognizes this unexpected revision as a promising finding, given that these revisions typically emerge in response to problem-solving in a particular context. In other

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1 By “we” we include the voices and experiences of each of the ECEs and university partners participating in the collaborative.

words, using SBDE demands that we be responsive to our context and partners and holds us accountable to the efficacy of our model through ongoing analysis of each teacher meeting. Adding well-being check-ins to the model allowed us to acknowledge ECE burnout, sustain fidelity to the reality of the early care education context at the time, build community through shared vulnerabilities, and nurture teacher leadership capacity and agency. We also noted that through this honoring of one another's well-being, our work together transitioned over time to a familiar professional space that included more honest and vulnerable reflections of practice.

### ***Centering Translingual Literacies Through Teacher-Researcher Collaborative Inquiry***

A previously established relationship between Angie and one of the ECE partners (Zapata, 2022; Zapata & Kleekamp, 2022) served as a catalyst for this collective, which was focused on developing understanding of translingual literacies through picture book literacy instruction. Although the focus of this paper is on the collaborative inquiry model itself and not on the translingual literacies learning among ECE and researchers, it is important to understand translingual literacies in order to appreciate how the discussions came to be.

The concept of translingual literacies highlights the ways people shuttle across languages and language varieties, utilize hybrid language practices, and are multilingual (Canagarajah, 2013; Zapata, 2020). Together, we explored the scholarship on translingual literacies, given its focus on both the multilingual *and* multimodal ways of making meaning, which is a well-documented phenomenon among RLE students and their families. Growing awareness and instruction that attends to the vastness of RLE students' linguistic and broader multimodal resources can cultivate a more inclusive and equitable space where RLE children can thrive (Zapata & Laman, 2023; Linares, 2022; Machado & Hartman, 2020). Specifically, we turned to translingual picturebooks, literature that offers written and illustrated portrayals of bi/multilingual and linguistically diverse communities' everyday lives, as an important resource for teaching.

Generous funding from the Foundation of Child Development (FCD) afforded the ECE extensive access to classroom libraries of translingual picturebooks and time for university partners to facilitate gatherings over two years. Included in our group of 12 partners was Angie Zapata, a Latina university associate research professor, two graduate research assistants (at the time of study)—Mary, who identifies as a cis White female, and Adrianna, who identifies as a third-generation Chicana/Latina—and two Black female preservice teachers. Participating ECEs included five early career and experienced classroom teachers who identified predominantly as White, English-dominant female teachers, and a White male librarian. The school setting has significantly shifted over the past five years. Many of our partners noted how their classrooms have gone from having no students identified as emergent bilingual learners to including a diverse representation of students identified as multilingual and refugee students from countries like Cambodia and Afghanistan.

As a group, we gathered a total of 13 times across both virtual and face-to-face settings. Our 90-minute meetings typically included a well-being check-in followed by sharing translingual picture book titles and reflections on classroom instruction. Angie would begin with the check-ins, which often elicited conversations about students, personal life updates of joys and challenges, or concerns about developing educational policy and rhetoric in state politics. She would present an agenda, followed by discussion led collectively by Angie and the educators, the modeling of translingual picturebooks by Angie, and reflections from teachers engaged with the translingual picturebooks in their classrooms. During these meetings, other university partners also shared their thoughts and experiences. To provide a more intensive encounter focused on curriculum planning with translingual picturebooks, the collective also met for two, three-hour gatherings at the local university.



The analysis presented here draws from observation video data and transcripts of meetings from both year one and year two, as well as 13 field notes and two analytic memos to document Tamara's experience with the collective, for a total of 575 pages of data for analysis. We utilized an iterative process of inductive analysis (Saldaña, 2021) to identify three critical components of an ECE and university partner collaborative inquiry model: the role of ECE partners as mentors and supporters, translingual picturebooks as tools, and the role of university partners as facilitators. Certainly, we see these as interactive and intersecting themes, but present them here as distinct for readers' ease and clarity.

