

# **Quality UPK Teaching in Diverse Settings**

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## **Introduction**

As our society becomes increasingly diverse and the importance of early education is better understood (from neurological, economic, academic perspectives), teaching practices for young children need to be intentionally mindful of societal contexts and biases that have shaped the thinking and practice of early childhood education professionals. Rooted in the historical inequitable distribution of power and privilege of our nation's social, political, economic, and educational structures, these biases are based on how race, class, culture, gender, sex, ability, language, religion, and other social identities signify power, intelligence, and achievement. To support a more equitable and emancipatory education for all young children, but particularly for those who have historically been excluded from or failed by schooling, educators must consciously challenge biases – both explicit and implicit – and shape teaching to combine the science of early learning and development with practices that are responsive, relevant, and sustaining of children's and families' cultures, languages, and community practices and histories. This is especially important in light of racial disparities in preschool suspensions, overidentification of bilingual and multilingual children for speech/language disorders, racial disproportionality in special education—all well-documented phenomena nationally (Chen, 2016; Potter, 2016; Souto-Manning, Falk, López, Barros Cruz, Bradt, Cardwell, McGowan, Perez, Rabadi-Raol, & Rollins, 2019). It is critical within a context where segregation has been shown to begin in Pre-K.

## **Project Purpose and Goals**

This study is situated within a context of increasing demographic diversity and increased funding of early education in New York City. The Pre-K for All initiative has enhanced access to early care, enrolling over 68,500 students in Pre-K in 2015 (City of New York, 2015). It has recently been lauded for earning high marks on access (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2019; Veiga, 2019). Although there is evidence that access has been expanded, we wanted to investigate the quality of Pre-K programs serving low-income children of color.

Thus, recognizing the importance and impact of New York City's commitment to access to Pre-K for all four-year-olds, this study set out to investigate teaching practices in the New York City Universal Pre-Kindergarten initiative (Pre-K for All), specifically attending to what took place within Pre-K classrooms that offered culturally relevant and linguistically sustaining teaching rooted in the science of how young children learn.

We began by reviewing the literature of three educational perspectives/pedagogies/fields, all which have different histories, foci, and advocacy networks:

- Child development
- Assets-based teaching (culturally responsive/relevant/sustaining pedagogies)
- Bilingual/multilingual development

Our goal was to connect these approaches by bringing together their most salient tenets and understandings in order to develop a set of principles that could work together to support a more effective and emancipatory education for young children, understanding what quality looked like across these fields and developing a more inclusive concept of quality. Such a concept of quality would necessarily position tenets from each of these fields as equally important and as interdependent. We employed these principles to identify practices that specifically support the learning of children and families from historically marginalized and underserved backgrounds – those from low-income and racially/culturally/linguistically diverse backgrounds (those often deemed different from the socially-preferred norm). Our study focused on programs that serve high percentages of children and families designated as “high-need” and culturally/linguistically diverse (those whose cultures did not align with the dominant American culture and who were not monolingual speakers of dominant American English). Our purpose was to shed light on teaching practices, classroom environments, family engagement practices, and organizational structures and policies that are responsive to and sustain the language, cultures, and ways of being of children and families from these backgrounds across three differently-resourced communities (as identified by the Foundation for Child Development) and across geographically-and administratively-located Pre-Ks (Pre-Ks in NYCEECs as well as Pre-Ks in public schools).

Our central question was:

What does high quality teaching in UPK look like?

Subquestions were:

- What does quality teaching in UPK look like for children who belong to communities designated as “high needs” (across socioeconomics, culture, language, race)?
- What does quality teaching in UPK look like in communities that comprise high percentages of children from culturally/linguistically diverse backgrounds?

In pursuing these questions, we were aware of research that showed that too often, for these groups of children, what is referred to as “high quality” teaching is impoverished - focusing on the transmission of knowledge, their preparation for elementary school literacy and math learning, and on the belief that children arrive in UPK classrooms without much knowledge or language. This often happens at the expense of providing active, engaging, and enriching experiences that nurture critical metacognitive skills (critical thinking and problem-solving) as well as social/emotional and cultural/linguistic development and that recognize multilingualism and family funds of knowledge as key resources, as assets for learning (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Genishi, Dyson & Fassler, 1994; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). This lent particular importance to our study and pointed toward the power of potential findings for understanding and ensuring equity in UPK.



## **Perspective and Connection to the Literature**

A recent explosion of research across many disciplines (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013; Falk, 2012; Garcia, 2009; Immordino-Yang, 2017; National Research Council, 2001; Shonkoff, 2017; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) has led to heightened understanding of how the early years shape life-long learning and development. This research, combined with increasing concerns for lessening the historical racial, linguistic, and cultural disproportionality in the school achievement of children (García & Frede, 2010; García & Otheguy, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Polakow, 2012; Valdés, 1996) has increased understandings of the need for high-quality early childhood education. However, too often, what is referred to as “high quality” teaching for low-income, immigrant, and culturally/linguistically diverse children is often understood as the acquisition of skills that are deemed to be important for elementary school literacy and math (Clements & Sarama, 2011) at the expense of providing active, engaging, and enriching experiences that nurture critical metacognitive development (critical thinking and problem-solving) as well as social/emotional and cultural/linguistic development (Brown & Reeve, 1987; Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Ginsburg, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Immordino-Yang, 2017; Raver, 2002). This understanding of quality has often informed deficit perspectives of children who are deemed to have “high needs,” those who are often seen as not knowing much and/or lacking language (Goodwin et al, 2008).

In contrast to a deficit perspective of diverse children and to an understanding of quality early education being assessed via the definition of only narrow academic skills, this study assumes the perspective that “high quality” must include elements of both skill development, developmentally appropriate practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), as well as culturally relevant and linguistically sustaining teaching (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Garcia & Wei, 2014; Gay, 2002, 2010, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). It begins with the assumption that family literacies, funds of knowledge, and community resources are central to the definition of quality teaching in early childhood; that these are critical for bridging children’s and families’ realities, experiences, and expertise with school-based learning standards, goals, and objectives (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016; Nelson & Sheridan, 2011; Nieto & Bode, 2018).

