Young Children

Fall 2025

Leadership in Early Learning Programs and Schools

The Journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children

naeyc®

Young Children
The Journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children
Volume 80 ▪ No 3
Fall 2025

Leadership in Early Learning Programs and Schools

YC–Young Children (ISSN 1538-6619) is published quarterly (publishing in the months of March, June, September, and December) by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1401 H Street NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005.

In the *Next Issue*

Published four times a year, each issue of *Young Children* offers practical, research-based articles on timely topics of interest. The Winter 2025 issue focuses on supporting children's understanding of and engagement with the environment and climate. Articles will share ideas and examples related to literacy and art, inquiries and projects, and policy efforts. Practitioners will also share reflections about how they weave climate education into their curricula.

NAEYC News

Voices of Practitioners

Feature Articles

Columns

NAEYC Membership NAEYC.org/membership
membership@naeyc.org 800-424-2460 or 202-232-8777

Subscriptions NAEYC.org/publications/subscribe
Purchasing (single issues) NAEYC.org/shop
Submission guidelines NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/yc/writing
Permissions NAEYC.org/resources/permissions

Advertising rates/media kits 202-350-8906 or
800-424-2460, ext. 8906
advertising@naeyc.org
NAEYC.org/about/advertise

Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.
Printed in Pewaukee, Wisconsin.

Postmaster: Send address changes to
YC–Young Children
NAEYC Member Services
1401 H Street NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005–2051

Index of Advertisers

Annie Moses
YC Editor in Chief

Leadership in Early Learning Programs and Schools

Picture a leader in your setting. Who do you see? What do they do? How did they become a leader? Do you picture yourself as a leader?

Leadership can take many forms, and early childhood professionals in all roles hold great potential to lead. Along with leaders who impact change at an organizational level, teachers and others working with children demonstrate leadership. They do this as they offer insights to principals and colleagues about how play and learning support each other. They offer words of comforting self-reflection when they overhear a neighboring educator having a difficult day. They engage in myriad other activities as leaders affecting their immediate contexts and beyond.

Some educators step into a leadership role without formal preparation, supports, or mentoring, leaving them to figure out much on their own. Others are in the process of developing the qualities to positively impact broader policies and practices, although they may not have yet stepped into a leadership role.

This issue of *Young Children* examines what it means to be an early childhood leader, the journey to becoming a leader, how leaders identify and support high-quality curricula, and how leaders develop positive cultures and partnerships that cultivate equitable, joyful learning for children, families, and educators.

The cluster begins with "The Role of Early Childhood Leaders in Removing Bias from Behavior Guidance Policies." Sascha Longstreth, Sarah Garrity, Anna Winneker, and Lise Fox outline seven key features of inclusive behavior policies. They offer an example of how one program leader used these features to establish and evaluate guidance policies for their setting.

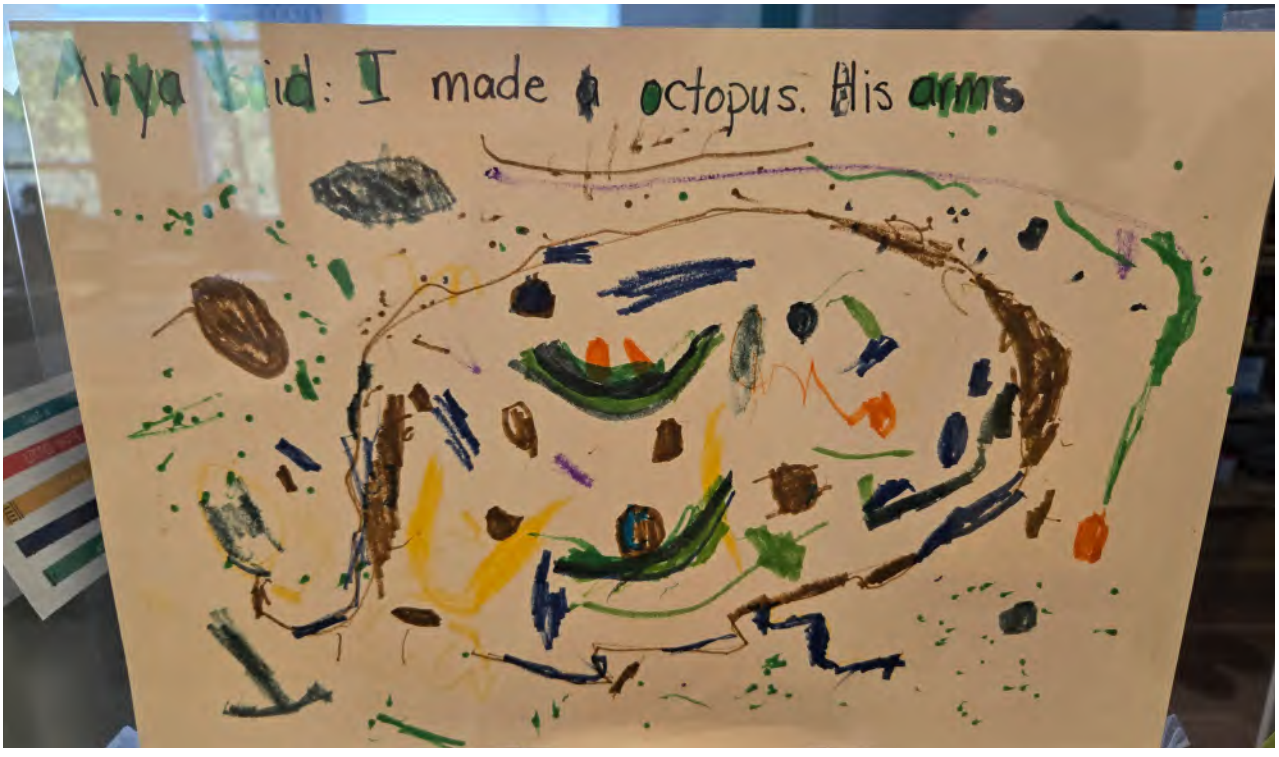
" 'Keep Children at the Center': A Discussion About the Principal's Role in Creating Joyful, Supported Learning" captures Nikeysha Jackson's approach to leadership, including details about how effective leadership links to child outcomes, family partnerships, and staff development. She shares how she ensures equitable opportunities and experiences for all children. Readers will also learn how they can take on new leadership roles.

The next two pieces connect leadership with well-being. "It Starts at the Top: Investing in Healthy Early Childhood Leaders, Leadership, and Workplaces" is written by Timothy G. Ford, Chris Amirault, Sarah "Sae" Chapman, Celene Domitrovich, and Brenda Lloyd-Jones. The authors cull from their research projects guidance and real-life voices and examples about nurturing early childhood leaders' well-being.

Lieny Jeon, Dominique Charlot-Swilley, Cheryl A. Varghese, Shuai Li, and Sooyeon Byun also outline findings from their latest work about well-being. They tap into educators' voices and experiences to present "Leading the Way: Strategies for Fostering Organizational Well-Being in Early Childhood Education," which leaders can use to reflect on educators' well-being in their settings.

In "The Power of BELLE: Creating a Pathway of Latine Education Leaders to Support Dual Language Learners," Alexandra Figueras-Daniel, Ellen Frede, Carmen Espinosa, and Elise Genao describe their asset-focused, cohort approach to mentoring Latina, Spanish-speaking early childhood educators for leadership positions in their state of New Jersey.

Courtney Shimek, Aimee Morewood, and Allison Swan Dagen explore "Structures of Support: Developing Early Literacy Leadership Ecosystems." As higher education faculty, they helped to grow pre-K through



second-grade educators as literacy leaders in West Virginia, but their recommendations can be applied to local- and state-level efforts elsewhere.

The cluster ends with inspiration and advice. "Give Yourself the Permission to Lead" is excerpted from the book *From Survive to Thrive: A Director's Guide for Leading an Early Childhood Program*, published by NAEYC. Debbie LeeKeenan and Iris Chin Ponte help directors think about how to build effectiveness as leaders, make intentional decisions, and lead with purpose.

Leading is complex, and effective leadership is needed at all levels of the early childhood ecosystem. I hope this issue assists your own reflections and efforts to lead in your immediate context and beyond.

—Annie Moses

A 3-year-old at House of Ruth's Kidspace Child and Family Development Center in Washington, DC, created an octopus during independent center time.

Is your classroom full of children's artwork? To feature it in *Young Children*, see the link at the bottom of the page or email **editorial@naeyc.org** for details.

We'd love to hear from you!

Send your thoughts on this issue, and on topics you'd like to read about in future issues of *Young Children*, to editorial@naeyc.org.

Would you like to see your children's artwork featured in these pages? For guidance on submitting print-quality photos (as well as details on permissions and licensing), see **NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/authors-photographers/photos**.

The Role of Early Childhood Leaders in Removing Bias from Behavior Guidance Policies

Sascha Longstreth, Sarah Garrity, Anna Winneker, and Lise Fox

The leaders of early childhood education programs are responsible for developing and articulating policies and procedures to guide their work (NAEYC 2022; Hedges 2023). These include guidance policies regarding children's challenging behaviors. While designed to create safe environments conducive to early learning, many of these policies are characterized by a punitive approach that fails to address the complexities of young children's behaviors and/or their developmental needs (DuShane & Yu 2024). Policies such as "three strikes and you're out" or zero tolerance toward specific behaviors (biting that breaks the skin, physical aggression toward peers or staff) may lead to removing children from educational settings either through suspension or expulsion (Clayback et al. 2024). This has a detrimental effect on a child's educational trajectory and emotional well-being (Gilliam et al. 2016; Williams & Yogman 2022).

Assessing guidance policies to eliminate suspension and expulsion practices is imperative for early childhood administrators and educators.

Written policies should be routinely reviewed for effectiveness (NAEYC 2022). This includes assessing directives on how to address challenging behaviors for any signs of bias (NAEYC 2019). Research has consistently shown that children of color and children with disabilities are disproportionately removed from early learning settings. For example, while Black preschoolers comprised 18 percent of overall preschool enrollment during the 2021–22 school year, they accounted for 38 percent of preschool suspension rates and 33 percent of those expelled. Preschool children with disabilities represented 23 percent of preschool enrollment but accounted for 41 percent of preschool suspensions and 74 percent of preschool expulsions (OCR 2025). Besides depriving children of essential instructional support and guidance, such practices often lead to negative self-image, the internalization of labels, and the exacerbation of behavioral issues (DeHaney et al. 2021; Curby et al. 2022).

Assessing guidance policies to eliminate suspension and expulsion practices is imperative for early childhood administrators and educators (NAEYC 2019; Nimmo et al. 2021). We (the authors) have reviewed the literature on effective behavior guidance practices for more than a decade and have examined almost 400 behavior guidance policies collected from NAEYC-accredited early childhood programs across the United States. Based on our work, we created the Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist (TAGPEC)—a research-validated tool that leaders can use to ensure that the guidance policies in their settings are evidence-based, developmentally appropriate, and culturally relevant (Longstreth & Garrity 2018; Longstreth et al. 2023). (See “TAGPEC Origins and Applications” on page 8.)

We also have identified seven essential features that are necessary for effective, inclusive behavior policies:

- An instructional, proactive approach to child guidance
- Developmentally appropriate learning environments
- Program-wide behavior expectations
- Comprehensive support systems
- Family partnerships
- Professional development
- Data-driven decision making

In this article, we discuss the inequities that are embedded in many behavior guidance policies. We then show how the essential features listed can guide leaders to create, implement, and regularly assess policies that are focused on inclusion. Based on our experiences with a range of early childhood programs, we end with an example of what an equitable behavior guidance policy looks like in practice.

Exclusionary Policies and Practices: Intentions and Consequences

Challenging behaviors in children can arise from systemic issues that impact their development and well-being. These include stressors related to socioeconomic status, access to quality education, and exposure to trauma (Zinsser et al. 2022; Williams & Yogman 2022). High-quality guidance policies should consider such stressors and promote equitable learning for all children (Longstreth & Garrity 2018; Longstreth et al. 2023). They must address any biases—both explicit and implicit—that may be experienced by children of color and/or with disabilities (NAEYC 2019). This includes examining not only policies for bias but how they are implemented as well (Gilliam et al. 2016): Differential judgments about and treatment of children by race and ability can lead to differential judgments of children’s play, aggressiveness, compliance, initiative, and abilities—deficit views that ultimately limit children’s opportunities to reach their full potential (NAEYC 2019; Lee & Alonzo 2024).

TAGPEC Origins and Applications

The Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist (TAGPEC) was first published in 2013, with the latest version released in 2023 (Longstreth et al. 2023). It provides a field-tested checklist of 34 items that leaders in preschool through third grade can use to examine the quality of their guidance policies. Because the TAGPEC is grounded in evidence-based practices, early childhood leaders can use it to enhance and expand other program-wide initiatives to advance equity. These include multitiered systems of support, trauma-informed care, and data collection (Longstreth et al. 2023).

After initial research on an earlier version of the TAGPEC revealed that behavior guidance policies in early childhood education settings frequently did not align with evidence-based practices (Garrity et al. 2017), the checklist was updated to focus on the importance of culture, race, language, and ability. Such research highlights the importance of creating systems, policies, and practices that reduce disparities to prevent and ultimately eliminate expulsions and suspensions in settings that serve young children.

Early childhood leaders can use the TAGPEC checklist independently as a programmatic self-assessment tool or as part of a unified system of early childhood education services. For example, the first two authors have used the tool with programs that receive Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation services to support collaborations among administrators, coaches, and other leadership team members. The TAGPEC has also been used to assist early childhood coaches and consultants in local and statewide quality improvement initiatives. In Utah, for example, the checklist was integrated into the state's Child Care Quality System as a systematic approach to reducing early childhood suspension and expulsion.

A tool like the TAGPEC can be aligned with existing frameworks—such as the pyramid model—to implement high-quality child guidance policies. To read more about this, please visit education2.sdsu.edu/tagpec.

For example, teachers may unconsciously expect to see more negative behaviors from young Black children than their White peers. This can lead them to observe Black children more closely and interpret their behavior as problematic (Okonofua & Eberhardt 2015). Indeed, when researchers in a 2016 study asked preschool teachers to review classroom footage and look for challenging behaviors, educators spent more time watching the Black children, particularly the Black boys (Gilliam et al. 2016).

Children with disabilities can also suffer from educators' implicit biases and limited knowledge about disabilities (Lee & Alonzo 2024). Teachers may assume that children with disabilities will present challenging behaviors (Monsen et al. 2014; Muccio & Kidd 2018; Yu 2019)—a viewpoint that is exacerbated when children of color have disabilities. Studies have shown that these children are less likely to enjoy strengths-based environments in which teachers focus on their assets (e.g., Park et al. 2021).

Deficit-based guidance policies that lead to suspensions or expulsions have far-reaching consequences: They disrupt a child's opportunity to form meaningful relationships with educators and peers, which are critical components of social, emotional, and cognitive development (Leung-Gagné et al. 2022). They create significant stress for families, who may feel stigmatized or unsupported in relation to their children's behaviors (Williams & Yogman 2022). Additionally, children who experience suspension or expulsion from early childhood programs are at an increased risk of future adverse educational outcomes. Studies conducted by Andrew and Blake (2023) and by Zinsser and colleagues (2022) reveal that children who experience suspension or expulsion early on are more likely to encounter academic failure, grade retention, negative perceptions of educational settings, higher dropout rates, and/or an increased likelihood of incarceration later in life. Such findings underscore the importance of adopting more supportive and inclusive strategies for managing challenging behaviors.

Fortunately, a variety of organizations connected to the early childhood field has taken steps toward ensuring that program policies help prevent suspension and expulsion during the early years:

- The Office for Civil Rights (OCR 2014) recommends that early learning programs develop and communicate preventive guidance and discipline practices that are developmentally appropriate and that promote social, emotional, and behavioral health.
- NAEYC's position statement on developmentally appropriate practice recommends that program leaders and others work toward providing equitable learning opportunities for all children (2020). This includes avoiding suspensions and expulsions.
- NAEYC's "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" position statement outlines steps that leaders can take to promote equity in their early learning settings (2019). These include focusing on policies and procedures that address challenging behaviors, such as establishing clear protocols for dealing with the behaviors; supporting staff to address the behaviors effectively and equitably; collecting and assessing data to determine if certain policies and procedures have differential impacts on different groups of children; and working toward eliminating suspensions and expulsions by ensuring appropriate support for teachers, children, and families.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes the importance of providing behavioral supports, such as mental health consultation, instead of using exclusionary practices (Williams & Yogman 2022). It also recommends that early care and education programs create clear policies regarding suspension and expulsion.

In addition, Head Start and the American Academy of Pediatrics (2019) have issued guidelines emphasizing the importance of comprehensive discipline policies. These should include a clear description of alternatives to expulsion for children who exhibit persistent challenging behaviors as well as a program's strategies for preventing such behaviors. It is crucial that these policies are written down and communicated clearly to families, guardians, staff, and other stakeholders. Policies should specify how a program plans to access mental health consultants and behavioral supports to address challenging behaviors that do not resolve easily—an approach that seeks to minimize the need for other types of external assistance, such as involving local police departments.

The Leaders' Role in Implementing Guidance Policies

Early childhood leaders must establish high-quality, setting-wide child guidance policies and effectively communicate them to staff and families. This foundational step ensures that everyone understands the guiding principles and expectations related to children's behavior and discipline (Zinsser et al. 2022). By fostering transparency and open communication, leaders build trust and collaboration among educators, families, and the community.

It is imperative for early childhood leaders to provide ongoing training and support for staff to ensure that their practices align with established policies. Professional development opportunities should focus on evidence-based strategies for understanding and responding to behaviors. This includes nurturing social and emotional development and implementing culturally responsive practices (NAEYC 2022). Comprehensive professional development, coupled with practice-based coaching, can significantly reduce suspension and expulsion rates by equipping educators with the skills necessary to address behaviors effectively (Longstreth et al. 2023).

Early childhood leaders are also responsible for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the child guidance policies in their settings. This is critical to ensuring that discipline practices are applied consistently and fairly. By regularly assessing policy effectiveness and gathering feedback from staff and families, leaders can make informed adjustments to improve children's experiences and outcomes (Hedges 2023). Such ongoing evaluation enhances the early learning setting's quality and reinforces a culture of accountability and continuous improvement.

Gathering and Using Data to Develop High-Quality Child Guidance Policies

Just as comprehensive assessment systems are necessary for understanding and making decisions about children's learning, they are important for

monitoring the effectiveness of a program's policies (National Research Council 2008). Like other aspects of early childhood education, guidance policies should be understood through multiple means. These include checklists, observations, and developmental assessments. Checklists like the TAGPEC can guide early childhood leaders to ensure that their guidance policies are evidence-based, developmentally appropriate, and culturally relevant (Longstreth & Garrity 2018; Longstreth et al. 2023). However, they should not be used as the only source of evidence to determine the quality and effectiveness of guidance practices.

In our work, we have identified seven essential features of effective behavior guidance policies. These are grounded in research and incorporate evidence-based practices that are developmentally appropriate and inclusive of individual, cultural, and linguistic differences (Longstreth & Garrity 2018; Longstreth et al. 2023). Following, we describe each of these features and show how program leaders, including family child care educators, can assess them using a checklist like the TAGPEC.

- **An instructional, proactive approach to child guidance:** The guidance policy explicitly states that the program or school takes an instructional, proactive approach for all learners. To ensure this is happening, program leaders ask, "Does the policy clearly state that the goal of behavior guidance is to teach social and emotional skills to all children?"
- **Developmentally appropriate learning environment:** The policy presumes the placement of children with challenging behaviors in inclusive settings and describes the value of a developmentally appropriate curriculum, environment, and responsive relationships. It clearly articulates the significance of nurturing and supportive teacher-child relationships as crucial for preventing challenging behaviors.
- **Program-wide behavioral expectations:** The policy clearly describes expectations across the learning setting that promote children's developing self-regulation. It includes clearly stated behavioral expectations that are appropriate for the program's developmental level.
- **Comprehensive support systems:** The policy outlines a multitiered system of support that provides varying levels of intervention based on individual children's needs. It includes universal as well as more individualized strategies for addressing challenging behaviors.
- **Family partnerships:** The policy highlights the significance of partnering with families in the behavior guidance process so that they have proactive and collaborative opportunities to participate in decisions regarding their children's behavior. When examining their policies, program leaders ask, "Does the policy encourage proactive, collaborative, and authentic relationships with families?"
- **Professional development:** Ongoing training and support are included so that staff is equipped with the skills necessary to implement the policy effectively. The policy outlines specific practices to ensure that staff will be trained.
- **Data-driven decision making:** The policy incorporates mechanisms for collecting and analyzing data to assess the effectiveness of behavior guidance strategies and to identify areas for improvement. It specifies how data will be used for continuous improvement to align practices with the behavior guidance policy's intent.

An Example of a High-Quality Child Guidance Policy

Sunshine Learning Academy is a community-based center that serves infants through preschoolers. Because high-quality behavior guidance policies should be shared broadly, Sunshine leaders created a policy handbook to distribute to families and staff, which it updates yearly.

While presented in narrative form, the handbook addresses each of the seven essential elements:

- The program's instructional, proactive approach is spelled out in the introduction:

  At Sunshine Learning Academy (SLA), we believe that social and emotional learning during the early years of a child's life sets a positive foundation for their future growth and learning. We believe that behavior is a form of

communication and that as adults, our role is to teach children social and emotional skills and help them learn how to regulate their feelings.

- The handbook provides a section on developmentally appropriate learning environments: SLA strives to

  establish a predictable environment, a balanced schedule of child-directed and teacher-directed activities, and strategies for supervising and guiding children to promote their engagement in learning. Our curriculum is developmentally appropriate and draws upon the cultural and linguistic strengths of children and their families.

- Behavior expectations are clearly delineated:

  We are safe.

  We are kind.

  We are responsible.

  Teachers in our SLA classrooms establish a few rules that are aligned to these expectations and appropriate for the needs of the children in their classrooms. These rules help children know how to meet the program-wide expectations by clearly defining what children should do (versus telling children what not to do) within activities and routines. Our goal is that children will learn emotional-regulation skills as they engage in behaviors that meet these expectations.

- To provide comprehensive support, the program uses instructional and assessment approaches that align with children's ages, strengths, and needs. These include the pyramid model, different learning formats, and special materials.
- SLA partners with families when developing behavior support plans. Team members meet regularly to assess the effectiveness of any support provided and to discuss children's progress at home and at school. If all resources are exhausted, the policy handbook explicitly states that "SLA will work with the family to identify a program where their child can be successful and will guide and support the family throughout the process of moving to a different program."
- Professional development occurs regularly: "All staff members will receive training on the child guidance policy when hired and annually after that." In addition, because SLA uses the pyramid model,

  Our program is committed to providing continuous professional development opportunities to our teachers so that they can effectively implement pyramid model practices in the classroom. All program staff will regularly participate in training in pyramid model practices, and teachers will receive ongoing coaching to ensure that they are supported in implementing pyramid model practices with fidelity.

- Finally, SLA engages in data-driven decision making by collecting information on how teachers respond to children's challenging behavior and the factors that might be prompting the behavior.

  By tracking teacher responses to behavior incidents, we can analyze this information to see if changes might be needed to strengthen our prevention and intervention practices. We also review our child guidance policy annually to determine if any revisions are required.

Conclusion

To begin the process of assessing, designing, and implementing effective behavior guidance policies, early childhood leaders can work through the following steps:

1. Evaluate their program's readiness for this work. When evaluating a program's readiness, leaders can assess staff openness and the overall program culture, including its approach to discipline and commitment to reflection and growth.
2. Involve key staff members and families to ensure their support and foster a sense of ownership. For example, leaders can consider how their programs currently partner with families and how responsive they are to families' insights about guidance policies and processes.
3. Use the TAGPEC checklist or another framework as a guide to analyze existing policies, staff practices, and program data to identify strengths and areas that need improvement.

4. Begin to implement the new behavior guidance policies. This entails staff training on the new policy as well as opportunities for ongoing reflection and coaching. Policies must be clearly documented and regularly reviewed to ensure they are applied equitably (Longstreth et al. 2023).

Early childhood leadership is key to implementing high-quality child guidance policies that foster an equitable educational environment. Tools such as the TAGPEC can help directors and administrators ensure such policies' continued effectiveness.

Want to Know More?

NAEYC offers a variety of resources to support educators as they consider policies and practices related to children's behaviors. These include

- *Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior,* eds. Charis L. Wahman and Janice K. Lee. 2024.
- *Education for a Civil Society: Teaching Young Children to Gain Five Democratic Life Skills,* Second Edition, by Dan Gartrell. 2023.
- *Addressing Challenging Behavior in Young Children: The Leader's Role*, by Barbara Kaiser and Judy Sklar Rasminsky. 2021.
- Transforming Our Understanding of and Approaches to Children's Behavior. *Young Children*, Spring 2025.

In addition, NAEYC's "Early Childhood Program Standards" position statement and accompanying research review highlight the latest and most foundational supporting evidence to guide early learning programs and policies. NAEYC.org/resources/position-statements/early-childhood-program-standards

About the Authors

Sascha Longstreth, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Child and Family Development at San Diego State University. She works with multiple local and statewide early childhood systems to promote equitable and developmentally appropriate guidance policies. slongstreth@sdsu.edu

Sarah Garrity, EdD, is the senior associate dean for the College of Education and a professor of child and family development at San Diego State University. Sarah was a practitioner in the early childhood education field for almost 20 years as a Head Start teacher and administrator, program director for a state-funded program, and literacy coach. sgarrity@sdsu.edu

Anna Winneker, PhD, directs the Program-Wide Positive Behavior Support Project at the University of South Florida, aiding early childhood programs in implementing the pyramid model. She collaborates with the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations and the Early Childhood Technical Assistance project, which promotes social and emotional competence and inclusive practices for young children and families. awinneker@usf.edu

Lise Fox, PhD, is professor and chair of the Department of Child and Family Studies (CFS) and codirector of the Florida Center for Inclusive Communities, the University of South Florida Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. Dr. Fox is a nationally recognized leader in interventions related to young children and challenging behavior, particularly as they relate to the pyramid model (program-wide positive behavior support).

References

American Academy of Pediatrics. 2019. *Caring for Our Children, National Health and Performance Standards*. 4th ed. American Academy of Pediatrics.

Andrew, M., & M.K. Blake. 2023. "The Long Arm of Early Exclusionary School Discipline? A Multi-Model Analysis." *Youth & Society* 55 (2): 238–58.

Clayback, K.A., H.-W. Yang, M. Domingo, E.E. Barton, & M.L. Hemmeter. 2024. "A Survey and Content Analysis of the Quality of Behavior Guidance Policies in Tennessee Early Childhood Programs." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*. doi.org/10.17615/pp53-k413.

Curby, T.W., K.M. Zinsser, R.A. Gordon, E. Ponce, G. Syed, et al. 2022. "Emotion-Focused Teaching Practices and Preschool Children's Social and Learning Behaviors." *Emotion* 22 (8): 1869–85. doi.org/10.1037/emo0000988.

DeHaney, F.L., C.T. Payton, & A. Washington. 2021. "Quality Includes Removing Bias from Early Childhood Education Environments." *Young Children* 76 (2): 12–20.

DuShane, D., & S. Yu. 2024. " 'Behavior That Endangers': Analyzing Preschool and Childcare Expulsion and Suspension Policies." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 52 (8): 1883–95.

Garrity, S.M., S.L. Longstreth, & L.K. Linder. 2017. "An Examination of the Quality of Discipline Policies in NAEYC-Accredited Early Care and Education Programs." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 37 (2): 94–106.

Gilliam, W.S., A.N. Maupin, C.R. Reyes, M. Accavitti, & F. Shic. 2016. "Do Early Educators' Implicit Biases Regarding Sex and Race Relate to Behavior Expectations and Recommendations of Preschool Expulsions and Suspensions?" Yale University Child Study Center. marylandfamiliesengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Preschool-Implicit-Bias-Policy-Brief.pdf.

Hedges, S.M. 2023. "The Power of a Policy: How Good Policies Make Great Programs." *Teaching Young Children* 16 (4): 13–16.

Lee, S., & M. Alonzo. 2024. "A Strengths-Based Approach to Inclusive Education for Children of Color with Disabilities." *Young Children* 79 (3): 14–22.

Leung-Gagné, M., J. McCombs, C. Scott, & D.J. Losen. 2022. *Pushed Out: Trends and Disparities in Out-of-School Suspension*. Learning Policy Institute. learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/crdc-school-suspension-report.

Longstreth, S., & S. Garrity. 2018. *Effective Discipline Policies: How to Create a System That Supports Young Children's Social-Emotional Competence*. Redleaf Press.

Longstreth, S., S. Garrity, & L. Linder. 2023. *Developing and Implementing Effective Discipline Policies: A Practical Guide for Early Childhood Consultants, Coaches, and Leaders*. Gryphon House.

Monsen, J.J., D.L. Ewing, & M. Kwoka. 2014. "Teachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusion, Perceived Adequacy of Support and Classroom Learning Environment." *Learning Environments Research* 17 (1): 113–26.

Muccio, L.S., & J.K. Kidd. 2018. " 'I'm the One with the Child with a Disability': Head Start Teachers' Perspectives on Inclusive Education." *Journal of School Connections* 6 (1): 36–71.

National Research Council. 2008. *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How*. The National Academies Press. doi.org/10.17226/1.446.

NAEYC. 2019. "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity.

NAEYC. 2020. "Developmentally Appropriate Practice." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents.

NAEYC. 2022. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*. 4th ed. Eds. S. Friedman, B.L. Wright, & M. Masterson. NAEYC.

Nimmo, J., D. LeeKeenan, & L. Derman-Sparks. 2021. "Being an Equity Leader." *Young Children* 76 (2): 21–27.

OCR (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights) 2014. *Data Snapshot: Early Childhood Education*. ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-early-learning-snapshot.pdf.

OCR (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights). 2025. *A First Look: Students' Access to Educational Opportunities in U.S. Public Schools*. ed.gov/media/document/2021-22-crdc-first-look-report-109194.pdf.

Okonofua, J.A., & J.L. Eberhardt. 2015. "Two Strikes: Race and the Disciplining of Young Students." *Psychological Science* 26 (5): 617–24.

Park, S., S. Lee, M. Alonzo, & J.K. Adair. 2021. "Reconceptualizing Assistance for Young Children of Color with Disabilities in an Inclusion Classroom." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 41 (1): 57–68. doi.org/10.1177/0271121421992429.

Williams, P.G., & M. Yogman. 2022. "Addressing Early Education and Child Care Expulsion." *Pediatrics* 152 (5): e2023064049. doi.org/10.1542/peds.2023-064049.

Yu, S.Y. 2019. "Head Start Teachers' Attitudes and Perceived Competence Toward Inclusion." *Journal of Early Intervention* 41 (1): 30–43.

Zinsser, K.M. H.C. Silver, E.R Shenberger, & V. Jackson. 2022. "A Systematic Review of Early Childhood Exclusionary Discipline." *Review of Educational Research* 92 (5): 743–85. doi.org/10.3102/00346543211070 .

"Keep Children at the Center"

A Discussion About the Principal's Role in Creating Joyful, Supported Learning

Editors' Note: Strong leadership is crucial for successful elementary schools and instruction (Döş & Savaş 2015). As they facilitate teaching and learning, principals set high standards, provide guidance and support for their educational staffs to create safe learning environments, and establish climates where reciprocal communication is welcomed (Goddard et al. 2019; Sharif 2020). Through their knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, principals establish a school's direction. They also support teachers to implement quality approaches—like differentiated instruction—to help all children learn and grow (Goddard et al. 2019).

All of these attributes adhere to developmentally appropriate practice and its emphasis on creating caring, equitable learning communities; teaching to enhance each child's learning and development; assessing children's progress through observation and documentation; and planning and implementing engaging curricula (NAEYC 2020). Yet what does this kind of leadership look like in practice?

Young Children recently spoke with Nikeysha Jackson, principal of John Lewis Elementary School in Washington, DC. Ms. Jackson joined John Lewis six years ago, after working as a teacher, instructional coach, assistant principal, and interim principal at another District of Columbia public school. Today, she guides 70 staff members and 526 children, pre-K through grade 5. John Lewis is one of six DC public schools with an advanced learner program. This designation provides all children the opportunity to engage in enriched learning.

In the following interview, Ms. Jackson describes her approach to leadership and how she ensures that she and her staff honor each child as an individual, with their own strengths and areas for growth. She discusses how effective leadership impacts student outcomes, relationships with families, and staff development. And she offers advice to educators who envision taking on new leadership roles themselves.

NAEYC: When you began your education training, did you know you wanted to be a principal?

Nikeysha Jackson: I definitely didn't aspire to this! I'm a career changer—I was working in human resources and saw a lot of adults who lacked skills as they entered the workforce, and I wondered how I could be part of changing that. I began as a second-grade teacher, which was hard but cemented for me that I was born to do this work. Then I became a kindergarten teacher, which was probably my favorite job. I was also in graduate school studying for a master's degree in early childhood education. I was asked to become a math coach and then was asked to join a leadership program for aspiring principals. I liked the instructional space, but I'm very driven by my impact on children. As a teacher, I impacted 20 children, but as a principal, I can support so many more.

As a teacher, what did you look for in your leaders? What traits did you want to emulate, and which ones did you want to avoid?

I had three principals. During my first year as a teacher, the principal and assistant principal left an indelible mark on me. I only worked at that school for a year, but the impact was the greatest. The principal was so supportive. I remember going to her and saying, "I don't really know how to teach reading in small groups." She sent me to workshops, connected with the county office so someone could come to observe me, and gave me videos to watch. She also gave me the best advice: My daughter, Tai, was 8 years old at the time, and the principal said: "If you want this for Tai, then it's what you give to your students. If it's not good enough for Tai, it's not good enough for these children." That hit me to the core because I knew how much I wanted for my daughter. I really internalized that, and I hold onto it as a leader. If it's not good enough for my child, it's not good enough for anybody's child.

One of the things I *didn't* appreciate was when a principal didn't hold firm to expectations because a situation was hard, could create pushback, or would ruffle someone's feathers. I'll give you an example: A principal at one of the schools I worked at heard a teacher speaking to a child in an inappropriate way, but because it was a teacher who had a lot of recognition, they ignored the situation. For me, if an interaction is not good for the children, then we're not going to accept it—regardless of who's doing it. I feel very strongly about this as a principal. We value support here.

How do you describe your approach as John Lewis Elementary's principal-leader?

Joyfulness is really important to me. I want our children to be happy; I want our adults to be happy.

Support is one of my core values. I believe in supporting my staff through feedback and coaching and accountability. That last point is really important—support without accountability becomes enabling. I'm very clear about expectations, and I am laser-focused on the children. We have 526 students, and I know all their names. I'm connected to the children, and I'm connected to their families. I know who's experiencing trauma, such as the loss of a family member. I know who may be experiencing homelessness. I also know who has great news to share, like who is going to Florida for vacation or whose grandparents are coming to visit.