## FINDINGS: LEARNING FROM TAMARA

Tamara is a sixth-year second-grade teacher and continues to teach in the same midwestern rural suburban school where she began her career. Within the collective, Tamara is recognized as an early career teacher and first-time mother. It is important to note that eight years earlier, Tamara was a student in Angie's undergraduate reading methods course at the local university, and her participation in the group built upon their relationship. Tamara identifies as a White, monolingual woman who wants to bring more equity-focused practices to her teaching. During the course of her participation, we observed Tamara's growing readiness to be vulnerable, to ask questions, and to position herself as a learner. For example, it was not uncommon to hear Tamara stop the conversation, and ask, "Okay, but what do I do?" This learning disposition and attitude toward her role within the collaboration is illustrated in the themes below. We highlight Tamara's qualities through the presentation of all three themes as we believe they played a significant role in her own and others' experience with the collaborative inquiry model.

### ***Role of ECE Partners: Mentorship and Support***

As the first critical component of the collaborative inquiry model identified in the analysis, we demonstrate how ECEs interacted with each other in two specific ways. We noted complex moments of growth and tension in which *mentoring and supporting* one another became standard practice as they shared their professional and personal challenges while learning about and sharing translingual picturebooks. We focus first on how ECEs engaged in snowballing, a dynamic in which one question or statement builds upon another, providing opportunities for teachers to continue building and expanding upon previous comments. The second pattern of teacher-peer interaction focuses on how the ECE received one another as colleagues and unburdened themselves of uncertainties and fears about equity-focused picture book instruction during an oppressive socio-political education climate.

### ***Snowballing as mentoring***

Snowballing discussions about translingual picturebook instruction repeatedly occurred during our collaborative meetings. Engaging in a reflective practice in this layered way produced a cumulative effect, allowing teachers to build upon one another's stories, perspectives, and thoughts in an open and continuous dialogue. For example, Tamara sought advice and mentorship from the teachers regarding students' book choices by explaining first that, in her classroom, students read their "just-right books" (i.e., books that are easily accessible to that particular reader) during a specific reading time during the day. While she acknowledged having been told by others to do things this way, she questioned the practice based on our conversation regarding students' free choice of books to read, including translingual picturebooks, as a more inclusive practice. In the data example that follows, note how Tamara launched the snowball effect with a question and how partners layered their offerings one after the other.

Tamara asked, "Do I need to go over there and make sure they have a "just-right" book...[or] should I give them opportunities to have whatever book they are drawn to?" Wendy, an ECE partner, then asked her, "What do you think?" Tamara responded that before this day, she would have said the students



needed to be reading “just right” books but then stated that her thinking had changed. She mentioned a statement Jacob, a male librarian partner, had made earlier about allowing student choice, suggesting that if a student were drawn to something, teachers should encourage it. Angie agreed, adding that it is a “both/and” situation: students need texts and time to build their decoding and fluency skills in addition to opportunities for self-selection as a way to encourage their “identity as a reader” and their “pleasure” in reading.

After hearing different perspectives from her ECE partners, Tamara said that she would “be making some changes.” Jacob affirmed that he had faced the same challenge with his fourth-grade students and explained that “it’s a balance.” Speaking to his experiences as an educator of 13 years, he elaborated on a few ways to support students’ self-selection of books, including reading picturebooks and frequently rotating in new books that they could read together as a class. Jenna, another ECE partner, discussed how she used individual book boxes for her students, putting one book of her choice for them in their book box and giving the students some choice, too—calling it “Yours and Mine.” Wendy suggested Tamara could consider setting up her literacy stations differently next year to accommodate book box time. Dena, another ECE partner, added that it could be timed, stating that students “must read” a teacher-selected book for a certain amount of time, then have their own choice for the rest of the time. As her partners made suggestions, Tamara nodded her head in agreement and shared that she would like to have two “must-reads” and make room for students’ readings choices, as well.

In this snowballing dialogue, we noted how Tamara’s uncertainty and questions about students’ text selection invited everyone in the room into the discussion. Her question served as a catalyst for a long list of ideas to consider for her practice and an opportunity for more seasoned teachers to similarly reflect on their practice.

### ***Receiving uncertainties and fears***

In the next illustrative data sample, we highlight Tamara’s willingness to unburden herself and share the tensions and challenges she experienced after selecting the children’s book, *Something Happened in Our Town* (Celano et al., 2018). It tells the story of two children, one White and one Black, and illustrates how they deal with a police shooting of a Black man in their community. Tamara explained that she ordered *Something Happened in Our Town* for her classroom and read through it on her own, but was unsure about reading it in her classroom.