Given (a) the historical disproportionality — what some have called “gap” — in school achievement of children from low-income, immigrant, and culturally/linguistically diverse backgrounds (García & Frede, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Valdés, 1996); (b) the proliferation of research showing that early education is the most important factor affecting a child’s educational trajectory (Bodrova & Leung, 2012; García, Heckman, Leaf, & Prados, 2016; Pianta & Walsh, 2014); and (c) that so many children served by NYC’s UPKs are from low-income, immigrant, and racially/culturally/linguistically diverse backgrounds (NYC DOE, 2019), it is important to know what teaching practices make the greatest positive impact on children’s lives and how these practices are enacted. This study sheds light on this issue.

We are grateful to the Foundation for Child Development for supporting our effort to examine and elucidate what high quality teaching practices, classroom environments, family involvement, and organizational structures and policies look like that support the development and educational outcomes of this large sector of young children and families served by the NYC UPKs.

## Research Questions

Our main research question was: What practices in NYC UPK programs foster the social/emotional/cognitive/ cultural/linguistic learning and development of children and families from low income and racially/culturally/linguistically/socioeconomically diverse backgrounds in culturally and linguistically sustaining ways? This question was parsed out into the following subquestions:

1. What are the pedagogical approaches and tools and classroom environments that support and are responsive to the social/emotional/cognitive learning and development of children from low-income families who are from racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds (including emergent bilingual and immigrant children)?
  - a. In what ways are these approaches and practices fostered in NYC UPK classrooms?
  - b. How do they support the learning of diverse children?
  - c. How do they utilize families and community resources?
  - d. In what ways do these practices impact the overall quality of education for all children in the classroom?
2. What ways of involving and working with families support the learning and development of low-income and racially/culturally/linguistically diverse learners?
  - a. How is this impacted by the income-level of families?
  - b. How is that impacted by race and by language?
  - c. How are families positioned within UPK programs? Within UPK classrooms?
    - i. How does this affect the quality of teaching in UPK classrooms?
3. What are the policies, resources, and organizational structures that enable high quality early learning practices?
  - a. How do they come to life in the context of diverse programs (public school and NYCEEC [community-based centers]) within and across three districts in NYC?
  - b. Who are the key players in enabling these practices?
    - i. How do they negotiate these practices within UPK structures and mandates?
    - ii. What collaborative structures support this work?
    - iii. How do these collaborative structures function?
4. What are the challenges and areas in need of improvement to enhance educators' and schools'/centers' responsiveness to low-income and racially/culturally/linguistically diverse learners and their families?

## Method

The questions above were explored through a qualitative inquiry into the practices, experiences, and perspectives of educators, families, and children in UPK settings situated in three NYC school districts - one low-income/high-need community, one moderate income community, and one well-resourced community - as identified by the Foundation for Child Development. Such exploration was informed by an extensive review of literature, which identified key tenets of child development, assets-based pedagogies, and bilingual/multilingual development. Through our questions we aimed to study situated representations of the phenomenon identified (quality teaching for low-income and racially/culturally/linguistically diverse UPK learners) and not the

phenomenon itself (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). This design choice was appropriate as it recognized that children are diverse and that teaching practices, strategies, and approaches look different across UPK contexts.

### Participants

UPK programs with high percentages of low-income learners (at least 60% free/reduced lunch) and racially/culturally/linguistically diverse learners in both DOE and NYCEEC (community-based) sites were identified for this study using demographic information. Sites where intense intervention by city agencies was taking place were excluded. From this information, a UPK program in a DOE and 2 NYCEEC sites were selected from each district based on review of data from ASPIRE, ECERS-R, CLASS as well as recommendations – from administrators, teachers, teacher educators, and families.

- 9 UPK classes
- 3 classrooms in each of 3 communities of New York City (place-based strategy as requested by FCD and selected from amongst a list of centers assigned to our project by MDRC):
  - one considered high income,
  - one considered to be middle income, and
  - one considered to be low income
- 2 classrooms in each district were in community-based centers and 1 elementary school was in each district
- Centers selected for study participation scored high on ASPIRE, ECERS-R, and CLASS assessments and had
  - high percentage of low-income learners and
  - high concentrations of children from racially/culturally/linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- Participants were: Teachers, administrators, support personnel, and children and families

### Data sources/evidence

- Each participant classroom was observed by one researcher for each site for 6-10 times (for 3-7 hours per visit per site) during one school year (2017 - 2018).
- Data sources included:
  - Observations and video recordings of teachers and children in classrooms
  - Interviews with teachers and directors and other school/center personnel
  - Classroom artifacts (i.e., school/class newsletters, assessments, children's work samples, teachers' plans and resources, etc.)
  - School and/or center-based documents and artifacts (i.e., education plans, online descriptions, quality reviews, accreditation documents, ads)

### Contexts for the data collection

We employed Geneva Gay's framework for culturally responsive curriculum and teaching (*Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching*, 2002) to guide us in our inquiry. These informed how we documented our data collection process:

- Formal: "...formal plans for instruction approved by the policy and governing bodies of educational systems...usually anchored in and complemented by adopted textbooks and other curriculum guidelines such as the "standards" issued

by national commissions, state departments of education, professional associations, and local school districts” (p. 108)

- Symbolic: “...images, symbols, icons, mottoes, awards, celebrations, and other artifacts used to teach students knowledge, skills, morals, and values” such as “bulletin board decorations; images of heroes and heroines; trade books; and publicly displayed statements of social etiquette, rules and regulations, ethical principles, and tokens of achievement” (p. 108)
- Societal: “...knowledge, ideas, and impressions about ethnic groups that are portrayed in the mass media” and society writ large. Through master narratives, the “societal curriculum engage in ideological management...and construct knowledge...because their content reflects and conveys particular cultural, social, ethnic, and political values, knowledge, and advocacies” (p. 109). These in turn shape interactions between individuals.

### Process for data collection

We began our study by engaging in a review of the literature of three different fields – child development, assets-based pedagogies (culturally relevant/responsive/sustaining pedagogies), and multilingual learning. From our analyses of this research we crafted seven principles of culturally and linguistically sustaining, developmentally-appropriate teaching practices (see appendix). We used these principles to guide our classroom/school/center observations. Before entering the classrooms/schools, we engaged in a Community Mapping exercise of the three districts in which our centers were located. Community Mapping is a tool that can tell a story about what is happening in a community. We divided our research team members into three groups - one for each district. Each district’s team came together and collected field data about their assigned district - an inventory of each community’s resources: e.g., health centers, restaurants, stores, schools, community centers, religious institutions, transportation availability, housing types, prisons/detention centers, homeless shelters, drug centers, parks, and cultural institutions. Demographic information of the district as well as the history of the community were obtained. These data were intended to help us understand the context in which each studied classroom was situated.