You're credited with significantly increasing student achievement, sustaining partnerships with families, and developing staff capacity. How do you ensure that every child's strengths and needs are addressed?

I am the instructional leader of this school. I'm focused on the whole child, which includes making sure that our children feel safe emotionally, safe physically, loved, and cared for.

Instructionally, we have a lot of supports in place. All of our children are talented and gifted, and we have to figure out how to hone and cultivate those talents and gifts. No two children learn the same way. Small-group instruction is a requirement in our school because it is vitally important that we differentiate and provide targeted support to our students based on their specific strengths and needs. There are spaces where we do whole group, like when we launch a lesson. But we have small-group instruction every day.

We collect data to differentiate this instruction. They might show that these four children need support with identifying letters and their sounds while these five children are ready to decode

consonant-vowel-consonant words. Differentiated, small-group instruction is a requirement for our teachers, and when we recruit, we're very clear about it.

How do you differentiate within a district-mandated curriculum?

A curriculum is a framework, but we have to be intentional. We can't be teaching just to teach. Curriculum must be personalized to the students. I will not be the principal who says, "You should be on math lesson module six, lesson two" if module six, lesson two is not what your children need. If they haven't quite mastered lesson one, we're going to put more time into lesson one. If they've mastered lesson two, then we're going to accelerate where they are. This is about being responsive to children, not just following a curriculum.

Collecting data helps with this. DC Public Schools has structures like weekly data meetings and planning meetings that we stay pretty true to. We're looking at exit ticket data, module assessments, and benchmark data. We analyze them to determine our next instructional steps based on where the children are performing.

We also provide support for our teachers in looking at and responding to these data. They may ask, "How do I reteach this concept? How do I teach for the next day?" We offer modeling and coaching. We also budget for coaching supports—that's a requirement for us because that's how our teachers get better.

How do you ensure families' participation and reciprocal communication in this work?

We will never know children as well as their families do. Families want the very best for their children, and we focus on building strong connections with them.

The first half of the year, every family gets a home visit. This is intentional. We want to establish a level playing field where we meet families outside of the school building—in their domain; their space. This interaction is not academic. We want to find out what their child is like and learn about their culture. We want to learn what families' hopes and dreams for their children are. We want to know our students and families as people.

Throughout the year, we partner academically with families. We have family-educator conferences that are conversations. I don't want to frame it as "Your child is not doing X, Y, and Z right." Instead, I ground these conferences in how we support children. I provide a template for the conference, so teachers can be honest and positive.

We offer a lot of touchpoints for families to be able to engage with the school. As our neighborhood gentrifies, the question becomes how we stay equitable. Are our programs serving all children—not just our most privileged children?

What does that attention to equity look like?

One example that always comes to mind is our school play. Our school serves a majority of Black children and families. We have a performing arts component, but when I came here six years ago, an overwhelming majority of our White children were in the school play. I thought, "This is interesting." So, I asked about the selection process and learned that one of the requirements for participation was that families had to volunteer during play practice. That excluded families who had to work or who worked nontraditional hours or who lived outside of the neighborhood. Families who faced barriers were being excluded. We can't say we're a school for all children if only a subset benefits from these types of enrichment activities.

So, I changed the requirements: Families could volunteer by sewing buttons on costumes at home or cutting out pieces of scenery in the evenings. We became more creative in how we defined our volunteer space and our family support.

What was the response?

I had to meet with some families about why their children weren't cast anymore in the play. But if the performing arts are so important to our school, then they should be available to all children. Participation will be based on merit and being fair to all children.

How do you support your staff in this work?

We have weekly professional development sessions in addition to the district's professional development days. When we had money from ESSER [the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund], I wanted the money to be used to directly impact children. For example, we invested in professional development that included training on research-informed literacy and math practices.

We also offer regular observation and feedback to our teachers. We're constantly asking "What can we do better? What can we do differently?"

One key question—for me as a leader and for our staff—is how do you keep your skills sharp? We need to be constantly reimagining, constantly looking at the children in front of us now and how they learn. What kind of instruction is going to meet their strengths, interests, and needs?

One of the things you emphasized earlier was the importance of focusing on the whole child. What does this look like in practice?

We spend a lot of time on social and emotional development. A few years ago, we extended this by partnering with Transcend [a nonprofit that helps build community in classrooms and develop social and emotional learning]. Every morning, every classroom has what we call a "Strong Start." Our students are personally greeted when they arrive each day. They engage in whole-class community building, then purposefully partner with another student. As they make eye contact, we focus on breathing and centering ourselves and on setting goals for the day.

Throughout the day, we help the children figure out how to recenter themselves and deal with their feelings. I'm big on letting children know that their feelings are natural. If they're angry or sad, those are valued feelings, and we help them self-regulate. Through this work, we have seen a significant decline in exclusionary discipline practices and an increase in the number of students who report feeling connected to the adults in our building.

We support our staff members to do this work—professional development is not just around math and reading and science. This is our second year of partnering with Transcend. Next year we're going to be a demonstration site for them.

John Lewis reopened in 2021 as one of the District's architecturally innovative schools. What role does the physical environment play in your leadership?

Our old building [known as the West Education Campus] was an open-space concept. There were no walls; no windows. It was not an ideal space.

This building has a net-zero designation, which means the school produces more energy than it consumes. It's filled with natural light. There's glass everywhere, and the building just feels happy. At our Meet Your Teacher Night the first year we moved into the building, there was a thunderstorm, and the power went out in the middle of a walkthrough. With the natural light, we were able to continue. It was beautiful.

All of our classrooms have retractable doors. Every quad of classes opens up to a collaborative space that's accessible when they open those doors. This is where teachers have group enrichment activities like read alouds, enrichment clusters, and culminating unit showcases. It's also a space for students to work in cooperative groups.

The classrooms have little bay windows where teachers have set up reading nooks. There are a lot of nooks and spaces in the rooms. We want our children to have flexibility within their learning environment—everything doesn't have to be done at a desk. Some children need to stand, and that's okay. I'm not a fan of rigidity. We allow our students to embrace their individual strengths, interests, and approaches to learning, and our classroom design supports flexible grouping and collaborative activities. It also allows students to work individually when needed.

How do you make sure your educators are comfortable with this more flexible approach?

When we hire, we look for specific qualities. I want to be sure our educators are comfortable supporting children, and they may need to unlearn some of those old-school practices, like an adherence to restrictive spaces. Every classroom at John Lewis must have a centering space where children can go to take a break. It's not time out; teachers can't tell them to go there. But children can select to go there if they're having a moment. I'm clear from the application stage that this is the norm. It's what we expect, and it's what we do here.

We understand that these practices might be new for some staff members, so we provide ongoing professional development and resources. These include materials and practices to support consistent and accurate observations and assessments. In addition, we offer individual coaching as well as strategies to support students' diverse needs. We also have a robust student wellness team that provides in-classroom support to teachers every day.

How do you empower others to be leaders?

I like to be clear about expectations, but I'm not a micromanager. I'm outcome-driven, and the way we achieve our outcomes can take a lot of different paths. This is a space where people can share their ideas. Not all of them will come to fruition, but the teachers know that they can be as creative as they need to be. In the classroom, they are the experts. And they're free to use their expertise.

I'm always asking, "What's the next step for you?" When I was teaching kindergarten, my principal came to me and said, "I created a math coaching position, and I want you to apply." She saw my talent and my hard work, and she cultivated and supported that. Someone saw talent in me when I was a coach and said, "Hmmm. We want you to become a resident principal."

I believe people should grow: Why box teachers in? They should be free to change grade levels and positions and schools. We're invested in you as a person, no matter where that takes you.

Based on your experiences and your work at John Lewis, what's your advice for principals in the elementary school setting?

Know your "why," and stand on that. This job can be hard: The days are long, and they may be challenging. We face competing priorities every day. But I always go back to my core philosophies about what I believe about students and their families, and I let that guide my decision making. Keep children at the center. This means having to make tough decisions and sometimes having tough conversations. But we're not here to please adults. It only takes one teacher to significantly impact a child's educational journey. And for some of our children, education is the only way out of adversity and poverty. This has to be your passion.

References

Döş, İ., & A.C. Savaş. 2015. "Elementary School Administrators and Their Roles in the Context of Effective Schools." *SAGE Open* 5 (1). doi.org/10.1177/2158244014567400.

Goddard, L., R.D. Goddard, L.P. Bailes, & R. Nichols. 2019. "From School Leadership to Differentiated Instruction: A Pathway to Student Learning in Schools." *The Elementary School Journal* 120 (2): 198–219.

NAEYC. "Developmentally Appropriate Practice." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents.

Sharif, U.M. 2020. "The Role of the Principal in Developing an Instructional Leadership Team in School." *Educational Research and Reviews* 15 (11): 662–67.

CedarWorks

CedarWorks commercial playsets and playground equipment combine original design and details with the highest quality materials to create beautiful playsets that meet commercial needs and safety standards.

All of our playsets feature modular designs, environmentally-friendly materials, and a variety of play accessories like slides, monkey bars, climbing walls, and other playful components. Our commercial playsets can also be designed to meet ADA requirements.

Made in Maine | 800-733-6711 | commercial.cedarworks.com

Supporting Educator and Leader Well-Being

Editors' Note: Educator well-being is a key part of early childhood education. In its position statement on professional standards and competencies, NAEYC stresses that educators of children birth to age 8 must manage their mental health and wellness in order to effectively and empathetically engage with children and their families (NAEYC 2020). There are many facets of well-being (Puma et al. 2025), and leaders of early learning programs and schools play a key role in ensuring it. Indeed, it is one of their ethical responsibilities (NAEYC 2025).

In the following articles, two groups of researchers and professionals reflect on their work to understand and cultivate educator and leader well-being. First, Timothy G. Ford and colleagues outline a research initiative focused on the health of early childhood leaders—be they directors, principals, or other administrators. Next, Lieny Jeon, Dominique Charlot-Swilley, and colleagues discuss ways that leaders can ensure healthy workforces. Their strategies are part of a national, grant-funded project focused on the well-being of Head Start educators. Together, these two articles emphasize the role leaders play in nurturing well-being that filters through early childhood settings to impact educators, children, families, and communities. (To read more about educator well-being, see the Summer 2025 issue of *Educating Young Children* in the NAEYC member portal.)

References

NAEYC. 2020. "Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators" Position statement. NAEYC. https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/professional-standards-competencies.

NAEYC. 2025. "Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators." Position statement. NAEYC.

Puma, J., K.A. Kwon, C. Domitrovich, C. Farewell, T. Ford, et al. 2025. "What Is Well-Being? Supporting All Domains of Well-Being for Early Childhood Educators." *Educating Young Children* 1 (2): 20–27.

It Starts at the Top

Investing in Healthy Early Childhood Leaders, Leadership, and Workplaces

Timothy G. Ford, Chris Amirault, Sarah "Sae" Chapman, Celene Domitrovich, and Brenda Lloyd-Jones

In early childhood education settings, leaders influence the quality of children's learning and experiences, the well-being of staff, and the cultivation of a positive and nurturing program culture (Masterson et al. 2019; Gibbs 2025). They also develop engagement with communities, foster collaborative partnerships with families, and advocate for children's access to equitable opportunities (Bloom & Abel 2015; Douglass 2017; Kirby et al. 2021; Markowitz & Bassok 2025). However, it is difficult for leaders to support the well-being of others when they themselves are struggling. Understanding and attending to their well-being is crucial because the stresses they face can have a cascading effect on teachers, children, and families (Fosco et al. 2023; Ford et al. 2024a).

Several years ago, evidence supporting recommendations for improving leader working conditions and well-being was largely anecdotal. As researchers on the Happy Leader Project (first author) and Head Start University Partnership Early Head Start/Head Start Workforce Well-Being Consortium projects (all authors), we have studied educator and leader working conditions and well-being both prior to and since the COVID-19 pandemic and across private and public learning settings, including those serving children from birth through age 8.

Here, we share what we have learned to improve leader well-being, such as reducing work-related demands, increasing consistent access to responsive, high-quality professional development, and creating strong professional communities (see "Happy Leader Project Survey Findings" on page 22). We also share the words of early learning leaders pulled from their survey responses. Equipped with evidence-based information, we hope early childhood education advocates and leaders can call upon agencies, districts, and policymakers to address leader well-being.

The Unique Challenges Early Learning Leaders Face

> I'm just fried. It is too much stress. I worry about work when I am not working. I answer work emails/messages off the clock. I have literally had to deal with work issues while at a funeral. It's just too much—the amount of hours, lack of support, lack of respect, compensation, and the daily stress of the child care field. This started way before COVID. . . . No one has ever paid attention to it.
>
> —Director of a mid-sized, not-for-profit child care center serving all ages up to pre-K

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of early childhood educators' well-being and working conditions has gained attention. This is crucial, given the significant number of challenges they face, such as low pay, few benefits, lack of respect, and high physical and psychological demands (Schaack et al. 2020; Kwon et al. 2021; Kwon et al. 2022; Sisson et al. 2023). However, a singular focus on classroom educators can divert attention from the challenges faced by leaders, who constitute an important but often neglected segment of the workforce (Douglass 2017; Ford et al. 2024a).

Happy Leader Project Survey Findings

I (first author) initiated the Happy Leader Project at the University of Oklahoma to study the working conditions and well-being of early childhood and pre-K–grade 12 leaders. In 2021, the project team began collecting surveys from leaders working in center- and district-based settings across all 50 states. Over 2,300 leaders participated. The following are findings from their responses:

- Center-based leaders were paid 40 percent less than their pre-K–12 counterparts who worked in public school settings. In addition, while both groups had similarly high workloads, center-based leaders had fewer opportunities for professional growth, coaching, and mentoring.
- Leaders across settings reported incidences of obesity, sedentary behavior, poor sleep, and low physical activity. Nearly 80 percent of directors and associate directors were classified as overweight or obese from their self-reported body mass index and reported exercising fewer than two days per week.
- Nearly 40 percent of leaders were at a high risk for depression and exhibited moderate burnout.
- Despite high demands and poor physical and psychological well-being, 60 percent of leaders across settings reported overall high job satisfaction, and less than 30 percent indicated thoughts of leaving, suggesting that they remain committed to the profession.

To learn more about the survey's findings, visit the Happy Leader Project.

As the opening quote suggests, early childhood education leaders confront many of the same challenges as those working directly with children, but these demands are compounded by the needs of staff, children, and families. Leadership positions come with high administrative workloads, excessive paperwork and bureaucracy, low pay and respect, few benefits, myriad staffing challenges, and financial constraints (Zheng et al. 2022; Doromal & Markowitz 2023; Ford et al. 2024a; Ford et al. 2024b; Markowitz & Bassok 2025). These factors are routinely cited as reasons why leaders leave their positions (McDonald et al. 2018; Doromal & Markowitz 2023).

A 2021 survey by NAEYC reported that a substantial proportion of center leaders (23 percent) have considered leaving the field due to difficult working conditions. Given that there are an estimated 250,000 early childhood administrators in the United States across a wide range of settings, understanding and attending to their needs are critical (Abel et al. 2018). Isolated in their settings, individual leaders may take responsibility for the struggles they face, unable to see the systemic failures that contribute to them, such as rising costs, staffing shortages, and chronically low wages (NAEYC 2025).

There is no doubt that early childhood leadership can be demanding, stressful, and sometimes exhausting. Yet with the proper guidance and support, it can be stimulating and rewarding. The following are ways to address some of the challenges early learning leaders experience across their various settings and contexts.

Reduce Demands and Increase Resources and Supports

> This job is so multifaceted . . . there are too many layers to what we do and when we do it . . . and why we do it. We all wear so many hats and do the very best we can to address the needs of the children, parents, teachers, and finally ourselves—and to also follow all of the rules and regulations of the governing agencies . . . .
>
> —Director of a large, for-profit child care center serving all ages up to kindergarten

Leaders have more to do than they have time to do it. Scholars have noted that early childhood education leadership is a particularly complex role, characterized by an overwhelming number of administrative tasks, management of multiple funding sources, and the need to respond strategically to numerous competing demands (Muijs et al. 2004; Rodd 2013). The Happy Leader Project found that work demands impact leader well-being more than having access to resources, including professional development, mentoring, and administrative and self-care supports (Ford et al. 2024b). While adding resources or supports is important, reducing demands such as paperwork, workload, and added responsibilities is key to improving leader well-being (Ford et al. 2024b).

By considering ways to divide and delegate tasks related to their instructional leadership and management roles, leaders can ease their workload and improve organizational efficiency. For example, the Whole Leadership Framework for Early Childhood Programs provides a model for early learning programs to separate the work related to the pedagogical and administrative domains (Masterson et al. 2019; Talan et al. 2023). *Pedagogical leadership* includes instructional leadership and family engagement; *administrative leadership* involves operations, strategic planning, advocacy, and working in communities.

In some center-based settings, multiple leaders carry out a variety of tasks and roles, but this is contingent on a center's size and funding. Smaller centers may require additional funding and support, which may be inaccessible without a policy solution. As an alternative, center-based leaders can consider adopting a *distributed leadership* approach, which involves those in formal leadership roles sharing responsibilities and decision making with staff members (Douglass et al. 2022). This approach, which would require leaders to provide leadership-related support and training, could offer educators an additional way to gain leadership experience and further their own professional development.

Address Gaps in Leadership Learning and Development

> I have no training in human resources, yet I am expected to manage staff conflicts . . . .
>
> —Director of a small, not-for-profit child care center serving all ages up to kindergarten

Pre-K–grade 12 school and district leaders often engage in leader preparation to meet requirements for degree programs, accreditation, and national standards, such as the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards (NPBEA, n.d.). However, leaders in other kinds of early learning settings (home- and center-based programs) do not. Thirty-three states recognize an early childhood administrator credential; however, no state requires these credentials for child care licensure (Talan & Magid 2021). These leaders tend to be promoted from the teacher ranks and receive little, if any, preparation for the role (Douglass 2017; Shore et al. 2021; Douglass & Kirby 2022; Kelton & Talan 2023).

In our 2023 sample, only 20 percent of over 250 center directors had prior leadership experience, and even fewer reported having been encouraged and/or mentored into the role by a practicing leader (Lavigne et al. 2024). Our survey also revealed that around 15 percent of new directors reported "falling into" the position—in contrast to only 2 percent of K–12 principals. In addition, there are issues of equity and representation in the early childhood education leader workforce. Our study found that only 20 percent of center-based directors were of color (Asian or Pacific Islander; Black or African American; Hispanic or Latinx; Multiracial or biracial; Native American or Alaskan Native), while the racial/ethnic diversity of the teaching workforce is estimated to be approximately 40–45 percent (Ford et al. 2024a; Markowitz & Bassok 2025). Similar underrepresentation of leaders of color was found in another study of center-based directors in Virginia (Hall et al. 2023).

Some may assume that effective, experienced teachers will achieve success as leaders, but this does not necessarily happen without intentional

development, mentorship, and guidance (Gibbs 2025). The discrepancies in access to leadership roles and professional development discussed above point to the necessity of thoughtful succession planning to ensure new leaders are well-prepared (Rodd 2013). Current leaders can identify potential leaders using equitable selection criteria and then, through sustained, intentional mentorship, can help develop prospective leaders' strengths and address their areas for growth. To facilitate access to higher education courses, state legislators and universities can partner to build and support early childhood leadership preparation programs and certification pathways.

Furthermore, many early childhood education leaders have important expertise in child development and instructional practices but are not sufficiently prepared to supervise and coach other adults. A small but growing number of colleges and universities with early childhood degree programs offer a specialized degree or certificate in early childhood leadership and/or management. These programs show promise for improving the early childhood leadership profession by providing much-needed training for aspiring leaders in traditional management skills (finance, law) and adult development and supervision.

Provide Professional Learning Opportunities for Transformation and Culture Building

> It seems like lately there have been so many required curriculums, you know, [for licensure and/or accreditation systems], that we're having to do a lot of stuff that we're not necessarily as interested in. . . . So, I feel like our trainings have been more prescribed lately, which stinks, but we also are a five-star center, so we have to maintain all of their requirements and make sure we're doing things the way they want, right?
>
> —Director of a mid-sized child care center serving all ages up to pre-K

Professional development should not be limited to new policies, programs, or procedures. After all, quality leadership is as much about managing and leading the current system as working as advocates and agents of change to improve it (Gibbs 2025). In addition to quality preservice training, early childhood education leaders need ongoing professional development that emphasizes transformational and culturally relevant leadership skills (Khalifa 2020; Kelton & Talan 2023). They also need the time and tools to develop the reflective skills for coaching and supervision, to evaluate their own practice, and to examine their role as it relates to teacher, child, and family outcomes. Training in these areas helps to build leaders' confidence, which is needed to sustain professional well-being and prevent turnover (Kelton & Talan 2023). It also empowers them to explore how *parallel processes*—the interplay between a given relationship and all other relationships in an early learning educational setting—can promote or detract from both program and classroom cultures for children, families, and staff (Watson, with Harris et al. 2022).

One additional way to boost leaders' commitment, self-efficacy, and overall motivation is to provide them with the freedom to choose the focus of their professional learning and the time to engage in it (Ford et al. 2020). A majority of the Oklahoma-based leaders who participated in the Happy Leader Project study expressed a strong desire for additional professional development in self-identified areas of improvement, such as increasing well-being. However, many lamented that there was little time to engage in these pursuits. Here again, the reallocation of leadership demands and additional funding could resource leaders to work on their own growth, learning, and development.

There is no doubt that early childhood leadership can be demanding, stressful, and sometimes exhausting. Yet with the proper guidance and support, it can be stimulating and rewarding.

Build Leadership Networks of Resources and Support

> I have never been a networker, and I've worked at the same school for 25 years now. Since COVID, I've joined several groups of administrators . . . and these have been so helpful. Just knowing that others are going through the same things has been really helpful. And I have never been the kind of person who needs that kind of thing before, but I sure do now.
>
> —Director of a large, not-for-profit daycare center for pre-K and kindergarten

The isolated nature of leadership across early childhood education settings, such as independently owned and operated centers or family home care providers, can be a significant obstacle to accessing support. However, as the above quote indicates, leaders in all types of settings can benefit from interactions with colleagues. Building stronger professional networks across sites, agencies, and states can provide leaders with opportunities to share knowledge, engage in collective improvement efforts, and provide moral and emotional supports for their long-term success, well-being, and retention (Bloom & Abel 2015; Ford et al. 2020). Creating such networks has been underway in K–12 leadership for several years (see, for example, Brown et al. 2024 for a recent review) and is characterized by a wide range of activities, memberships, frequencies, and intensities. This work suggests that networks should be tailored to meet the specific needs of groups.

For early learning leaders, networks could be focused on facilitating real-world explorations of the individual and systemwide challenges they face, promoting adult learning principles and collaborative problem solving, and improving psychological and professional well-being. For example, one component of Promoting Resilience and Mental Health in Educational Settings for Early Childhood, a teacher wellness intervention program at Georgetown University, is a community of practice for leaders. Site directors and leadership staff meet twice a month to focus on their own self-care by reflecting on their work and habits, learning with peers about social and emotional leadership, and developing strategies to support a culture of wellness at their sites.

Reflection Questions

For center- and district-based leaders:

- What are the primary sources of stress in your job right now? Which are in your sphere of control or influence, and which are not? How might you focus on the former to make positive changes?
- What support and resources do you need to improve your overall well-being (physical, psychological, professional) from where it is today?
- What do you wish agency leaders and policymakers knew about your lived experiences as an early childhood education leader?

For agency leaders:

- For the leaders you supervise, do you know their answers to the previous questions? Are there responsibilities that you could remove from their sphere of control in order to elevate other important priorities?
- Reflecting on the concerns raised across the agency, what skill or knowledge gaps are prevalent among leadership? What training and/or support might you provide to address these gaps?
- What steps can you take to address the working conditions and well-being of leaders in your setting?

Conclusion

Trends in early learning leadership research suggest that the field is beginning to recognize the importance of healthy, happy, committed leaders to the overall health of the workplace, organization, and profession. The goal of the Happy Leader Project is to apply what we have learned to design a wellness intervention specifically tailored to address the needs and challenges of early childhood education leadership. This project is first and foremost guided by an understanding that any intervention must address all aspects of well-being—the physical, psychological, and professional—as these have been demonstrated in prior research to be strongly associated with one another (Kwon et al. 2021; Ford et al. 2024b). It is only through addressing leader working conditions and the structural elements of the work and profession that shape them that we can hope to see this critical segment of the workforce grow and thrive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

About the Authors

Timothy G. Ford, PhD, is an associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Oklahoma and executive director of the THRIVE center. He is also principal and coprincipal investigator of the Happy Leader and Happy Teacher Projects. tgford@ou.edu

Chris Amirault, PhD, served for two decades as the director of NAEYC-accredited Early Head Start, preschool, and state pre-K programs. He is the author of the book *Sparking Learning in Young Children: Classroom Best Practices* and coauthor of *Finding Your Way Through Conflict: Strategies for Early Childhood Educators*. chrisamirault@gmail.com

Sarah "Sae" Chapman, MAEd, is a research specialist with the Well-Being for Early Learning Lab at the University of Virginia. Chapman's research focuses on finding ways to improve early childhood educator and leader well-being and organizational justice in early learning settings. jeb3ks@virginia.edu

Celene Domitrovich, PhD, is the director of research for the Thrive Center for Children, Families, and Communities and a professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical Center. cd1029@georgetown.edu

Brenda Lloyd-Jones, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Human Relations and was formerly the department's associate chair at the University of Oklahoma. Her scholarship addresses the representation and experiences of women of color in senior-level leadership and mentoring approaches to support, retain, and advance women. blloydjones@ou.edu

References

Abel, M.B., T.N. Talan, & M.S. Magid. 2018. *Closing the Leadership Gap: 2018 Status Report on Early Childhood Program Leadership in the United States*. McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University. mccormickcenter.nl.edu/library/closing-the-leadership-gap-2018-status-report-on-early-childhood-program-leadership-in-the-united-states.

Bloom, P.J., & M.B. Abel. 2015. "Expanding the Lens: Leadership as an Organizational Asset." *Young Children* 70 (2): 10–17.

Brown, C., R. Luzmore, R. O'Donovan, G. Ji, & S. Patnaik. 2024. "How Educational Leaders Can Maximise the Social Capital Benefits of Inter-School Networks: Findings from a Systematic Review." *International Journal of Educational Management* 38 (1): 213–64.

Doromal, J.B., & A.J. Markowitz. 2023. "Following the Leader: Associations Between Leader Support and Teacher Retention in Child Care Settings." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 65: 250–60.

Douglass, A. 2017. *Leading for Change in Early Care and Education: Cultivating Leadership from Within*. Teachers College Press.

Douglass, A., T. Halle, G. Kirby, & K. Nagle. 2022. *Recognizing and Supporting Early Childhood Educators and Program Administrators as Agents of Change: An Exploration of Distributed Leadership in Early Care and Education.* OPRE Report 2022-74. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children & Families, US Department of Health and Human Services. acf.gov/opre/report/recognizing-and-supporting-early-childhood-educators-and-program-administrators-agents.

Ford, T.G., A.L. Lavigne, A.M. Fiegener, & S. Si. 2020. "Understanding District Support for Leader Development and Success in the Accountability Era: A Review of the Literature Using Social-Cognitive Theories of Motivation." *Review of Educational Research* 90 (2): 264–307.

Ford, T.G., K.-A. Kwon, A.L. Lavigne, & T. McHugh. 2024a. "The Working Conditions and Well-Being of Early Childhood Leaders in the US." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 53: 1435–50.

Ford, T.G., K.-A. Kwon, A. Lavigne, & T. McHugh. 2024b. "Testing a Holistic Framework of Early Care and Education and K–12 Leaders' Working Conditions and Well-Being" *AERA Open* 10. doi.org/10.1177/23328584241235923.

Fosco, S.L.D., M.A. Brown, & D.L. Schussler. 2023. "Factors Affecting Educational Leader Wellbeing: Sources of Stress and Self-Care." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 53 (3): 582–601.

Gibbs, L. 2025. *Cultivating Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care: Trouble, Complexity, and Promise.* Routledge.

Hall, T., D. Bassok, J.B. Doromal, & A.J. Markowitz. 2023. "A Director Like Me: Teacher-Leader Racial/Ethnic Match and Job Outcomes in Child Care Centers." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 62: 369–84.

Kelton, R., & T. Talan. 2023. *We Can't Afford to Lose Leaders: Professional Development to Increase Administrator Retention During the First Few Years.* McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University mccormickcenter.nl.edu/library/research-brief-2306.

Khalifa, M. 2020. *Culturally Responsive School Leadership.* Harvard Education Press.

Kirby, G., A. Douglass, J. Lyskawa, C. Jones, & L. Malone. 2021. *Understanding Leadership in Early Care and Education: A Literature Review.* OPRE Report 2021-02. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children & Families., US Department of Health and Human Services. acf.gov/opre/report/understanding-leadership-early-care-and-education-literature-review.

Kwon, K.-A., T.G. Ford, L. Jeon, A. Malek-Lasater, N. Ellis, et al. 2021. "Testing a Holistic Conceptual Framework for Early Childhood Teacher Well-Being." *Journal of School Psychology* 86*:* 178–97.

Kwon, K.-A., T.G. Ford, A.L. Salvatore, K. Randall, L. Jeon, et al. 2022. "Neglected Elements of a High-Quality Early Childhood Education Workforce: Whole Teacher Well-Being and Working Conditions." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 50: 157–68.

Lavigne, A., T.G. Ford, K. Kwon, & C. Carter. 2024. "The Socialization of Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary School Leaders." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Council of Educational Administration, in Los Angeles, CA.

Markowitz, A.J., & D. Bassok. 2025. "The Early Care and Education Workforce in the United States." In *Handbook of Education Research Policy.* 2nd ed. Eds. L. Cohen-Vogel, P. Youngs, & J. Scott. American Educational Research Association.

Masterson, M., M. Abel, T. Talan, & J. Bella. 2019. *Building on Whole Leadership: Energizing and Strengthening Your Early Childhood Program*. Gryphon House.

Muijs, D., C. Aubrey, A. Harris, & M. Briggs. 2004. "How Do They Manage? A Review of the Research on Leadership in Early Childhood." *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 2 (2): 157–69.

NAEYC. 2025. " *'An Unsustainable Status Quo: We All Bear the Burdens of an Underfunded System': State by State Survey Briefs."* naeyc.org/state-survey-briefs-2025.

Rodd, J. 2013. *Leadership in Early Childhood: The Pathway to Professionalism*. 4th ed. Routledge.

Schaack, D.D., V.N. Le, & J. Stedron. 2020. "When Fulfillment Is Not Enough: Early Childhood Teacher Occupational Burnout and Turnover Intentions from a Job Demands and Resources Perspective." *Early Education and Development* 31 (7): 1011–30.

Sisson, S.B., A. Malek-Lasater, T.G. Ford, D. Horm, & K.-A. Kwon. 2023. "Predictors of Overweight and Obesity in Early Care and Education Teachers During the COVID Pandemic." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20 (3): 2763. doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20032763.

Talan, T.N., & M. Magid. 2021. *Closing the Leadership Gap: 2021 Status Update on Early Childhood Program Leadership in the United States*. McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University. mccormickcenter.nl.edu/library/closing-the-leadership-gap-113021.

Talan, T., M. Masterson, & J. Bella. 2023. *Whole Leadership: A Framework for Early Childhood Programs–2023*. McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University. mccormickcenter.nl.edu/library/whole-leadership-a-framework-for-early-childhood-programs-2023.

Watson, C., with M. Harris, J. Hennes, M. Harrison, & A. Meuwissen. 2022. *RIOS Guide for Reflective Supervision and Consultation in the Infant and Early Childhood Field*. ZERO TO THREE.

Zheng, X., Q. Dan, Z. Wu, S. Luo, & X. Peng. 2022. "A Job Demands-Resources Perspective on Kindergarten Principals' Occupational Well-Being: The Role of Emotional Regulation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19 (22): 15030. doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192215030.

Leading the Way

Strategies for Fostering Organizational Well-Being in Early Childhood Education

Lieny Jeon, Dominique Charlot-Swilley, Cheryl A. Varghese, Shuai Li, and Sooyeon Byun

Early childhood educators face significant challenges, ranging from the psychological demands and emotional labor of their work to the impact of systemic inequities that contribute to structural and economic disparities (Phillips et al. 2016; Totenhagen et al. 2016; Cumming 2017; Schaack et al. 2020; Ntim et al. 2023). Program leaders in early learning settings can support educators by fostering inclusivity, safety, and well-being. Such an environment not only enhances job satisfaction but also empowers educators to provide the best possible care and education to young children (Phillips et al. 2014; Maldonado & Mondragón 2023; Charlot-Swilley et al. 2025).

We (the authors) were part of the Head Start University Partnership: Early Head Start and Head Start Workforce Well-Being Consortium, a collaborative initiative that developed, implemented, and evaluated wellness interventions in Early Head Start and Head Start programs (see "Wellness Intervention Models in Head Start Settings" on page 29). Based on the consortium's findings and our individual research and experiences, we discuss how leaders can implement policies and practices that promote job satisfaction. Our research indicates that educators' job satisfaction and well-being improve when they feel appreciated. Leaders can support effective communication, manageable workloads, collaborative practices, and a sense of community by creating workplaces that reduce stress and provide opportunities for educators' professional growth. In addition, we showcase voices from the field to amplify educators' perspectives of navigating demanding day-to-day responsibilities.

Build a Culture of Appreciation and Respect

> What's the word I'm looking for? Like, *appreciated*. I feel like my work makes a difference here.
>
> —Head Start educator

Feeling valued can translate into increased staff retention and quality in early childhood programs (Jennings & Greenberg 2009; Phillips et al. 2016; Totenhagen et al. 2016). It can also reduce educators' stress and burnout, encourage greater emotional investment in their work, and foster stronger connections with children and families (Turinas et al. 2023). These factors, in turn, lead to more consistent and nurturing interactions with children, improved classroom climate, and a more collaborative team dynamic.

Leadership practices that foster psychological safety and professional respect are associated with increased educator well-being (Logan et al. 2021). In contrast, educators working in environments characterized by micromanagement and lack of appreciation often describe being in a perpetual state of fight, flight, or freeze or feeling strained (Cumming 2017; Douglass 2019). We encountered teachers who felt unrecognized for their hard work, such as staying late to plan lessons, bringing work home, and supporting children outside of regular hours.

In the Well-Being First (WBF) study, we found that even a simple message or small action of appreciation could provide teachers with a meaningful sense of affirmation. Leaders can provide specific and timely recognition of educators' efforts (acknowledging when

a teacher stays late to support a student or introducing a mindfulness strategy to a child). They can also help educators feel cared for and valued during regular check-ins, especially when navigating stress or personal challenges. These leadership practices can improve educator well-being, retention, and a stronger sense of professional fulfillment (Totenhagen et al. 2016; Charlot-Swilley et al. 2025).