As she reflected on her discomfort about sharing this picture book portrayal of racial injustice from a child’s perspective, she expressed concern over the “different perspectives of different families” in her class, specifically noting the racist comments of one student in the classroom. Tamara stated that she was simultaneously “worried” and “not worried” about what this student might say and how this student’s family might respond. Listening, Angie enthusiastically mentioned wanting to “open up a space about what it’s like to share texts,” like this picture book, which offers anti-racist perspectives, with students. The ECEs and university partners made space for Tamara to express her uncertainties where she revealed how she found planning for a read-aloud with this picture book to be a bit “nerve-wracking” because “I want to say the right thing.” Angie responded with a question, “And what is that right thing?” Tamara quickly answered, somewhat nervously, “I don’t know right now.” Other ECEs contributed their personal responses to Tara to both affirm and reconcile her fears.

Tamara articulated her uncertainties and fears about difficult literature topics and looked to the ECEs for support. Tamara perceived introducing this picture book as a risk for both her and her students because of her own insecurity about saying “the right thing.” By creating space to receive Tamara’s uncertainties, the collective not only supported a partner’s process of negotiation, but encouraged her to take time to familiarize herself with a book before sharing it with children. These interactions served

as an important foundation while the collective began to hone in on translingual picturebooks more closely.

### ***Translingual Picturebooks as a Tool for Learning***

The second critical component of the collaborative inquiry model, translingual picturebooks, served as an important tool for discussion as the ECEs sought to connect curricular materials to children's lives, languages, and literacies. In this section, we highlight *Bright Star*, a picture book by Yuyi Morales (2021). It blends Spanish and English, and centers the topic of immigration through a story about animal migration. The book includes illustrations of the US-Mexico border wall to depict the borderland, animal life, flora and fauna and the disruption of a fawn's migration.

At our second meeting in our first year as a collective, we engaged in a discussion about selection processes and approaches to translingual picture book read-alouds, including *Bright Star*. It offered an important illustrated and print narrative for questions and conversation about the American and Mexican socio-political context.

Tamara shared how the students in her classroom responded to the picture book. She explained that they recognized a connection between the illustrations of the animals and of the children by noting that the children's clothing had images of the animals represented in the book. But they did not make the link that both of them were migrants. The children also focused closely on the need to breathe slowly when you're afraid, connecting this practice to familiar Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons that they had participated in. Sharing the book without explanation did not generate discussion of the deeper theme of immigration or of the translingual features, such as the Spanish in the text:

Tamara: [The students] didn't bring up anything about immigration, the wall, the border. The Spanish [in the text] didn't ring any bells for them. And so, I was wondering, I knew that that was like a [translingual] connection that the book had. And so, like, should I initiate that and bring it up? Or should I just follow their lead?

Angie: Can you talk a little more about how that felt? The negotiation?

Tamara: I ended up just, like, going with their conversation and not bringing it up. But we did watch the video of her [the author] reading it. And they were really excited to do that. But yeah, we didn't bring up any conversation about the social context of it. But they still really enjoyed it.

In sharing *Bright Star* with her students, Tamara was confronted with the challenge of whether or not to name the translingual features and the illustrated geographical and social context of the book with her students. The absence of any discussion of the translingual features of the text made her question whether she should "initiate that and bring it up" or "just follow their lead." Tamara explained that her purpose in reading the book was to "see what they discovered from it." She said she "didn't want to make it a social conversation ... if that's not where they took it." Clearly, the book brought up specific conversations and questions about instruction that the collective and in this case, Tamara, had not considered at first.

Through this teaching reflection, Tamara acknowledged the importance of introducing global topics to students rather than working from the assumption that because they do not have "prior existing knowledge," students do not need to engage in the themes presented in translingual picturebooks. After discussion with the collective, Tamara stated that she wanted to do "it the right way," but at that moment, she was not ready.

The salience of having materials like translingual picturebooks to mediate ECE and partner reflections is noteworthy. Translingual picturebooks provided opportunities for partners to reflect on teaching practices that underestimated children’s capacity for engaging in global socio-political issues and confronting complex equity issues, such as immigration. Without materials like translingual picturebooks shared in the context of a collaborative inquiry, the discussion, reflection, and development of more equity-focused instruction would not have been possible.

### *Role of University Partners as Facilitators*

The final critical component of the collaborative inquiry model illuminates the role of university partners as facilitators who offer “nudges” towards reflection. In this context of a reciprocal relationship of learning, university partners amplified voices of Color and critical translingual perspectives as a model for the ECE partners. Angie, in particular, did this in various ways, including sharing her personal schooling and life experiences as a bilingual Latina and ECE. Angie also posed questions and provided resources centered in critical language and literacy frameworks. In this final theme, we focus on how Angie provided “nudges” through comments and questions, and encouraged Tamara to reflect on her ideological beliefs and the ways they shaped her teaching practices.