### Analytic method

- We used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the evidence collected in each site.
- Then, we employed axial coding. Within and inspired by grounded theory, we related pieces, or codes, of data to each other. We engaged deductive and inductive reasoning, looking for relationship identification between codes, identifying and refining central (i.e., axis) phenomena in the data across settings (Allen, 2017).
- A member check with the participants lent trustworthiness to the analysis and confirmed our identified principles and supporting sub-principles.

### Limitations

We acknowledge that the data collected for this qualitative study is not a representative sample of all UPK classrooms in New York City. The intention of our study, as in all qualitative studies, was not to make generalizations applicable to all, but rather to gain insight into the conditions informing quality UPK teaching in the centers and schools that we studied. We thus

offer what we have learned from our efforts in the hopes of strengthening future initiatives to support the work of the field.

## **Findings**

The findings that are presented below are based on the seven principles identified in our literature review and revised in accordance with the data collected across sites (via axial coding and member checks). They are exemplified with evidence from our study to articulate practices, behaviors, and attitudes that comprise learning for diverse populations of young children.

### **1. All children can learn**

The first principle of culturally and linguistically sustaining, developmentally appropriate teaching is the foundational belief that all children can learn. This principle has its roots in the history of early childhood education, which was founded on the notion that “all” children have an inherent drive to learn (Feeney, Christensen, & Moravick, 1983). However, because this thinking emanated from Eurocentric philosophies and epistemologies (Ladson-Billings, 2000), the “all” used in the phrase of “all children” has historically not been sufficiently represented or included children from minoritized backgrounds (Siddle Walker, 1996). Enhanced by our review of the literature on culturally relevant/responsive/sustaining pedagogies and the literature on how best to support multilingual learners, we reframe this principle as predicated on viewing intersectionally-minoritized young children’s and families’ cultural repertoires and language practices as assets, while challenging and troubling deficit assumptions and stereotypes about children and their families. We also posit that the principle involves adults ensuring equitable opportunities for learning, taking responsibility for children’s progress, and holding high expectations and providing high levels of support for young children across racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as dis/abilities.

We noted the following practices representative of this principle in the evidence we collected in Pre-K classrooms:

#### Teachers make visible the belief that all children can learn

Teachers hold high expectations about capabilities and future possibilities for all. These are communicated to children by curriculum and teaching practices that challenge and support all the children in the classroom—across formal and symbolic curricular contexts. The photos below are examples of how this belief is manifested in the messages displayed around Pre-K classrooms.



Multiple resources are accessed to support children's and families' health and well-being

Educators who uphold the principle that all children can learn understand that optimal learning for all can only be realized when children and families are healthy – both physically and emotionally – and have access to resources that support their development. This understanding was manifested in the following ways:

- Some of the community-based centers have individuals whose role is a “Family Advocate.” These individuals, recruited from the community themselves, support families in a variety of ways: goal-setting to address their issues/problems, counseling, support for how to seek resources and supports (for food, clothing, language learning & GED classes, jobs, immigration, homelessness, housing, furniture, rent, violence, abuse, sex education, parenting, foster parenting, legal aid, etc.)

- The community-based centers engaged in a program sponsored by the Agency for Children's Services (ACS) called *Trauma Smart*. This program offers supports for those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences/trauma. It provides educators/caregivers with strategies to help children and families whose behaviors are impacted by trauma and it helps educators/caregivers identify and deal with their own past experiences of trauma that are triggered by being around those who have experienced trauma.
- Some of the centers visited have referral services for both children and families to health-related services: dental, vision, nutrition, early intervention, and disability support services.
- Attention is paid throughout the school day to physical health and personal hygiene such as handwashing, teeth-brushing, and other personal hygiene practices.



- Efforts are made to provide healthy foods that reflect those present in the homes and communities of the children and families. Educators make sure that healthy foods are served daily for breakfast, lunch, and snacks. In one center serving high proportions of families living in temporary housing and experiencing food insecurity, the afternoon snack is actually a full meal, as educators know that this may be the only dinner children get.





Food is often cooked on site by individuals representing the identities of the children and families served. Efforts are made to introduce healthy options while appealing to the tastes/food preferences of the different cultures.





Efforts are made to provide children and families with opportunities for development  
Another key element of supporting all children to learn is making culturally/linguistically relevant, developmentally-appropriate learning opportunities available in school as well as at home.

- Raising a Reader Program

Some centers encourage home reading and provide access to books through a program that sends books home with children each week for them to read with their families.

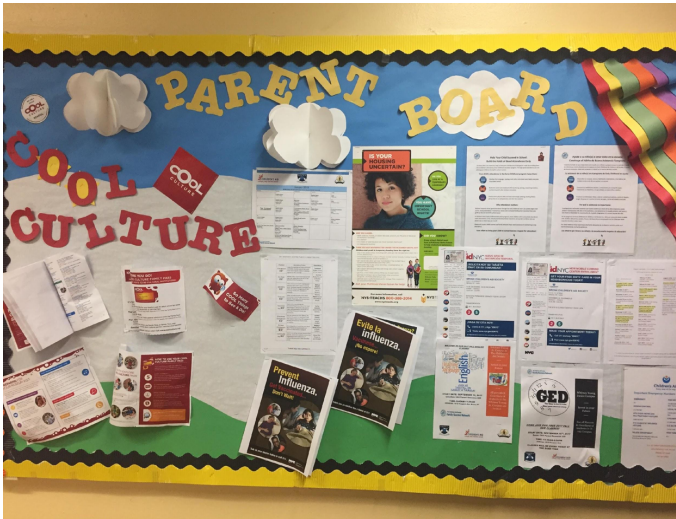
Across the centers observed, books reflected the identities and linguistic backgrounds of the children they served and their families.



- Guest author visits

Some centers host guests who represent the languages, cultures, and identities of the community who write about different aspects of the community's history/culture (e.g., the history of hip-hop in the Bronx). They visit the school to talk with children and families and share their stories.

- Access to cultural resources is provided  
Many of the centers provides families with free passes to a range of NYC cultural institutions via partnerships with an organization called Cool Culture.