Communicate Clearly and Transparently

> Clear and precise communication is not always consistent, understandable, logical, and received in a timely manner and respectful.
>
> —A team of Head Start educators

A group of educators who analyzed the root causes of workplace stress shared this quote during a WBF training. A different group of participants in a recent WBF training also listed ineffective communication—which can include a lack of consistency and timeliness, misunderstandings, and the breakdown of communication channels—as a top stressor.

Lapses in sharing information with clarity can create feelings of exclusion, uncertainty, and mistrust, particularly when educators feel left out of important decisions that directly affect their daily work (Travis et al. 2014). For example, educators may be informed of last-minute staffing changes in their rooms, allowing no time for newly paired coteachers to discuss important information about families or routines. Educators may also learn about new curriculum expectations from a colleague instead of during staff meetings or in writing, leading to uncertainty about how to plan instruction.

Wellness Intervention Models in Head Start Settings

In 2021, six universities received funding to study the effects of wellness intervention programs on educators working in Early Head Start and Head Start programs. Members of our author team worked on projects that focused on one of the three following models:

- **Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE):** The CARE program is a mindfulness-based professional learning initiative designed to enhance teachers' well-being and social and emotional skills. It combines instruction, activities, and discussion across emotion skills, mindfulness and stress management, and compassion practices. CARE has shown effectiveness in elementary settings, improving teacher well-being, classroom interactions, and student engagement.
- **Promoting Resilience and Mental Health in Educational Settings for Early Childhood (PROMISE):** The PROMISE program is a multi-component intervention aimed at cultivating wellness in early learning environments by addressing staff stress, burnout, and mental health at both individual and organizational levels. PROMISE includes the self-paced online courses TeacherWISE and Compassion, Practice, Relationships, and Restoration (CPR^2), which are clinician-led wellness groups that incorporate psychoeducation and mindfulness practices, and a bimonthly community of practice for leaders.
- **Well-Being First (WBF):** The WBF model draws on evidence-based strategies from education, human services, public health, and medicine to promote individual and organizational well-being in the early childhood education workforce. It includes a three-day, all-staff training on resilience, relationship building, stress analysis, and collaborative problem solving, followed by monthly consultations, leadership development, and access to practical well-being toolkits.

For more information about these projects, see the 2024 ZERO TO THREE article "Nurturing the Nurturer: Elevating Educator Well-Being and Competencies Through Comprehensive Wellness Programs" by Kyong-Ah Kwon, Jini Puma, Yoonkyung Oh, Lieny Jeon, Holly Hatton, Timothy G. Ford, Charlotte Farewell, Celene Domitrovich, Carrie Clark, and Dominique Charlot-Swilley.

To ensure educators have the information they need to manage their daily responsibilities effectively, they need clear, timely, and supportive communication (Cumming 2017; Douglass 2019).

To foster a more supportive workplace culture, leaders must assess and reflect on the quality of communication within their settings (Bloom et al. 2016). Structured and intentional workplace communication is key to operational efficiency and builds respectful, inclusive professional relationships (Fenech & Ribarovski 2020). Leaders can increase transparency and predictability by collaborating with educators to establish an internal communication plan, which can include

- Agreed-upon systems and timelines
- Responsibilities for communicating important information (classroom changes, curriculum updates, staffing changes)
- Opportunities for two-way communication (suggestion boxes, regularly scheduled check-ins)

Support Educators' Basic Needs

> We're not in jail. Don't rush me to go to the bathroom.
>
> —Head Start teacher

Everyone deserves moments to step back, take deep breaths, stretch, and reset their focus. Ensuring educators have time for rest and self-care during the day is essential for maintaining energy, focus, and overall health (Nicholson et al. 2019). Many early childhood educators spend up to eight hours in the classroom without sufficient breaks. This can affect their physical and psychological well-being (Jeon et al. 2014; Linnan et al. 2017). Leaders can integrate daily structured pauses during transition times or low-activity periods. They can also ensure that educators can signal when they need unplanned breaks, such as a discreet visual cue placed in a designated spot (a hook and sign or whiteboard near their room's door). While onboarding, leaders can proactively encourage newly hired educators to develop a go-to routine (one-minute hand massage, listening to music, deep breathing) as an opportunity to reset.

Additionally, there are times when educators must reconcile their professional responsibilities with the invisible burden of their unmet basic needs. For example, in early learning settings, family-style eating is promoted as a practice that fosters social and emotional development, autonomy, and positive relationships with food (Neelon & Briley 2011). However, educators who have lived or are living with chronic food insecurity may experience distress or discomfort when modeling mealtime behaviors like engaging in conversation and supporting self-serving practices while also eating with children.

Acknowledging food insecurity among the workforce can be part of broader efforts to support workforce sustainability and promote relational well-being. Within a program, elevating this reality is essential to create environments that foster educators' physical well-being (Bartlett et al. 2017). For the comfort of their staffs, program leaders can provide them with time to meet their dietary needs in an environment of their choosing, such as one with adult-size tables and chairs.

Promote a Work-Life Balance

> You can't be all things—or do all things—for all people.
>
> —WBF training content

Early childhood educators are often so deeply committed to caring for others that they overlook their own needs (Erdman et al. 2020). Research suggests that when educators are given the space and time to balance their professional and personal lives, they experience lower levels of burnout, stress, and job dissatisfaction (Haug 2022). Educators who have the opportunity to prioritize their self-care routines while managing their workloads can care for children more effectively (Cumming 2017).

To cultivate organizational well-being, leaders must create policies to help educators maintain a healthy work-life balance. To sustain this, leaders can ensure educators have time to disengage from work-related tasks and attend to personal responsibilities. For example, providing some flexible work hours allows teachers to plan for personal commitments and lesson

planning, helping them to have more control of their time. Leaders can implement creative approaches to address coverage, such as organizing staggered breaks and shifts and creating a rotating schedule. Additionally, cross-training educators in similar duties can allow staff members to step in for one another during planned breaks or unanticipated absences. Another strategy is building a reliable pool of substitute educators familiar with the organization's culture and policies.

Leaders can also establish a dedicated wellness space for educators: A quiet room or area with comfortable seating, calming visuals, soft lighting, and stress-relief tools like meditation cushions, aromatherapy diffusers, or adult coloring books. This can serve as a place for educators to disconnect from their duties, take restful breaks, recharge emotionally, and return to work feeling refreshed.

Streamline Paperwork

> Out of eight hours, we spend 50 percent of the time on paperwork.
>
> —A team of Head Start educators

A group of educators who analyzed the root causes of workplace stress shared the above quote during a WBF training. Early childhood educators often face significant paperwork demands daily. These include child assessments, Individualized Education Programs or Individualized Family Service Plans, documentation, incident reports, behavior logs, lesson planning, administrative forms for licensing and funding regulations, and their own program's policies and practices. Streamlining paperwork can help create a more balanced work environment, allowing teachers to dedicate more time and energy to children.

While larger systems and regulations often set paperwork requirements, we encountered Head Start programs that successfully implemented specific strategies to improve efficiency, such as

- Dividing paperwork tasks among teams to reduce the burden on individual staff members
- Creating ways for educators to share practical tips and strategies for completing paperwork
- Guiding and supporting educators to intentionally use technology (including artificial intelligence) to assist with drafting tasks, such as family engagement protocols and attendance tracking

Offer Collaborative Professional Development

> We can't always put everything that we learn into place because we're jumping from place to place all day long.
>
> —Head Start teacher

Many educators report challenges in finding time to apply what they have learned from professional development (Warner-Richter et al. 2020). In addition, some feel that training topics do not always align with their specific needs or interests (Hirsch et al. 2018). To address these challenges, leaders can schedule a time after professional development sessions for educators to share what they learned and practice ways to implement new approaches. To support educators in brainstorming solutions and exploring practical applications, leaders can create structured opportunities for reflection, collaboration, and practice among teaching teams and with coaches shortly after sessions. As leaders observe and facilitate discussions among staff, they can ask open-ended questions like "What part of the professional development session stood out to you?" or "How can I support you in applying what you learned?"

In addition, leaders can gather input when planning professional development so that topics align with teachers' needs and goals. By doing so, leaders can offer more meaningful opportunities for educators' professional growth and career advancement. This approach not only enhances the practical value of training but also fosters a culture of shared ownership and motivation (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017).

Encourage Collaboration and Peer Support

> We're pretty much a close-little-knit family, and we try to help each other the best way we can. When we see somebody struggling, we're always there to help out.
>
> —Head Start teacher

A strong sense of community among coworkers and leaders is essential for promoting early childhood educators' well-being (McGinty et al. 2008). However, educators sometimes feel they lack adequate support from their peers or supervisors. Leaders should nurture positive relationships with and among educators to promote organizational well-being. Flexibility and approachability are often highlighted as key attributes of supportive leadership (Aubrey et al. 2013). Leaders can implement an open-door policy, have regular small-group meetings for reflection, and invite educators to voice concerns, ask questions, and seek guidance as needed.

Coteaching pairs with differing teaching styles, communication methods, and misaligned professional strengths can experience frustration, a lack of cohesion in the classroom, and missed opportunities for mutual support. In addition, different levels of experience and credentials among pairs can sometimes lead to power imbalances hindering mutual collaboration. Leaders can focus on intentionally pairing staff, so they complement each other's strengths and create a supportive synergy (Mowrey & Farran 2022).

In reality, it is not always possible to create ideal pairings across teaching teams. Program leaders can routinely check in with coteachers who need additional support to boost their collaboration and problem solving. If resources allow, leaders can connect with an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health consultant to help facilitate these check-ins and ensure they address the logistical and relational aspects of their team's functioning in supportive, ongoing ways. Providing designated planning time for teaching teams is equally important for alignment in teaching strategies, communication, policies, and practices—all of which help foster more cohesive and productive learning environments (Mowrey & Farran 2022).

Conclusion

Prioritizing organizational well-being leads to higher staff morale, increased retention, and enhanced teaching quality, which benefit both educators and the children in their care.

To get started, program leaders can reflect on the following:

- What strategies do you already use that build a positive culture that supports educators' well-being? What could you revise or introduce?
- How does your organization celebrate, honor, and recognize the successes and efforts of educators?
- How could your organization improve educators' well-being? What steps could you take to move toward this growth?

FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Coauthors' Contribution Note
Lieny Jeon and Dominique Charlot-Swilley contributed equally to this work and are co-first authors. Both authors also share corresponding author responsibilities.

About the Authors

Lieny Jeon, PhD, is an associate professor of early childhood education at the University of Virginia and director of Early Childhood Initiatives at the Baltimore Education Research Consortium. Her research focuses on the well-being of children, families, and educators and advancing health and educational outcomes through evidence-based practices and community partnerships. ljeon@virginia.edu

Dominique Charlot-Swilley, PhD, is assistant professor, senior research policy at the Georgetown Thrive Center for Children, Families, and Communities. She works in early childhood and pediatric primary care and researches intervention science promoting early relational health and provider well-being. As a community-based researcher and mindfulness meditation teacher, she emphasizes the importance of co-creating with communities to develop solutions. dc1203@georgetown.edu

Cheryl A. Varghese, PhD, is an assistant professor at the Children's Learning Institute at UTHealth Houston. Her research focuses on the development and evaluation of professional development approaches for early childhood educators, using implementation science approaches. Cheryl.A.Varghese@uth.tmc.edu

Shuai Li, PhD, is a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Virginia and the project lead for the Well-Being First intervention. His current research focuses on early care and education and educator well-being. bcv4qy@virginia.edu

Sooyeon Byun, PhD, is an assistant professor at Yonsei University in South Korea. Her work integrates global insights to improve the quality of early care and education and educator well-being, as reflected in her recent contribution to the Well-Being First intervention. sbyun10@yonsei.ac.kr

References

Aubrey, C., R. Godfrey, & A. Harris. 2013. "How Do They Manage? An Investigation of Early Childhood Leadership." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 41 (1): 5–29.

Bartlett, J.D., S. Smith, & E. Bringewatt. 2017. *Helping Young Children Who Have Experienced Trauma: Policies and Strategies for Early Care and Education*. Child Trends. cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017-19ECETrauma.pdf.

Bloom, P.J., A. Hentschel, & J. Bella. 2016. *A Great Place to Work: Creating a Healthy Organizational Climate*. 2nd ed. New Horizons.

Charlot-Swilley, D., S. Zuskov, L. Curtis, S. Mitchell, & E. Anderson. 2025. "Fostering Workforce Wellness: Insights from Nurse Managers and Early Childhood Educators." *Healthcare* 13 (5): 487. doi.org/10.3390/healthcare13050487.

Cumming, T. 2017. "Early Childhood Educators' Well-Being: An Updated Review of the Literature." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 45 (5): 583–93.

Darling-Hammond, L., M.E. Hyler, & M. Gardner. 2017. *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Learning Policy Institute, June 2017. learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_REPORT.pdf.

Douglass, A. 2019. "Leadership for Quality Early Childhood Education and Care." *OECD Education Working Papers,* No. 211. OECD Publishing. doi.org/10.1787/6e563bae-en.

Erdman, S., L.J. Colker, & E.C. Winter. 2020 "Preventing Compassion Fatigue: Caring for Yourself." *Young Children* 75 (3): 28–35. naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/jul2020/preventing-compassion-fatigue.

Fenech, M., & J. Ribarovski. 2020. *Professional Communication for Early Childhood Educators: Interpersonal and Workplace Communication in Everyday Practice*. Oxford University Press.

Haug, E. 2022. "Work-Life Balance in Early Childhood Education." *Journal of Early Childhood Education* 15 (4): 128–36.

Hirsch, S.E., E. Ely, J.W. Lloyd, & D. Isley. 2018. "Targeted Professional Development: A Data-Driven Approach to Identifying Educators' Needs." *School-University Partnerships* 11 (2): 84–91. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1199818.pdf.

Jennings, P.A., & M.T. Greenberg. 2009. "The Prosocial Classroom: Teacher Social and Emotional Competence in Relation to Student and Classroom Outcomes." *Review of Educational Research* 79 (1): 491–525.

Jeon, L., C.K. Buettner, & A.R. Snyder. 2014. "Pathways from Teacher Depression and Child-Care Quality to Child Behavioral Problems." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 82 (2): 225–35.

Linnan, L., G. Arandia, L.A. Bateman, A. Vaughn, N. Smith, et al. 2017. "The Health and Working Conditions of Women Employed in Child Care." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14 (3): 283. doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14030283.

Logan, H., L. McFarland, A.T. Cumming, & S. Wong. 2021. "Supporting Educator Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care Organisations." *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 46 (4): 309–21.

Maldonado, M., & M. Mondragón. 2023. *The Need for Fair Compensation in the Early Childhood Workforce*. Start Early. startearly.org/post/the-need-for-fair-compensation-in-the-early-childhood-workforce.

McGinty, A.S., L. Justice, & S.E. Rimm-Kaufman. 2008. "Sense of School Community for Preschool Teachers Serving At-Risk Children." *Early Education and Development* 19 (2): 361–84.

Mowrey, S.C., & D.C. Farran. 2022. "Teaching Teams: The Roles of Lead Teachers, Teaching Assistants, and Curriculum Demand in Pre-Kindergarten Instruction." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 50 (8): 1329–41.

Neelon, S.E.B., & M.E. Briley. 2011. "Position of the American Dietetic Association: Benchmarks for Nutrition in Child Care." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 111 (4): 607–15.

Nicholson, J., P. Driscoll, J. Kurtz, D. Márquez, & L. Wesley. 2019. *Culturally Responsive Self-Care Practices for Early Childhood Educators*. Routledge.

Ntim, S.Y., J. Qin, C.O. Antwi, M.O. Aboagye, S. Chen, et al. 2023. "Early Childhood Educators' Emotional Labor and Burnout in an Emerging Economy: The Mediating Roles of Affective States." *Heliyon* 9 (3): e14053. doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e14053.

Phillips, D., L.J.E. Austin, & M. Whitebook. 2019. "The Early Care and Education Workforce: Challenges and Opportunities." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 47: 231–43.

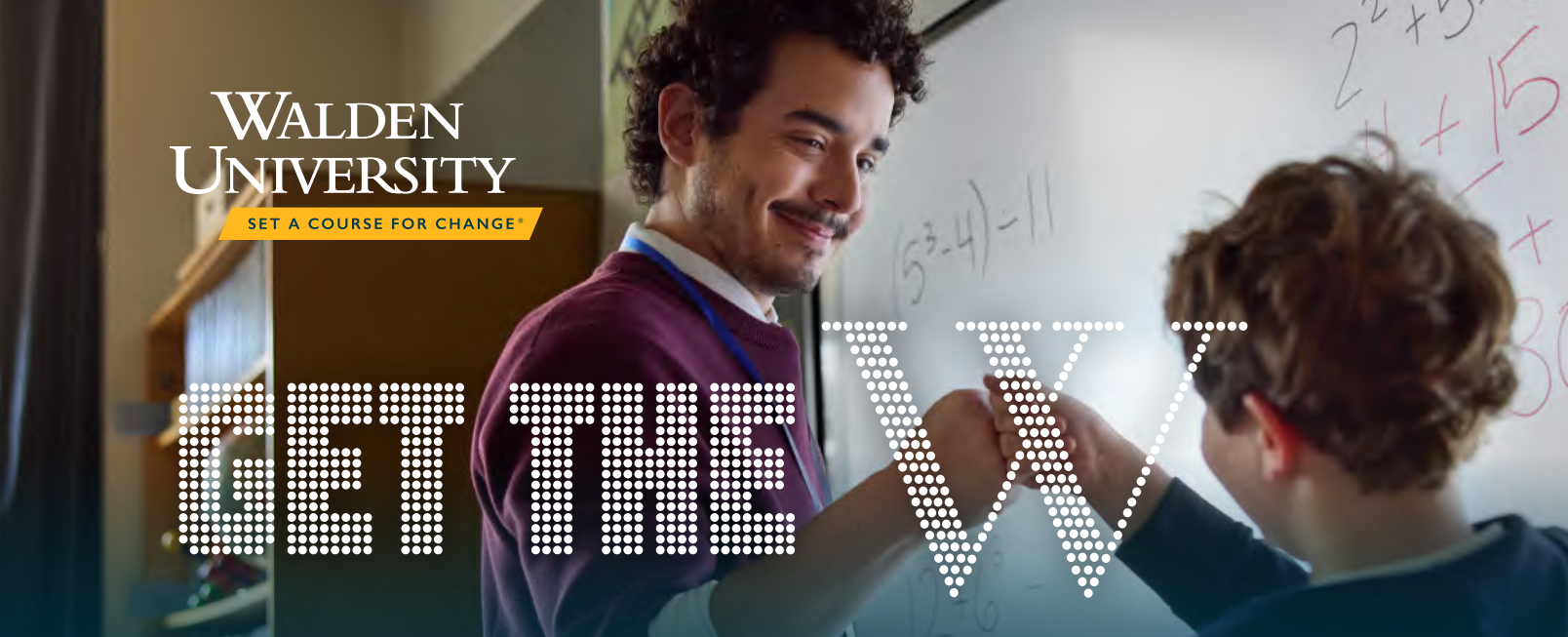
Schaack, D.D., V.-N. Le, & J. Stedron. 2020. "When Fulfillment Is Not Enough: Early Childhood Teacher Occupational Burnout and Turnover Intentions from a Job Demands and Resources Perspective." *Early Education and Development* 31 (7): 1011–30.

Totenhagen, C.J., S.A. Hawkins, D.M. Casper, L.A. Bosch, K.R. Hawkey, et al. 2016. "Retaining Early Childhood Education Workers: A Review of the Empirical Literature." *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 30 (4): 585–99.

Travis, D.J., A. Lee, M. Faulkner, P. Gerstenblatt, & J. Boston. 2014. "Cultivating a Thriving Childcare Workforce: A Theory-Driven Qualitative Analysis." *Community, Work & Family* 17 (3): 325–45.

Turinas, E., K.C. Mosley, & C.J. McCarthy. 2023. "Understanding the Impact of Receiving Gratitude on Teachers: Assessing the Effect of Risk-for-Stress on Perception of Gratitude." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 133: 104267.

Warner-Richter, M., K. Paschall, K. Tout, & C. Lowe. 2020. *Understanding Facilitators and Barriers to Professional Development Use Among the Early Care and Education Workforce*. Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services. acf.gov/opre/report/understanding-facilitators-and-barriers-professional-development-use-among-early-care.



WALDEN UNIVERSITY

SET A COURSE FOR CHANGE®

GET THERE

TAKE YOUR EDUCATION TO THE NEXT LEVEL, AND MAKE AN IMPACT ON THOSE AROUND YOU.

At Walden, we make it easy to get started with a streamlined admissions process, self-paced and instructor-led learning formats and multiple start dates.

15% TUITION REDUCTION*

Programs Include:

- BS in Early Childhood Studies
- EdS in Early Childhood Education (Non-Licensure)
- MS in Early Childhood Studies

Professional Development On Your Own Time

Walden's Webinar Hub offers year-round professional development webinars presented by industry experts, from leadership development, self-care, and hot topics in business.

GET STARTED TODAY!

waldenu.edu/naeyc

*A 15% tuition savings is available to eligible members of National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Tuition savings are applicable to new tuition charges after the date the savings is awarded only and does not apply toward books, materials, and other supplies or fees needed for a course.

This offer cannot be used in combination with any other tuition savings benefit, unless otherwise noted. The tuition savings is a non-transferrable "non-cash" offer, and in no event will the recipient receive a check or other disbursement of money pursuant to this tuition savings. Walden may change this tuition savings offer at any time, but such change will not affect the tuition savings for students who are currently enrolled at Walden and using it.

The Power of BELLE

Creating a Pathway of Latine Education Leaders to Support Dual Language Learners

Alexandra Figueras-Daniel, Ellen Frede, Carmen Espinosa, and Elise Genao

Spanish-speaking dual language learners are among the fastest growing group of children in US early childhood education settings (Zong & Batlova 2018). However, the number of Spanish-speaking early childhood educators in leadership positions has not kept pace (Beck et al. 2022). This is worrisome because diverse leadership is critical to better teaching for children from a variety of racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Moore 1997; Souto-Manning 2013; Ramsey 2015; Pak & Ravitch 2021).

To support the needs of young Spanish-English dual language learners and their families, early childhood education leaders must understand Latine families (McWayne et al. 2022), child development (Garcia Coll et al. 1996), and the culturally and linguistically sustaining strategies necessary to ensure high-quality education and care (Paris & Alim 2017). Latine leaders can draw on their cultural backgrounds and their own experiences to make these connections. Indeed, their ability to recognize and value children's and families' identities, experiences, and ways of knowing offer significant benefits to learning communities (IES, n.d.; Méndez-Morse et al. 2015). These include advocating for multicultural curricular practices, fostering a positive environment for all children, and ensuring that Latine families are able to effectively participate in

Authors' Note: While NAEYC style is to use *Latino/a*, we have chosen to use *Latine*, unless speaking specifically about Latine women (in which case, we use *Latina*). *Latine* is a term created by LGBTQIA+ Spanish speakers. It uses the letter *e* to illustrate gender inclusivity within existing Spanish pronunciation and reflects the community's desire to ensure that all participants are appropriately reflected. For the purposes of BELLE, we define Latine as anyone who considers a Spanish-speaking country of particular importance to their identity and who is bilingual in English and Spanish.

the education of their children (Moore 1997; Scanlan & López 2012; Méndez-Morse et al. 2015; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica 2020).

There have been calls to action, position statements, and research aimed at increasing representation among Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) educators in positions of leadership (e.g., Coleman-Stokes 2022). Yet implementation is not clear: What does it take to make change? How can we better value the assets that BIPOC educators bring and support them to pursue leadership positions? What conditions and experiences help create a successful journey?

Advancing equity in leadership requires intentionality. Structures must be put into place to empower underrepresented educators to take on leadership roles while understanding that their own experiences are assets (Long et al. 2016). In 2021, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) created a program to provide mentorship, professional development, and networking opportunities tailored to the unique needs of Latine early childhood educators. Building Early Learning Latine Educators (BELLE) aims to create a pathway of bilingual, Spanish-speaking, Latine leaders who can support and improve educational opportunities for Latine, Spanish-speaking, dual language learners birth to age 8.

We (the authors) come to this work as either Latina scholars and former educators or as observers of the lack of Latine representation in decision-making roles. Given our personal experiences, BELLE was created to address these observed gaps and to elevate the communities of friends and colleagues both to pursue these positions and to be seen by others. Using the presence of our larger organization, our long-term relationships with the communities we have worked with for years, and our knowledge of theory, research, and policy, we have sought to bring about large-scale change within our state. In this article, we outline the BELLE approach and share observations from program participants. We also discuss ways that early childhood administrators and Latine educators can put these strategies into practice.

A Dearth of Latine Leaders

Latine Spanish-speaking dual language learners make up 62 percent of the overall population of dual language learners in US early childhood settings (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). Research indicates that specific supports and approaches are necessary to create the most effective educational experiences for them. This includes the use of Spanish for instruction through dual immersion programs (Soto-Boykin et al. 2024).

However, policy and practice have not kept up (Park et al. 2018). Neither has leadership. Research in this area is limited—a reality that compounds the issue and further accentuates the oversight of the population more broadly. Yet consider:

- A 2023 investigation of how state leaders think about key issues related to instructional policy found that in 30 state-led early childhood departments, none of the leaders identified as "Hispanic" (Little & Gragson 2023).
- Research highlighting obstacles that impede women from underrepresented groups from rising to positions of leadership shows that Latinas face barriers that may not exist for White women (Bonilla-Rodriguez 2011). These include a lack of mentors and sponsors.
- Many Latine educators face double and triple binds based on their gender, ethnicity, and race—factors that affinity support groups could address by facilitating "safe space(s) for BIPOC leaders to discuss their experiences, challenges, and support each other" (Northey 2022, 284).

Advancing equity in leadership requires intentionality. Structures must be put into place to empower underrepresented educators to take on leadership roles while leveraging their lived experiences as assets.

NAEYC's position statement on advancing equity calls for leaders to "take proactive steps with measurable goals to recruit and retain educators and leaders who reflect the diversity of children and families" (2019, 9). Without leaders who understand the lived experiences, cultures, and languages of all children and families, policies and systems will remain stagnant (Leu Bonanno 2023).

Introducing BELLE: A Responsive Space for Latine Educators

In our work, we have come to understand that it is key for Latine educators to pursue opportunities to lead so that they can develop as professionals, act as mirrors for others, and advocate for policies to improve systems for dual language learners. Because they may have experienced discrimination, challenges related to their status of residence, bias from others, and/or the complexities of balancing two cultures, these educators have developed a sensitivity to similar experiences in others, which they can access and leverage as leaders (Colomer 2019).

BELLE offers a cohort model in which teachers create a community while being mentored to realize their leadership potential. It aims to create a pathway for Latine leaders with shared cultures, languages, and experiences to create policies that will better advance the outcomes for young dual language learners in asset-oriented ways (see "BELLE at a Glance" on page 39). By embedding mentors and implementing strategies for dual language learners, BELLE aims to help participants gain the knowledge, confidence, and networks needed to successfully pursue leadership

positions. While the program is open to both men and women, teacher participants to date have been women. (One man has served as a BELLE mentor.)

Through our initial design process, we researched the limited body of studies investigating Latina leadership both in and out of educational spaces to understand already documented hurdles and barriers. We agreed that a teacher-facing, culturally sustaining framework was necessary not only to guide our thinking but also to support the realization of BELLE participants' potential as Latine leaders. We wanted Latine teachers to realize that the ability to lead is within them: They need to be recognized, understood as assets, and then leveraged intentionally to support the pursuit of leadership opportunities both within and outside of the learning setting.

Identifying Participants

BELLE begins with a recruitment process: Educators who are already functioning as leaders (program directors, preschool instructional coaches, principals, early childhood education directors, superintendents) and who work across the birth-to-age-8 band are asked to nominate a teacher who has demonstrated leadership skills, is bilingual English-Spanish, and identifies as Latine. There are no requirements related to years of experience, degrees, certifications, or credentials. Both the nominating leader (who may or may not identify as Latine) and the teacher then participate as a dyad, engaging in all program workshops and activities as a team. This allows for each of our cohorts to include educators from different locations and program types (public schools, private child care providers, Head

BELLE at a Glance

BELLE is a leadership academy that seeks to create a special kind of community of practice called a "community of cultural wealth" (Yosso 2005). This allows educators who consider themselves Latine from a variety of backgrounds to participate. The yearlong program serves up to 30 educators at a time. Each is paired with a mentor to gain the knowledge, confidence, and networks needed to successfully pursue leadership positions.

Specific components of BELLE include

- **A focus on Latina leadership traits:** These were gleaned from Ana Nogales (2003) and include creativity, determination, diplomacy, discretion, courage, balance, confidence, and strength. We use the attributes as a broader frame for discussions about finding voice and power and how to use cultural assets to lead.
- **Self-evaluation tool:** Participants use NIEER's Self-Evaluation of Supports for Emergent Bilingual Acquisition tool (SESEBA) as a framework for learning about supportive practices for dual language learners in early learning settings. Research shows that even teachers whose cultural and linguistic identities align with the children being served still need pedagogical knowledge that can support and implement dual language learning strategies (Choi et al. 2021; Figueras-Daniel & Li 2021; Rojas et al. 2022).
- **Classroom assessment tool:** NIEER's Classroom Assessment of Supports for Emergent Bilingual Acquisition tool (CASEBA) gives participants a visual way to see start and end points and to increase conversations about where the opportunities to improve quality for dual language learners might exist.
- **Journey map exercise:** This initial exercise is done by all BELLE participants and enables the group to find community and commonalities. It also helps to establish a trusted network within the cohorts.
- **Keynote speakers:** Latina leaders in various capacities share stories about their leadership journeys or how they have enacted policy change in their roles. These speakers are intended to serve as role models: BELLE participants see that others have charted similar journeys and that it is possible to meet big goals.
- **Hybrid workshops:** These include information on dual language strategies, supporting research, and systems building. Besides allowing us to share knowledge, these workshops foster conversations and engage BELLE participants in activities that support the program's key concepts.
- **Concluding presentations:** Participants present on a set of strategies they have implemented in their settings and that they believe they will be able to use to lead further change in their programs, schools, or centers.

Participants pay nothing for BELLE. NIEER funding and grants cover the program's costs. For further information and details, visit nieer.org/building-early-learning-latine-educators-belle.

Start), which fosters mentorship. It also increases participants' awareness of opportunities and resources outside of their dyad's current program.

Early planning, scheduling, and clear communication of BELLE's goals help to attract applicants. After selection, all dyads are expected to attend four virtual and four in-person sessions where teachers receive training on working with dual language learners and building leadership skills. They also learn about policy- and systems-related content. All sessions are rooted in research that undergirds the benefits of bilingualism, the recommended strategies for working with dual language learners in early learning settings, and the limited presence of Latines at decision-making tables nationally. BELLE participants have highlighted

this component as especially impactful. As one said, "The research is so helpful to back you up. It makes me feel more confident to educate others."

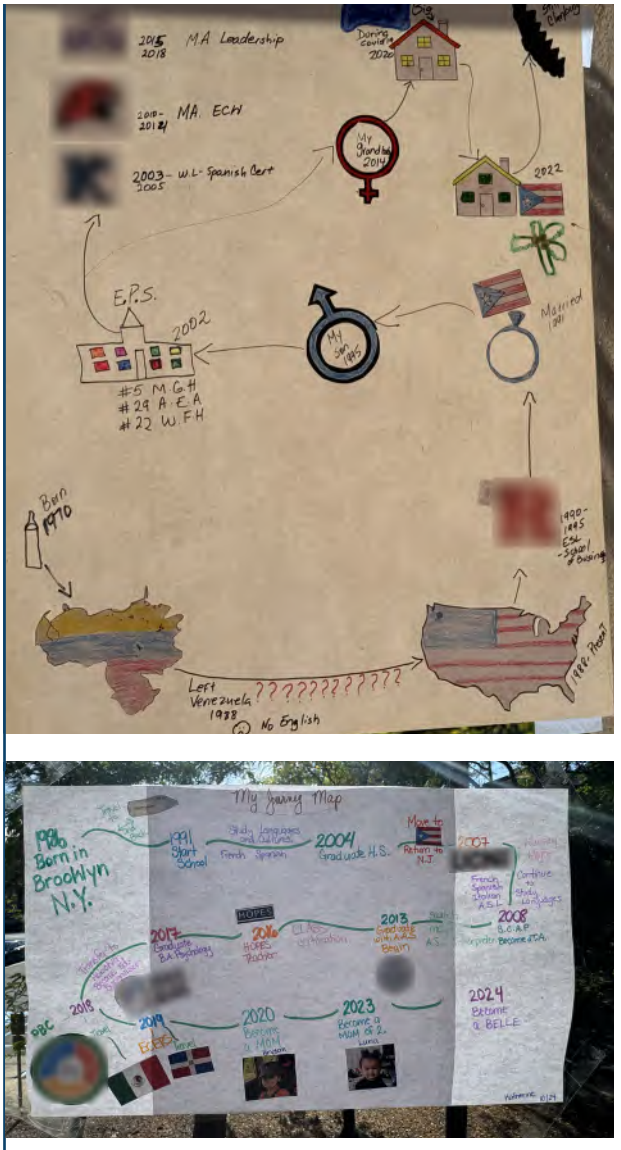
BELLE Workshops

BELLE provides a blend of research-based strategies to support dual language learners and their families alongside a leadership academy. By emphasizing both elements and integrating the narratives of successful Latine leaders, the program effectively combines research, leadership theories, and practical application. We have discovered that pairing actionable research with the sharing of stories creates a meaningful impact.

Because of the few opportunities preservice teachers have to work with dual language learners, training for practicing educators on the supports available to them is essential (Lim et al. 2009). Further, to appropriately develop and implement systems-level policies and change, leaders must have a sound understanding of the strategies necessary to support dual language learners to acquire English and, when possible, to maintain their home language. Besides engaging with virtual learning modules, teachers learn to implement specific strategies by video recording themselves in their learning settings. This lets them implement strategies directly with dual language learners, and it provides opportunities for them to receive feedback from their dyad leader.

During the first in-person meeting of BELLE, teachers are asked to create a "journey map" of their career so far. We leave this open-ended so that participants can decide what elements they will use as time points. Through this activity, we find vulnerability and insights as the community engages in discussions about their Latine identities. These include participants' immigration stories, racial identities, and academic and professional journeys.

Because many conversations touch on biases, disappointments, failures, and discrimination, sensitivity and trust are necessary to navigate them successfully. Establishing this sense of trust early on ensures that every participant feels free to express their thoughts without fear of judgment. As one teacher expressed, "The opening activity of the map made an instant comfort in the group. An instant feel of familiarity even though we come from different places.



Examples of how two BELLE participants used maps to represent their professional journeys. These maps include both personal and professional milestones, which serve as interesting reflection points about how experiences and culture inform their decisions to pursue new opportunities.