For example, we noted how Angie encouraged Tamara to examine her pedagogical decision-making by nudging her to talk more about how she felt about her students’ initial responses to *Bright Star*. Tamara’s response revealed the tension she felt between steering the direction of the conversation or “seeing what they took out of it.” After this facilitated discussion with the university partner and her final realization that she was “not ready,” Tamara’s confidence grew, and she made careful preparation of translingual read-alouds. In her follow-up reading of *Bright Star* as a whole-class read-aloud, Tamara provided more information to her students about the socio-political and geographical features of the book. Although she still expressed apprehension about discussing the translingual features, it was clear that her uncertainties were not about the content and preparation, but about how to support discussion of such a complex and important topic.

The university partner’s facilitation further mediated the ECE partners’ engagement with translingual picturebooks in complex and encouraging ways. In this second illustrative data sample at a teacher inquiry meeting later in the second year, Tamara shared a book from her collection entitled *Wishes*, by Muon Thi Van (2021). Tamara said she found this title by using a search for “diverse literature books 2022” on various literature search engines, and then learned more about the author. These were skills she developed through her work with the collective and which reflected her growing understanding of how to select authentic representations of translingualism in picturebooks.

Tamara asked how she should approach a class reading of *Wishes*, which centered on a Vietnamese family’s powerful immigration story by boat. She was hesitant and uncertain, expressing distress about how to begin. Angie encouraged her to “work through the discomfort.” In this way, Angie not only nudged Tamara forward, but affirmed that she was capable of engaging with the picture book with intentionality and with care. Speaking to Tamara’s concern about how to engage the themes of immigration in the book, Angie encouraged her and the other teachers to “make sure we are not contributing [to] narratives that all immigrants go through that [the same experience]” and emphasized the need for “robust and nuanced collections” of immigration stories for children.

Tamara reflected on these comments, thinking about ways she could pair *Bright Star* with *Wishes* to contextualize stories of immigration and disrupt stories that might perpetuate stereotypes. In her concluding thoughts, she reminded herself to “slow down” and not rush the process of selecting and sharing translingual picturebooks. Like Tamara, the ECE partners in this collaborative inquiry model responded well to university partners’ facilitation of discussions as nudges that cultivated a habit of reflective practice in the collaborative inquiry experience.

## DISCUSSION

Together, these findings illuminate *relationships* as essential to ECE learning that centers equity and inclusivity in schools, particularly when located within an ECE and university model of professional development. The analysis highlights how ECEs and university researchers nurtured partnerships of mutual respect through the following: relationships among ECEs, relationships to materials, and relationships with university partners.

Relationships among ECE partners can be characterized as relationships of inquiry, trust, and vulnerability, as demonstrated in the data. The snowballing dialogue and mentoring unfolded in the contexts of the relationships and the sense of community they had cultivated over time through their participation in the model. ECEs nurtured their community of trust as they listened and engaged in a non-hierarchical and non-judgmental conversation that affirmed, mentored, and challenged one another in their teaching practices. This later served as a foundation for developing their translingual picture book instruction. Within these relationships of support and trust, Tamara was able to be vulnerable and reveal her fears around literature instruction about equity and anti-racism, which in turn set an important precedent for other partners to do the same.

The relationships the partners developed to curricular materials, specifically translingual picturebooks, were essential to the development of practice and to discussions about equity. For example, Tamara repeatedly reflected on her own picture book instruction and often voiced her thoughts within the group. Specifically, she talked about her teaching of *Bright Star* and later recognized *Wishes* as a helpful companion book to elicit discussion about translingualism and immigration, and she spoke about the ways the picturebooks provided an opening to connect to her students' lives. Tamara's questions about translingual picturebooks often ignited an opportunity for other ECEs to mentor her and reflect on their own teaching practices and teaching ideologies. Translingual picturebooks were a tool that Tamara and her partners could grapple with as both educators and learners.