Adults take responsibility for children's progress and growth

- Teachers who believe that all children can learn teach in the ways that young children learn. Opportunities for play and active learning as well as meaningful, purposeful experiences that encourage the application of new knowledge and understandings to real-world issues are provided throughout the day.



- Teachers recognize & support each child's diverse strengths, needs, and interests.



- Teachers observe children, document their learning, understand and support their progress along a developmental continuum, utilizing understandings from Vygotsky's theory of the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978), which calls for adults to scaffold children's learning to deepen and extend their learning.





- Teachers intentionally and systematically attend to building each child's skill & knowledge development in and through their teaching, interactions, and plans.

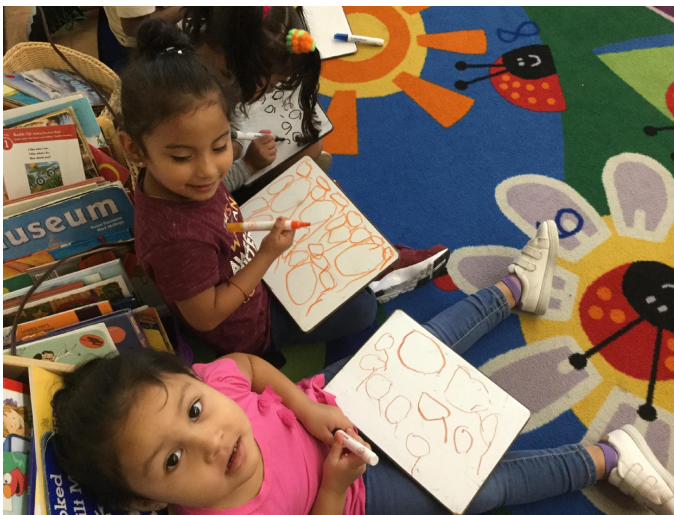


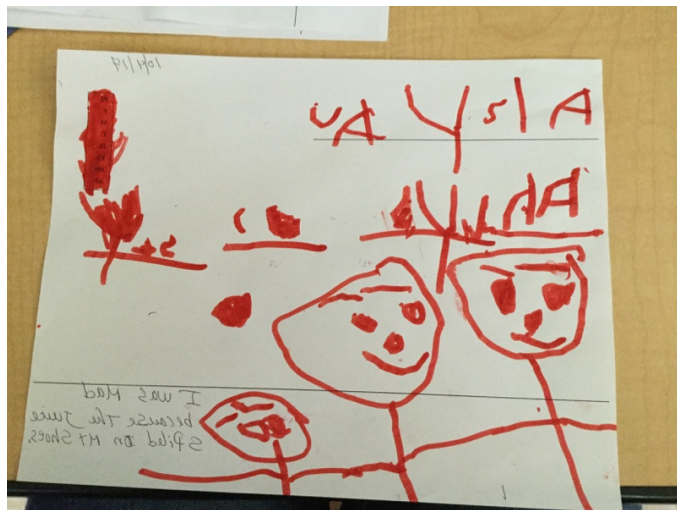
- Teachers make sure that children are learning and developing across curricular areas (language, literacy, social studies, science, mathematics) and domains of development. They ask depth of knowledge questions; make connections between what children know and new knowledge/skills that are presented.



## 2. Young children's learning is varied

Closely connected to the notion that all children can learn is the understanding that children's learning is varied (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; 2012; National Research Council, 2000). Research across fields acknowledges young children's progress along different trajectories and timelines. This principle requires understanding the cultural nature of learning and child development (Rogoff, 2003). It was manifested in classrooms where we saw educators keeping track of and recognizing, affirming, and supporting children's differing strengths, needs, and interests; their different paces and styles of learning and development; their diverse ways of expression and varied paces in emotional and social development; and the variations in their learning and development stemming from sociocultural contexts and experiences.





Year			
Pre-Kindergarten			
<b>Social-Emotional Development</b> Interacts well with others Participates in group activities Keeps hands to self Respects the rules of the school Shows self-confidence Takes care of one's own needs			
<b>Work Habits</b> Listens attentively Follows simple directions Handles materials carefully Has good clean-up habits			
<b>Motor Skills</b> Fits small items together Holds pencil/marker correctly Uses scissors effectively Can print first name			
<b>Language Arts/Reading Readiness</b> Shows interest in books/stories Answers questions about stories Retells familiar stories Shows interest in writing Dictates sentences to be written Writes using pictures/symbols/letters Identifies same and different Recognizes own name in print Identifies uppercase letters Identifies lowercase letters			
<b>Math/Science Readiness</b> One-to-one correspondence Compares quantities of sets Sorts objects by color Sorts objects by shape Sorts objects by size Identifies 8 basic colors Identifies 4 basic shapes Verbally counts forward to 10 Counts 1-10 objects Identifies numerals 0-10 Arranges slices in order Makes simple patterns			
<b>Conduct</b> B/S/N			
<b>Attendance</b> Days Absent Days Tardy			
<b>Grading Scale:</b> 1 - Beginning 2 - Developing 3 - Proficient NA - Not assessed at this time			

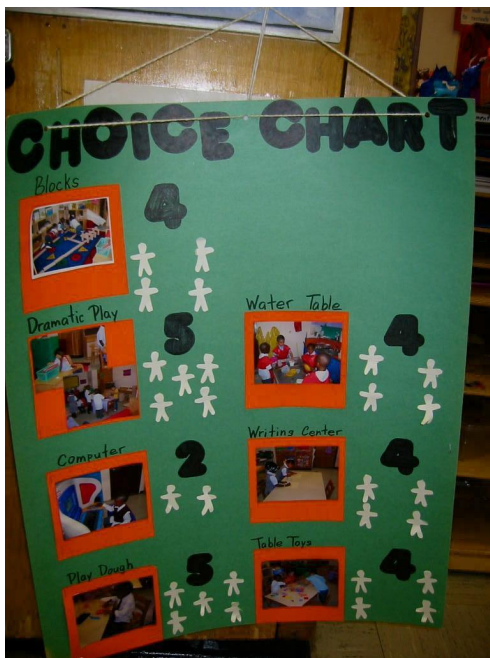
### 3. Young children are active and multimodal meaning makers

Acknowledging that all children's learning and development is varied and that all children can learn, this principle of culturally and linguistically sustaining teaching attends to *how* young children learn. Considering young children's purposeful and reciprocal engagements and interactions, transdisciplinary research findings support the understanding that young children



are active and multimodal meaning makers. Support for culturally and linguistically sustaining and developmentally appropriate early childhood teaching requires acknowledging and supporting not only a range of timelines (Genishi and Dyson, 2009; 2012), but also facilitating a range of learning experiences (e.g., individual, small group, whole class) that actively engage young children as doers, and supports their multimodal meaning making and sophisticated communicative repertoires (e.g., Arreguín-Anderson, Salinas-Gonzalez, & Alanis, 2018; Axelrod, 2014; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Soltero-González, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2016). This view of teaching also requires educators to provide children with opportunities to self-initiate and make choices, engage in child-initiated and child-led play as well as interdisciplinary approaches to learning (National Research Council, 2000). In doing so, early childhood teaching engages in the systematic and purposeful recognition, leveraging, and support of multiple cultural and linguistic practices and legacies.