A willingness to open up in the group. A comfort in the similarity of our backgrounds. Sometimes when you go to workshops, you don't get that."

Providing Role Models

To envision themselves as leaders, members of underrepresented populations must see themselves in positions of leadership (Bonilla-Rodriguez 2011).

It is key for Latine educators to pursue opportunities to lead so that they can develop as professionals, act as mirrors for others, and advocate for policies to improve systems for dual language learners.

For that reason, BELLE strives to bring in a Latine education leader as a keynote speaker during each in-person setting. Stories are a powerful way to share challenges and the strategies used to overcome them.

During one meeting, we were able to secure New Jersey's first woman and first Latina state senate majority leader. She shared how she navigates male-dominated spaces to advocate and create policies in favor of educational improvements. "I think it is really empowering," one participant said. "It's powerful to hear. It's great to see women of the same background as you. Sometimes I doubt myself. I don't see many women who look like me, sound like me, that have made it so far." Another shared, "Uno lo escucha y dice, 'Si ella lo puedo hacer por qué no yo?' A uno lo incentive. (One listens and says, 'If she can do it, why not me?' It incentivizes you.)"

Classroom Observations

Data are important for continuous improvement (DeMonsabert et al. 2022). Using a high-quality, equity-focused measure exposes teachers to structured observation tools. It also is critical to establishing levers that can increase equity in early childhood education settings (Meek et al. 2022).

To underscore these points and to understand participating teachers' contexts, we use NIEER's Classroom Assessment of Supports for Emergent Bilingual Acquisition tool (Frede & Figueras-Daniel 2014) to collect classroom observation data both before and after teachers participate in BELLE. This information is used to assess the quality of teachers' language support, to respond to their needs, and to guide the program's overall goals. Results in aggregate are shared during our first workshop, which reinforces the idea of using data for continuous improvement. In addition, we use attitude and belief surveys to understand teachers' ideologies about the use of Spanish for instruction. We also use individual interviews to examine teachers' perceptions and understandings about BELLE and to gauge what they gained from participating in the program.

Collectively, these data support decisions about what content to spend more time on both during and across cohort years. For example, we have been able to identify patterns about the frequency with which teachers use English and Spanish in the classroom. Data have also helped us know where to focus efforts with specific teachers and how BELLE has improved teacher practices over time.

BELLE Achievements and Lessons Learned

A key component of BELLE's success is creating awareness of the issues it seeks to remedy. These include the lack of Latine leaders and the need for policy and practice informed by the research that shows dual language instruction is most effective for dual language learners.

However, implementing systemwide change takes time and careful planning. From our data collection over the past four years, we have learned that while participants have introduced some of the specific strategies they learned into their dual language settings, challenges remain: Implementing practices specifically related to the language of instruction is difficult without a program's overarching systemic support. This is in line with recent recommendations that outline the need for policies to better govern this area (Soto-Boykin et al. 2024).

Given ongoing reflection, our internal team has used the past four years to tweak program components iteratively, adjusting both logistical elements (time of meetings, number of meetings) and content. One common theme that all BELLE participants have shared is that the program allowed them to explore work and culture in ways they had never experienced before. After completing the program, they were motivated to spring to action. For example,

- Two BELLE participants were asked to lead the New Jersey Department of Early Education's official preschool instructional coach training on dual language learners.
- Many participants have applied to degree and credential programs. One applied and was accepted to a doctorate of psychology program, sharing: "My participation in BELLE really inspired me to take this step, which had been on my mind for the past 10 years, and I finally went for it. Thank you, thank you, thank you!"
- At least four teachers have applied for and been selected as preschool instructional coaches; one sought a Head Start director position; and at least two have enrolled in degree programs to seek lead teacher roles.
- Participants from almost all participating districts and programs are leading professional learning communities for their peers on strategies that they learned. This is an important outcome: A main emphasis of BELLE is to start from where you are, acknowledging that leadership opportunities begin from within the learning setting.
- Former participants are proposing presentations to local and national conferences, including NAEYC's.

We see these examples as evidence that programs like BELLE can empower historically marginalized populations to pursue leadership roles.

BELLE in Your Setting

Seeking, mentoring, and providing leadership opportunities for Latine, Spanish-speaking teachers will benefit dual language learners in early childhood education. Both teachers and administrators in any setting can begin this work by adopting a few targeted practices. Among them:

- **Understand the value of language and culture as pedagogical strengths.** Teachers should use their personal experiences, language, and culture to enrich the learning setting and reflect on how these assets connect to children and families. Administrators should create settings in which teachers understand that their language and culture have value.
- **Identify the gems.** Administrators should highlight the exemplary practices of bilingual teachers; teachers should share how using language and culture in daily lessons, routines, and activities welcome families into their settings.
- **Learn about different measures that support continuous improvement.** Teachers can request that program oversight includes language and culture as part of quality assessment. Administrators should assess program quality through linguistically and culturally responsive lenses to understand the practices that are evident and to allow the use of Spanish to be made visible and given credit.
- **Open doors and hold up mirrors.** Administrators can identify professional organizations and opportunities that focus on Latine issues and dual language learners in early childhood education. They should encourage Latine teachers to attend meetings and conferences. Likewise, Latine teachers must seek opportunities to attend meetings, webinars, or conferences led by Latine leaders who can serve as inspirations and role models.
- **Seek (and be) mentors.** Teachers should reach out to leaders who embody the values that resonate with them or who have a journey that feels familiar. As Latine teachers express their personal goals and visions, administrators should think about how they can use their professional networks to help teachers realize their vision through coaching and connection to opportunities for new roles.

About the Authors

Alexandra Figueras-Daniel, PhD, is an assistant research professor and bilingual early childhood education specialist at the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Alex has worked as a preschool teacher and currently oversees a variety of research initiatives and technical assistance projects. She also leads professional development for teachers. afiguerasdaniel@nieer.org

Ellen Frede, PhD, recently retired as senior codirector of the National Institute for Early Education Research in New Brunswick, New Jersey. A continuing thread in Ellen's work has been researching and supporting dual language policies and practices in early childhood education settings.

Carmen Espinosa, MEd, is a research project coordinator at NIEER and is pursuing her EdD degree at Rutgers University. Carmen collaborates closely with educators and policymakers to build strong, cooperative relationships and advance research that benefits young multilingual learners. Additionally, she serves as a trainer for Grow NJ Kids through the Rutgers School of Social Work. cespinosa@nieer.org

Elise A. Genao is the bilingual training specialist at NIEER. She has served in various roles within public school settings, including preschool teacher, curriculum supervisor, master teacher, and school administrator in a preschool-through-grade-8 school. Elise also was an education manager within a Head Start agency. In her most recent position, she was a preschool-through-grade-5 principal, supporting students, teachers, and parents in a high-serving Hispanic community. egnao@nieer.org

References

Beck, J.S., K. Hinton, & B.M. Butler. 2022. "Truly Open to All: Three Ways to Diversify Teacher Leadership." *Phi Delta Kappan* 104 (2): 32–36.

Bonilla-Rodriguez, D.M. 2011. "A Profile of Latina Leadership in the United States: Characteristics, Positive Influences, and Barriers." EdD dissertation. St. John Fisher University.

Coleman-Stokes, V. 2022. "Exploring the Lived Experiences of Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color Leaders' Perceptions on and Access to Opportunities that Support Positional Leadership at a Catholic, Marianist, Predominately White Institution: A Critical Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study." Graduate thesis and dissertation. University of Dayton. ecommons.udayton.edu/graduate_theses/7177.

Choi, J.Y., D. Ryu, C.K. Van Pay, S. Meacham, & C.C. Beecher. 2021. "Listening to Head Start Teachers: Teacher Beliefs, Practices, and Needs for Educating Dual Language Learners." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 54: 110–24.

Colomer, S. 2019. "Double Binds and (Re) Imagined Storylines: *Las Obligaciones* of Being a Latina Teacher in a New Latinx Community." *Theory Into Practice* 58 (3): 273–81.

DeMonsabert, J., S. Brookes, M.M. Coffey, & K. Thornburg. 2022. "Data Use for Continuous Instructional Improvement in Early Childhood Education Settings." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 50 (3): 493–502.

Figueras-Daniel, A., & Z. Li. 2021. "Evidence of Support for Dual Language Learners in a Study of Bilingual Staffing Patterns Using the Classroom Assessment of Supports for Emergent Bilingual Acquisition (CASEBA)." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 54: 271–85.

Frede, E., & A. Figueras-Daniel. 2014. "Policy Advances and Levers Related to DLLs in Pre-K–3rd Grade." Paper prepared for the National Research Summit on the Early Care and Education of Dual Language Learners. cal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/NRSECEDLL2014-FredeFigueras-Daniel.pdf.

Garcia Coll, C., G. Lamberty, R. Jenkins, H.P. McAdoo, K. Crnic, et al. 1996. "An Integrative Model for the Study of Developmental Competencies in Minority Children." *Child Development* 67 (5): 1891–1914.

IES (Institute of Education Sciences). n.d. "What Is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy?" ies.ed.gov/rel-pacific/2025/01/culturally-sustaining-pedagogy-infographic.

Leu Bonanno, S. 2023. "Examining the Foundations of Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining School Leadership: Towards a Democratic Project of Schooling in Dual Language Bilingual Education." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 59 (1): 72–111.

Lim, C.I., K.L. Maxwell, H. Able-Boone, & C.R. Zimmer. 2009. "Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Early Childhood Teacher Preparation: The Impact of Contextual Characteristics on Coursework and Practica." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 24 (1): 64–76.

Little, M., & A. Gragson. 2023. "State Leaders in Early Childhood Education: Perspectives on Instructional Policy Supports and Alignment." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 63: 288–98.

Long, S., M. Souto-Manning, & V.M. Vasquez, eds. 2016. *Courageous Leadership in Early Childhood Education: Taking a Stand for Social Justice*. Teachers College Press.

McWayne, C.M., G. Melzi, & J. Mistry. 2022. "A Home-to-School Approach for Promoting Culturally Inclusive Family-School Partnership Research and Practice. *Educational Psychologist* 57 (4): 238–51.

Meek, S., I. Iruka, X. Soto-Boykin, D. Blevins, B. Alexander, et al. 2022. *Equity Is Quality, Quality Is Equity: Operationalizing Equity in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems*. Children's Equity Project. cep.asu.edu/resources/Equity-is-Quality-and-Quality-is-Equity.

Méndez-Morse, S., E.T. Murakami, M. Byrne-Jiménez, & F. Hernandez. 2015. "*Mujeres* in the Principal's Office: Latina School Leaders." *Journal of Latinos and Education* 14 (3): 171–87.

Migration Policy Institute. n.d. *Young Dual Language Learners in the United States and by State*. migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-state-profiles-young-dlls.

Moore, E.K. 1997. "Race, Class and Education." In *Leadership in Early Care and Education,* eds. S.L. Kagan & B.T. Bowman. NAEYC.

NAEYC. 2019. "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity.

Nogales, A. 2003. *Latina Power!: Using 7 Strengths You Already Have to Create the Success You Deserve*. Simon and Schuster.

Northey, K. 2022. "Double and Triple Binds: How Status, Gender, and Race Influence the Work of State Prekindergarten Leaders." *Journal of Education Human Resources* 40 (3): 282–304.

Pak, K., & S.M. Ravitch. 2021. "Transforming Systems." In *Critical Leadership Praxis for Educational and Social Change,* eds. S.M. Ravitch & K. Pak. Teachers College Press.

Paris, D., & H.S. Alim, eds. 2017. *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*. Teachers College Press.

Park, M., J. Zong, & J. Batalova. 2018. *Growing Superdiversity Among Young US Dual Language Learners and Its Implications*. Migration Policy Institute. migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/SuperDiversityAmongDLLs_FINAL.pdf.

Partika, A., A.D. Johnson, D.A. Phillips, G. Luk, A. Dericks, et al. "Dual Language Supports for Dual Language Learners? Exploring Preschool Classroom Instructional Supports for DLLs' Early Learning Outcomes." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol. 56, 33 2021, pp. 124–38. doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.03.011.

Ramsey, P. 2015. *Teaching and Learning in a Diverse World: Multicultural Education for Young Children*. 4th ed. Teachers College Press.

Rodela, K.C., & C. Rodriguez-Mojica. 2020. "Equity Leadership Informed by Community Cultural Wealth: Counterstories of Latinx School Administrators." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 56 (2): 289–320.

Rojas, N.M., S. Ramos, & A. Salgado. 2023. "Early Childhood Education Teacher's Beliefs About a Match in Home Language Proficiency with Emergent Bilingual Learners." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 63: 194–203.

Scanlan, M., & F. López. 2012. "¡Vamos! How School Leaders Promote Equity and Excellence for Bilingual Students." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 48 (4): 583–625.

Soto-Boykin, X., S. Meek, C. Williams, G.Y. Aponte, L. Espinosa, et al. 2024. *Operationalizing High-Quality Dual Language Programming: From the Early Years to the Early Grades*. Children's Equity Project. cep.asu.edu/sites/g/files/litvpz916/files/2024-04/DLI-quality-indicators-032924.pdf.

Souto-Manning, M. 2013. *Multicultural Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom: Approaches, Strategies and Tools, Preschool–2nd Grade*. Teachers College Press.

Yosso, T.J. 2005. "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8 (1): 69–91.

Zong, J., J. Batlova, & J. Hallock. 2018. *Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States*. Migration Policy Institute. migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states-2018.

Structures of Support

Developing Early Literacy Leadership Ecosystems

Courtney Shimek, Aimee Morewood, and Allison Swan Dagen

Strong literacy leadership contributes to overall school improvement efforts and is crucial for early literacy learning and success (Louis et al. 2010). Literacy leaders can be reading specialists, coaches, and classroom teachers (ILA 2018). Educators who become literacy leaders instruct students in essential literacy skills, model a love for reading and writing, cultivate colearning in the classroom and school community, and collaborate with colleagues to improve literacy instruction across disciplines (Dagen & Bean 2020; Hill & Stone 2023-2024). They also have a deep and comprehensive understanding of literacy content and instructional practices (Bean & Ippolito 2025).

We (the authors) are teacher educators at West Virginia University (WVU). As faculty working in the Master of Arts in Literacy Education program with reading specialist certification, we teach literacy theories and practices to pre-K–12 pre- and in-service educators. In our roles, we have strategically created literacy networks to accommodate, encourage, and develop educators into literacy leaders across rural West Virginia. In this article, we discuss how organizational

structures can create strong literacy leadership ecosystems that enable educators to access, apply, and share their knowledge across their professional roles and contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000). We also describe how we implemented initiatives at the higher education level to deepen the pedagogical knowledge of pre-K through third-grade educators in early literacy content. Finally, we offer recommendations for teacher educators and early elementary educators to create and participate in literacy ecosystems at local, state, and national levels.

Our Context

WVU is in Morgantown, which is West Virginia's third-largest city with 30,000 residents. Much of the state is rural (US Census Bureau 2024b). There is one school district for every county, and while many counties have multiple K–8 elementary schools, several have only one high school. Many educators who work in these settings teach students who may be experiencing community- and family-related traumas as well as inconsistent access to nutritious food, safe housing, and health care (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2024). West Virginia's educators often feel overwhelmed with responsibilities, are underpaid, and live more than 25 miles from urban centers (Kannapel et al. 2015; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell 2019).

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the early literacy achievement gap in West Virginia widened, compounding challenges for teachers and school communities (WVDE 2020; Annie E. Casey Foundation 2024). Based on the 2020–2021 West Virginia Summative Assessment (WVSA) results, only 40 percent of third graders read at a proficient level (WVDE 2025a; WVDE 2025b). However, with each successive year, students have made gains: In 2023–2024, 46 percent of third graders demonstrated reading proficiency (WVDE 2025b).

Public and private stakeholders at local and state levels, including faculty at WVU, have collaborated to increase investments and implement multitiered initiatives to support young children's early literacy development (WVPEC, n.d.; WVDE 2020; WVDE 2025). It can be challenging for educators in West Virginia to participate in interactions with colleagues outside of their schools, a practice that supports both educator satisfaction and their development as literacy leaders (Eckert & Alsup 2014; Hill & Stone 2023–2024). Our program faculty have worked to increase these opportunities and to provide multiple entryways for early elementary teachers to access support for their professional development and address our state's early literacy learning goals. (See "Providing Access to Literacy Education Courses Through Partnerships.")

The Interconnected Ecosystems of Educators

Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory on human development underwent revision over the course of three decades but retained a focus on individuals' growth and change within the context of their interconnected environments (Rose & Tudge 2013). These environments, or *ecosystems*, are "nested systems ranging from micro to macro" (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006, 769), including public policy, laws, and programs that "create the environments that shape the course of human development" (Bronfenbrenner 2005, xxvii; Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006). (For more details about each system as related to early learning, see Chapter 1 in *Hear Our Voices*, by Bweikia Foster Steen.)

Educators participate in and are affected by their ecosystems, from their immediate contexts, such as home and work (microsystems), to broader cultural and societal structures and norms, including those passed on by state or national policies and initiatives (macrosystems).

When thinking of teachers' desires for professional connections and growth within and across these systems, we designed programmatic approaches and coursework to provide them with effective levels of support. We have seen that as their expertise and confidence as literacy leaders grow, educators can navigate within and between systems more readily (Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000). (See "Moving Among Systems: Promoting Educators as Literacy Leaders" on page 48 for an example of how different professional contexts impacted an educator's identity and formation as a literacy leader.)

Teachers as Literacy Leaders

Research has shown that teacher quality is essential with respect to early literacy development (Early et al. 2007). Early elementary educators can serve a vital role in progressing literacy goals in their classrooms and schools and even at the district level (Hill & Stone 2023–2024). In order to take on this role, it is important for educators to become "continuous learners" (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium 2011, 11). As they practice reflection and deepen their knowledge, they can deliver instruction in developmentally appropriate ways that meet national, state, and local literacy standards (ILA 2018; NAEYC 2020).

Teacher leadership roles and responsibilities vary and can be formal or informal (Dagen 2017). Teacher leaders perform tasks such as "model[ing] effective practices" for teacher colleagues and support staff and "support[ing] collaborative team structures within their schools" (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium 2011, 11). Literacy leaders might engage in tasks that include collaborating with peers on instructional approaches; creating trainings, presentations, and activities; modeling effective literacy practices; and supporting a strong literacy culture in their schools (ILA 2018; Hill & Stone 2023–2024). They also cultivate a "deep understanding of content, pedagogy, curriculum, equity, student development, digital literacies, and adult learning theory" (Morewood et al. 2020, 24–25).

Pathways to Literacy Leadership

Perceptions of an individual's competence in the workplace can impact their professional progress and influence how their roles and responsibilities change over time (Bronfenbrenner 2006). According to Bronfenbrenner and Evans, *competence* is the "acquisition and development of knowledge, skill, or ability to conduct and direct one's own behavior across situations and developmental domains" (2000, 118). Education and training, like literacy leadership programs, can help to increase an educator's ability to be seen and to serve as a competent literacy expert in their setting (Bronfenbrenner 2000; ILA 2018). These kinds of programs can also help retain educators by fostering "belonging, agency, and productive collaboration" and creating careers in education that are "engaging and fulfilling" (Hill & Stone 2023–2024, 13).

Early elementary educators may choose to informally pursue professional growth as literacy leaders by being active members of literacy associations, staying informed about updates to literacy research, participating in a community of practice focused on literacy, and so on. Other educators may choose to reach their goals through higher education, but their access, experiences, and growth can vary in these programs (Morewood et al. 2020).

We designed our program to make graduate-level coursework accessible. Our Master's in Literacy Education program has undergone substantial changes over time: We transitioned from offering hybrid courses to offering them fully online and shortening the credit-hour requirement from 36 to 30 (Morewood et al. 2020; Dagen et al. 2021). Candidates can choose to complete the program with or without pursuing pre-K–adult reading specialist certification. Regardless of the path candidates choose, they take two courses dedicated to leadership work in schools.

In this section, we describe how we supported educators' development as literacy coaches, helped to strengthen their content knowledge, created opportunities for professional engagement, and provided mentorship and other support as they carried out their own grant-funded projects.

Developing as a Coach

> Because of my courses, I would definitely say my role in my school has changed, and I am starting to be a support to my colleagues. This evening, a fellow teacher expressed concern with students reading each word slowly by sounding it out, and I provided some suggestions and advice to aid in this.
>
> –Student in the Master's in Literacy Education program

Educators, including early elementary teachers, often work in rural schools where they are the sole teachers for their grade level. When they engage in course activities and discussions, they meet with colleagues across the state, allowing them to share ideas, challenges, and successes directly applicable to their early literacy practices. To build upon these peer-to-peer experiences and support meaningful learning connections, we facilitate collective inquiry, active participation, and reflection (Dagen et al. 2021).

Our faculty has closely aligned content, instruction, practicum experiences, and course objectives with the ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals*, earning our program the ILA National Recognition with Distinction (Dagen et al. 2021; CAHS 2025). Our intentional approach to alignment has allowed us to provide candidates with literacy leadership knowledge and practices that exist within their broader ecosystem. Throughout our program, candidates learn and demonstrate components of the ILA standards, including those that focus on leadership and practicum experiences.

Moving Among Systems: Promoting Educators as Literacy Leaders

An important facet of literacy leadership is "to design, lead, and/or participate in relevant professional learning activities" (ILA 2018, 41). Building opportunities across systems grounds our work in educators' immediate contexts (microsystem) and allows us to provide them with professional networking and collaboration opportunities at the state level (macrosystem).

Over the years, we have intentionally worked to create inlets for educators to participate in statewide professional gatherings, such as the West Virginia Reading Association's annual conference. Each fall, the conference hosts teachers, reading specialists, school administrators, teacher education faculty, and West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) members who gather to share peer-reviewed presentations, listen to keynote speakers, hear from children's book authors, and engage in conversations.

In 2022, we gave a keynote speech and invited a candidate in our program to present with us. Melanie, a first-grade educator working in a K–2 school, completed a teacher research project while enrolled in the Motivation and Engagement in Literacy Learning course. She explored whether students would be motivated to "increase the readability of their writing" when "explicitly taught to use a sound chart to support effective encoding and inventive spelling" (Morewood et al. 2023, 10). She used a variety of instructional strategies and intentionally chosen materials, such as individual sound-letter charts and engaging decodable texts. Then she scaffolded an authentic, independent writing experience in which students composed letters to their favorite authors. Her data indicated that these interventions were effective: The students exhibited growth in their writing skills and increased interest in writing (Morewood et al. 2023).

When Melanie presented her project during a class session, we saw the connections she made between what she learned in the program and her classroom practice. Being a keynote speaker at a state-level conference was something she had never considered before our invitation. She was thankful but admitted to being nervous about the opportunity. "I'd much rather speak in front of 6–7-year-olds, but I will have plenty of time to tweak my presentation," she wrote to us.

By accepting our invitation, she took on a new facet of her literacy leadership: She provided knowledge generated from her classroom and from our program to an audience of teachers from other districts, faculty from other teacher preparation programs, and statewide leaders. Indeed, her leadership both influenced and was influenced by systems ranging from micro to macro.

Students develop coaching mindsets and engage in coaching experiences to help them "communicate across teams and stakeholders" in their school settings (ILA 2018, 41). They learn about the four coaching mindset frameworks outlined by Bean and Ippolito: ". . . the presence of strong leadership, collaborative relationships, a clear mission/vision, and a focus on systems thinking" (2025, 13).

They practice these mindsets as they progress along a continuum of coaching experiences, which helps candidates prepare for the variety of responsibilities and roles they may have as literacy leaders (Bean et al. 2015, 11). After field experiences, candidates reflect and debrief with their observers and through video recordings (ILA 2018, 40).

The last course candidates take is Literacy Leadership, where they apply what they have learned by researching and designing approaches to increase literacy growth in their settings. They create professional learning opportunities for a small audience of colleagues, complete an inquiry-based project focused on evaluating a school's literacy plan, and propose a schoolwide literacy program. In the process, they collaborate "with colleagues to design, align, and assess instructional practices and interventions within and across classrooms" (ILA 2018, 40).

Strengthening Content Knowledge

Teacher retention is an important factor for student achievement, particularly in under-resourced settings (Lochmiller et al. 2016). In 1987, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established to strengthen the teaching profession through a voluntary national certification process (NBPTS 2025). Evidence suggests that educators who achieve national board certification are more likely to stay in the profession (Lochmiller et al. 2016).

Many of the leadership components outlined in the ILA standards and the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium standards align with NBPTS's standards, such as collaborating with teacher colleagues, grounding their practice in sound theory and research, and being "valued members of learning communities at the local, state, and national levels" (NBPTS 2024, 86). To increase student academic achievement, the WVDE has encouraged, supported, and financially incentivized elementary and secondary teachers to pursue national board certification (CAHS 2018).

We contributed to these efforts by implementing the Literacy Leadership Through National Board Certification program. We created a six-credit course for pre-K educators working toward national board certification, which we offered tuition-free from 2014 through 2017 with support from a local funding organization. This graduate-level course was designed to help pre-K educators become more confident in their early literacy knowledge and practices (Dagen & Morewood 2016).

Students were able to engage using synchronous and asynchronous online methods, such as discussion boards, messages, and live chat and/or video. The course topics and content we focused on included "oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, phonics/word study, comprehension, vocabulary, writing, print environment . . . read-alouds, [and] emergent writing" (Dagen & Morewood 2016, 22). Students were able to apply this content to their work with young learners and share what worked and what did not with their peers each week.

The post-course survey responses indicated that as the pre-K educators deepened their literacy content and pedagogical knowledge, they became more confident collaborating with peers. Their identities as literacy leaders also deepened. One educator wrote that she was able to share what she learned from the course with her pre-K colleagues and felt a sense of accomplishment. Feedback like this demonstrates that professional competence can help educators influence and navigate various systems, both within and across them (Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000).

Learning from Professional Interactions

Even as educators complete courses or a program, they are still at risk of feeling isolated in their own school settings, where professional interaction may be "limited to brief, cordial pleasantries sprinkled with a few quick PLC (Professional Learning Community) meetings each week" (Hill & Stone 2023–2024, 13). We realized that current and former students crave new knowledge and connections across the state.

To foster literacy learning in their settings, educators need opportunities to develop as literacy leaders.

We created and received funding to carry out two additional macrosystem components: Mastermind mentor meetings and a statewide speaker series.

Mastermind Mentor Series

We applied for and received a grant to implement mastermind mentor meetings, which we successfully implemented through the spring of 2025. We created this program to provide kindergarten, first-, and second-grade teachers with mentoring support while they worked to earn their degrees and certifications (Shimek et al. 2025). Mastermind mentor meetings consisted of three to four participants who gathered biweekly to learn about relevant research and discuss their professional goals and challenges (Gonzalez 2017).

During each meeting, a program graduate or pre-K educator who had participated in the Literacy Leaders Through National Board Certification grant led discussions about readings and on topics like the science of reading, dyslexia, multimodal learning, culturally responsive teaching, writing, and so on. Each session, one member took the "hot seat" and would pose an issue they were grappling with. Other members asked questions, offered perspectives, and gave suggestions. The gatherings ended with goal setting, which added a layer of accountability and allowed participants to "reflect on their professional practices" (ILA 2018, 40).

One mentor shared that the educators in their group felt "better prepared in teaching literacy within their classrooms." These meetings became a place where they could reflect on their practices and help one another become literacy leaders in their various systems (classrooms, schools, counties). We found this model of peer mentorship to be an effective component in developing literacy leadership and hope to be able to offer it to program candidates in the future.

Statewide Speaker Series

We observed an increase in feelings of isolation among educators in our program following the COVID-19 pandemic. We also witnessed the uptick in their use of digital communication technologies. In response, we created a statewide speaker series, which involved a network of teachers across the state who met online to collaborate once a semester from the fall of 2021 to the spring of 2024. Speakers from West Virginia and other states shared their current research initiatives, attempts to shape policy, and effective literacy practices (macrosystem). Sessions also focused on educator-requested topics, such as writing in the elementary classroom, incorporating diverse children's literature, and dyslexia legislation in the United States.

These sessions provided another opportunity for educators to "seek out and participate in literacy professional learning activities" (ILA 2018, 40). They also fostered statewide professional connections and peer support, which helped educators seeking to expand their literacy leadership development.

Implementing Literacy Initiatives with Mentors

Since 2021, the Sparking Early Literacy Growth Initiative has supported people and programs to increase early literacy growth across systems in West Virginia. The early elementary educators who receive funding demonstrate many key aspects of literacy leadership: They further their content and pedagogical knowledge, assess and reflect on their work, and advocate for students and families (ILA 2018; Dagen 2023).

Examples of grant projects that early elementary educators have implemented include

- A schoolwide professional development book club on the research between play and literacy
- Purchasing supplies to engage pre-K through third-grade students in literacy-based play centers
- Looping to encourage student-teacher relationships across multiple school years

We serve as literacy consultants to grant recipients and advise educators on data collection, collaborative processes, and literacy content pertinent to their projects. We have also authored white papers to share their efforts with those at the macrosystem level. This includes state leaders and literacy advocates tasked with considering which of these grant projects could be carried out in other districts.

We witnessed the professional growth of teachers who planned and implemented their projects. For example, they often took informal literacy leadership roles that extended beyond the classroom and school as they worked with families on how best to support their children's literacy skills at home.

Recommendations to Develop Literacy Leaders

Faculty members in our program aim to develop a literacy ecosystem that encourages pre-K through early primary educators to identify and serve as literacy leaders in their communities. The following recommendations can open a wealth of opportunities to support educators to develop as early literacy leaders.

For Teacher Educators

- Consider the different systems your program impacts. Brainstorm ways to connect with others beyond your immediate system.
- Network with literacy leaders, educators, and administrators at local, state, and national conferences.
- Identify which organizations provide grants that support education. Meet with grant officers to hear about their goals and initiatives and to find creative ways to support early literacy leaders through these grants.
- Talk with university administrators and advocate for ways to reduce the cost of degree programs. Make sure you are aware of federal, state, and local options to alleviate the financial burden of professional development, degrees, and certifications.
- Work with administrators, departments of education, and other leaders to design systems for literacy leaders. Follow state legislative initiatives, and advocate for programs that can support educators' literacy efforts and goals.

For Pre-K Through Early Elementary Educators

- Attend local conferences, such as your NAEYC Affiliate conference and state literacy association, and meet with other literacy leaders.
- Use social media to connect with educators in your state (and beyond). Develop virtual once-a-month meetings to discuss the challenges and successes you are experiencing in your setting.
- Follow education groups, colleges of education, and education-focused student organizations on social media to become knowledgeable about literacy initiatives. They are often looking for teachers to work with and may be open to new ideas and collaborations.
- Reach out to university faculty and financial aid offices before enrolling in higher education programs, and ask what kinds of funding and/or other resources they provide.
- Join national organizations like NAEYC and ILA. Subscribe to their newsletters, attend webinars, and search for scholarships on their websites.

Conclusion

To foster literacy learning in their settings, educators need opportunities to develop as literacy leaders (Bean & Ippolito 2025). Collaborations among educators, administrators, district leaders, funders, professional organizations, and higher education programs and faculty can strengthen literacy leadership across systems that impact educators and the children they teach. We remain focused on our efforts to increase young children's literacy growth in West Virginia by engaging in cooperative efforts to provide new and exciting opportunities for West Virginia's educators. We hope this can inspire the work that occurs in other states too.

About the Authors

Courtney Shimek, PhD, is an assistant professor at the School of Education at West Virginia University. She teaches early literacy courses in the literacy education program and is a former pre-K educator. Her research includes literacy teacher preparation, play, and children's literature.

Aimee Morewood, PhD, is a professor at the School of Education at West Virginia University. She is the program coordinator for literacy education. Dr. Morewood's research includes effective online instruction, literacy leadership, adaptive teaching, and readability.

Allison Swan Dagen, PhD, is a professor at the School of Education at West Virginia University. She teaches courses focused on the role of specialized literacy professionals and literacy leadership with research interests in these fields.

References

Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2024. *2024 Kids Count Data Book*. Report. assets.aecf.org/m/databook/aecf-2024kidscountdatabook-embargoed.pdf.

Bean, R.M., & J. Ippolito. 2025. *Cultivating Coaching Mindsets: A Guide for Instructional Learners*. 2nd ed. Guilford Press.

Bean, R.M., V. Goatley, & D. Kern. 2015. "The Multiple Roles of School-Based Specialized Literacy Professionals." ILA (International Reading Association). literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/literacy-professionals-research-brief.pdf.

Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. 1994. "Ecological Models of Human Development." In *The International Encyclopedia of Education*. 2nd ed. Eds. T. Husen & T.N. Postlethwaite. Elsevier Sciences.

Bronfenbrenner, U. 2005. *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*. Sage Publications.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & G.W. Evans. 2000. "Developmental Science in the 21st Century: Emerging Theoretical Models, Research Designs, and Empirical Findings." *Social Development* 9: 115–25.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & P.A. Morris. 2006. "The Bioecological Model of Human Development." In *Handbook of Child Psychology: Theoretical Models of Human Development*. 6th ed. Eds. R.M. Lerner & W. Damon. John Wiley & Sons.

CAHS (College of Applied Human Sciences). 2018. "WVU Program Produces State's First National Board Certified Pre-K Teachers." CAHS Enews. February 6, 2018. wvutoday.wvu.edu/stories/2018/02/06/wvu-program-produces-state-s-first-national-board-certified-pre-k-teachers#:~:text=A%20partnership%20between%20the%20West,12%20counties%20throughout%20the%20state.

CAHS (College of Applied Human Sciences). 2025. "WVU Literacy Education Program Earns ILA 'National Recognition with Distinction.' " CAHS Enews. April 14, 2025. media.appliedhumansciences.wvu.edu/stories/2025/04/14/wvu-literacy-education-program-earns-ila-national-recognition-with-distinction.

Dagen, A.S., & R.M. Bean. 2020. *Best Practices of Literacy Leaders: Keys to School Improvement*. 2nd ed. Guilford Press; International Literacy Association.

Dagen, A.S., L. Canyon, D. Peduto, & M. Claxton. 2023. "Sparking Early Literacy: Reversing Pandemic-Era Learning Losses." *West Virginia Reading Association Visual Conference Journal* 1 (1): 18–27. wvpec.wvu.edu/files/d/18539a44-25fd-4e3a-8098-60816a5fc118/west-virginia-reading-association-journal-may-2023-1.pdf.

Dagen, A.S., & A. Morewood. 2016. "Strengthening Early Literacy Through Online Collaboration and Mentoring." *Young Children* 71 (4): 20–25.

Dagen, A.S., A. Morewood, & M.L. Smith. 2017. "Teacher Leader Model Standards and the Functions Assumed by National Board-Certified Teachers." *The Educational Forum* 81 (3): 322–38.

Dagen, A.S., A. Morewood, S. Taylor, C. Glance, A. Curfman, et al. 2021. "Preparing Contemporary Reading/Literacy Specialists: Pairing Research and Standards." *Literacy Practice and Research* 46 (1): 6. digitalcommons.fiu.edu/lpr/vol46/iss1/6.