The relationships the ECEs developed with the university partners are also noteworthy. It was evident that experiencing professional development as a partnership mattered, particularly among a collective of bi/multiracial and bi/multilingual partners working with White women and a White man towards equity and inclusivity in the classroom. Angie's facilitation of resources, questions, and her sharing of personal experiences encouraged Tamara to develop habits of reflection and planned translingual picture book instruction, along with the pairing of picturebooks in ways that resisted stereotyping. We believe it is significant that voices of Color were in a relationship of collaborative inquiry with White ECEs, and thus, we encourage more research in this area.

This analysis of the critical components of an ECE and university partner model of teacher learning has implications for future research on equity-focused ECE professional development. The use of SBDE as a method demanded that we consider the local context and humanize the partners and their needs rather than install an experiment without consideration of ECE capacity and aptitudes as educators.

Attending to ECE well-being and learning through relationships were central to the success of the work. In practice, we found that ECE development must consider the immense pressure educators of young children carry as they attempt to reconcile the complexities and burden of inequitable schooling experiences for their students and their families. When supporting ECE professional development, we must collaborate and, as Falchi and Medellín-Paz (2023) say, "we make the road to humanize professional relationships by walking together" (pp. 131-138). Holding up and supporting ECEs can occur through collaborations focused on uncovering, questioning, and resisting unequal systems of power and privilege that many ECEs experience themselves. If we desire to transform inequity in

schools, we must approach ECE teacher development in ways that humanize and receive ECEs as capable and worthy of doing it. The benefits of an ECE and university partner model of ECE development are evident and deserve to be examined more widely.

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# “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.

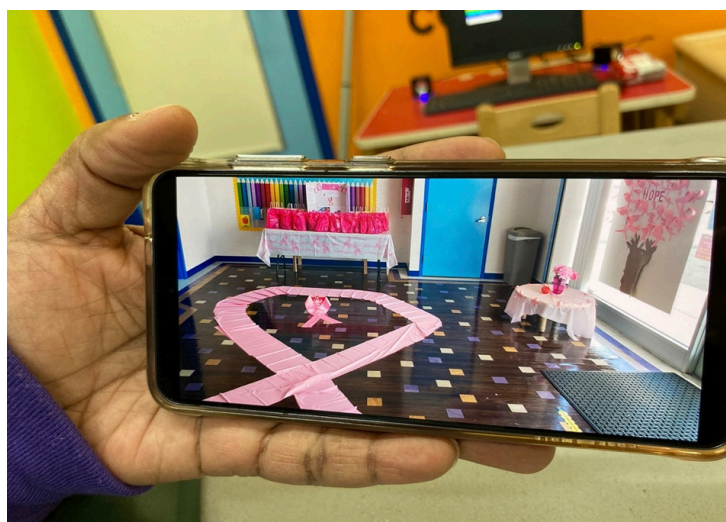


Figure 2. A photo taken on a phone of the Cancer Awareness Event

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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# 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.

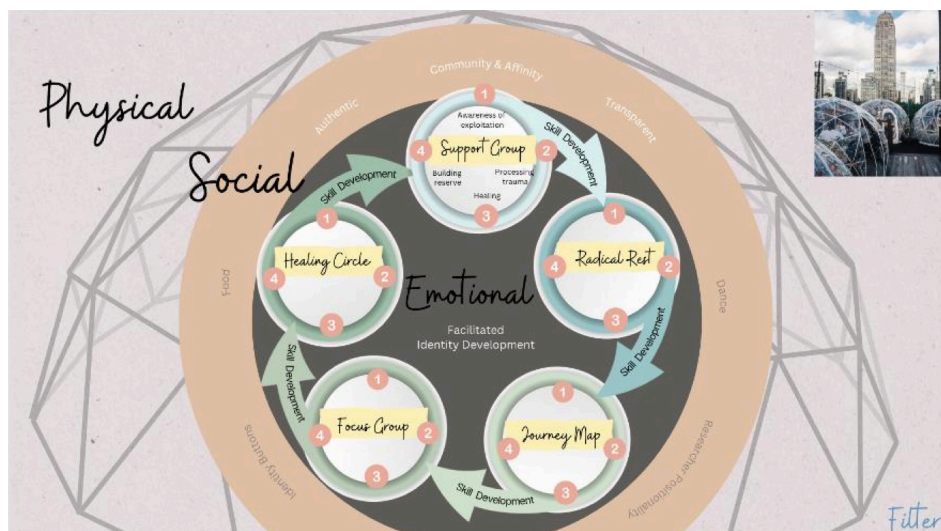


Figure 1. The Radical Refuge

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).