In the classrooms we visited, we witnessed children actively engaged as doers in multiple modalities. For example, across Pre-K classrooms, children had opportunities to make choices;



for engagement in self-initiated, child-led play;







and for interdisciplinary learning that built on their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and experiences—for example, the pizzeria.

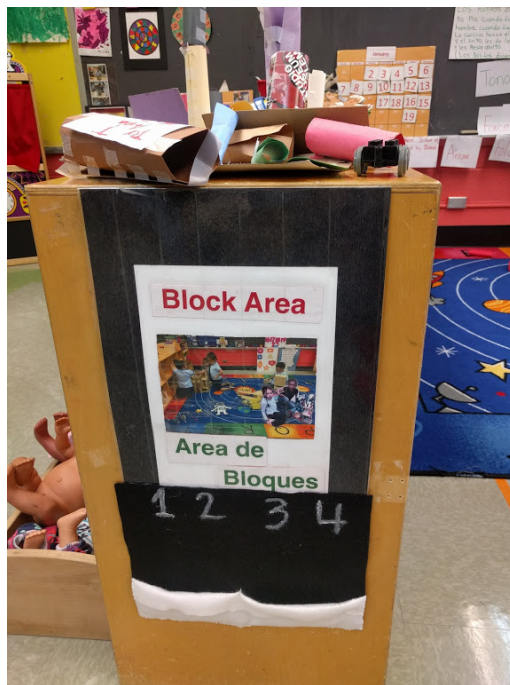
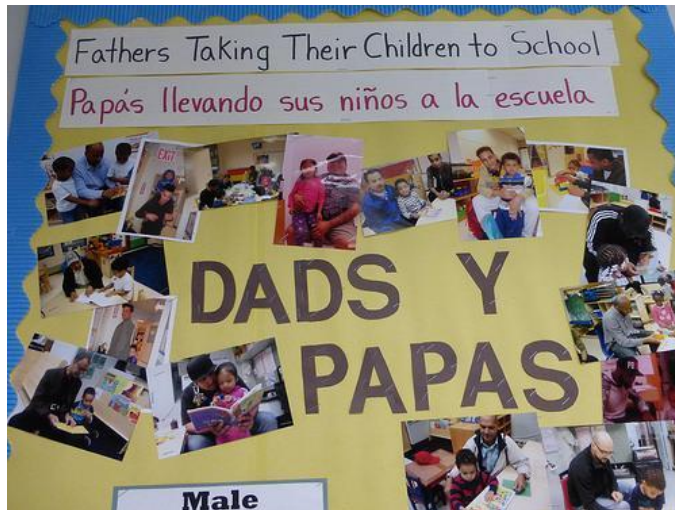


#### **4. Young children's language practices are diverse, fluid, and flexible**

This principle call on teachers to support linguistic diversity as a norm (Genishi and Dyson, 2009) in and through their teaching practices. Support for linguistic diversity involves the need for teachers to learn about their students' communicative practices and to intentionally and strategically engage in translanguageing to support learning (e.g., Arreguín-Anderson et al., 2018; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Soltero-González, 2009), develop cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and sustain young children's rich languaging repertoires (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). Doing so decenters dominant American English so that multilingualism—in all its forms—can be fully embraced and sustained. Embracing multilingualism includes ensuring that young children's multiple languaging practices be recognized, valued, and leveraged as

resources in learning, and that the classroom landscape (including tools, materials, and artifacts) reflects the full range of their linguistic repertoires as well as the linguistic repertoires of their families and communities. It also involves teachers acknowledging the varied processes by which multilingual children develop their linguistic repertoires, not stigmatizing or characterizing children as deficient as a result of the pace of their language learning process, and making efforts to communicate with, include, and learn from and with families in their home languages.

In the centers we visited, we witnessed multiple languages being honored and leveraged as resources:





8:15 - 8:30	Wash Hands/Table Toys/Sign In Lavarse las manos/Juguetes de mesa /Firma
8:30 - 8:40	Greeting Time Saludo
8:45 - 8:50	Wash Hands Lavarse las manos
8:50 - 9:10	Breakfast Time Tiempo de Desayuno
9:10 - 9:30	Small Group Time Tiempo de grupo pequeño
9:30 - 9:45	Bathroom/Prepare for Outside Time Baño/Tiempo de Preparase para afuera
9:45 - 10:35	Outside Time Tiempo de Afuera
10:35 - 10:45	Wash Hands Lavarse las manos
10:45 - 10:50	Planning Time Tiempo de Planear
10:50 - 11:45	Work Time Tiempo de Trabajar
11:45 - 11:55	Put things away Tiempo de Recoger
11:55 - 12:05	Recall Time Tiempo de Recordar
12:05 - 12:10	Wash Hands Lavarse las manos

Translanguaging between teachers and children was used throughout the day so that children's existing language practices were built upon. Additionally, we witnessed efforts to include, communicate with, and learn from and with families in their home languages.

### **5. Young children's sociocultural contexts are assets and valuable resources for learning**

Another key principle of culturally and linguistically sustaining and developmentally appropriate practice is recognizing and valuing young children's sociocultural contexts and assets as foundational resources for learning and development (Axelrod, 2014; Moll, et. al., 1992; Souto-Manning, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). This principle calls for practices and policies to centrally account for multiple cultural and language referents and bodies of knowledge, paying particular attention to those which have been historically minoritized. This means that families' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and community resources (Souto-Manning, 2016) need to be identified, recognized, valued, leveraged, and sustained and that intersectionally-minoritized families and communities be positioned as full partners in teaching and learning. Research across disciplines underscores how such learning environments need to provide a high-level of support for children to develop academically, socially, physically, and emotionally, and in the process, foster positive self-identity and empathy across cultures, languages, and socioeconomics.