Early, D.M., K.L. Maxwell, M. Burchinal, S. Alva, R.H. Bender, et al. 2007. "Teachers' Education, Classroom Quality, and Young Children's Academic Skills: Results from Seven Studies of Preschool Programs." *Child Development* 78 (2): 558–80.

Eckert, L.S., & J. Alsup. 2014. *Literacy Teaching and Learning in Rural Communities: Problematizing Stereotypes, Challenging Myths.* Routledge.

Gonzalez, J. 2017. "What Is an Educator Mastermind, and Why Should You Join One?" *Cult of Pedagogy*. cultofpedagogy.com/educator-mastermind.

Hill, T., & A. Stone. 2023–2024. "Empowering Teachers as Literacy Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Retention." *Tennessee Education Leadership Journal* 49 (2): 12–18.

ILA (International Literacy Association). 2018. "Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017." ILA.

Kannapel, P., M. Flory, E. Cramer, & R. Carr. 2015. "Appalachia Rising: A Review of Education Research." CNA Corporation. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED612954.pdf.

Lochmiller, C.R., E. Adachi, C.E. Chesnut, & J. Johnson. 2016. "Retention, Attrition, and Mobility Among Teachers and Administrators in West Virginia. REL 2016-161." US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia. ies.ed.gov/rel-appalachia/2025/01/descriptive-study-8.

Louis, K.S., B. Dretzke, & K. Wahlstrom. 2010. "How Does Leadership Affect Student Achievement? Results from a National US Survey." *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 21 (3): 315–36.

McHenry-Sorber, E., & M.P. Campbell. 2019."Teacher Shortage as a Local Phenomenon: District Leader Sensemaking, Responses, and Implications for Policy." *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 27 (87): 1–29. doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4413.

Morewood, A., S. Taylor, A.S. Dagen, J.W. Ankrum, & C. Glance. 2020. "Online Instruction: An Innovative Environment Bridging Literacy and Leadership Learning." *Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers Yearbook* 42: 21–38.

Morewood, A., C. Shimek, A.S. Dagen, & M. Cox. 2023. "We've All Heard It . . . 'I Don't Want to Write': A Teacher's Approach to Engaging Her Early Writers." *West Virginia Reading Association Visual Conference Journal* 1 (1): 7–12. wvpec.wvu.edu/files/d/18539a44-25fd-4e3a-8098-60816a5fc118/west-virginia-reading-association-journal-may-2023-1.pdf.

NAEYC. 2020. "Developmentally Appropriate Practice." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents.

NBPTS (National Board Certification for Professional Teaching Standards). 2024. *Early Childhood Generalist Standards.* 2nd ed. NBPTS. nbpts.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EC-GEN.pdf.

NBPTS (National Board Certification for Professional Teaching Standards). 2025. "Mission and History." nbpts.org/about/mission-history/.

Rosa, E., & J. Tudge. 2013. "Urie Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development: Its Evolution from Ecology to Bioecology." *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 5 (4): 243–58.

Shimek, C., A.S. Dagen, & A.L. Morewood. 2025. "Using Virtual Mastermind Mentor Meetings as an Innovative Tool to Support Teachers Post COVID-19: Meeting Teachers Where They Are." In *Redefining Education with Pandemic Pedagogies,* eds. T. Lobalsamo & D. Segreti. IGI Global Scientific Publishing.

Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium. 2011. "Teacher Leader Model Standards." nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/teacher_leader_model_standards.pdf.

US Census Bureau. 2024a. "QuickFacts Morgantown City: West Virginia." US Department of Commerce. census.gov/quickfacts/morgantowncitywestvirginia.

US Census Bureau. 2024b. "QuickFacts: West Virginia." US Department of Commerce. census.gov/quickfacts/WV.

WVDE (West Virginia Department of Education). 2020. *West Virginia's Transformative System of Support for Early Literacy: A Report of Progress.* West Virginia Department of Education. wvde.us/sites/default/files/2021/01/21347-LeadersOfLiteracy-LOCEA-Report-v9.pdf.

WVDE (West Virginia Department of Education). 2025a. "General Summative Assessment." West Virginia Department of Education. wvde.us/academics/assessment/general-summative-assessment.

WVDE (West Virginia Department of Education). 2025b. "State Assessment Results." West Virginia Department of Education. zoomwv.k12.wv.us/Dashboard/dashboard/7301.

WVDE (West Virginia Department of Education). 2025c. "Third Grade Success Act." West Virginia Department of Education. wvde.us/academics/early-elementary-education/third-grade-success-act.

WVPEC (West Virginia Public Education Collaborative). n.d. "Sparking Early Literacy Growth." wvpec.wvu.edu/events-and-initiatives/sparking-early-literacy-growth-in-west-virginia.

Give Yourself the Permission to Lead

Debbie LeeKeenan and Iris Chin Ponte

Many program directors never intended to be in the role. Quite a few are classroom teachers who became very knowledgeable about the program and advanced over time to lead it. Some directors are placed in the position at the request of their program boards; others are asked to step in during transitional periods or emergency circumstances. In cases like these, directors often find it hard to lead a group of individuals who have been their peers. As a classroom teacher, you are trained to be warm and nurturing at all times, and you work hard to build the trust and respect of children and families. But while directors should likewise be approachable and supportive, they also need to be authoritative, confident decision makers—whether it makes everyone happy or not.

Building partnerships with staff and exercising facilitative leadership are important, but to fulfill all of your different responsibilities, you must give yourself the permission to lead and act with authority in your role. Being an effective director requires striking the right balance between good management

Editors' Note: Many program leaders come to their position with a wealth of knowledge and experience as early childhood educators but little formal preparation or training in leadership. In an excerpt from Chapter 1 in *From Survive to Thrive: A Director's Guide for Leading an Early Childhood Program* (published by NAEYC), Debbie LeeKeenan and Iris Chin Ponte offer advice to help directors build effectiveness as leaders, make intentional decisions, and lead with purpose.

and good leadership. Neither directors nor teachers want authority to be the only aspect of their work relationships. Most people want—and greatly benefit from—boss-employee interactions that are grounded in human connection and motivation, and research shows that when employees have a more personal relationship with their boss, it improves their level of engagement in their work (Artz 2013; Anitha 2014).

I never thought I would be a director. I always loved kids and my job as a classroom teacher, and I wasn't looking for something else. But when an opportunity presented itself, I thought, "I can do that job." I took the leap and never looked back. While some days the challenges are more difficult than I bargained for, overall I have found the rewards of supporting teachers and creating a center-based system, organization, and community that goes beyond one classroom deeply satisfying . . . and certainly never boring!

You can build your effectiveness as a leader by following these three essentials (Hill & Lineback 2011):

- **Manage yourself.** Formal authority alone does not motivate or influence people. Instead, model the kind of behavior you expect from your staff. Be a leader they trust and want to emulate. For example, when listening to a teacher express a concern, model active listening and acknowledge their concern. Invite their thoughts on solutions, and contribute thoughtful responses.
- **Manage your network.** Familiarize yourself with the roles, needs, and expectations of your staff, the program's board members, the families you serve, and the community. For example, be sure to make time to understand the role of each of the program's constituents and to meet with them as often as necessary to maintain a collaborative relationship.
- **Manage your team.** Think about the individual performance of teachers and staff who report to you and how you can inspire and empower them to be their best by supporting and fostering their goals and professional development. Promoting a high-performing "we" will lead to an effective, high-quality program. For example, engage teachers by offering a goal sheet at the beginning of each year on which they list things they want to accomplish in the classroom and as part of their professional growth. Check in at least once during the school year to see how things are going, and ask what resources you could provide that would help them accomplish their aims. At the end of the year, discuss what went well and what could be improved.

As you build a solid foundation in these areas, your confidence in your ability to make intentional decisions and to lead with purpose will grow.

My problem is that I want my staff to like me. I have never been good at being a "boss." That's why during staff meetings, I use the state licensing regulations and NAEYC guidelines to justify my decisions. I tell my staff, "This is best practice. This is what we need to achieve." I want to get better at being a strong leader without falling back on a larger organization for support.

Recognize What You Really Have Control Over

It is easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer number of responsibilities and problems you face on a daily basis. Each person who comes to you with a concern can often make it seem that *their* dilemma is the most pressing issue for you to address and resolve. Some problems are clear cut and relatively straightforward while others are more complex. So, what should the director do to effectively prioritize and respond to issues? Start by considering these two points:

- **Clarify your role.** Ask what the person (or situation) needs or wants from you: A quick yes or no answer? A specific resource? Advice on what to do next? Simply a good listener?
- **Clarify your limitations.** What can you do to help resolve the problem? What can't you do? What do you have control over? What is out of your hands?

Knowing your role and your limitations can help you prioritize and focus your time and energy where it will be most effective. The following vignette illustrates how being mindful of these two points helps the director determine if and how she should act:

> Zoya, a kindergarten teacher, walks into Melissa's office before the children arrive, shuts the door behind her, and begins to cry. Melissa is alarmed, wondering if there is a concern with a child or if Zoya is having an issue with a colleague. Her immediate priority is to find out the problem and to help Zoya regain her composure. If the issue is complex, it might require further conversations with Zoya, but for now, Melissa must try to help her return to the classroom to begin her responsibilities for the day.
>
> She expresses concern and asks what is happening. Zoya confides that her home life has been very stressful lately; she and her husband have been fighting about finances.
>
> "I'm so sorry to hear that," says Melissa, offering Zoya a tissue. "How can I help you?"
>
> Zoya asks about her salary and if there is the possibility of a raise. Melissa knows that she does not have the authority to decide this, and she replies that she will reach out to the board for more information about the budget allocation plans for teacher salaries in the coming year. She also offers to meet with Zoya after school later in the week, so they can take the time to discuss her concerns in more detail. With a plan in place and after talking a bit more with Melissa, Zoya calms down and returns to her classroom to get ready for the day.

Every decision you make, from curriculum to family engagement, has implications. Being aware of and in tune with yourself as a leader will help you be intentional and strategic in your decision making. Your work as a director will include challenges, but you'll be sure to find there are rewards as well.

This piece is excerpted from NAEYC's *From Survive to Thrive: A Director's Guide for Leading an Early Childhood Program.* The book's chapters are self-contained and focused on typical functions of the director role, and they are grounded in the concepts and self-reflection explored in this excerpt. For more information about the book, visit NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/books/from-survive-to-thrive.

About the Authors

Debbie LeeKeenan, MEd, is codirector of Anti-Bias Leaders ECE in Seattle, Washington. She was director and lecturer at the Eliot-Pearson Children's School, the laboratory school affiliated with the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study. debbie.leekeenan@gmail.com

Iris Chin Ponte, PhD, is director and classroom teacher at the Henry Frost Children's Program in Belmont, Massachusetts. She is an adjunct faculty member in the Graduate School of Education at Lesley University.

References

Anitha, J. 2014. "Determinants of Employee Engagement and Their Impact on Employee Performance." *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management* 63 (3): 308–23.

Artz, B. 2013. "The Impact of Supervisor Age on Employee Job Satisfaction." *Applied Economics Letters* 20 (14): 1340–43.

Hill, L., & K. Lineback. 2011. *Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader.* Harvard Business Review Press.

FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Activating Our Best in Leadership

Stretching and Extending Toward Our Collective Mission

Tonia R. Durden

In this issue of *Young Children*, we explore leadership and leading in early childhood education. When I reflect on being a leader, leading, and leadership, I am reminded of a quote shared by John S. Mbiti, a Kenyan philosopher, that captures a concept rooted in African philosophy: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."

It is my belief and experience that an effective leader takes ownership of the responsibility and task of leading while also understanding that their success reflects collective action with the community. As a leader, my success reflects the success and support of those I'm leading. Therefore, if someone compliments a successful outcome of my leadership, you will likely hear me say, "I am because we are, we are because I am."

One of the messages I've communicated in this column has been the power of *with* and the role we each have in promoting equity in early childhood. How do we lead *with* children, families, colleagues—especially those who are often marginalized and not provided access to high-quality and culturally responsive early learning experiences? How do we lead *with* the intention of modeling equitable, high-quality, and culturally responsive early learning experiences? How do we lead *with* influence, trust, and respect so that children, families, and colleagues choose to follow and are not just required to do so? How do we lead *with* our talents, gifts, and privileges to optimize individual and collective action?

Take a moment to reflect on these questions, the ways you are currently leading with intention, and your successes that reflect your community.

As a teacher educator within the Birth Through Five Program at Georgia State University, I see teacher candidates leading in various ways. Our teacher candidates demonstrate leadership in their classrooms and communities. Their leadership is transformative and represents the collective action and success of the children and communities they teach and serve. They lead children in experiences that are developmentally appropriate and that support their holistic development. They lead advocacy efforts to petition for safer walking zones or more access to fresh fruits and vegetables in their neighborhoods. They host a book fair that features more diverse authors and perspectives. Teacher candidates also lead by modeling for others how to aspire to and achieve high-quality early childhood education for every child, and they model career goals even as they face significant social determinants of health and financial barriers.

For example, most teacher candidates in our program are leading classrooms while pursuing a full-time college schedule. Many experience food and housing insecurity, and some face health challenges. Still, they show leadership, grace, and unbridled determination. One student in particular, Ms. Shanequa, demonstrated these qualities as she battled a type of lymphoma while teaching preschool full time and pursuing her degree and certification. She successfully earned both last fall, and she is thriving in her health and early education career. (Read more about Ms. Shanequa, her leadership, and her journey in Georgia State's news story "Graduate of Birth Through Five Education Program Inspired by Her Children.")

It is great in early childhood when our leadership efforts are recognized by others. Therefore, I'd like to take a moment to provide kudos to NAEYC's CEO, Michelle Kang, who has taken on the responsibility and the task of leading critical issues and needs in our field. In early May of this year, Michelle was awarded the Visionary Leadership Award from the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, which commemorates the work, memory, and spirit of Paula Jorde Bloom (founder of this center). Michelle was honored for her work toward increased compensation and professional recognition for early childhood educators, her dedication to elevating their voices, and her advocacy for greater systemic investment in early childhood education. Please join me in congratulating Michelle for her leadership and championing for all children, families, and early childhood professionals. (Read more about NAEYC

NAEYC's Leadership in Promoting High-Quality Early Learning for All Children

Recent Initiatives

Being a leader includes modeling for others how to navigate challenges while staying focused on the task you are charged to lead. NAEYC continues to be the US leader in promoting high-quality early learning for all young children. Its Governing Board has worked with and supported NAEYC staff and leaders to help achieve the Association's mission of promoting high-quality early learning for all children.

One major initiative has involved NAEYC's position statements. In the Summer 2025 issue of *Young Children*, NAEYC Governing Board member Stacey French-Lee shared the latest information about the revision of "Early Childhood Program Standards." In addition, this year the "Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators" has been revised for the first time since 2011. The Code has been updated and streamlined so that all practitioners—including early childhood educators, administrators, and adult educators—can use it to guide and defend ethical conduct and decision making, especially when navigating complex situations with professional judgment and integrity.

This revision has emerged from a multiyear process that included a robust public comment period engaging hundreds of educators across all states and settings. It also reflects the guidance of more than two dozen early childhood and ethics experts serving on the revision workgroup and the NAEYC Governing Board.

With its release, this version of the Code becomes the fifth and final foundational position statement NAEYC has written or revised since 2019. These five foundational documents—which the organization holds *with* and on behalf of the early childhood education profession—are designed to work together. For example, the ethical responsibilities of early childhood educators described in the latest Code work together with the "Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators" in laying out the model professional practices that promote the development, learning, and well-being of young children. (Watch *Young Children* for more about the position statements and their uses.)

In addition, Governing Board members are excited to lift up these recent key accomplishments from NAEYC in our collective work to promote high-quality early learning for all children:

- Redesigning NAEYC's accreditation system and process, so it is easier to navigate and has more diverse quality assessment and accreditation options
- Leading the field in DAP resources and professional supports, including resources created just for you
- Revamping NAEYC's membership portal, including new interactive features and digital resources
- Launching a new, member-exclusive magazine, *Educating Young Children*, with its second issue packed with practical ideas and examples about educator well-being
- Providing ongoing feedback and strategic direction through NAEYC's early childhood education workforce surveys
- Creating the new *Early Childhood Education Higher Education Faculty Newsletter*, which you can sign up for now
- Debuting the "Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators" Resource Library, which is a hub of resources centered on this position statement
- Offering the new *Advocacy in Action* newsletter and advocacy resources to keep you up-to-date on early childhood policies and advocacy opportunities

There is more to come to ensure NAEYC is leading efforts toward our collective vision that all young children learn and thrive in a society dedicated to ensuring they reach their full potential.

leaders and leadership in "NAEYC's Leadership in Promoting High-Quality Early Learning for All Children: Recent Initiatives" on page 59.)

Shortly after Michelle's recognition, Dr. Barbara Cooper, a NAEYC Governing Board member, was honored with the 2025 Early Childhood Education Alumni Leadership Award given by the University of Colorado Denver School of Education and Human Development (SEHD). The award "recognizes extraordinary SEHD alumni whose leadership exemplifies the school's mission to engage in inclusive leadership practices that seek to advance early childhood education in the State of Colorado and across the nation." We witness firsthand Barbara's leadership and contributions on the NAEYC Board and her commitment to championing educational equity. I'm delighted that SEHD also recognized her transformative, impactful leadership and collective action within the community while leading in early childhood.

Whether I'm writing in *Young Children* or providing a keynote during NAEYC conferences, I often reference three things: Stories of teachers/teaching, anecdotes from my young children or family, and connections to Beyoncé. Therefore, I cannot end this article without a reference to my children and to Beyoncé.

Beyoncé is a distinguished artist who has led the rhythm-and-blues field in fashion, art, and entertainment. *Cowboy Carter*, her latest album and tour, is an example of how she leads and extends her talents within the country music genre, ultimately transforming it. Beyoncé has broken barriers, provided access for other Black country music artists, and elevated this genre to new audiences. So, I ask you: What is your *Cowboy Carter*? What is that initiative you'll lead to advance early education for the children and families in your community? How will you lead this effort, even when it is a new topic or area? Who will you collaborate with? What professional resources will you seek to learn to be able to lead?

My *Cowboy Carter* is leading and supporting our workforce in cultivating a community of care and wellness—grounded in our talents, resources, and gifts—to advance educational equity. This is a new area for me: I'm beginning to explore and learn more about how we can be happy, healthy, and whole so that we can do the good work, the exhausting work, the hard work on behalf of children, families, and communities. More and more, I've come to see educator well-being and self-care as an area in need of support for the teachers I teach.

Lastly, in effective leadership, we must learn from children and be open to opportunities in which they show us how to lead. My 7-year-old son, Frederick, is an avid (and pretty good) soccer player. This past May, he played seven games, in four different positions, against children two to three years older than him, in 100-degree heat. He and his team went on to become the division champions at the Capital Cup tournament in Tallahassee, Florida. When his father and I asked him how he felt to be a champion and team leader, his response was *"*I am best when I am *my* best*."*

Let's lead in our best by being *our* very best for children, families, and each other each day!

Onward and upwards in early childhood education!

DE NUESTRA PRESIDENTA

Cómo activar nuestro mejor liderazgo

Ampliar y extender nuestro esfuerzo para alcanzar nuestra misión colectiva

Tonia R. Durden

En este número de *Young Children*, exploramos el tema del liderazgo y cómo liderar en la educación de la primera infancia. Cuando reflexiono sobre lo que significa ser líder, cómo liderar y el liderazgo, me viene a la mente una cita de John S. Mbiti, filósofo keniano, que recoge un concepto arraigado en la filosofía africana: "Soy porque somos; y porque somos, entonces, soy".

En mi opinión y según mi experiencia, un líder eficaz asume la responsabilidad y la tarea de dirigir, a la vez que comprende que su éxito refleja la acción colectiva con la comunidad. Como líder, mi éxito refleja el éxito y el apoyo de aquellos a quienes lidero. Por lo tanto, si alguien elogia un logro obtenido en mi liderazgo, es probable que me oigan decir: "Yo soy porque nosotros somos; nosotros somos porque yo soy".

Uno de los mensajes que he transmitido en esta columna ha sido el poder de trabajar *con* los demás y el papel que cada uno de nosotros tiene en la promoción de la equidad en la primera infancia. ¿Cómo lideramos *con* los niños, las familias, los colegas, en particular, con aquellos que suelen ser marginados y no tienen acceso a experiencias de aprendizaje temprano de calidad y culturalmente sensibles? ¿Cómo lideramos *con* la intención de ejemplificar experiencias de aprendizaje temprano equitativas, de alta calidad y culturalmente sensibles? ¿Cómo lideramos *con* influencia, confianza y respeto para que los niños, las familias y los colegas decidan seguirnos y no solo sientan que es una obligación? ¿Cómo lideramos *con* nuestros talentos, aptitudes y privilegios para optimizar la acción individual y colectiva?

Tómense un momento para reflexionar sobre estas preguntas, sobre las maneras en que actualmente logran liderar con intención y cómo sus logros reflejan a su comunidad.

Como formadora de maestros/as en el Programa de educación para niños desde el nacimiento hasta los 5 años de la Universidad Estatal de Georgia, veo que los candidatos lideran de diversas maneras. Nuestros futuros maestros y maestras demuestran liderazgo en sus aulas y comunidades. Su liderazgo es transformador y representa la acción colectiva y los logros de los niños y las comunidades a los que enseñan y asisten. Guían a los niños en experiencias adecuadas para su desarrollo y que promueven su desarrollo integral. Lideran iniciativas de promoción para solicitar zonas más seguras para caminar o mayor acceso a frutas y verduras frescas en sus barrios. Organizan una feria del libro que presenta autores y perspectivas más diversos. Los futuros maestros y maestras también sirven de ejemplo a los demás sobre cómo aspirar y lograr una educación de la primera infancia de calidad para todos los niños y niñas, y cuando persiguen sus metas profesionales incluso cuando enfrentan importantes factores sociales que dificultan el acceso a la salud y representan barreras económicas.

Por ejemplo, la mayoría de los futuros maestros y maestras de nuestro programa están a cargo de sus aulas mientras cursan estudios universitarios a tiempo completo. Muchas de estas personas sufren inseguridad alimentaria y habitacional, y algunas tienen problemas de salud. Aun así, demuestran liderazgo, gracia y una decisión sin límites. Una estudiante en particular, la Sra. Shanequa, demostró estas cualidades mientras estaba en tratamiento contra un linfoma a la vez que daba clases en preescolar a tiempo completo y estudiaba para obtener su título y certificación. El otoño pasado obtuvo ambos títulos, y tanto su salud como su carrera en la educación infantil van en ascenso. (Lean más acerca de la Sra. Shanequa, su liderazgo, y su experiencia en el artículo del boletín de la Universidad Estatal de Georgia "Graduate of Birth Through Five Education Program Inspired by Her Children." - Graduada del programa de educación infantil inspirada por sus estudiantes).

Es fantástico ver cuando nuestros esfuerzos de liderazgo en el ámbito educativo de la primera infancia son reconocidos por los demás. Por lo tanto, me gustaría dedicar un momento para felicitar a la Directora General de NAEYC, Michelle Kang, que ha asumido la responsabilidad y la tarea de liderar en cuestiones y necesidades fundamentales en nuestro sector. A principios de mayo de este año, Michelle recibió el Premio al Liderazgo Visionario del Centro McCormick para el Liderazgo en la Primera Infancia, que conmemora el trabajo, la memoria y el espíritu de Paula Jorde Bloom (fundadora de este centro). Michelle fue galardonada por su trabajo a favor de una mayor remuneración y reconocimiento profesional de los educadores de la primera infancia, su dedicación a hacer oír sus voces y su labor para lograr una mayor inversión gubernamental en la educación de la primera infancia. Súmense para felicitar a Michelle por su liderazgo y su defensa de todos los niños y niñas, las familias y los profesionales de la primera infancia. (Lean más acerca de los líderes y el liderazgo de NAEYC en "El liderazgo de NAEYC en la promoción de un aprendizaje temprano de calidad para todos los niños: Iniciativas recientes", en la página 62).

Poco tiempo después del reconocimiento de Michelle, la Dra. Barbara Cooper, miembro de la Junta Directiva de NAEYC, recibió el Premio al Liderazgo en Educación de la Primera Infancia para exalumnos 2025, otorgado por la Facultad de Educación y Desarrollo Humano de Denver (SEHD), perteneciente a la Universidad de Colorado. El premio "reconoce a exalumnos extraordinarios de SEHD cuyo liderazgo ejemplifica la misión de la escuela de llevar adelante prácticas de liderazgo inclusivas que apuntan a promover la educación de la primera infancia en el estado de Colorado y en todo el país". Somos testigos de primera mano

El liderazgo de NAEYC en la promoción de un aprendizaje temprano de calidad para todos los niños:

Iniciativas recientes

Cumplir con la misión de liderar significa servir de ejemplo a los demás sobre cómo afrontar los problemas sin dejar de centrarse en la tarea que se le ha encomendado. NAEYC sigue siendo el líder en los Estados Unidos a la hora de promover un aprendizaje temprano de calidad para todos los niños pequeños. Su junta directiva ha colaborado con el personal y los líderes de NAEYC, y los ha apoyado, para poder cumplir con la misión de la Asociación de promover el aprendizaje temprano de calidad para todos los niños.

Una de las principales iniciativas ha sido la creación de las declaraciones de posición de NAEYC. En el número de verano 2025 de *Young Children*, Stacey French-Lee, miembro de la Junta Directiva de NAEYC, difundió la información más reciente sobre la revisión de los *Estándares de los programas de educación de la primera infancia*. Además, este año se ha revisado el *Código de ética para educadores de la primera infancia* por primera vez desde 2011. El Código se ha actualizado y simplificado para que todos los profesionales—incluidos los educadores de la primera infancia, los administradores y los educadores de adultos—puedan utilizarlo para orientar y defender la conducta ética y la toma de decisiones, sobre todo, a la hora de afrontar situaciones complejas con criterio profesional e integridad.

Esta revisión es el resultado de un proceso de varios años que incluyó un sólido período de comentarios públicos en el que participaron cientos de educadores de todos los estados y entornos. También refleja las recomendaciones de más de una veintena de especialistas en ética y primera infancia que forman parte del grupo de trabajo de revisión y de la Junta Directiva de NAEYC.

Con su publicación, esta versión del Código se convierte en la quinta y última declaración de posición fundacional que NAEYC ha redactado o revisado desde 2019. Estos cinco documentos fundacionales—que la organización sostiene en nombre de la profesión de la educación de la primera infancia—están diseñados para que se usen en conjunto. Por ejemplo, las responsabilidades éticas de los educadores de la primera infancia descritas en el último *Código* funcionan de manera conjunta con los *Estándares y competencias profesionales para educadores de la primera infancia* al establecer las prácticas profesionales ideales que promueven el desarrollo, el aprendizaje y el bienestar de los niños pequeños. (Mire *Young Children* para conocer más acerca de las declaraciones de posición y sus usos.)

Además, los miembros de la Junta Directiva están encantados de poder destacar estos recientes logros clave de NAEYC en nuestro trabajo colectivo para promover el aprendizaje temprano de calidad para todos los niños:

- La reformulación del sistema y proceso de acreditación de NAEYC, para que sea más fácil de entender y tenga opciones más diversas de evaluación de la calidad y acreditación
- Liderazgo en el área de los apoyos profesionales y recursos de DAP, entre ellos, recursos creados exclusivamente para ustedes
- Renovación del portal para miembros de NAEYC, que incluye nuevos elementos interactivos y recursos digitales
- Lanzamiento de una nueva publicación exclusiva para miembros, *Educating Young Children* (La educación de los niños pequeños), con un segundo número repleto de ideas prácticas y ejemplos sobre el bienestar de los educadores
- Proporcionamos información continua y orientación estratégica a través de las encuestas de NAEYC sobre los trabajadores de la educación de la primera infancia
- Creación del nuevo *Boletín para docentes de educación superior del profesorado de educación de la primera infancia*, al que se pueden suscribir ya mismo

- Presentación de la biblioteca de recursos de los Estándares y competencias profesionales para los educadores de la primera infancia, que es un centro de recursos centrado en esta declaración de posición
- Ofrecemos el nuevo boletín *Advocacy in Action* (Promoción en acción) y recursos de promoción para que se mantengan informados sobre las políticas relacionadas con la primera infancia y las oportunidades de tareas de promoción

Aún queda mucho por hacer para que NAEYC logre concretar las iniciativas orientadas a cumplir nuestra visión colectiva de que todos los niños pequeños aprendan y crezcan en una sociedad dedicada a garantizar que alcancen su pleno potencial.

del liderazgo y las contribuciones de Barbara en la Junta Directiva de NAEYC y de su compromiso con la defensa de la equidad educativa. Me complace enormemente que SEHD también haya reconocido su liderazgo transformador y trascendental y su acción colectiva dentro de la comunidad a la vez que ejerce su liderazgo en el ámbito de la primera infancia.

Tanto si estoy escribiendo para *Young Children* como si estoy dando un discurso en alguna conferencia de NAEYC, suelo hacer referencia a tres cosas: Historias de maestros(as)/enseñanzas, anécdotas de mis hijos pequeños o de mi familia, y conexiones con Beyoncé. Por lo tanto, no puedo terminar este artículo sin una referencia a mis hijos y a Beyoncé.

Beyoncé es una artista distinguida que ha liderado el campo del *rhythm-and-blues* en la moda, el arte y el entretenimiento. *Cowboy Carter*, su último álbum y gira, es un ejemplo de cómo ella lleva adelante y amplía su talento dentro del género de la música country, y termina por transformarlo. Beyoncé ha derrumbado barreras, les ha abierto la puerta a otros artistas negros de música country y ha elevado este género a nuevos públicos. Por eso, les pregunto: ¿Cuál es para ustedes su *Cowboy Carter*? ¿Cuál es la iniciativa que eligen liderar para impulsar la educación de la primera infancia para los niños y las familias de su comunidad? ¿Cómo dirigirán esta iniciativa, incluso cuando se trate de un tema o un área nuevos? ¿Con quiénes colaborarán? ¿Qué recursos profesionales buscarán para mejorar sus aptitudes de liderazgo?

Mi *Cowboy Carter* se trata de liderar y respaldar a nuestra fuerza laboral para cultivar una comunidad de cuidados y bienestar —fundad en nuestros talentos, recursos y aptitudes— con el fin de promover la equidad educativa. Esto es algo nuevo para mí: Estoy empezando a investigar y aprender más sobre cómo podemos ser felices, saludables y completos para poder llevar a cabo el trabajo eficiente, el trabajo agotador, el trabajo arduo en nombre de los niños, las familias y las comunidades. Observo cada vez más que el bienestar y el autocuidado de los educadores es un área a la que debe prestarse atención para los maestros y maestras a quienes enseño.

Por último, respecto al tema del liderazgo eficaz, debemos aprender de los niños y niñas y estar abiertos a la posibilidad de que ellos nos demuestren cómo liderar. Mi hijo de 7 años, Frederick, es un ávido (y bastante buen) jugador de *soccer*. El pasado mes de mayo jugó siete partidos, en cuatro posiciones distintas, contra niños dos o tres años mayores que él, con una temperatura de 100 grados. Él y su equipo salieron campeones de su división en el torneo Capital Cup de Tallahassee, Florida. Cuando su padre y yo le preguntamos qué se sentía ser campeón y líder de un equipo, su respuesta fue: "Soy el mejor cuando logro ser la mejor versión de *mí mismo*".

¡Lideremos dando lo mejor de *nosotros mismos* por los niños y las niñas, las familias y por cada uno de nosotros todos los días!

¡Sigamos adelante y elevemos la educación de la primera infancia!

NAEYC Governing Board & Leadership

NAEYC Governing Board

Tonia R. Durden, *President* / Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA
Nadia Jones, *President-Elect* / Rollins Center for Language & Literacy, Atlanta, GA
Kelly Ramsey, *Vice President* / Developing People, All Our Kin, Oklahoma City, OK
Brian Johnson, *Secretary* / Children and Youth Institute Michigan State University Extension, Lansing, MI
Nicole Woods, *Treasurer* / Karsh Institute of Democracy, Charlottesville, VA
Joseph Alviani / Salesforce, Newton, NJ
Alyson Anderson / Early Childhood Education and Human Development and Family Studies, Iowa State University, Ames, IA
Barbara Cooper / Start Early, Montgomery, AL
Erin Covington / Alvarez & Marsal, Washington, DC
Dianne Haulcy / Minnesota Department of Children, Youth and Families, Minneapolis, MN
Troy Hunter / Groundwork Ohio, Columbus, OH
Chara Fisher Jackson / Cincinnati Preschool Promise, Cincinnati, OH
Chris Lambert / Retired Attorney and Educator
Megan Madison / Author, Educator, Organizer, New York, NY
Kharesa Rivera / University of Colorado Denver, Monte Vista, CO
Toni Sturdivant / Mid America Regional Council, Kansas City, MO
Shu-Chen "Jenny" Yen / California State University, Fullerton, CA
Michelle Kang *(Ex Officio)* / NAEYC, Washington, DC

Young Children Consulting Editors

Jessica Alvarado / National University, San Diego, CA
Lawrence Balter / New York University, New York, NY
Holland Banse / University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL
Bonnie Blagojevic / Morningtown Consulting, Orono, ME
Meghan Block / Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI
Lorraine Breffni / Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL
Pam Brillante / William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ
Samuel Broaden / Honoring Childhood, Portland, OR
Amber Brown / University of Houston-Clear Lake, Houston, TX
Kutasha Bryan-Silva / University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL
Jennifer Buchter / Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL
Karen Burger Cairone / Education Development Center Inc., Learning and Teaching Division, Newtown, PA
Lisa Castillo / South Salem Elementary School, Port Washington, NY
Jolene Charbeneau / Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI
Eun Kyeong Cho / University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH
Dong Hwa Choi / Park University, Parkville, MO
Rebecca Rohloff Clough / Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA
Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove / Texas State University, San Marcos, TX
Christan Coogle / George Mason University, Fairfax, VA
Patricia Cooper / Queens College-CUNY, Long Island City, NY
Tanya Cordoba / Anderson University, Anderson, SC
Jennifer Corkern / Martin County School District, Stuart, FL
Shelly Counsell / University of Memphis, TN
Jennifer Crandell / WestEd, Scituate, MA
Becky DelVecchio / University of Massachusetts, Boston, MA
Michelle Dent / Educational consultant, CT
Maleka Donaldson / Smith College, Northampton, MA
Emily Dorsey / University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL
Dede Dunst / Mitchell Community College, Statesville, NC
Angela Eckhoff / Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
Angela Elkins / Red Barn Cooperative Nursery School, Weston, MA
Nagwa Elsamra / Central Jersey Family Health Consortium, North Brunswick, NJ
Andrea Emerson / Western Oregon University, Monmouth, OR
Alexandra Figueras-Daniel / Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ
Jeanne Galbraith / State University of New York, Geneseo, NY
Keri Giordano / Kean University, Union, NJ
Ron Grady / Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA
Ashley Y. Grays / University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL
Kathleen Harris / Seton Hill University, Greensburg, PA
Dorian Harrison / Ohio State University, Newark, OH
Holly Hatton-Bowers / University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE
Jayme Hines / St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY
Emily Brown Hoffman / National Louis University, Chicago, IL
Cindy Hoisington / Education Development Center, Newton, MA
Sara Hooks / Towson University, Towson, MD
Tamar Jacobson / Rider University, Philadelphia, PA
Rebecca Roji John / Old Dominion University, Chesapeake, VA
Courteney Johnson / Fordham University, New York, NY
Candace Joswick / University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX
Kristen Kemple / University of Florida, Gainesville, FL
Jinhee Kim / Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA
Anita Kumar / William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ
Hannah Kye / Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ
Joohi Lee / University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX
Sunmin Lee / Texas State University, San Marcos, TX
Melanie Loewenstein / Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, TX
Lynn Lubecki / Empire State University, Rochester, NY
Julia Luckenbill / Davis Joint Unified School District, Davis, CA
Christine Lux / Montana State University, Bozeman, MT
Sue Mankiw / William Paterson University, Vernon, NJ
Bernice Mayfield / Northern Virginia Community College, Manassas, VA
Lauren Meade / Solon City Schools, Solon, OH
Kelly McCormick / University of Southern Maine, Portland, ME
Candice McKinnon / California State University–Channel Islands, Camarillo, CA
Hannah Mills Mechler / University of North Texas at Dallas, Fort Worth, TX
Amanda Messer / Lincoln County School System, Stanford, KY
Lori Erbrederis Meyer / University of Vermont, Burlington, VT
Gayle Mindes / DePaul University, Chicago, IL
William Mosier / Istanbul University, Dayton, OH
Meir Muller / University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC

Voices of Practitioners

Executive Editors

Editorial Advisory Board

Member Spotlight

Eric Unrau

Lead Teacher,
Ruth Staples Child
Development Lab
University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Nebraska

Eric Unrau graduated in 1990 with an associate's degree in early childhood education—the first man to complete the program at Southeast Community College in Lincoln, Nebraska.