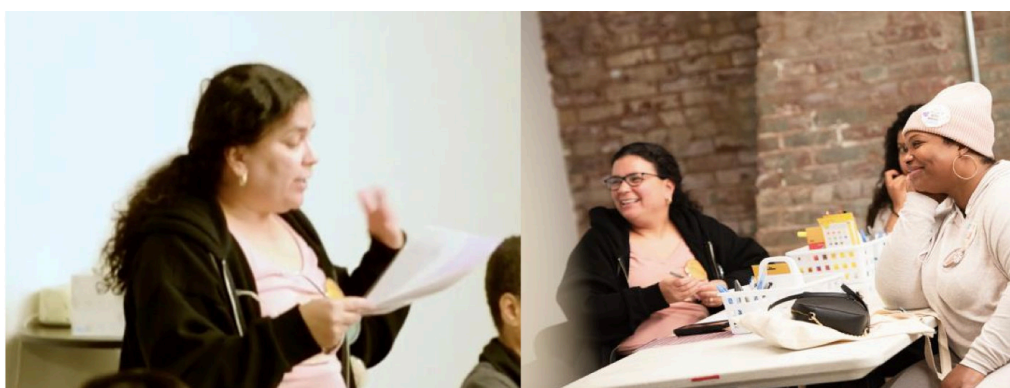


Figure 2. Facilitator describing her journey map and working with educators



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).

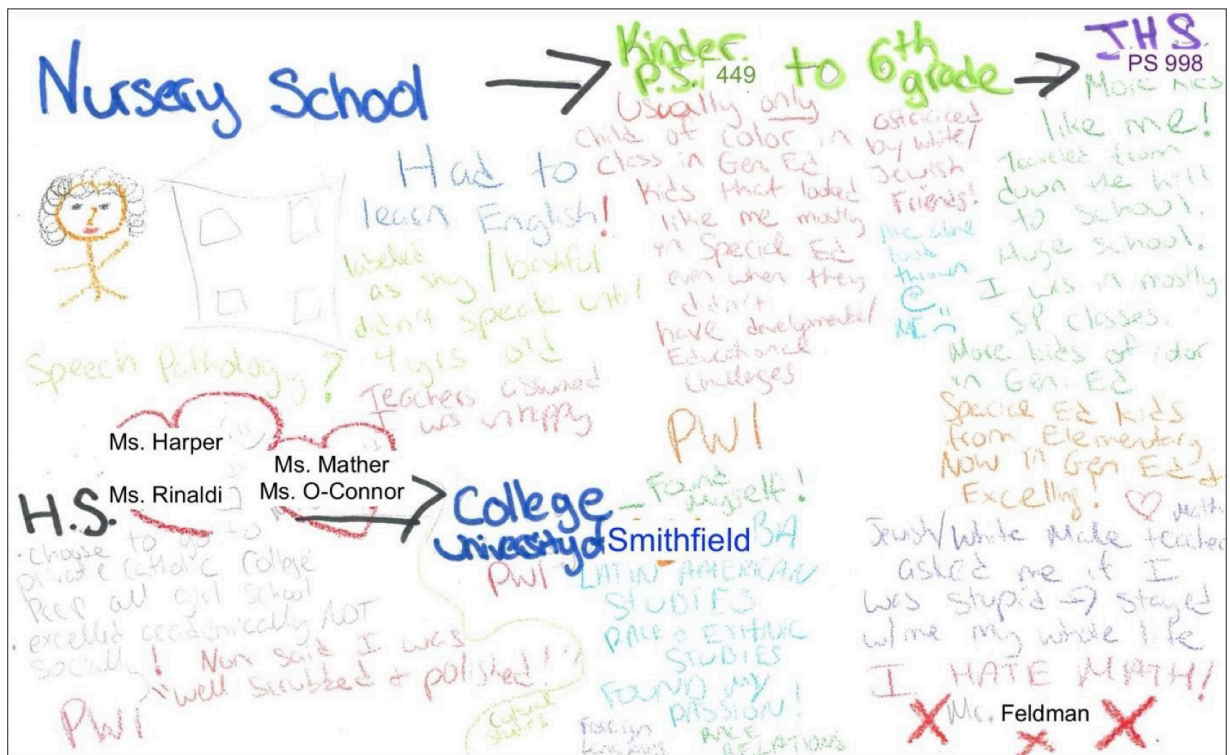


*Figure 4. Educators engage in Cartographer’s Clinic*

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.