In the classrooms we visited we noted a variety of culturally relevant pedagogies and culturally sustaining practices. For example, multiple cultural and language referents were acknowledged and used



and children were supported to have and develop a positive sense of identity.



Family funds of knowledge and community resources were recognized, valued, and included - as in this mosaic mural made by an artist of the community-based childcare center's community and displayed in the halls of the center.



Families and communities were included as partners in the learning of the classroom.





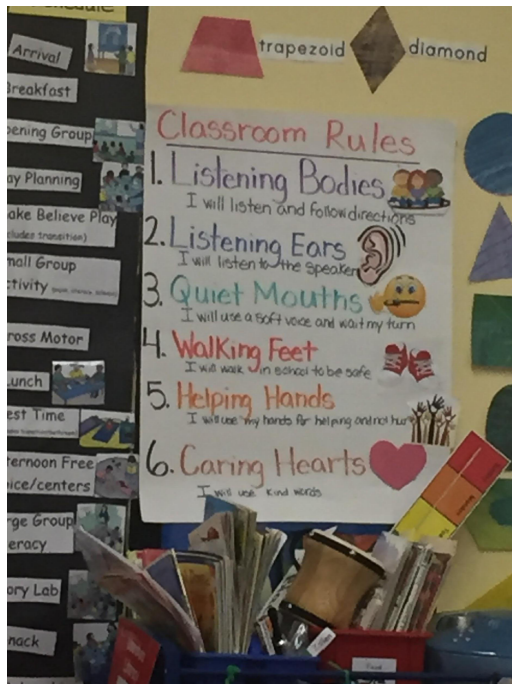
## **6. Young children learn and develop within the context of caring and reciprocal relationships**

Teaching and learning are relational endeavors (Souto-Manning, Llerena, Martell, Maguire, & Arce-Boardman, 2018; Freire, 2000; 2005; Immordino-Yang, 2017; Lally & Mangione, 2017; Raver, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2017) and young children learn within the context of caring and reciprocal relationships (with families, community members, teachers, and peers). As it relates to classroom communities, this principle stresses ensuring that children's thoughts, ideas, and voices are heard, that their questions and concerns are acknowledged and addressed, and that their understandings, interests, and experiences are honored and used to create, revise, or adapt learning experiences. Additionally, this principle calls on adults to support young children to develop agency (advocacy, independence, and self-regulation) and to encourage them to be inclusive and empathetic with each other. Of critical importance are teaching practices and policies (of the classroom and school) centered on the whole child (Siddle Walker, 1996).

In our school visits we noted caring relationships between children and their caregivers.



They established a classroom community culture in which children understood rules and participated in routines. Simultaneously, the culture of the classroom supported children's development, learning, agency and self-regulation.



Additionally, we noted how children were encouraged to be inclusive and empathetic.

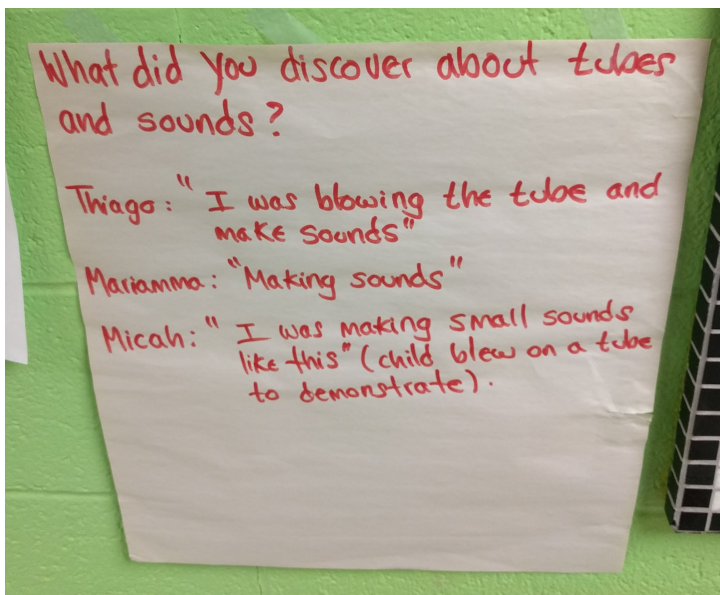
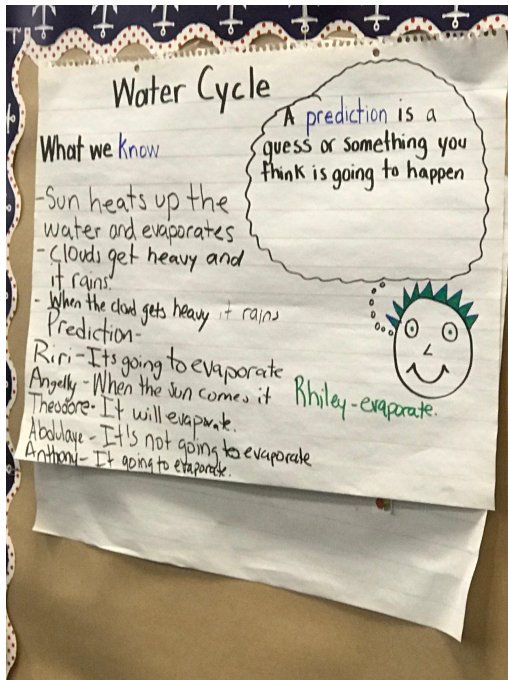


We witnessed individuals' needs and understandings being attended to. This was manifested by how children's prior knowledge, understandings, experiences, and community resources were utilized in the development of formal and symbolic curriculum;





by how children's noticings, questions and discoveries were acknowledged and addressed in the course of learning experiences;



and by how children's interests and life experiences were acknowledged and honored in the activities of the classroom.



We also noted how families were welcomed and engaged as resources and partners in learning.