"I had always kind of struggled in school, but finding something that I had a passion for made all the difference," he recalls. "I graduated with distinction. The next summer, I applied for a group supervisor position at the college's child development center, and I spent the next 25 years working there with 4-year-olds, their families, and the college students in the child development program."

Today, Eric is a lecturer and the lead teacher at the Ruth Staples Child Development Lab at the University of Nebraska. In 2023, he received the Sally Wysong Award for excellence in early childhood education from the Lincoln chapter of the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children. Here, he shares observations from 35-plus years in the field.

You've spent more than three decades as an early childhood educator. What are the biggest changes you've observed?

When I started, everything was thematic based. We planned around set themes and holidays. Today, we're letting children take the lead. I love that switch. We coach our teacher candidates about this type of planning. A lot of them are going to go on to teach in public schools, and this is a real paradigm shift.

The evidence is clear about the benefits of balancing child- and teacher-directed experiences. But what does this look like in practice?

Our student teachers spend five hours every day at the Child Development Lab. At the beginning of the semester, they each get an iPad to use to observe what children are interested in. They bring their observations into our weekly planning meetings, where each student teacher and each lead teacher share two observations they made about the children from the past week. Using this information, we do curriculum webbing to see what interests the children share. These common interests are used to plan their weekly activities.

We also plan with the children. We have a floor book that we use with them to document what they see and say. We collaborate with them, and that's how we plan for the next week. For example, when we visited Harden Hall's prairie grass area, we knew that a professor had brought in four cows to "mow" the grass. Before we went, we talked with the children about what they might see and prepared ourselves for any questions they might ask. After our visit, we recorded the children's comments, questions, and areas of interest in our floor book.

Families are part of this planning and learning too. Our teacher candidates do home visits, and families do a self-assessment of their children when they start in the program. We use that information to set learning goals for each child. The more we can engage families, the better. We're in this together.

You're a proponent of outdoor education. How do you incorporate that at the Ruth Staples Child Development Lab?

We spend as much time as possible outdoors. In the late spring, summer, and early fall, families drop off their children in our outdoor classroom. This includes a garden area, climbing structures, a mud kitchen, and a climbing wall. We're on a college campus, so we use all of the walkways to explore the children's learning environment. We typically eat outdoors. Nap time is sometimes outdoors. We call this *place-based learning experience.* I've had a chance to present at conferences on it, including with Dr. Michelle Rupiper at the 2016 NAEYC Annual Conference.

Is there a particular activity that you love doing with children?

Woodworking! I started doing this with young children early in my career. There is something about working with tools that is very satisfying for children. I think the fascination comes from being offered something to use that is usually a "don't touch" for them. Woodworking is safe for children when we've taught them how use these materials safely. Anything that a child has an interest in, let's find a way to let them use it without saying no.

You were the first male graduate of Southeast Community College's Early Childhood Education Program. Are there specific challenges associated with being a man in early childhood education?

First let me say that I would never have lived this dream without all the amazing women who work with our youngest children and who have welcomed me throughout my career. But supporting my family financially has always been a challenge. This isn't just for men, but for anyone who works with young children.

Compensation is an issue NAEYC continues to address. Has pay affected your professional arc?

People who work with children don't do this for the money. We need early childhood educators to be adequately compensated. But I wouldn't trade this work for anything. When I graduated from high school, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. By my late 20s, I was wondering what I was going to do for a "real" job when I came across an opening at a child care center. I'd always loved being around younger children and their families. I applied for the position, and the first step was to fill out a questionnaire. I had no idea how to answer any of the questions! The next day, I went to Southeast Community College and enrolled in its child development program. At the end of my second semester, I started working at the college's onsite center. I knew this was what I wanted to do.

What's next for you?

I'm in the winter of my career. The children mistakenly call me Dad, but more and more—it's Grandpa. That might just be the highest of compliments!

NAEYC.org/get-involved/membership/spotlight/nominate

SHARE YOUR STORY Answer a few questions to tell us about your work with young children and what NAEYC membership means to you.

NOMINATE A MEMBER Share why a NAEYC member you know should be recognized for their work with young children.

Photographs: courtesy of Eric Unrau

voices of PRACTITIONERS

An Introduction to Mickey Willis and Amanda Lautenbach's "Using Celebrations and Literature in Project Work to Affirm Children's Identities"

Barbara Henderson and Robyn Brookshire

A story is an invitation to engage. When we hear another teacher encounter a knot or challenge in their practice, we can learn how they moved through the tensions and toward practices more aligned with their hopes and values. In this spirit, *Voices of Practitioners* recently invited early childhood educators to share a *pedagogical narrative*; that is, a reflective, story-based account of inquiry centering the educator's voice and lived experience (Henderson 2025).

Our call to authors asked educators to describe how children's literature or other forms of quality media have significantly influenced their work with children. Educators of young children have a particular responsibility to curate texts that reflect children's real-world experiences and curiosities, both in and beyond the classroom. An intentional and critical approach to text selection enhances literacy, gives deeper meaning to shared stories, and affirms children as people with agency.

At the beginning of a new school year, Mickey Willis and Amanda Lautenbach were shifting back into a classroom full-time with 4- and 5-year-olds. They wondered how to incorporate anti-bias values into project work with a new classroom community. Their article, "Using Celebrations and Literature in Project Work to Affirm Children's Identities," describes how they developed a literature-based project to extend children's inquiry over time and deepen relationships and connections. Their story shows us how two teachers worked alongside children and families to build curriculum—and reminds us that learning is, at its heart, a process of change embedded in relationships. We hope that this story will inspire other educators to create child- and family-driven projects tailored to their unique settings.

Indeed, pedagogical narratives provide a fluid way to incorporate reflection into teaching, enabling us as educators to become more intentional in our work with children. These stories become like stones dropped into water, sending ripples flowing outward far from the spot where they first landed. Such stories remind us why we do this work and invite us to step into the new school year with purpose and a sense of curiosity. What are you wondering about as the year begins? What changes are you hoping to make? How will you make time to reflect? Who will you share your stories with?

For more about pedagogical narratives, read "The Pedagogical Narrative as a Form of Teacher Research: Stories for Inquiry, Reflection, and Transformation" in the Summer 2025 issue of *Young Children.*

About the Authors

Barbara Henderson, PhD, is the director of the doctoral program in educational leadership at San Francisco State University and a professor in elementary education with an early childhood specialization. Her research expertise is in practitioner and teacher research. She is one of the founding editors of *Voices of Practitioners*. barbarah@sfsu.edu

Robyn Brookshire, PhD, is currently clinical assistant professor of interdisciplinary early childhood education and previously directed the early childhood laboratory school at the University of Tennessee. Her research and practice advances teacher development, pedagogical leadership, and equity in early education. rbrooks8@utk.edu

References

Henderson, B. 2025. "The Pedagogical Narrative as a Form of Teacher Research: Stories for Inquiry, Reflection, and Transformation." *Young Children* 80 (2): 66–74.

Using Celebrations and Literature in Project Work to Affirm Children's Identities

Mickey Willis and Amanda Lautenbach

Mickey Willis is a coteacher in the 4K classroom at Preschool of the Arts (PSA) in Madison, Wisconsin, a nonprofit, Reggio Emilia-inspired school. She has been an early childhood educator since 2008, finding her home at PSA in 2014. Mickey served as one of PSA's curriculum developers for a number of years before following her heart back to the classroom full time.

Amanda Lautenbach is a coteacher in a 4K classroom at Preschool of the Arts in Madison, Wisconsin. Amanda was previously a music specialist at the organization and served as a cochair on the school's diversity, equity, and inclusion committee for several years.

It was the first day of school for our teaching team, who collectively had 25 years of first days of school. It wasn't new to us, yet we were both coming off of leadership roles that made the day feel new. Amanda Lautenbach (the second author) had been a music specialist for Preschool of the Arts (PSA) for six years, and Mickey Willis (the first author) had been a curriculum developer at the school for the last four years. Now, we were back in a classroom full-time with 16 4- and 5-year olds.

PSA is a Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool in Madison, Wisconsin. As part of our practice, we view the curriculum as a delicate, intentional, and spontaneous dance among teachers, children, families, and the environment. For several years, our school has made an intentional and organized effort to educate, implement, and practice anti-bias education using a variety of resources to inform our work with children. These include the anti-bias education approach shared in NAEYC resources.

In both of our previous classroom teaching experiences, we used children's literature as a provocation for learning. As we came together as a team, we recognized this as a shared value. Through conversations and reflections about the upcoming school year, the two of us formed a shared vision for a yearlong curriculum focus that would combine our dedication to anti-bias education and children's literature. In this article, we share how we incorporated identity and diversity, the first two goals of anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020), through the use of high-quality children's literature to affirm children's identities. We leaned into two central principles of the Reggio Emilia approach—curriculum as negotiated and families as partners—to ensure that the exploration was authentic and meaningful.

Our Favorite Day of the Year

Beautiful, high-quality children's literature is a passion we both share. It was crucial for us to choose a book that would allow for a deep, long-term focus that mirrored the children in our classroom while opening doors to new experiences (Bishop 1990). The recent implementation of a schoolwide holiday policy inspired by the book *Celebrate! An Anti-Bias Guide to Including Holidays in Early Childhood,* by Julie Bisson, paired with a strong desire to involve our classroom families in our project work led us to begin our journey with the book *Our Favorite Day of the Year*, by A.E. Ali and illustrated by Rahele Jomepour Bell.

Our Favorite Day of the Year follows a class's journey of getting to know one another throughout their time together at school. It focuses on learning about and honoring differences and inspiring family participation as families share holidays and celebrations that are important to them. We began the year by reading this book to children each day for at least a week before reading it to families at our back-to-school night. The book inspired us to create a classroom sign-up sheet that would invite families and other home caregivers to pick a date to share about the holidays or celebrations that reflected their values and family cultures. We committed to opening our classroom to families and allowing them to take over when it was their time to share. Again, drawing inspiration from *Our Favorite Day of the Year*, we suggested that families could share authentic artifacts, books, or activities that represented their traditions.

When learning about holidays and traditions from cultures that were not our own, we relied on having open conversations with families to ensure that we were holding ourselves accountable and appropriately representing and appreciating their important day. Knowing that some families didn't have the flexibility to come into our setting, we welcomed other avenues for them to represent their traditions.

Be You!

While we waited for families to sign up to share their favorite days, we decided to take the lead and celebrate something we all knew was important: Ourselves! We used books such as *Chrysanthemum*, by Kevin Henkes, and *The Name Jar*, by Yangsook Choi, that allowed children not only to focus on the academic elements of learning their names, but also on social and emotional elements. These included having pride in themselves and appreciating differences in others. When reading books with names or words that were not in our primary language, we relied on YouTube and other forms of digital media. Because we know the importance of hearing your name pronounced correctly, we diligently looked for a read aloud by either the book's author or someone who was a native speaker of the language of the book.

Broadening our celebration to include ourselves also opened the door to other rich children's literature. One book that became a class favorite was *Be You!*, by Peter H. Reynolds. This book creates a joyful celebration of individuality and staying true to Y-O-U! With each new book we introduced, it was like a twirl or dip in our curriculum dance.

The use of these books in our class was simple, yet impactful. We would read them at least once a day, every day, during our morning meetings or our end-of-day check-ins. As a way to keep the children engaged with the repetition, we invited them to notice something different in the story each time we read it—maybe a new word or a detail in the illustrations. This really increased engagement and opened a lot of discussion. We began to get great insight into each child's individual interests and personalities through this celebration of self. We were beginning to feel the music of our yearlong curriculum collaboration with the children.

We soon shifted our focus to learning about and observing national and international holidays that reflected children's interests (like creating observational drawings of our cats on Global Cat Day). This allowed us to keep the dance music on, if you will. We relied heavily on the National Day Calendar (n.d.) as a framework for these investigations, and we incorporated quality children's literature and media where we could. National Polka Dot Day was a class favorite as we introduced artist Yayoi Kusama through the book *Yayoi Kusama: From Here to Infinity!*, by Sarah Suzuki and illustrated by Ellen Weinstein. We enhanced this experience by using online video clips to virtually explore one of Kusama's installations, *Obliteration Room* at the Tate Museum in London. This inspired us to use white paper and polka dot stickers to turn our loft into our own "obliteration room."

We documented each celebration on a giant calendar in our hallway, which was inspired by the teacher's gift at the end of *Our Favorite Day of the Year.* This calendar generated a buzz of excitement throughout the school as we reminisced and looked forward to upcoming special days. Colleagues and even families from other classrooms began sharing their own resources and ideas with us to guide our celebrations. Our documentation served as an invitation for others to join the rhythm of our project.

Seeing examples of how we celebrated in big and little ways helped our families become more comfortable in sharing their own practices and traditions. Our first family-led sharing about a celebration focused on their alternative to traditional Thanksgiving celebrations: Instead of eating turkey on Thanksgiving, they went for a walk through the woods looking for turkeys! This tradition enriched our curriculum as the family

shared a presentation about turkey facts and created a scavenger hunt for the class to use during our own outdoor walk.

Soon, we noticed the children coming up with personalized celebrations, like "National Amy Becomes a Big Sister Day" or "National Mickey Comes Back from Vacation Day." They also began offering ideas for celebrating our hundredth day of school, like "a cake that says 100" and finding 100 "beautiful things." The children were beginning to take the lead in our dance.

What Do You Do with an Idea?

By spring, we began conversations with the children about taking the lead on planning a "grand finale," or end-of-year celebration. Throughout the year, we had discussed the difference between *big* and *little* celebrations and ways we learned about or celebrated them. We thought about their birthdays, where there might be a special song or a treat that made it a big celebration. Conversely, on holidays such as National Oreo Day, we simply took time to appreciate the people and/or things we loved. Knowing we wanted our grand finale to be a big celebration, we guided the children to start thinking about things that are often a part of them. We took their ideas and grouped them into the following categories:

- Music
- Gifts
- Invitations
- Food
- Activities/games
- Decorations

Using these ideas, we created committees of small work groups for children to discuss, reflect, plan, and prepare for their big celebration.

But what were we celebrating exactly? The children said, "We're celebrating getting bigger!" and "That I remembered to write all the *E*s in my name!" Of course we used another children's book to guide our discussions: *What Do You Do with an Idea?*, by Kobi Yamada and illustrated by Mae Besom, invited us to think about the possibilities for the event.

What the children created was uniquely theirs, complete with face paint, cereal (inspired by a poll we took on National Cereal Day), and even a song called "I Love Copper Room," sung to the tune of Joan Jett's "I Love Rock and Roll." Ultimately, we had an idea, the children danced with it, and it became a beautifully choreographed culmination of all of our accomplishments and celebrations.

Literature as an Invitation to Learning: Final Thoughts

Developing a yearlong curriculum based on children's literature was a new and rewarding practice for us. We noticed the children's deep personal connection to the literature as we repeatedly read each book:

- *Be You!* became intertwined with almost every element of the classroom. When children followed along with a peer's idea that could possibly end in a poor choice, we used language from the book to remind them to "be your own thinker!" Families became connected to the literature and would put notes in their children's lunch boxes quoting the book, signing their notes "Be you!" Children could identify the words in various contexts, such as when a student wore a shirt to school that said, "Be You!"

- *Our Favorite Day of the Year* allowed us to have a guided, open-minded, and focused curriculum that led to investigations and invitations that were personally connected to the children and families in our class. It invited a year of finding joy and connection. The children named days like "National Ms. Amanda Gets Married Day" and "National Aaron Finds Out He's Going to Have a Baby Sister Day," showing that they understood the importance of celebrating others' life events. This brought our class together in a way that was deeply meaningful.
- And finally, *What Do You Do With An Idea?* brought all of our investigations together into a big idea that the children were proud to share with their families and friends.

We have considered relaunching the investigation with a new group of children, again using *Our Favorite Day of the Year*. We are curious to see how the makeup of the new class will change the curriculum and what we create together. What we do know for sure is that there is always something to learn and to celebrate.

This piece first appeared in the *Voices of Practitioners* Winter 2024 collection of pedagogical narratives. To read the full collection, visit NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/vop/dec2024.

voices of PRACTITIONERS

References

Bishop, R.S. 1990. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6 (3): ix–xi.

Derman-Sparks, L., & J.O. Edwards, with C.M. Goins. 2020. *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*. 2nd ed. NAEYC.

National Day Calendar. n.d. "Year at a Glance." Accessed October 2023–April 2024. nationaldaycalendar.com/year-at-a-glance.

Photographs: courtesy of the authors

Building a Literacy Foundation

Strategies to Implement and Maximize Small-Group Literacy Lessons in Preschool

Cynthia M. Zettler-Greeley, Kandia Lewis, Shayne B. Piasta, Laura L. Bailet, Leiah J.G. Thomas, and Shelby Dowdy

Literacy is a cornerstone in the lifetime acquisition of knowledge (Rabiner et al. 2016; Smart et al. 2017; Peng & Kievit 2020). Yet children must first learn to read before they can read to learn. In their meta-analysis, Mol and Bus (2011) found that preschoolers' early opportunities to learn about print, such as through shared book reading, contributed to their development of oral language and comprehension skills. In turn, children with stronger language and comprehension skills tended to read more, thus creating additional opportunities to foster the growth of knowledge and skills.

Importantly, young children begin to cultivate the foundational skills that underpin future reading achievement during the first years of life. This means it is imperative to engage infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in activities and experiences that foster language and literacy skills, such as alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and print concepts (Suggate et al. 2018; Terrell & Watson 2018; Schickedanz & Collins 2024). These emergent skills bloom in the presence of rich linguistic interactions with families and peers and through regular exposure to age-appropriate print materials (Terrell & Watson 2018).

In preschool and early elementary settings, literacy instruction in small groups can provide valuable opportunities to boost emergent reading skills (Goldstein et al. 2017; Giacovazzi et al. 2021). This is particularly true for children who, for a variety of reasons, may need more individualized support and scaffolding (Sénéchal & LeFevre 2002; Mol & Bus 2011; Wagner et al. 2022; Hall et al. 2023). Additionally, many of the opportunity gaps already experienced by children have widened due to education disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dorn et al. 2020; Kwakye & Kibort-Crocker 2021). This has led some to call for an increased use of evidence-based strategies to support children's literacy development (McGinty et al. 2021).

Using systematic, intentional, differentiated small-group instruction to expose children to print and letter knowledge, oral language, phonological awareness, and emergent writing can measurably improve children's literacy development (Herrera et al. 2021). Teaching practices that incorporate differentiated instruction in small groups accommodate the inherent variation in children's unique strengths and needs, thus avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction (Shillady 2013; Bondie et al. 2019). Yet challenges to implementing small-group instruction exist consistently (Greenwood et al. 2013; Farley et al. 2017; Tal 2018).

In 2024, we (the authors) completed a study that examined the efficacy of a small-group early literacy program for children enrolled in preschool across three consecutive years, beginning in 2016. We gathered videos and responses from 34 participating educators who offered feedback on the program to help us understand the primary factors that facilitated or impeded successful implementation of small-group literacy activities. Their experiences aligned with the available literature: The challenges they cited most often were inadequate support staff to make small groups feasible, finding time to deliver small-group lessons, and difficulties addressing children's behavior and engagement (Piasta et al. 2021). (To read more about the program used in our study, see "Nemours BrightStart!" on this page.)

In this article, we discuss the benefits of small-group literacy instruction in preschool settings and the practices that support it. We describe the key challenges that educators in our study identified as well as strategies to overcome them. Finally, we outline ways that early childhood educators can apply these ideas in their settings. Many of the suggestions we propose may be applicable to the primary grades as well.

The Benefits of Small-Group, Early Literacy Instruction

Small-group formats are groupings in which educators work with two to seven children. These low child-to-staff ratios allow teachers to offer more focused experiences as children practice a new skill or concept: Teachers are able to ask follow-up questions, individualize instruction and scaffolding, and observe where a child might need extra support (Masterson 2022). This aligns with developmentally appropriate practice and its emphasis on maximizing each and every child's learning potential (NAEYC 2020).

While emergent literacy concepts are often taught through whole-group instruction, small-group instruction offers additional opportunities for children to learn and practice skills. Like in whole groups, small-group literacy instruction is led by the teacher or another education professional. Lessons are intentional (based on an effective and engaging literacy curriculum), structured (offered in a defined setting and at consistent times), and designed to provide additional instructional opportunities for diverse learners (Wasik 2008; Zettler-Greeley et al. 2018; Lewis et al. 2023). Instruction also is differentiated

Nemours BrightStart!

Nemours BrightStart! (NBS!) is a supplemental, small-group early literacy program designed to bolster the skills of preschool children who are at risk for later reading difficulties (NBS! 2010). The commercially available curriculum consists of 20 intentional, scripted, scaffolded lessons that are thematically based and revolve around read alouds. Age-appropriate early literacy concepts are presented through multisensory activities that promote print awareness, oral language, phonological awareness, and beginning writing. Targeted skills include exposure to letters, syllable segmentation, beginning sounds, onset-rime, rhyming, and alliteration.

We chose to study NBS! because it demonstrated evidence of promise following a series of randomized controlled trials we conducted in more than 100 preschools and child care centers in the southeastern United States (Bailet et al. 2009, 2013; Zettler-Greeley et al. 2018). For those studies, NBS! was implemented by a group of early literacy specialists who were trained and employed by Nemours and who worked to develop and refine the NBS! program. The specialists worked closely with participating centers in one state to collaborate and plan as they delivered the curriculum to hundreds of children who demonstrated risk for reading difficulties.

For the most recent study, we wanted to understand how the program worked for preschool teachers and aides under authentic classroom conditions in a different part of the country. Results from this study and our experiences conducting the research are shared in this article and in other published papers (Piasta et al. 2021, 2023, 2024, 2025; Lewis et al. 2023, 2025; Hudson et al. 2025).

> Abundant empirical evidence supports the use of small-group literacy instruction to improve preschoolers' and kindergartners' emerging literacy skills.

to target the specific learning needs of the children in the group (Subban 2006; Farley et al. 2017; Puzio et al. 2020). In these ways, small-group instruction is distinguishable from center time or other instances of child-directed play.

Abundant empirical evidence supports the use of small-group literacy instruction to improve preschoolers' and kindergartners' emerging literacy skills (NELP 2008; Herrera et al. 2021), including

- Print awareness (Bailet et al. 2013; Lonigan & Phillips 2016; Zettler-Greeley et al. 2018)
- Oral language (Nielsen & Friesen 2012; Lonigan & Phillips 2016; Phillips et al. 2021)
- Letter knowledge (Hatcher et al. 2006; Piasta et al. 2010)
- Phonological and phonemic awareness (Hatcher et al. 2006; DeBaryshe & Gorecki 2007; Bailet et al. 2009, 2013; Kruse et al. 2015; Lonigan & Phillips 2016; Goldstein et al. 2017; Zettler-Greeley et al. 2018)
- Emergent writing (DeBaryshe & Gorecki 2007; Hall et al. 2014; Hudson et al. 2025).

Benefits also extend to children who are multilingual learners (Roberts et al. 2022; Kennedy & McLoughlin 2023). (For evidence of small-group literacy instruction's effects in the elementary grades, see Wanzek et al. 2016; Hall & Burns 2018; and Goldfeld et al. 2022.)

Challenges to Small-Group Instruction

Despite the many benefits of small-group instruction, it is underutilized by early childhood educators. Challenges include creating a classroom environment that is conducive to learning for all children, managing instructional time, and guiding children's behavior to maximize learning opportunities during small-group lessons (Wasik 2008; Zucker et al. 2021). Space limitations, inadequate training, and unclear roles for teaching assistants also create barriers, as do high child-to-staff ratios that challenge educators to manage many children without additional adult assistance (Farley et al. 2017; Mowrey & Farran 2022; Trauernicht et al. 2023).

In the following sections, we outline the three challenges most often identified by educators in our study—inadequate support staff, time management, and behavior guidance—and offer strategies for addressing these potential roadblocks.

Inadequate Support Staff

> I work alone, and it's hard trying to implement the program lesson to the children on the list. I had no one to monitor the others.

Early childhood educators aim to create safe, engaging, and supportive learning environments. This is part of developmentally appropriate practice and the field's code of ethics, which includes making sure that child-to-staff ratios align with the profession's guidelines (NAEYC 2020, 2025).

Research has shown that early childhood educators who enjoy low ratios—such as the 10:1 child-to-staff ratio recommended by NAEYC (2018)—are more likely to implement small-group activities, including small-group instruction (Korpershoek et al. 2014; Farley et al. 2017). However, licensing standards vary by state and may exceed NAEYC's recommendations. For example, Florida requires a child-to-staff ratio of 15:1 for children 3 to 4 years old. For 4- and 5-year-olds, the ratio is 20:1 (State of Florida Legislature 2024). In contrast, Ohio requires a ratio of 12:1 for 3-year-old children and 14:1 for 4- to 5-year-old children (Ohio Legislative Service Commission 2023).

Inadequate staffing often means that educators cannot oversee both a busy learning setting and a small group. To adapt, they may lead large-group literacy activities like read alouds or alphabet letter introductions—lessons that rely less on responsive interactions. Research documents the dominance

of such large-group activities (Cabell et al. 2013; Ansari & Purtell 2017; Cutler et al. 2022; Weiland et al. 2023). Consequently, educators working in states with higher child-to-staff ratios may need strategies to overcome the staffing issues that often impede small-group instruction.

To ensure that educators have the staff necessary for offering small groups, it is imperative that they ask for support from coteachers and program or school administrators before implementing a small-group literacy curriculum. This planned approach is ideal and requires a commitment from one or more colleagues to provide reliable coverage during small-group lessons. These colleagues may include an assistant or student teacher, another staff member, or an adult volunteer.

Still, despite these efforts, another adult may not always be available. In these cases, we recommend teaching large-group literacy activities, like the ones mentioned above. Educators may also consider conducting small-group literacy lessons during center or self-directed play time (Wasik 2008) using the following strategies:

- **Mirroring small-group instruction.** Educators can plan for and introduce centers that allow children to practice small-group literacy content independently. For example, a reading center can include books that highlight the focus letter being taught in the small group; a writing center can invite children to trace and write the focus letter with sand trays, gel bags, or white boards; a dramatic play center can invite children to reenact a story that highlights the focus letter. In these ways, children are engaged in self-guided literacy learning while the educator provides direct literacy instruction to a small group.
- **Peer pairings.** Informed by the literature on peer tutoring with primarily elementary (and older) students, an educator can pair a child who grasps a new literacy concept with one or more children who are less familiar with it. This creates multiple small groups for center activities, with each group including at least one "expert learner" (Greenwood et al. 1988; Xu et al. 2022; Romero et al. 2025). These pairings are intended to be short-term. Ideally, all children will be recognized over time for their strengths and areas of growth.

Importantly, the use of literacy stations and peer pairings affords opportunities for the educator to attend to their small-group lesson, which then functions as an independent "center."

Time Management

> When I first began [delivering small-group instruction], I felt uncomfortable using all the materials and keeping them organized. However, after implementing several lessons, I organized the tools with the appropriate class exercises, and the lessons became easier to facilitate.

In education, time management involves planning, preparing, and organizing to support the effective implementation of a curriculum. Planning and preparation are particularly essential when delivering small-group instruction (Weiland et al. 2018).

In our study, most of the teachers spent between 16 and 60 minutes preparing each small-group lesson outlined in our early literacy program. This included organizing materials, creating or replacing manipulatives, and reviewing the lesson content. Only a handful of teachers reported that they did no preparation, and nearly three-quarters agreed that the preparation required was minimal.

For successful small-group literacy instruction, we recommend that educators create an implementation plan that blocks out time for organizing materials, reviewing small-group lessons, and teaching content (see "Sample Small-Group Implementation Plan" on pages 77–78). This makes it easier to prioritize small-group lessons and fit them into each day's schedule. The time of delivery should remain consistent: Both educators and children will make the most of their instructional time when it becomes a routine part of the learning day.

Behavior Guidance

> As Ms. Jones talks about the letter *A* to a small group of children, she notices Yamara becoming restless. Ms. Jones astutely pivots to a movement activity to reengage her.

> "Get your writing finger ready!" she says. "Let's all stand up. We are going to write the letter *A* in the air. Keep your elbow straight and point your finger. The uppercase *A* is tall and shaped like a mountain. Start at the top and slide down one side of the mountain. Now, lift your finger and go down the other side of the mountain, like this. Lift your finger again and make a line across the mountain. Great job making your *A*!"

The relationship between teacher and child provides the foundation for active engagement in learning. Educators who have established positive relationships with children through high-quality classroom practices and genuine interest are more likely to motivate them than those who have not (Mashburn et al. 2008; Hatfield et al. 2016, 2022). In preschool, these positive interactions have been associated with increases in children's interest toward a task (Williford et al. 2013). Thus, engaging children in stimulating activities can promote on-task behavior and minimize off-task behaviors, such as inattention, outbursts, and not following instructions.

In our study, most teachers noted that children were engaged during small-group literacy lessons. Engagement and motivation increased when educators introduced activities that involved physical movement along with other modes, like speaking and listening. These activities are particularly helpful when children become restless and need to move (Vazou et al. 2021).

To guide children's behavior during these times, educators might invite them to search the room for items that begin with a lesson's target letter. Air writing letters (as described in the vignette) is another example of supporting letter knowledge through physical movement, coupled with speaking and listening (Kirk et al. 2013).

Teachers can also guide children's behavior by communicating expectations and supporting children's engagement through positive reinforcement, such as verbal praise. When children know what is expected, they are less likely to demonstrate challenging behaviors and more likely to engage in learning activities (Simonsen et al. 2008). Similarly, positive feedback about children's actions ("I like how you are looking at me and listening carefully right now") is one way to encourage continued behavior that aligns

Sample Small-Group Implementation Plan

This table highlights two key elements of successful small-group implementation: Lesson preparation and lesson delivery. Educators can use this template to implement small-group lessons, noting any unexpected or significant deviations between time planned versus actual time spent on lesson administration. With consistent use, this time management technique will help to show where too much (or too little) time is being spent on each lesson, allowing teachers to make any adjustments where they are needed.

Lesson Information			**Preparation**		
	Lesson	**Date**	**Time spent organizing materials**	**Time spent preparing materials**	**Time spent reviewing lesson**
Planned*	9: *If You Give a Pig a Party*	9/14	10 min	10 min	15 min
Actual**		9/15	5 min	15 min	20 min

* The expected time needed for prepping and delivering the lesson, according to professional development guidance or the curriculum developer's recommendations.

** The time spent preparing and delivering the lesson. This includes any events that may have disrupted the lesson, impacting its duration.

with expectations educators have discussed with children (Ritz et al. 2014). All of these strategies are part of *behavior guidance*, or the method of motivating positive child behavior through teacher support and positive teacher-child interactions (Gartrell 2020; Porter 2020).

We encourage early childhood educators—prekindergarten through grade 3—and administrators to maximize opportunities for successful small-group instruction by engaging in self-reflection, assessment, and planning.

Recommendations for Educators

Small-group literacy instruction is a key way to increase children's learning opportunities and help them develop skills for continued language and literacy success. We encourage early childhood educators—prekindergarten through grade 3—and administrators to maximize opportunities for successful small-group instruction by engaging in self-reflection, assessment, and planning. Our recommendations include:

- Teachers and administrators can evaluate the most feasible parts of the day to conduct small-group instruction.
- They can consider what expectations, routines, and/or staff must be in place to facilitate small-group instruction. This will inform decisions regarding staffing, scheduling, and instructional plans.
- Educators can use assessments early in the school year to understand children's initial literacy learning strengths and needs. This will guide them as they consider how to begin grouping children and planning toward learning goals.

Delivery						Notes
Delivery location	**Time lesson began**	**Lesson duration**	**Was adult assistance needed?**	**Were all children present?**	**Is make-up time needed?**	**Was the lesson completed as planned?**
Classroom	9:45 a.m.	20 min	Y	–	–	–
Classroom	9:45 a.m.	32 min	N	Y	Y	N—Fire drill occurred during the lesson; children were distracted following our return to the small group.

- Teachers can use ongoing assessments, such as progress monitoring, to modify small-group composition and instructional goals throughout the year.
- Educators and administrators can support small-group instruction by participating in and offering professional development opportunities related to behavior guidance.

Collectively, these efforts can increase children's engagement in learning and teachers' abilities to engage with small-group literacy instruction.