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



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.

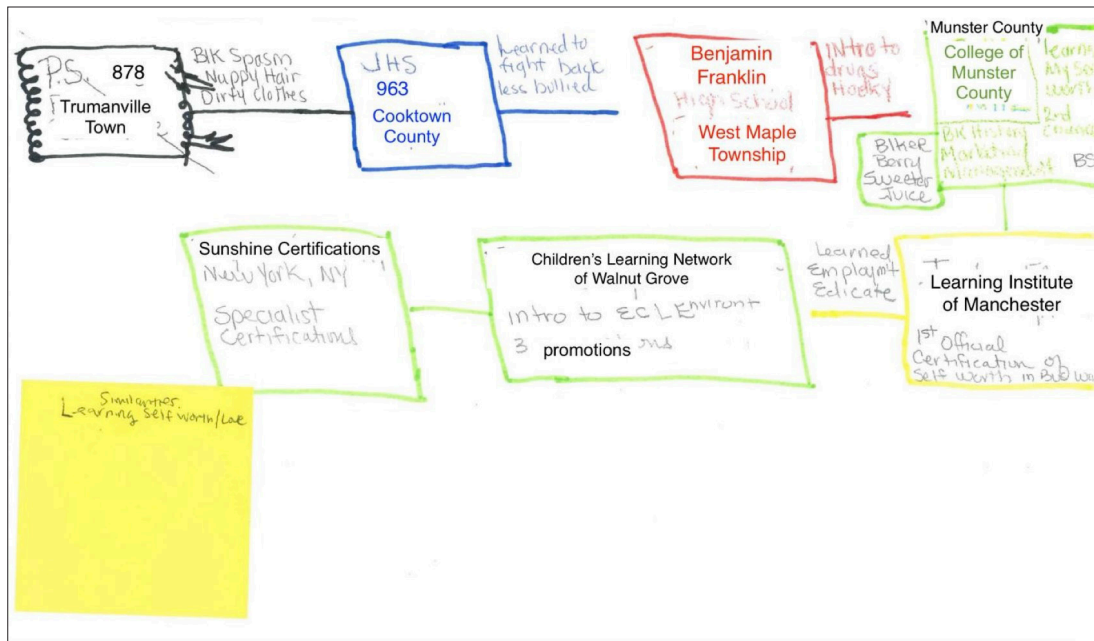


Figure 6. Rhonda's journey map

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.”



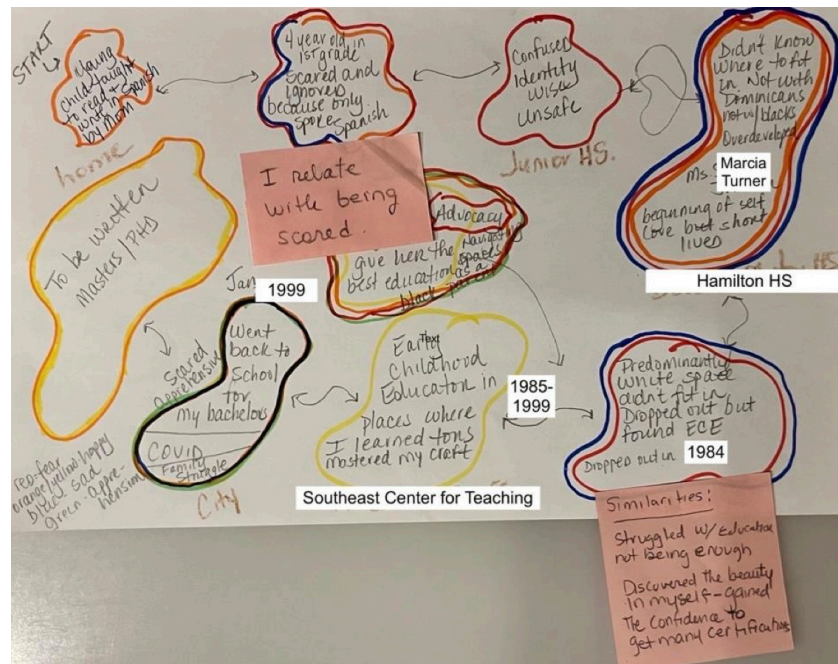


Figure 7. Responses to external quality measures

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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