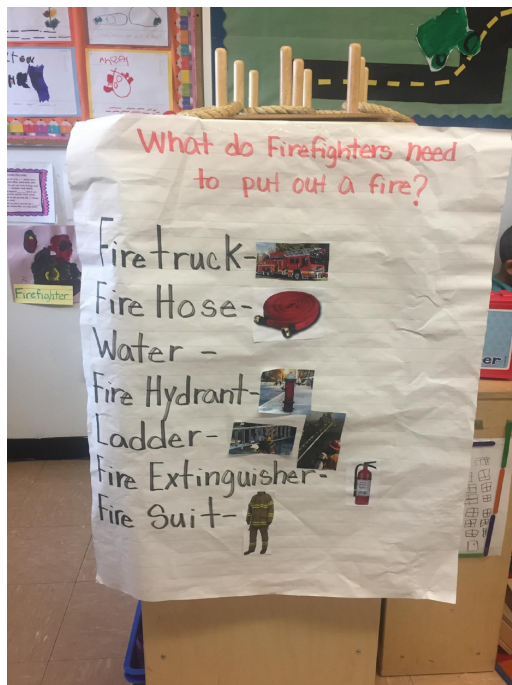
and how family breakfasts, celebrations, and other events happened regularly,



## 7. Young children are critical thinkers and inquirers

Rooted in literature that affirms young children as active inquirers who are aware of inequities and competent in understanding and/or discussing issues of fairness (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Paley, 1986; Ramsey, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2013; Souto-Manning et al., 2018; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016), this principle requires fostering critical thinking and questioning—engaging with controversies, interrupting, and interrogating social norms as truths in and through early childhood teaching, from infancy on. Curriculum and teaching make space for children and teachers to problematize social inequities while multiple perspectives and issues of fairness and inclusivity are welcomed and nurtured. The development of cultural competence and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995) are centered. At the same time that these critical skills are supported and that children’s linguistic and cultural practices are affirmed and sustained, attention is paid to ensuring that children simultaneously develop the skills and knowledges needed to successfully navigate—and to eventually be equipped to interrupt and dismantle—the culture of power (Delpit, 1998). This principle “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

In the classrooms visited we noted children being invited continually to engage in inquiry activities, which demonstrated a culture of honoring children’s questions. Teachers asked open-ended questions, encouraged critical thinking pertaining to everyday issues (how fires are put out) as well as to normative color-gender associations (e.g., blue is a boy color, pink and purple are girl colors) and racial affinity in family representations (problematizing normative family representations, reading and talking about picture books that represent interracial families).



An example of this took place in one classroom where the students were engaged in a routine of naming the day of the week and making observations about the weather. It was early March, when the seasons were beginning to shift, and the lead teacher extended these conversations to further students' thinking about feelings and emotions. She probed the students to move beyond their observation that it was sunny outside, asking them to describe how the sun made them feel. They sat quietly thinking about this question, with some students even closing their eyes to feel the sunrays beaming in through the window. One boy opened his eyes and expressed to the class that "warm morning sun makes [him] feel happy." In a follow up conversation, the lead teacher noted her surprise in the poetry of this student's response, as she was excited to see that her students were thinking critically about how the weather can be connected to their feelings and moods.

Another example of children being encouraged to engage in critical thinking and inquiry happened when the students in a classroom were listening to an audio story of *The Three Little Pigs*. In the discussion of the story that followed, they were invited to explore hypothetical situations that problematized social issues, particularly of fairness. As the story progressed it was evident that it was being told from a different perspective than the familiar one that vilifies the wolf. Instead, the story went into detail about how the three little pigs were homeless and offered food to the wolf for his assistance in helping the pigs build their homes. Opposed to telling a story of destruction and greed, this audio encouraged the children to consider how communities can come together to support each other during times of need. This story also spoke to differences in socioeconomic class, with the students acknowledging the importance of sharing resources. Throughout the discussion, the teachers encouraged the children to entertain multiple perspectives.

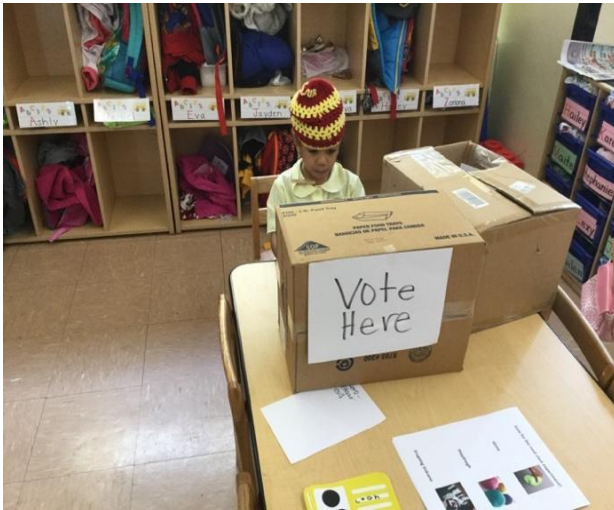
Other manifestations of the principle that children are critical thinkers and inquirers was our noticings in numerous classrooms of how children were encouraged to take action about issues of the world. Among the examples of this were:

A class involved in a recycling project;



a class discussing and enacting the responsibility of citizens to vote in elections;





and a class creating a garden as part of a study about climate change and sustainability.



### **Conclusions and Implications for the Field**

Taken together, these seven principles (alongside the supporting subprinciples) reconceptualize early childhood teaching in ways that are answerable to minoritized young children and communities who have historically been underserved, marginalized, and invisibilized in and through education systems (Pérez & Saavedra, 2017; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Thus, they afford us pathways for transforming the architecture of early childhood education in ways that center assets-based pedagogies and honor multilingualism in integral ways (Mallory & New, 1994; Teacher Education Exchange, 2017).

These seven principles can be helpful for transforming early childhood teaching in ways that foster equity in and through teaching in early childhood education across formal, symbolic, and societal contexts (Gay, 2002). Rooted in key findings from our qualitative transdisciplinary

analysis of research (Souto-Manning, et. al., 2019) and from our documentations of practice in the nine Pre-K classrooms where our study took place, we offer these principles as guidelines that can be used for changing early childhood teaching practices in ways that foundationally account for racial, cultural, and linguistic diversities.

Early childhood education's shifting demographic, diversities, and enduring racial disproportionality urgently call for a transformation in teaching practices, one that moves away from Eurocentric notions of teaching practices and instead fully honors, leverages, develops, and sustains the strengths and assets of intersectionally-minoritized peoples—their ideas, ways of being, and systems of knowing. We posit that the principles we identify in our transdisciplinary review of research and our documentations of practice are starting points for this much-needed transformation, allowing us to move toward emancipatory praxis; toward practical solutions to the long history of racism and closely associated inequities and oppressions that are manifested in U.S. education—from early childhood onward. These principles address a real problem as they offer a possible pathway toward realizing more equitable and just teaching practices in early childhood education.