About the Authors

Cynthia M. Zettler-Greeley, PhD, is a senior research scientist with Nemours Children's Health in Jacksonville, Florida. Cynthia has conducted efficacy studies on language and literacy interventions and collaborated on the development of early literacy screening surveys. czettler@nemours.org

Kandia Lewis, PhD, is a research scientist with Virtual Health and Informatics at Nemours Children's Health in Wilmington, Delaware. Kandia has experience in educational research examining language and literacy programming and interventions for young children. kandia.lewis@nemours.org

Shayne B. Piasta, PhD, is a professor of literacies, literature, and learning in the Department of Teaching and Learning and a faculty associate at the Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy in the College of Education and Human Ecology at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. Shayne researches classroom practices to support early literacy development and has published widely on this topic. Piasta.1@osu.edu

Laura L. Bailet, PhD, is the retired chief academic officer at Kaplan Early Learning Company in Lewisville, North Carolina. She is a school psychologist who worked at Nemours Children's Health for 30 years, focusing on language and literacy development and children with learning disorders. Laurabailet04@gmail.com

Leiah J.G. Thomas, PhD, is a social science researcher at Stanford University. She has worked on nationwide evaluations of young children's literacy learning and K–12 education policy initiatives. lgroomth@stanford.edu

Shelby Dowdy, Ready 4 Success director at The Ohio State University's Schoenbaum Family Center, specializes in professional development and coaching to support kindergarten readiness. She advocates for family engagement, fostering strong home-school partnerships for children's development. dowdy.54@osu.edu

References

Ansari, A., & K.M. Purtell. 2017. "Activity Settings in Full-Day Kindergarten Classrooms and Children's Early Learning." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 38: 23–32.

Bailet, L.L., K.K. Repper, S.B. Piasta, & S.P. Murphy. 2009. "Emergent Literacy Intervention for Prekindergarteners at Risk for Reading Failure." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 42 (4): 336–55.

Bailet, L.L., K.K. Repper, S.P. Murphy, S.B. Piasta, & C. Zettler-Greeley. 2013. "Emergent Literacy Intervention for Prekindergartners at Risk for Reading Failure: Years 2 and 3 of a Multi-Year Study." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 46 (2): 133–53.

Bondie, R.S., C. Dahnke, & A. Zusho. 2019. "How Does Changing 'One-Size-Fits-All' to Differentiated Instruction Affect Teaching?" *Review of Research in Education* 43 (1): 336–62.

Cabell, S.Q., J. DeCoster, J. LoCasale-Crouch, B.K. Hamre, & R.C. Pianta. 2013. "Variation in the Effectiveness of Instructional Interactions Across Preschool Classroom Settings and Learning Activities." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 28 (4): 820–30.

Cutler, L., R.E. Schachter, C. Gabas, S.B. Piasta, K.M. Purtell, et al. 2022. "Patterns of Classroom Organization in Classrooms Where Children Exhibit Higher and Lower Language Gains." *Early Education and Development* 34 (5): 1128–46. doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2022.2106766.

DeBaryshe, B.D., & D.M. Gorecki. 2007. "An Experimental Validation of a Preschool Emergent Literacy Curriculum." *Early Education and Development* 18 (1): 93–110.

Dorn, E., B. Hancock, J. Sarakatsannis, & E. Viruleg. 2020. *COVID-19 and Learning Loss—Disparities Grow and Students Need Help*. McKinsey & Company. mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help.

Farley, K., S. Piasta, M. Dogucu, & A. O'Connell. 2017. "Assessing and Predicting Small-Group Literacy Instruction in Early Childhood Classrooms." *Early Education and Development* 28 (4): 488–505.

Gartrell, D. 2020. "Instead of Discipline, Use Guidance." *Teaching Young Children* 13 (3). naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/feb2020/using-guidance-not-discipline.

Giacovazzi, L., S. Moonsamy, & M. Mophosho. 2021. "Promoting Emergent Literacy in Under-Served Preschools Using Environmental Print." *South African Journal of Communication Disorders* 68 (1): 1–11. doi.org/10.4102/sajcd.v68i1.809.

Goldfeld, S., R. Beatson, A. Watts, P. Snow, L. Gold, et al. 2022. "Tier 2 Oral Language and Early Reading Interventions for Preschool to Grade 2 Children: A Restricted Systematic Review." *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties* 27 (1): 65–113. doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2021.2011754.

Goldstein, H., A. Olszewski, C. Haring, C.R. Greenwood, L. McCune, et al. 2017. "Efficacy of a Supplemental Phonemic Awareness Curriculum to Instruct Preschoolers with Delays in Early Literacy Development." *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* 60 (1): 89–103.

Greenwood, C.R., J. Carta, J. Atwater, H. Goldstein, R. Kaminski, et al. 2013. "Is a Response to Intervention (RTI) Approach to Preschool Language and Early Literacy Instruction Needed?" *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 33 (1): 48–64.

Greenwood, C.R., J. Carta, & R. Vance Hall. 1988. "The Use of Peer Tutoring Strategies in Classroom Management and Educational Instruction." *School Psychology Review* 17 (2): 258–75.

Hall, A.H., M.D. Toland, J. Grisham-Brown, & S. Graham. 2014. "Exploring Interactive Writing as an Effective Practice for Increasing Head Start Students' Alphabet Knowledge Skills." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 42: 423–30.

Hall, C., K. Dahl-Leonard, E. Cho, E.J. Solari, P. Capin, et al. 2023. "Forty Years of Reading Intervention Research for Elementary Students with or at Risk for Dyslexia: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Reading Research Quarterly* 58 (2): 285–312. doi.org/10.1002/rrq.477.

Hall, M.S., & M.K. Burns. 2018. "Meta-Analysis of Targeted Small-Group Reading Interventions." *Journal of School Psychology* 66: 54–66.

Hatcher, P.J., C. Hulme, J.N. Miles, J.M. Carroll, J. Hatcher, et al. 2006. "Efficacy of Small Group Reading Intervention for Beginning Readers with Reading-Delay: A Randomised Controlled Trial." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 47 (8): 820–7.

Hatfield, B.E., M.R. Burchinal, R.C. Pianta, & J. Sideris. 2016. "Thresholds in the Association Between Quality of Teacher–Child Interactions and Preschool Children's School Readiness Skills." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 36: 561–71.

Hatfield, B.E., J.K. Finders, D.L. Zandbergen, & H. Lewis. 2022. "Associations Between Consistent and High-Quality Teacher-Child Interactions and Preschool Children's Self-Regulation and Activity in the Stress Response System." *Early Education and Development* 33 (7): 1222–36.

Herrera, S., B.M. Phillips, Y.C. Newton, J.L. Dombek, & J.A. Hernandez. 2021. *Effectiveness of Early Literacy Instruction: Summary of 20 Years of Research* (REL 2021-084). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast. ies.ed.gov/use-work/resource-library/report/systematic-literature-review/effectiveness-early-literacy-instruction-summary-20-years-research.

Hudson, A., L.L. Bailet, S.B. Piasta, J.A.R. Logan, K. Lewis, et al. 2025. "Latent Profile Moderation: Examining the Differential Impact of a Small-Group Emergent Literacy Intervention." *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 30 (1): 1–33.

Kennedy, C., & A. McLoughlin. 2023. "Developing the Emergent Literacy Skills of English Language Learners through Dialogic Reading: A Systematic Review." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 51 (2): 317–32.

Kirk, S.M., W.W. Fuchs, & E.P. Kirk. 2013. "Integrating Physical Activity into Preschool Classroom Academic Lessons Promotes Daily Physical Activity and Improves Literacy." *HS Dialog: The Research to Practice Journal for the Early Childhood Field* 16 (3): 45–63.

Korpershoek, H., T. Harms, H. de Boer, M. van Kuijk, & S. Doolaard. 2014. *Effective Classroom Management Strategies and Classroom Management Programs for Educational Practice*. RUG/GION.

Kruse, L.G., T.D. Spencer, A. Olszewski, & H. Goldstein. 2015. "Small Groups, Big Gains: Efficacy of a Tier 2 Phonological Awareness Intervention with Preschoolers with Early Literacy Deficits." *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* 24: 189–205.

Kwakye, I., & E. Kibort-Crocker. 2021. "Facing Learning Disruption: Examining the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on K–12 students." Washington Student Achievement Council. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED613296.pdf.

Lewis, K., A. Hudson, J.A.R. Logan, S.B. Piasta, C.M. Zettler-Greeley, et al. 2025. "Do Classroom and Home Environments Jointly Contribute to Literacy Gains for Preschoolers At-Risk for Literacy Difficulties?" *Reading & Writing Quarterly* 1–20.

Lewis, K., J.A.R. Logan, L.J.G. Thomas, N. Schneider, C.M. Zettler-Greeley, et al. 2023. "Behavior Management and Engagement During Small-Group Instruction as Predictors of Preschoolers' Literacy Skill Outcomes." *Early Education and Development* 34 (8): 1872–95.

Lonigan, C.J., & B.M. Phillips. 2016. "Response to Instruction in Preschool: Results of Two Randomized Studies with Children at Significant Risk of Reading Difficulties." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 108 (1): 114–29.

Mashburn, A.J., R.C. Pianta, B.K. Hamre, J.T. Downer, O.A. Barbarin, et al. 2008. "Measures of Classroom Quality in Prekindergarten and Children's Development of Academic, Language, and Social Skills." *Child Development* 79: 732–49.

Masterson, M. 2022. "Teaching to Enhance Each Child's Development and Learning." In *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*. 4th ed. Eds. S. Friedman, B.L. Wright, & M. Masterson. NAEYC.

McGinty, A., A. Gray, A. Partee, W. Herring, & J. Soland. 2021. "Examining Early Literacy Skills in the Wake of COVID-19 Spring 2020 School Disruptions: Virginia Fall 2020 Statewide Screening Findings and Implications." School of Education and Human Development, University of Virginia. literacy.virginia.edu/sites/g/files/jsddwu1006/files/2022-03/PALS_Fall_2020_Data_Report_5_18_final.pdf.

Mol, S.E., & A.G. Bus. 2011. "To Read or Not to Read: A Meta-Analysis of Print Exposure from Infancy to Early Adulthood." *Psychological Bulletin* 137 (2): 267–96.

Mowrey, S.C., & D.C. Farran. 2022. "Teaching Teams: The Roles of Lead Teachers, Teaching Assistants, and Curriculum Demand in Pre-Kindergarten Instruction." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 50 (8): 1329–41.

NAEYC. 2018. *Staff-to-Child Ratio and Class Size*. NAEYC. naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/accreditation/early-learning/staff_child_ratio_0.pdf.

NAEYC. 2020. "Developmentally Appropriate Practice." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents.

NAEYC. 2025. "Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/code-of-ethics.

NBS! (Nemours BrightStart!). 2010. "The Complete Program for Early Literacy Success, Level One." Kaplan Early Learning Company.

NELP (National Early Literacy Panel). 2008. "Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel." National Institute for Literacy. lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/NELPReport09.pdf.

Nielsen, D.C., & L.D. Friesen. 2012. "A Study of the Effectiveness of a Small-Group Intervention on the Vocabulary and Narrative Development of At-Risk Kindergarten Children." *Reading Psychology* 33 (3): 269–99.

Ohio Legislative Service Commission. 2023. *Staff to Child Ratios* (Section 5104.033). Ohio Laws and Administrative Rules. codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-5104.033.

Peng, P., & R.A. Kievit. 2020. "The Development of Academic Achievement and Cognitive Abilities: A Bidirectional Perspective." *Child Development Perspectives* 14 (1): 15–20. doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12352.

Phillips, B.M., Y.-S.G. Kim, C.J. Lonigan, C.M. Connor, J. Clancy, et al. 2021. "Supporting Language and Literacy Development with Intensive Small-Group Interventions: An Early Childhood Efficacy Study." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 57: 75–88.

Piasta, S.B., A.K. Hudson, J.A.R. Logan, K. Lewis, & C.M. Zettler-Greeley. 2025. "Alphabet Knowledge Trajectories and U.S. Children's Later Reading and Spelling." *Scientific Studies of Reading* 29 (3): 303–27. doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2025.2481064.

Piasta, S.B., A. Hudson, R. Sayers, J.A.R. Logan, K. Lewis, et al. 2024. "Small-Group Emergent Literacy Intervention Dosage in Preschool: Patterns and Predictors." *Journal of Early Intervention* 46 (1): 39–57. doi.org/10.1177/10538151231155411.

Piasta, S.B., J.A.R. Logan, L.J.G. Thomas, C.M. Zettler-Greeley, L.L. Bailet, et al. 2021. "Implementation of a Small-Group Emergent Literacy Intervention by Preschool Teachers and Community Aides." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 54: 3–43.

Piasta, S.B., J.A.R. Logan, C.M. Zettler-Greeley, L.L. Bailet, K. Lewis, et al. 2023. "Small-Group, Emergent Literacy Intervention Under Two Implementation Models: Intent-to-Treat and Dosage Effects for Preschoolers at Risk for Reading Difficulties." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 56 (3): 225–40.

Piasta, S.B., D.J. Purpura, & R.K. Wagner. 2010. "Fostering Alphabetic Knowledge Development: A Comparison of Two Instructional Approaches." *Reading and Writing* 23: 607–26.

Porter, L. 2020. *Young Children's Behaviour: Guidance Approaches for Early Childhood Educators*. Routledge.

Puzio, K., G.T. Colby, & D. Algeo-Nichols. 2020. "Differentiated Literacy Instruction: Boondoggle or Best Practice?" *Review of Educational Research* 90 (4): 459–98.

Rabiner, D.L., J. Godwin, & K.A. Dodge. 2016. "Predicting Academic Achievement and Attainment: The Contribution of Early Academic Skills, Attention Difficulties, and Social Competence." *School Psychology Review* 45 (2): 250–67.

Ritz, M., A. Noltemeyer, D. Davis, & J. Green. 2014. "Behavior Management in Preschool Classrooms: Insights Revealed through Systematic Observation and Interview." *Psychology in the Schools* 51 (2): 181–97.

Roberts, G.J., C. Hall, E. Cho, B. Coté, J. Lee, et al. 2022. "The State of Current Reading Intervention Research for English Learners in Grades K–2: A Best-Evidence Synthesis." *Educational Psychology Review* 34 (1): 335–61.

Romero, M.E., M.K. Burns, H.T. Wan, H. Abdelnaby, & T.J. Crawford. 2025. "A Meta-Analysis on the Effects of Peer Tutoring on Emergent Bilinguals' Academic Achievement." *Psychology in the Schools* 62 (6): 1963–65.

Schickedanz, J.A., & M.F. Collins. 2024. *So Much More Than the ABCs: The Early Phases of Reading and Writing*. Rev. ed. NAEYC.

Sénéchal, M., & J.A. LeFevre. 2002. "Parental Involvement in the Development of Children's Reading Skill: A Five-Year Longitudinal Study." *Child Development* 73 (2): 445–60.

Shillady, A. 2013. "[Introduction]." *Young Children* 68 (2): 6–7.

Simonsen, B., S. Fairbanks, A. Briesch, D. Meyers, & G. Sugai. 2008. "Evidence-Based Practices in Classroom Management: Considerations for Research to Practice." *Education and Treatment of Children* 31 (3): 351–80.

Smart, D., G.J. Youssef, A. Sanson, M. Prior, J.W. Toumbourou, et al. 2017. "Consequences of Childhood Reading Difficulties and Behaviour Problems for Educational Achievement and Employment in Early Adulthood." *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 87 (2): 288–308.

State of Florida Legislature. 2024. *Licensing Standards; Child Care Facilities* (Section 402.305). The 2024 Florida Statutes. leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0400-0499/0402/Sections/0402.305.html#:~:text=every%2011%20children.-,4.,personnel%20for%20every%2020%20children.

Subban, P. 2006. "Differentiated Instruction: A Research Basis." *International Education Journal* 7 (7): 935–47. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ854351.pdf.

Suggate, S., E. Schaughency, H. McAnally, & E. Reese. 2018. "From Infancy to Adolescence: The Longitudinal Links Between Vocabulary, Early Literacy Skills, Oral Narrative, and Reading Comprehension." *Cognitive Development* 47: 82–95.

Tal, C. 2018. "The Challenge of Implementing Small Group Work in Early Childhood Education." *Global Education Review* 5 (2): 123–44. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1183937.pdf.

Terrell, P., & M. Watson. 2018. "Laying a Firm Foundation: Embedding Evidence-Based Emergent Literacy Practices into Early Intervention and Preschool Environments." *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* 49 (2): 148–64.

Trauernicht, M., Y. Anders, E. Oppermann, & U. Klusmann. 2023. "Early Childhood Educators' Emotional Exhaustion and the Frequency of Educational Activities in Preschool." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 31 (6): 1016–32. doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2217485.

Vazou, S., K. Long, K.D. Lakes, & N.L. Whalen. 2021. "'Walkabouts' Integrated Physical Activities from Preschool to Second Grade: Feasibility and Effect on Classroom Engagement." *Child & Youth Care Forum* 50: 39–55.

Wagner, R.K., F.A. Zirps, & S.G. Wood. 2022. "Developmental Dyslexia." In *The Science of Reading: A Handbook,* eds. M.J. Snowling, C. Hulme, & K. Nation. Wiley.

Wanzek, J., S. Vaughn, N. Scammacca, B. Gatlin, M.A. Walker, et al. 2016. "Meta-Analyses of the Effects of Tier 2 Type Reading Interventions in Grades K-3." *Educational Psychology Review* 28 (3): 551–76.

Wasik, B. 2008. "When Fewer Is More: Small Groups in Early Childhood Classrooms." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 35 (6): 515–21.

Weiland, C., L. Moffett, P.G. Rosada, A. Weissman, K. Zhang, et al. 2023. "Learning Experiences Vary Across Young Children in the Same Classroom: Evidence from the Individualizing Student Instruction Measure in the Boston Public Schools." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 63: 313–26.

Weiland, C., M. McCormick, S. Mattera, M. Maier, & P. Morris. 2018. "Preschool Curricula and Professional Development Features for Getting to High-Quality Implementation at Scale: A Comparative Review Across Five Trials." *AERA Open* 4 (1): 1–16. doi.org/10.1177/2332858418757735.

Williford, A.P., J.E.V. Whittaker, V.E. Vitiello, & J. Downer. 2013. "Children's Engagement Within the Preschool Classroom and Their Development of Self-Regulation." *Early Education and Development* 24 (2): 162–87.

Xu, Y., C.-C. Chen, C. Spence, M. Washington-Nortey, F. Zhang, et al. 2022. "Supporting Young Spanish Speaking English Learners Through Teacher Scaffolding and Reciprocal Peer Tutoring." *Early Child Development and Care* 192 (8): 1324–36.

Zettler-Greeley, C.M., L.L. Bailet, S.P. Murphy, T. DeLucca, & L. Branum-Martin. 2018. "Efficacy of the Nemours BrightStart! Early Literacy Program: Treatment Outcomes from a Randomized Trial with At-Risk Prekindergartners." *Early Education and Development* 29 (6): 873–92.

Zucker, T.A., E. Jacbos, & S.Q. Cabell. 2021. "Exploring Barriers to Early Childhood Teachers' Implementation of a Supplemental Academic Language Curriculum." *Early Education and Development* 32 (8): 1194–1219. doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2020.1839288.

HIGHSCOPE.

The Legacy of *Early Learning*

In the final monograph, explore how the historic Perry Preschool Project continues to shape education and policy in the 21st century.

You'll Learn:

- Long-term impact of preschool
- Evidence-backed outcomes through age 54
- Key components of effective child development programs
- Why HighScope's approach makes the difference

Get Your Printed Version

www.highscope.org

Embracing a Focus on Anti-Bias Education in Early Learning Coursework

Anita R. Kumar, Amber Beisly, Rebecca Swartz, and Ruth Facun-Granadozo

Creating a caring and equitable community of learners is one key facet of developmentally appropriate practice. To establish this community, early childhood educators recognize and value children's strengths and nurture positive relationships; promote behaviors conducive to the learning and well-being of all; and create physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe educational environments (NAEYC 2020a). They intentionally "affirm and support positive development of each child's multiple social identities," such as those related to "race or ethnicity, language, gender, class, ability, family composition, and economic status" (NAEYC 2020a, 7). Addressing bias and implementing culturally responsive teaching in early learning settings positively contributes to children's overall development, including how they view themselves as learners (NASEM 2024).

Anti-bias education (ABE) is a perspective and a framework that emphasizes the importance of understanding every child as an individual "with their own personalities and temperaments and with social group identities." By attending to identity and actively working to eliminate inequity, educators can ensure that "all children are able to blossom, and each child's abilities and gifts are able to flourish" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020, 4–5). However, they need preparation and support to implement this framework. Teacher educators can integrate instruction and content that provide current and future educators with strategies to guide them in recognizing their explicit and implicit biases and to help them chart successful journeys toward creating caring, equitable learning communities in their own settings.

We (the authors) are early childhood education teacher educators and members of a community of practice. Within our group, we reflect, refine, and develop ABE-related teaching practices to support early childhood educators in our contexts. In this article, we each share about a learning experience we designed to examine identity, power, privilege, and bias in our teacher preparation courses (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020). When done with intention, practicing ABE can be a lifelong journey that generates curiosity and encourages the pursuit of deeper understandings. While a single learning experience is not sufficient to attain all of ABE's goals, we hope readers consider how the activities and approaches in this article could be applied in their educator preparation programs and courses.

Using a Community of Practice to Explore ABE in Educator Preparation

During break time in the Issues and Trends in Early Childhood Education course that I (Anita; first author) teach, I observed two of my students, Melissa and Grace, talking about their recent teaching experiences.

> **Melissa:** It was a harrowing day today. An entire section of ceiling tiles came crashing down in our classroom. Thankfully, we were reading a book on the other side of the room, but I was horrified and started screaming. Our janitor came and quickly fixed the ceiling, and the kids were mesmerized by his power tools. Later that day, some of the children were playing in the dramatic play area. The boys were pretending to work with power tools while some of the girls started screaming, as I had done. I wonder if I reinforced the stereotype that girls are helpless and need to be taken care of by boys with powerful tools.

> **Grace:** I know how that feels. The children have seen me talk to our persona doll, Maria, in Spanish. Now, I see them speaking to the brown dolls in our dramatic play area in Spanish. They're watching us and doing what we do.

I recognized this as an opportunity to discuss how educators' unconscious biases can affect young children in their learning settings. With Melissa and Grace's permission, I began the conversation. They each shared their recent experiences and the discomfort they felt. Some of their peers responded by telling their own stories. I used our impromptu conversation to reiterate the value of reflection and collective sharing. I also emphasized that revisiting assumptions and behaviors is a lifelong process. When Melissa and Grace shared about their classroom experiences, they created an opening for vulnerability, where they and their peers could explore how personal and social identities can shape biases.

Experiences like these can be challenging for educators (Vittrup 2016). Acknowledging and validating the discomfort that can arise when in-service and preservice educators confront unconscious biases is an important step in facilitating discussions around ABE. Implicitly held biases can make it difficult for them to identify the presence of inequities in their settings and their roles in perpetuating them (Staats et al. 2016). When early childhood educators understand, incorporate, and value children's social and cultural identities and experiences, they engage in developmentally appropriate practice and demonstrate professional competencies (NAEYC 2020a; NAEYC 2020b). Teacher educators play a significant role in preparing preservice and in-service early childhood educators to work in diverse early learning settings (NCES 2024).

Formed in 2022, our eight-member community of practice addresses ways to intentionally integrate ABE and culturally responsive pedagogies into our coursework and teaching. We are a diverse group, holding a variety of identities and working in different states, political climates, and institutional contexts. The professional experiences and areas of expertise we collectively possess allow us to engage in valuable peer learning and reflection, share new perspectives and practices, and increase our own self-awareness. (See "Our Community of Practice's Goals and Approaches" on page 87.)

Fostering Educators' Skills and Knowledge to Support ABE Approaches

Implementing "culturally and linguistically relevant anti-bias teaching strategies" is an early childhood educator professional competency (NAEYC 2020b, 19). Teacher educators can intentionally support early childhood education students to integrate accessible and engaging materials and activities for all children. In this section, we share examples of how we integrated ABE into our higher education coursework to address professional competencies focused on recognizing and celebrating children's individual identities and creating caring and equitable learning communities.

Exploring Perceptions of School Through Family Interviews

I (Amber; second author) teach at the University of Oklahoma's satellite campus in Tulsa. We offer a bachelor's completion program, where students attend the local community college and then matriculate to the university. Many of our students are returning to school. I begin my science and math courses with assignments that allow students to critically examine how their identities can influence their perceptions of schooling, academic achievement, and teaching. They reflect on how their past learning experiences shaped them as individuals and educators. Many of the students are White women who have had positive school experiences. It can be difficult for them to imagine school as a place where children and families feel like they do not belong. As a White, nonbinary person who has experienced certain privileges, I also found school as a place where I felt welcomed and was successful.

Derman-Sparks and colleagues state, "When children see themselves and their families reflected in their early childhood setting, they feel affirmed and that they belong. When children's identities and families are invisible, the opposite happens" (2020, 27). Another assignment students engage in is the family interview assignment. It provides an opportunity for them to

Our Community of Practice's Goals and Approaches

Members of our community of practice are committed to practicing ABE in the courses and seminars we teach, which focus on a range of topics such as child development, supporting diverse learners, content area teaching and curriculum development, teaching methods, collaborating with families and communities, and so on. Doing this work in members' different contexts requires an expansive approach. We use *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, 2nd edition, by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, with Catherine M. Goins, as an anchor text. We discuss how we can foster preservice and in-service teachers' understanding of the anti-bias approach, increase their self-awareness in a variety of learning settings, and develop their intercultural sensitivities (Nganga 2015; Monroe & Ruan 2018; Arsal 2019).

Integrating an ABE approach begins by reflecting on the beliefs, values, and practices we hold and examining how they impact our current thinking and actions (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020). Our conversations and exercises taught us that this process requires vulnerability and authenticity and can surface necessary tensions. The experiences we have gained from confronting our biases together have enabled us to apply these practices in our teaching.

Because we aim to establish mutual understanding and experience personal change, we value new perspectives: We dialogue about our diverse ideas and opinions (Pruitt & Thomas 2007). During our first exercise, we wrote autobiographies to explore our multiple identities and how they intersect. Then we shared our autobiographies as a way to introduce ourselves and establish group norms. Each month, a member shares a specific incident from their classroom, and we use the *critical incidents protocol*—a step-by-step process that involves inquiry and group dialogue—to explore how the member can align their practice with ABE goals (CLEE 2007). We listen, show empathy, think critically, and encourage each other to question previously unexamined beliefs and ways of knowing. This is important for achieving ABE goals in our own practices and in preparing early childhood educators to do the same.

"know about, understand, and value the diversity of families" and to apply ABE concepts (NAEYC 2019, 14). Students interview members of families with cultural and racial/ethnic backgrounds different than their own to learn about the range of perceptions that can exist about school and potential barriers to inclusion. They also make connections between a learner's sense of belonging and their school identity.

We begin by discussing the rationale for the assignment and the thoughts and/or emotions that may arise for students. They read the Winter 2019 *Teaching Young Children* article "Many Languages, One Classroom: Supporting Children in Superdiverse Settings" by Carola Oliva-Olson, Linda M. Espinosa, Whit Hayslip, and Elizabeth S. Magruder. They also explore the ¡Colorín Colorado! website for information about multilingual children and their families.

As students consider possible family members to interview, they become aware of the connections and relationships within their personal and professional communities. They are often trepidatious about finding and approaching an interviewee. We spend time in class talking about possible candidates. Students share contacts with each other; if a student is still having difficulty finding someone to interview, I share a list of potential options. Once they confirm an interview, students research to understand more about their interviewee's cultural background and share what they have learned in small group discussions.

Next, they draft interview questions. To help them with this step, I offer resources to get them started, such as the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage's webpage "Some Possible Questions." I work with students to craft open-ended questions that focus on interviewees' lived experiences. For example,

I have helped one student opt for "What makes you feel welcome when you come into the classroom?" instead of "What kind of food does your family eat?" They practice interviewing each other to gain comfort and feedback and evaluate their questions for appropriateness and relevance.

By the time students conduct their interviews, they have read about and discussed the treatment that families with diverse social identities may receive and how this can impact their impressions of school and learning (Kurucz et al. 2020; Souto-Manning et al. 2021; Norheim et al. 2024). After the interviews, students write a reflection comparing their recent learning and experiences with their prior thinking. Many note the lasting impact that teachers can have on children and families. One student remarked, "Before [this assignment], I did not take the time to learn about a family's culture and background. This interview allowed me to truly get to know this family at a deeper level and compare my own experiences as a child."

During the final stage of the project, we have a whole-class discussion about their current and future practices, such as specific ways to make children's and families' identities more visible in early learning settings. As one student summarized, "To support children, I need to do more than ask questions about their culture. I need to integrate what I learned from them into the classroom and talk about it."

Confronting Bias Through a Picture Book Critique Assignment

I (Ruth; fourth author) teach early childhood education courses at East Tennessee University, an institution in the southeast region of the United States. While many of my undergraduate students are White, middle-class women, most of my graduate students are from countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, and Venezuela. English is my third language. I was born and raised in a rural community in the Philippines, where people made the most of their limited resources.

Sharing picture books is a staple practice in early childhood settings (Spear et al. 2024). Many early learning settings provide children with access to children's books, and educators often read to children at least once during the learning day. While teachers can access a variety of children's books in different ways, they may be drawn to their favorite texts without critically examining the content. I implement collaborative book critiques of popular titles in my curriculum development courses to foster a critical mindset. This supports students to reflect upon their biases and to learn about cultures and new stories. They also learn how children's books can serve as entry points to explore topics that reflect children's identities and experiences (Bishop 1990).

To prepare them for this work, I share readings, such as the online article and resource "Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books," by Louise Derman-Sparks, and the journal article written by my colleagues and me, "Using Texts to Accurately Represent Africa's Cultures and Promote Healthy Personal and Social Identities Among Children." Then I read a children's book aloud and solicit their feedback about its content. They often share favorable impressions that focus on the book's illustrations, themes, and use of language. Next, students work in small groups and have more time to identify stereotypes or misrepresentations in the illustrations and text. While they carefully examine the book, they do not often find an example of bias. When this happens, I direct them to specific pages for further review and discussion.

For instance, when reading *All Are Welcome,* by Alexandra Penfold and illustrated by Suzanne Kaufman, students initially expressed delight that the book represented a variety of identities. However, when I asked them to take a second look, one group noticed that one character, a Muslim girl, wore a head covering. Based on their understanding, very young Muslim girls did not generally wear head coverings. Another group noticed that the lion dance was included to depict Chinese culture. They shared that the lion dance was just one representation of Chinese culture.

These experiences led to aha moments and further discussion. The students wanted to learn more about the use of stereotypes and tokenism in children's books. They reflected on how their thinking changed over the readings. One student shared, "The pictures shown in the book are like what we have seen in the popular media—what we were exposed to since we were young. However, remembering what we learned about tokenism and differences within groups and having the chance to think aloud with our peers, we became more critical and reflective."

By taking a closer look at popular children's books through the lens of equity and inclusion, students begin to feel comfortable articulating questions and thoughts they might otherwise keep to themselves. It is an activity that invites them to examine their identities, beliefs, and changing perspectives (NAEYC 2019; NAEYC 2020b). Students' thinking, shared in journal entries and exit tickets, often evolve over time. For example, one student wrote, "I need to check myself. I need to recognize my own biases. Young learners are perceptive and will be watching my every move. I will be responsible for modeling the behavior that I desire from them." Students engage in dialogue about what it means to intentionally foster a sense of belonging in early childhood settings. They listen, discuss, ask questions, accept responsibility when they get things wrong, and practice humility and commitment to make changes, all of which are dispositions needed to sustain ABE (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020).

Unveiling Inequities Through Equity Audits

I (Anita; first author) teach graduate-level early childhood education courses to in-service teachers at William Paterson University, a large suburban university in the Northeast. The students who take my courses are mainly White women who teach in the region's urban school districts, which serve racially and ethnically diverse communities and families with low incomes. I am a primary speaker of Indian languages who learned to speak English as a second language. I am also a heterosexual, nondisabled, cisgender woman.

In my Issues and Trends in Early Childhood Education course, students learn how to conduct an *equity audit* to evaluate learning environments, teaching practices, and program policies for bias (Dodman et al. 2019; MAEC 2021). They use tools, such as checklists and rating scales, to examine how children's social identities related to race, socioeconomic status, language, and disability can impact their experiences in learning settings. This process helps them to develop *equity literacy,* enabling them to identify, address, and rectify unfair practices in their settings. By engaging in inquiry, applying critical data analysis, considering necessary changes, and promoting inclusive learning opportunities for all children, they become better equipped to act as change agents (Gorski & Swalwell 2015; Dodman et al. 2019).

Students use the "Checklist for Assessing the Visual-Material Environment" from the *Anti-Bias* book to assess their overall physical learning environments (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020, 180–181). They use the "Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books" to learn if the children's books in their settings align with ABE goals. Students are often surprised to discover that their libraries contain many books positively depicting White main characters and lack books prominently featuring various identities and experiences, such as those that include the stories of immigrant families. They also develop questions to assess the use of inclusive language in their program's handbooks, policies, and communications to families. Here, too, they often uncover inequities, such as the absence of translation in children's home languages and a lack of terminology referring to different family structures.

After collecting data, students create visual data stories and participate in a data walk, allowing them to share graphs, charts, and tables that highlight disparities. They examine each other's data stories using a structured protocol. Afterward, they come together to engage in a critical discussion on the following:

- General reactions to data
- Questions that the data raise
- Which learners are being served, which are not, and why
- How learning environments, policies, and practices increase access, equity, and inclusion or exacerbate disparities
- Solutions for addressing issues raised by these data

Students' discussions and written reflections reveal a range of ideas and feelings, from frustration about difficulties in accessing data about their settings to the unsettling realization that inequity commonly exists in educational practices. For example, one student wrote in her post-data walk reflection, "My school has a great reputation. I was proud of the high quality of programming we offer. My data make me wonder if all the children are experiencing the same high quality or if it is high quality for some and not for others."

Students use an excerpt from the "Classroom Assessment of Sociocultural Interactions" rating scale to observe and reflect upon the exchanges and communication in their settings (Jensen et al. 2018).

They note who they frequently engage with and how by identifying which children receive praise, positive affect, and scaffolds and which children receive negative feedback and corrections. Then they analyze their ratings for patterns of preference or neglect toward certain children and consider the causes and impacts of their interactions with learners. After using this rating scale, one student began to wonder about her reactions to children who displayed physically aggressive behaviors. She wondered if her strong responses could have led their peers to exclude them. Critical examinations like these are important for educators to improve self-awareness and teaching practices.

Equity audits can inspire educators to act on their desire to create more inclusive learning environments for all children (Dodman et al. 2019). Planning for advocacy projects often involves problem solving. For example, one student remarked, "I wish someone would ask me for ideas about good children's books to be included in our studies, [but] we have to use what we are given." We brainstormed how to break through this barrier and to share recommendations based on their audit findings. When the auditing process reveals disparities to students, they often feel the urgency to respond by changing their classroom or program environments, campaigning for funds to procure diverse children's books, connecting with curriculum developers to share their findings, or partnering with community agencies to access needed resources.