Moving forward, we encourage our early childhood education colleagues to reflect on teaching in relation to these principles. And we encourage researchers as well as educators to document teaching and learning environments that embody these principles. After all, we need more situated representations of what equitable teaching looks like in early childhood education in order to educate and inspire our profession and better support the learning and development of the young children we serve.

### **Noticings From Our Findings About Teaching and Quality in Different Types of Sites and Districts**

Although our study took place in three distinct socioeconomic districts, variation in teaching quality and care amongst centers did not seem to be related to what district (high/medium/low income) they belonged to. The biggest differences we found were that the community-based centers included in our study had a history of and provided more family support services and had more extensive connections with their communities than those in the elementary schools we studied (i.e., wrap-around services such as supports for health, nutrition, GED, new language learning, counseling, parent education, extended hours, provisions accounting for food insecurity, homelessness, housing, rent, violence prevention, abuse, fostering, etc.).

We also found differences in the demographics of the teachers who were in community-based centers versus those situated in elementary schools. Few teachers in elementary school preschool classrooms were members of the communities where they taught; whereas *all* of the preK teachers in the community-based centers were members of the communities where they taught (many were former parents who worked their way from volunteer to aide, to assistant teacher, etc.) and who reflected the cultures, languages, backgrounds of the children they taught more than the teachers in elementary schools. In the classrooms we observed, we noticed that all Pre-K teachers in elementary school were monolingual whereas all Pre-K teachers in community centers were multilingual. Pre-K teachers in public schools were all white, while all Pre-K teachers were teachers of color. Further, public school teachers did not have the same degree of experience and/or of preparation in child development and early childhood education as the



teachers in the community-based centers. (We noted that many of the public school Pre-K teachers had been reassigned from higher grades). Finally, we noted that teacher turnover in the community-based centers was [and still remains] high: 4 of the 6 Pre-K teachers in the community-based centers in our study left their positions since our study. Reasons cited were low salaries, long work hours, and no summer break.

These noticings speak to the systemic issues and challenges of the early childhood field that are currently being discussed and reappraised. No doubt, salary parity between those working in community centers and the public system, along with more resources and supports for the educators in the community-based centers could equalize and strengthen the work force and thus provide stronger supports for the children and families served.

### **Recommendations to Consider**

Based on the findings of our study, we recommend the following:

- To ensure that all children (especially those from historically underserved communities) are supported to realize optimal learning, consider providing wrap-around services (supports for health, nutrition, counseling, education, and services and resources to address food insecurity, homelessness, housing, rent, violence prevention, abuse, fostering, etc.) in all sites that serve young children and their families.
- To ensure high quality teaching in all early childhood sites, to diversify the teaching force, and to retain teachers in community-based centers:
  - ensure all Pre-K teachers have child development and depth of preparation in early childhood education;
  - provide parity of salary and other benefits between Pre-K teachers in elementary school and Pre-K teachers in community-based settings.
- To strengthen culturally and linguistically sustaining curriculum and teaching practices:
  - recruit teachers who reflect the diverse cultures, languages, and backgrounds of the children they teach (perhaps a residency program that could serve as the kind of pipeline that exists in the community-based centers);
  - provide professional development to support deeper understandings of and expertise in culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies as well as teaching multilingual learners, addressing how these need to be integrally connected to what has been known as developmentally-appropriate practice.

## **Principles of Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining, Developmentally-Appropriate Practice**

### **All children can learn.**

1. Curriculum and teaching challenge and support all children
2. Adults take responsibility for progress & growth of children
3. Interests, cultural & language background are seen as assets
4. Opportunities for learning are varied regardless of age, size, dis/ability
5. Home languages and cultural knowledges are validated & leveraged
6. Assumptions and stereotypes are challenged/troubled
7. Adults access multiple available resources

### **Children's learning and development is varied.**

8. Strengths, needs, and interests (...acknowledged, valued, supported)
9. Pace, trajectory, and style
10. Ways of expression and social-emotional development
11. Sociocultural contexts and experiences

### **Young children are active and multimodal meaning makers.**

12. Children are actively engaged as doers, through multiple modalities
13. Children are supported to use multiple communicative repertoires
14. Children have opportunities to self-initiate and make choices
15. Opportunities exist for engagement in child-initiated & child-led play
16. Multiple cultural influences on children's development are supported
17. Interdisciplinary approaches to learning are supported

### **Young children's language practices are diverse, fluid, and flexible.**

18. Language practices are recognized, valued, supported as fluid & flexible
19. Language development is seen as non-linear and dynamic process
20. Children's existing language practices are built upon
21. Multiple languages are honored and leveraged as resources
22. Efforts are made to include, communicate with, and learn from & with families

**Young children's sociocultural contexts are assets and valuable resources for learning.**

- 23. Multiple cultural and language referents & bodies of knowledge are used
- 24. Practices/policies are culturally relevant, supportive, and responsive to children & families
- 25. Family funds of knowledge and community resources are recognized, valued, included
- 26. Children are supported to have a positive sense of identity
- 27. Families and communities are positioned and included as partners in learning

**Young children learn and develop within the context of caring and reciprocal relationships.**

- 28. Caring and reciprocal relationships are enacted
- 29. Children's questions and concerns are acknowledged and addressed
- 30. Children's understandings, interests, experiences are acknowledged & honored in curriculum
- 31. Children are supported to develop agency – advocacy, independence, self-regulation
- 32. Children are encouraged to be inclusive and empathetic
- 33. Practices and policies are centered on the child

**Young children are critical thinkers and inquirers.**

- 34. Critical thinking and questioning are promoted and fostered
- 35. Controversies and stereotypes are dealt with directly
- 36. Social norms are interrogated (rather than accepted as truths)
- 37. Curriculum & teaching make space for children and teachers to problematize social inequities
- 38. Multiple perspectives are promoted and fostered
- 39. Issues of fairness and inclusivity are welcomed, fostered, promoted, and incorporated
- 40. Children are supported to *additionally* develop skills & knowledge of culture of power

(Souto-Manning, Falk, et al., 2019)

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