Reframing Challenging Behaviors as Learning Opportunities

I (Rebecca; third author) teach in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, located in the St. Louis/East Illinois metro area. I am a Jewish, cisgendered, married woman with children. In our cohort program, teacher candidates participate in a book study of *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* during two courses I teach: Collaborative Relationships and Supporting Language and Literacy Development: Birth–Age 5. As teacher candidates progress through each chapter, they write journal entries and engage in small-group discussions.

Throughout their program coursework, teacher candidates learn about applying ABE in new instructional contexts. Teacher candidates learn about the application of ABE in my mathematics instruction course. During this point in the program, they begin working in their K–2 placements. This can be an adjustment: The child-to-adult ratio and the expectations for instruction and learning increase. This can especially be true for math, which requires learners to use specific executive function skills to engage in math content (Blair & Razza 2007; Clements et al. 2016).

Successful early math learning has been shown to predict future success across content areas (Claessens & Engel 2013; NASEM 2024). However, rich math experiences are not equally accessible to all young learners. Children who possess marginalized identities related to race/ethnicity, income, and ability are at a greater risk of having lower math learning outcomes (Hojnoski et al. 2018; Dumas et al. 2019; James-Brabham et al. 2023). To foster whole-child development, I emphasize the importance of embedding scaffolds to support children's executive function skills and their social and emotional learning to help them engage in math lessons.

To this end, I facilitate discussions and activities to support teacher candidates as they consider the behaviors they see during their math lessons. For example, a teacher candidate suggested that a child in their class may have stopped working and put their head down on their desk because of a lack of motivation or interest in working on the new kind of math problem she introduced. Once we broke down the steps required for the new problem, she realized that the problem added a layer of cognitive demand. We discussed how she could take an anti-ableist approach by incorporating strategies to help the child overcome this challenge. This helped her apply some of the ABE principles she learned in previous courses and emphasized how ABE practices can fit into all domains.

This example reflects the space from which many teacher candidates begin. Other behaviors they discuss include children shouting out answers, interrupting, not following directions, and playing with math manipulatives in ways other than intended. Some teacher candidates have responded by taking manipulatives away and separating children from the group for causing interruptions. Instead, I encourage them to consider how they can work to "understand and value each child as an individual with unique developmental variations, experiences, strengths,

interests, abilities, challenges, approaches to learning, and with the capacity to make choices" (NAEYC 2019, 9). I also discuss how they can embed supports to ensure that all children have access to math learning (e.g., Coogle et al 2021).

Holding the viewpoint that some individuals inherently lack the necessary abilities to be successful can result in "practices that discriminate against people with disabilities" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020, 182). I engage teacher candidates in conversations about different abilities and the unintentional influence of ableism within early mathematics classrooms. This encourages them to examine how math instruction can inadvertently favor children without disabilities or other learning challenges. It also reinforces the need to address social, emotional, and executive function skills across the curriculum.

To help teacher candidates identify and integrate effective supports, I provide them with resources such as the Center on the Developing Child's "A Guide to Executive Function" and "InBrief: Executive Function: Skills for Life and Learning." I also share examples of classroom scenarios to help them practice identifying children's learning needs and ways to effectively respond. As teacher candidates gain more knowledge, they feel empowered to explicitly teach executive function skills and self-regulation to help children persist through negative thoughts and emotions during math experiences (Yang et al. 2024).

As teacher candidates begin to reflect on children's past learning contexts to understand their current actions, they start to see challenging behaviors in a new way. I invite them to write about a child in their setting who is experiencing difficulties in a series of quick writes that they later revisit. We discuss which multitiered approaches, instructional adaptations, and targeted supports they could implement to increase the child's access to and engagement in learning (Fox et al. 2010). I also encourage teacher candidates to consider the steps required for routines and tasks and what children need to complete them. A teacher candidate placed in a second-grade class provided children with a checklist to support working memory. Another included a card prompting children to raise their hands before sharing. In addition, we plan for the use of adaptive materials like mats to help children organize math manipulatives and window cut-outs to help them focus on one problem at a time when completing math handouts.

Teacher candidates have shared that learning about social and emotional development, executive function, and responsive supports helped them manage their classes more effectively and shift their mindsets and approaches toward an inclusive, anti-ableist stance. They come to recognize the possibilities of putting ABE principles into action.

Innovations in Higher Education, coedited by Anthony Broughton, PhD, and Elisa Huss-Hage, MEd, aims to recognize and support the efforts of educators, staff, and administrators who prepare early childhood professionals. The column examines stories from the field, connections to theory and research, and recommendations for practices related to coursework, clinical experiences, and professionalism.

Conclusion

Learning about ABE is not a solitary undertaking. When educators share and examine each other's perspectives, stories, and experiences, they engage in collective power that enables them to raise their voices and take necessary actions. In our community of practice, we mindfully craft learning experiences to create spaces where students feel able to dialogue about diverse ideas, engage in deep listening and learning, and embrace changes to their thinking and approaches.

About the Authors

Anita R. Kumar, EdD, is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education: PreK–12 at William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey. She has worked as an early childhood educator in preschool and early primary settings and a teacher educator in two- and four-year higher education programs. She researches how early childhood educators learn from practice.

Amber Beisly, PhD, is an associate professor of early childhood education at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma. Their research interests include STEM, approaches to learning, and self-regulation.

Rebecca Swartz, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville. In her courses and her creative work, she promotes joyful learning and partnerships with families and communities during the early years. rswartz@siue.edu

Ruth Facun-Granadozo, PhD, is an associate professor of early childhood education at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee. She has experience working in diverse higher education institutions and is dedicated to promoting anti-bias education in her teacher education courses. facunr@etsu.edu

References

Arsal, Z. 2019. "Critical Multicultural Education and Preservice Teachers' Multicultural Attitudes." *Journal for Multicultural Education* 13 (1): 106–18.

Bishop, R.S. 1990. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books from the Classroom 6 (3): ix-xi.

Blair, C., & R.P. Razza. 2007. "Relating Effortful Control, Executive Function, and False Belief Understanding to Emerging Math and Literacy Ability in Kindergarten." *Child Development* 78 (2): 647–63.

Claessens, A., & M. Engel. 2013. "How Important Is Where You Start? Early Mathematics Knowledge and Later School Success." *Teachers College Record* 115 (6): 1–29.

CLEE (Center for Leadership & Educational Equity). 2007. "Critical Incidents Protocol." clee.org/resources/critical-incidents.

Clements, D.H., J. Sarama, & C. Germeroth. 2016. "Learning Executive Function and Early Mathematics: Directions of Causal Relations." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 36: 79–90.

Coogle, C., E.R. Lakey, J.R. Ottley, J.A. Brown, & M. Romano. 2021. "Embedded Learning Opportunities for Children with and Without Disabilities." *Young Children* 76 (4): 8–15.

Derman-Sparks, L. & J.O. Edwards, with C.M. Goins. 2020. *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves.* 2nd ed. NAEYC.

Dodman, S.L., E.K. DeMulder, J.L. View, K. Swalwell, S. Stribling, et al. 2019. "Equity Audits as a Tool of Critical Data-Driven Decision Making: Preparing Teachers to See Beyond Achievement Gaps and Bubbles." *Action in Teacher Education* 41 (1): 4–22.

Dumas, D., D. McNeish, J. Sarama, & D. Clements. 2019. "Preschool Mathematics Intervention Can Significantly Improve Student Learning Trajectories Through Elementary School." *AERA Open* 5 (4): 1–15.

Fox, L., J. Carta, P.S. Strain, G. Dunlap, & M.L. Hemmeter. 2010. "Response to Intervention and the Pyramid Model." *Infants & Young Children* 23 (1): 3–13.

Gorski, P.C., & K. Swalwell. 2015. "Equity Literacy for All." *Educational Leadership* 72 (6): 34–40.

Hojnoski, R., G.I.L. Caskie, & R. Miller Young. 2018. "Early Numeracy Trajectories: Baseline Performance Levels and Growth Rates in Young Children by Disability Status." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 37 (4): 206–18.

James-Brabham, E., T. Loveridge, F. Sella, P. Wakeling, D.J. Carroll, et al. 2023. "How Do Socioeconomic Attainment Gaps in Early Mathematical Ability Arise?" *Child Development* 94 (6): 1550–65. doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13947.

Jensen, B., S. Grajeda, & E. Haertel. 2018. "Measuring Cultural Dimensions of Classroom Interactions." *Educational Assessment* 23 (4): 250–76.

Kurucz, C., S. Lehrl, & Y. Anders. 2020. "Preschool Teachers' Perspectives About the Engagement of Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Parents in Their Children's Early Education." *International Journal of Early Childhood* 52 (2): 213–31. doi.org/10.1007/s13158-020-00269-1.

MAEC (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium). 2021. "Equity Audit." Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium. maec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/MAEC-Equity-Audit-2021-508.pdf.

Monroe, L., & J. Ruan. 2018. "Increasing Early Childhood Preservice Teachers' Intercultural Sensitivity Through the ABCs." *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* 39 (1): 1–15.

NAEYC. 2019. "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity.

NAEYC. 2020a. "Developmentally Appropriate Practice." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents.

NAEYC. 2020b. "Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/professional-standards-competencies.

NASEM (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine). 2024. *A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum*. The National Academies Press.

NCES (National Center for Education Statistics). 2024. "Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools." *Condition of Education*. nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cge.

Nganga, L. 2015. "Culturally Responsive and Anti-Biased Teaching Benefits Early Childhood Pre-Service Teachers." *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching* 4 (2): 1–16. doi.org/10.5430/jct.v4n2p1.

Norheim, H., M. Broekhuizen, T. Moser, & G. Pastori. 2024. "ECEC Professionals' Views on Partnerships with Parents in Multicultural Classrooms in Four European Countries." *IJEC* 56: 443–460. doi.org/10.1007/s13158-023-00382-x.

Pruitt, B., & P. Thomas. 2007. *Democratic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners*. International IDEA; United Nations Development Programme; Organization of American States. oas.org/es/sap/dsdme/pubs/dial_%20demo_e.pdf.

Souto-Manning, M., K. Malik, J. Martell, & P. Pión. 2021. "Troubling Belonging: The Racialized Exclusion of Young Immigrants and Migrants of Color." *International Journal of Early Childhood* 53: 101–118. doi.10.1007/s13158-021-00286-8.

Spear, C.F., J.O. Briggs, T. Sanchez, M. Woody, & J. Ponce-Cori. 2024. "The Power of Picturebooks to Support Early Elementary Teachers' Racial Literacy in Communities of Practice: An Example from the 3Rs (Reading, Racial Equity, Relationships)." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 52 (7): 1361–73.

Staats, C., K. Capatosto, R.A. Wright, & V.W. Jackson. 2016. *State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review*. Report of the Kirwan Institute, Ohio State University. kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/2016-implicit-bias-review.pdf.

Vittrup, B. 2016. "Early Childhood Teachers' Approaches to Multicultural Education & Perceived Barriers to Disseminating Anti-Bias Messages." *Multicultural Education* 23 (3-4): 37–41.

Yang, H.-W., M. Vinh, E. Sharifnia, J. Amsbary, D.H. Clements, et al. 2024. "(Re)Conceptualizing STEM Learning and Teaching for Young Children with Disabilities." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 44 (3): 185–94.

More than a Job Title

Exploring Leadership in Infant and Toddler Settings

Rebecca Parlakian and Lynette Aytch

Jessi and Ali teach 14 toddlers, three of whom began the year with identified developmental delays and one in the process of being screened for autism spectrum disorder. Jessi and Ali increasingly find themselves moving from challenging moment to challenging moment. As the weeks go by and they learn more about the children's needs, they realize that their class size makes it difficult for them to provide the individualized and small-group attention necessary for the toddlers' growth.

In light of this insight, Jessi takes time to reflect on the question, "What's the best way to advocate for change?" Increased staffing may have financial implications, particularly for families. After some deep introspection and discussion with Ali, Jessi requests a meeting with the center's director. She wants to share her concerns and to suggest that another qualified staff person could create a safer, more supportive learning environment.

Unaware of the extent to which Jessi and Ali have been questioning how to respond to children's behavior and growth, their director offers to move a floater into their classroom for several hours each morning. This is when the two teachers need the most help. She also suggests partnering with the local early intervention office to have an infant-toddler special educator observe the classroom to see if routines or materials can be modified to support the children more effectively.

Too often, we think of leadership as limited to a few people in senior positions of authority who direct and supervise the performance of others toward a specific mission and vision. But as the opening vignette shows, thriving, high-quality early childhood education programs support their entire staff's ability to lead. Leadership is not limited to those in positions of power or authority; rather, every person has the potential to lead from where they are. This is particularly true in infant and toddler settings, where a flat management structure (typically a director and assistant director) means that just a few "leaders" head up a team of talented educators with decades of combined experience. This column offers up a new concept of leadership that invites us all to consider the opportunities for leading wherever we contribute in an organization's structure.

In designing and running the ZERO TO THREE Fellowship program—an 18-month professional development experience created to nurture emerging leaders in the infant-toddler field—we have come to believe there are two key ingredients to nurturing leadership at all levels. First, directors and supervisors must build a culture of reflection to promote regulated, thoughtful, and intentional action. Second, quality relationships must be supported at all levels: Supervisor to staff, colleague to colleague, and staff to children and families. This allows for leadership that values authentic connection, which is integral to high-quality early childhood education.

Reflection in Our Work

Reflection is the process of purposefully focusing on our thoughts, feelings, emotions, behaviors, and identities to make meaning of our experiences in relation to our professional roles. *Reflective practice* is taking the time to consider our experiences, reactions, and feelings about a situation as we decide how to respond to it. This practice can occur at all levels of an organization—individually, in teams, and in supervision. It is particularly helpful in guiding our understanding of the children and families we serve.

For example, due to the cost of diapers, a parent tells a teacher that they are toilet training their toddler, who just turned 2 years old, and they want the teacher's help during the day. Internally, the teacher's

initial reaction is that the child shows few signs of readiness, the parent's decision is not developmentally appropriate, and going along with the request will add a time-consuming task to the day. Meeting with a supervisor or colleague to reflect on and talk about this interaction can help bring conscious awareness to the exchange. Questions to ask include

- "What happened?"
- "What am I feeling?"
- "Why am I having these feelings?"
- "What can I learn from these feelings?"

Reflection and reflective practice help us better understand ourselves, our "hot buttons," and our biases—a critical practice for the profession (NAEYC 2019). In the example above, the teacher was able to recognize that her initial reaction was rooted in a number of factors, including the fact that she considered this parent quite difficult. Through reflection, she was able to separate her concerns (developmental readiness) from her feelings (her sense that the parent was asking too much from two busy toddler teachers). Taking this time allowed her to identify constructive next steps, like creating a plan for a phased approach to potty training over the next six months that she could discuss with the parent. It also let her identify community resources (like the local diaper bank) that could address the family's needs in the meantime.

Slowing down and considering our experiences and reactions as we move through our daily tasks help us learn more about ourselves and our relationships in the workplace. Reflecting on our work—and using what we learn to adjust our practice—help us understand how our feelings and behaviors affect others (Hatton-Bowers et al. 2021). Through this process, we become more intentional in our roles as early childhood educators and begin to identify patterns of thinking and acting that may not serve our best interests or that may hold us back. This effort takes time, and sometimes the discoveries can be uncomfortable. Yet recognizing these patterns can spark the insight we need to make positive change.

Using Reflection to Drive Learning

Often, one of the biggest challenges faced by early childhood educators is the "fierce urgency of now" (Jaffe 2019, 39). The fast pace, high stakes, and intense demands of our work leave little (or no) space for pausing, wondering, or even meaningfully debriefing about our successes or failures. In essence, all of this "doing swallows up learning" (Amulya 2004, 3).

This is certainly true of working in an infant-toddler setting. Think about the range of experiences an educator manages in any given day:

- Supporting new parents as they separate from their 6-week-old newborn for the first time
- Nurturing an inconsolable baby with reflux
- Designing experiences that give babies an opportunity to move, stand, and creep—and watching one take their first step
- Observing what circumstances seem to elicit challenging behavior from a toddler
- Pulling together documentation for a family-educator conference about a 2-year-old's possible communication delay

Plus, they must meet the needs for attention, love, diapering, feeding, learning, and play for up to four (or more!) children simultaneously. All of these intimate and intricate moments are part of the everyday professional experience of infant-toddler educators. Each one demands a deep well of compassion, self-regulation, expertise in child development, and a deft hand with relationships.

To cull insight from these hundreds of moments and interactions, reflection is essential (Hilden & Tikkamäki 2013). Those who guide early childhood programs can support reflective learning by building a network of healthy relationships across the organization. When staff understand that they're safe and that their observations, thoughts, and reactions will not lead to judgment, they become free to be curious about the meaning of their experiences (Heffron et al. 2016).

Teaching staff and teams learn best when they can step away from the immediate moment and consider an experience with some emotional distance. This creates the space necessary to identify solutions they may have missed during the intensity of the moment. To foster reflective learning, supervisors should normalize the practice of asking questions like

- "What were you feeling/thinking in the moment?"
- "What do you think the other person was hoping for?"
- "Looking back, what other options do you see?"
- "What do you think you learned from that experience?"

Using reflection in this way allows each staff member to contribute insights that can guide team learning, planning, and practices.

An equally important aspect of reflection is enhancing our capacity for self-awareness (Lilienfeld & Basterfield 2020). Educators can use a number of strategies to embed self-awareness into their daily routines. These include

- Pausing to consider their feelings and body sensations. (Am I tense? Is my jaw clenched or shoulders rigid?)
- Asking a trusted colleague to observe them leading an activity or responding to a child's behavior. What strengths do they see? What opportunities for learning might exist?
- Seeking out a mentor or coach to provide ongoing support and to act as a sounding board for stressors, ideas, and opportunities. A more experienced teacher, a peer in another organization, or a recently retired colleague could serve in this role (Heifetz et al. 2009; Taylor 2022).

Relationship-Based Work

Quality relationships are integral to a program's effectiveness and positive impact (Bertacchi 1996; Zöggeler-Burkhardt et al. 2023). Reflective practice goes hand-in-hand with relationship-based work because it allows all staff to more deeply understand how their relationships affect the ways they engage with and support peers, children, and families.

Each of us can apply our experiences, perspectives, skills, and knowledge toward advancing change and positive outcomes for young children and families.

While educator-child relationships are integral to positive outcomes in all education settings, infant-toddler programs are unique. Infants develop within the context of loving, care-giving relationships, which include their educators as well as their families. The quality of these early relationships shapes the architecture of their growing brains (Lally & Mangione 2017; Ilyka et al. 2021). Nurturing the well-being of infants and toddlers involves responding to their feelings and needs in a sensitive, culturally relevant, and consistent manner.

Supervisors, teachers, and families benefit when their needs are met in a similar way. This idea that one set of relationships (such as teacher-child) can impact other relationships (such as the connection between coteachers) is called the *parallel process* (Bosk et al. 2022). Consider: The teacher who was bitten earlier in the day might speak sharply to a coteacher who miscounts the number of snacks needed. Similarly, the teacher who receives unexpected recognition from her director is likely to approach her morning's work with positive energy.

Because the conditions or experiences that are desirable for one group often work for many (Garrett et al. 2023), the parallel process also translates to organizations (OCR 2023). For example, a program that observes families staying longer during morning drop-off when they are offered a cup of coffee or tea might establish a "self-care cafe" for staff. This space could have snacks, beverages, and relaxation tools available during breaks.

Leading from Where We Are

Mr. Tomas, an assistant teacher in one of the toddler rooms, notices that his colleagues feel increasingly pressured to spend more time on

structured learning tasks rather than play. He begins researching play-based learning and shares what he discovers with his lead teacher. Together, they try out some new activities with the children and discover that the toddlers are much more engaged. They also observe the children learning key skills through play over time.

Mr. Tomas's enthusiasm sparks the curiosity of his colleagues in the other toddler classroom. They ask him to lead a discussion during the next staff meeting on his approach, so they can experiment with embedding learning experiences into play. Slowly, Mr. Tomas's colleagues begin to make changes to their teaching approaches. The program's director is thrilled to receive positive feedback from families about how much fun their children are having in the program.

Leadership can mean proposing new ideas, taking initiative, supporting others, and making positive contributions toward achieving goals regardless of title, position, or formal authority (Gambill 2025). While sometimes referred to as *informal leadership*, this description recognizes that leaders are not defined by formal job titles. As in the above vignette, passion, creativity, and persistence can create significant change.

Each of us—whether we're in a formal leadership role or not—can apply our experiences, perspectives, skills, and knowledge toward advancing change and positive outcomes for young children and families. Although Mr. Tomas—and Jessi and Ali from the opening vignette—weren't directors or supervisors, they exhibited leadership capabilities that included

- **Cooperation and collaboration:** They appreciated the importance of working both independently and alongside others to achieve a desired goal.
- **Curiosity and creativity:** They sought new knowledge and were open to innovative ideas—traits that can permeate an organization.
- **Comfort with ambiguity or challenges:** Both Mr. Tomas and Jessi were willing to work toward achieving a task or initiative even when the path forward was not completely clear.
- **Emotional intelligence and self-awareness:** The educators appreciated that the quality of their relationships and interactions with others was as important as the goals they were striving to achieve.
- **Equity, inclusion, and diversity:** The educators worked to ensure that they and their colleagues had the knowledge and skills to serve each other, children, and families in a just, unbiased manner (Irving Harris Foundation 2018).

Leaders motivate the support of others and help programs achieve aspirational goals. When staff and others take the lead on issues that they care about, they create a positive and productive work environment that ultimately leads to better outcomes for children and families (Lee et al. 2022).

Wrapping Up

At its heart, leadership is about reflection and relationships. Reflection helps us hone our professional practices by providing us with insights into our thoughts, behaviors, and skills. A commitment to relationships means that we possess the ability to engage and empower others to bring their best to the moment. Together, these two elements shape our leadership approach and practices, creating positive ripples across our infant and toddler programs.

Think About It

Reflect on a recent experience you've had when responding to a young toddler's behavior:

- What was your immediate reaction?
- What went well? What didn't go so well?
- What will you take from the experience that you can use the next time something similar occurs?

The next time you're in a challenging moment at work—such as when talking with a family member about their openness to allowing an infant mental health consultant observe their child in the classroom—pause and ask yourself

- What am I feeling right now?
- What is this bringing up for me?
- What strengths or skills do I bring to this situation?

Take a moment (alone or with others) to plan for the future by reflecting back on a challenging moment and asking

- What did I do to calm myself down in that situation? What could I try next time?
- What do I imagine the other person was experiencing in that situation? How can I use this information to respond constructively in the future?
- If this situation occurs again, what responses could I try? What actions on my part could lead to a different outcome?

Try It

- Choose a reflective question to discuss as a team during each staff meeting.
- Contribute to strong relationships at work by reaching out to a colleague (in a conversation, text, or note) to share a positive observation, skill, or quality you see in them.
- Take time to journal or discuss with peers something you've learned from a challenging experience at work and how you'll use that insight in the future.

Rocking and Rolling is written by infant and toddler specialists and contributed by ZERO TO THREE, a nonprofit organization working to promote the health and development of infants and toddlers by translating research and knowledge into a range of practical tools and resources for use by the adults who influence the lives of young children.

About the Authors

Rebecca Parlakian serves as senior director of programs at ZERO TO THREE, where she directs a project portfolio related to program leadership, child development, parenting, home visiting, and high-quality teaching. rparlakian@zerotothree.org

Lynette Aytch, PsyD, is director of the Leadership Development Institute (LDI) at ZERO TO THREE in Washington, DC. The LDI scope of work includes the ZERO TO THREE Fellowship, the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Mentorship Program, the IECMH Emerging Leadership Awards, and the Academy of ZERO TO THREE Fellows. laytch@zerotothree.org

References

Amulya, J. 2004. *What Is Reflective Practice?* Center for Reflective Community Practice, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. careinnovations.org/wp-content/uploads/what-is-reflective-practice65.pdf.

Bertacchi, J. 1996. "Relationship-Based Organizations." *ZERO TO THREE Journal* 17 (2): 1–7.

Bosk, E.A., S.V. Kautz, A. Mendez, K.E. Hanson, A.J. Myers, et al. 2022. "Not Just for the Client: Translating Principles of Relationship-Based Practice to the Organizational Level." *ZERO TO THREE Journal* 43 (2): 53–59.

Gambill, T. 2025. "Lead Without a Title: The Power of Informal Leadership." *Forbes*, March 9. forbes.com/sites/tonygambill/2025/03/06/lead-without-a-title-the-power-of-informal-leadership.

Garrett, C., S. Ritchie, & E. Phillips. 2023. *Children Come First Mindset: Parallel Process, Continuous Improvement, and Collaborative Inquiry.* CCNetwork, March 2023.

region6cc.uncg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Mindset_ParellelProcessContinuousImprovement CollaborativeInquiry_23_RC6_013.pdf.

Hatton-Bowers, H., E. Amini Virmani, L. Nathans, B.A. Walsh, M.J. Buell, et al. 2021. "Cultivating Self-Awareness in Our Work with Infants, Toddlers, and Their Families." *Young Children* 76 (1): 30–34.

Heffron, M.C., D. Reynolds, & B. Talbot. 2016. "Reflecting Together: Reflective Functioning as a Focus for Deepening Group Supervision." *Infant Mental Health Journal* 37 (6): 628–39.

Heifetz, R., A. Grashow, & M. Linsky. 2009. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Harvard Business Press.

Hilden, S., & K. Tikkamäki. 2013. "Reflective Practice as a Fuel for Organizational Learning." *Administrative Sciences* 3 (3): 76–95.

Ilyka, D., M.H. Johnson, & S. Lloyd-Fox. 2021. "Infant Social Interactions and Brain Development: A Systematic Review." *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Review* 130 (27): 448–69.

Irving Harris Foundation. 2018. *Diversity-Informed Tenets for Work with Infants, Children, and Families*. irvingharrisfdn.org/how-we-work/initiatives/diversity-informed-tenets.

Jaffe, J. 2019. "Reflective Practice for Learning from Experience: Navigating the Back Roads at Work." *Foundation Learning* 11 (1): 35–48.

Lally, J.R., & P.L. Mangione. 2017. "Caring Relationships: The Heart of Early Brain Development." *Young Children* 72 (2): 17–24.

Lee, Y., A. Douglass, S. Zeng, A. Wiehe Lopes, & A. Reyes. 2022. "Preparing Early Educators as Frontline Leaders and Change Agents with a Leadership Development Initiative." *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* 16 (2). doi.org/10.1186/s40723-022-00095-z.

Lilienfeld, S.O., & C. Basterfield. 2020. "Reflective Practice in Clinical Psychology: Reflections from Basic Psychological Science." *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 27 (4): e12352.

NAEYC. 2019. "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education." Position statement. NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity.

OCR (Office of Head Start). 2023. *Supporting Professionals Who Support Families: The Parallel Process*. headstart.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/supporting-professionals-families-parallel-process-eng.pdf.

Taylor, M. 2022. *The Noble School Leader: The Five-Square Approach to Leading Schools with Emotional Intelligence*. Jossey-Bass.

Zöggeler-Burkhardt, L., E-M. Embacher, & W. Smidt. 2023. "Social Relationships, Interactions and Learning in Early Childhood: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Findings, and Challenges." *Early Child Development and Care* 193 (11-12): 1199–1203.

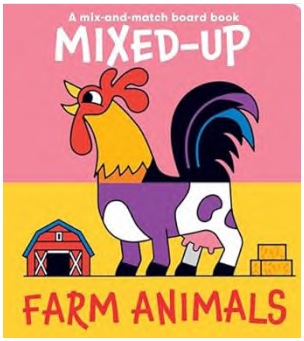
The Reading Chair

New children's books too good to miss

While children's books may target readers of a specific age range, a good book can appeal to and engage young and old alike. Intentional educators thoughtfully select appropriate titles for the children in their settings. They can also take advantage of some books' flexibility in appealing to children with different interests, strengths, and areas for growth, including where they are in their literacy development.

For example, educators can use *Mixed-Up Farm Animals* to introduce animal sounds to the youngest learners. For older children, the book's flaps can be used to create a guessing game. While the rhyming language of *The Ballad of Cactus Joe* may appeal to younger children, the back matter offers lots of animal and plant facts for children who want more. *Pigs Dig a Road* introduces vehicle names for young readers and can be a jumping off point for talking about teamwork with older children. As children grow as readers, educators can invite them to interact with books they love on different levels.

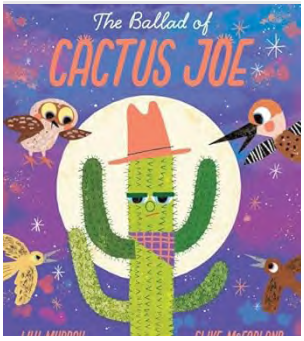
—Isabel Baker and Miriam Baker Schiffer



Mixed-Up Farm Animals (A Mix-and-Match Board Book)

Illustrated by Spencer Wilson. 2024. Boxer Books. 20 pp. Ages birth to 3.

Many young children enjoy learning animal sounds, and listening to and producing animal sounds help children engage with language. In this board book, bold and inviting illustrations take children on a tour through the farm, practicing animals sounds as they go. Instead of having the animals "say" each sound, more interesting verbs are used. The cat "purrs," the sheep "bleats," the pig "snorts," and the chicken "clucks." The pages are split, so half a page can be turned at a time to add an element of guesswork. This board book is on the larger side, making it easier to share with a group. Upbeat and appealing!

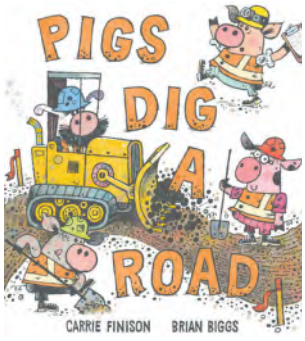


The Ballad of Cactus Joe

By Lily Murray. Illustrated by Clive McFarland. 2024. Silver Dolphin Books. 32 pp. Ages 2 to 8.

Join in for an engaging rhyming tale about a cactus who likes his own space out in the desert. Being part of a community doesn't come naturally to Cactus Joe. Still, *symbiosis*—when two living things exist in an interconnected and mutually beneficial relationship—is something that even the prickliest cactus can't resist. When a series of birds invite themselves to burrow in his trunk or nest on his branches, in exchange for keeping Joe free of pests, the self-described "prickle machine" comes to appreciate their company.

In addition to addressing social and emotional themes around community and interconnectedness, the book provides a springboard for conversations about how cactuses grow and thrive and about symbiotic relationships across the plant and animal kingdoms. Teachers can ask children to think about how they live in connection with nature, friends, and family, including talking, drawing, and writing about how nature influences them and how they affect the nature around them.



Pigs Dig a Road

By Carrie Finison. Illustrated by Brian Biggs. 2024. G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers. 48 pp. Ages 2 to 7.

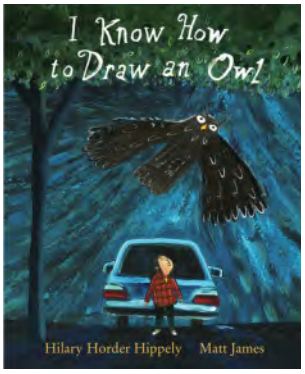
Rosie and her crew need to work fast. The fair is about to open, and they must build a road! The only problem? Rosie has to fix her crew's repeated mistakes! The story takes a twist when desperately exhausted Rosie dozes off. Not wanting to disturb their hard-working leader, her crew rises to the occasion: They put their heads together and finish the project.

The story is rich with social and emotional content, including serving the community, the importance of teamwork, and appreciating a kind and hard-working leader. Biggs's energetic illustrations are infused with humor and generosity. The large-format book can be a favorite for many years, offering truck identification for the young and a tension-filled story for older readers. Teachers can use the book to introduce words like *asphalt*, *gravel*, *roadbed,* and the names of vehicles, or they can ask children to think about and pretend or role-play the teamwork involved in various settings, such as a zoo, a family, and a doctor's office.

About the Authors

Isabel Baker, MAT, MLS, is the founding director of The Book Vine for Children, a national company dedicated to getting good books into the hands of preschool children and their teachers. Isabel has worked as a children's librarian and is currently a presenter on early literacy and book selection.

Miriam Baker Schiffer, MFA, is a writer in Brooklyn, New York. She consults on book selections for The Book Vine, in McHenry, Illinois. Miriam's children's book, *Stella Brings the Family,* was published by Chronicle Books in 2015.

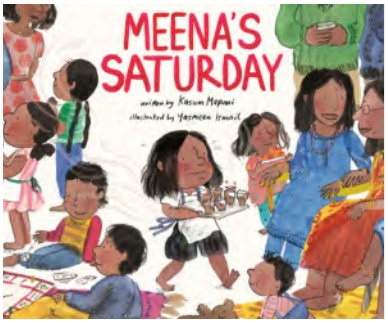


I Know How to Draw an Owl

By Hilary Horder Hippely. Illustrated by Matt James. 2024. Neal Porter Books. 32 pp. Ages 3 to 7.

When Belle's class learns to paint an owl, her bird has mesmerizing bright eyes and feathers that pop. No one knows that it's based on a real owl that lives in the park where she and her mother sleep each night in their car. They listen to the owl's hooting, imagining that it's there to protect them. A child who is new to the class comes to school in an old car like Belle's, chock full of belongings, looking scared. Belle thinks about what it's like to offer welcome and protection, like her owl did for her. She takes the boy's hand and brings him inside.

This compelling and artful story is about what makes Belle who she is: Her connection to nature, her mother's love, her interest in art, and her inclination to help a friend. Belle's life feels powerful on each page with James's majestic illustrations. Based on Hippely's experience educating a child whose family was unhoused, the text is poetic and concise, such that even young children will be engaged by it. This book can be used one-on-one with a learner experiencing this circumstance. It can also serve as a starting point for broader explorations about communities or families, including about housing insecurity. Teachers may want to leave time for children to react and talk about how they connect with the story.



Meena's Saturday

By Kusum Mepani. Illustrated by Yasmeen Ismail. 2024. Kokila. 40 pp. Ages 4 to 8.

On Saturdays, Meena's parents host a huge meal for friends and family in their Gujarati (Indian) immigrant community. Meena and her sisters work hard to prepare, cleaning their home and translating English labels for their mother. As the house fills with visitors, the women and girls work together, chatting and making the meal. Meena describes the hustle and bustle with deep love and affection for her community and their traditions. But she's frustrated that her brother relaxes while she works and that the men eat first when they come up short on seats at their small table. Why is it like that? At the close of the book, Meena squeezes in with her dad at the first seating, and he welcomes her. Meena values tradition and modernity, and she is already finding a way to uphold both.

Mepani's rich story doesn't shy away from complexity. Ismail's illustrations are loose enough to capture the organized chaos in Meena's loving home and precise enough to render subtleties, such as the way one child strains to get the chai into the cups without a spill. This book is an excellent jumping off point for talking about family traditions and how they've changed over the generations.