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## Reflections On Pre-Kindergarten Pedagogical Practices For Latine Preschoolers: An Autoethnography

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REFLECTIONS ON PRE-KINDERGARTEN PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES FOR LATINE  
PRESCHOOLERS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Foundations

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my wonderful supportive parents Ernesto and Isabel, who instilled a love of learning in me.

To my brother Rafael who patiently read to me when all he thought about was going out to play.

To my ever-present friends Lola, Mimi, Pepe, Charlie, Bonnie+, and Clyde+.

REFLECTIONS ON PRE-KINDERGARTEN PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES FOR LATINE  
PRESCHOOLERS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

by

CYNTHIA CHAVEZ, M.Ed.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This personal reflexive account of my experiences as a Latine Pre-K teacher and Instructional Coach represents the adversities that many early childhood education public school teachers face within marginalized public-school campuses. Using myself as the subject and researcher within the context of area public school districts provided the drive to seek social justice for disadvantaged Latine preschoolers in their quest for an equitable footing in public school offerings. Through the participant's lens, I chronicle my experiences as a prekindergarten public-school teacher and later as a multi-district instructional coach using the qualitative methodology of both emotive and analytical/interpretive viewpoints. This genre of writing propels the reader to experience the sociopolitical and sociocultural aspects that entail an early childhood educator's lens throughout the process of working with other educators and administrators such as central office personnel, school principals and assistant principals, and prekindergarten teachers. The experiences I encountered as a Latine prekindergarten educator and mentor are interpreted in this study to help serve and strengthen educators in early childhood education.

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*The most important period of life is not the age of university studies, but the first one, the period from birth to the age of six.*

- Maria Montessori

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this first chapter I introduce the reader to a summary of how education for the youngest Latine children living along the Texas-Mexico border was conceived. During the late 1800's when Common Schools were initiated, education for Latine children came from private schools called *escuelitas* because Latine children were excluded from the White schools (Gallegos, 1991). I report on the various challenges and successes I encountered since I first began my teaching career as an early childhood education teacher. While Texas does consider a child's right to an education, at times sociopolitical factors can prevent these young children from having equal opportunities for learning. Early childhood teachers must be able to overcome such challenges which do require administrative support. Although advocates and policy makers have answered the need for funding of early education for the poor, existing environmental conditions within certain communities may not address the reality that exists for young and vulnerable preschoolers. I compare some of my experiences as a preschooler to those preschoolers I encountered throughout my teaching career. As a child from a marginalized population, I identified disparities but was not quite sure what to make of them. As a preschooler living in two worlds, that of school and that of home, young children create misconceptions about the inequitable journey through school that ultimately impacts their sense of self, whether positively or negatively.

This study is a self-reflexive narrative analysis of my lived experiences as a public-school prekindergarten educator, living and evolving into an early childhood teacher, advocate, mentor, and coach. My forty plus years teaching as a bilingual, then dual language prekindergarten teacher, early childhood instructional coach, and state level mentor, contributed to my view of equitable education for our preschoolers by invoking a LatCrit lens. Over those years, I worked with marginalized children who spoke languages other than English, some living in disadvantaged conditions, sometimes lacking basic needs of a thriving and nurturing home life. I wanted to improve their education and sought to improve pedagogical practices for them, which continues to be my personal mission to this day.

A high-quality early childhood education program is one that supports optimal learning and development (Marshall, 2004). Many researchers agree that early childhood programs are important in preparing a child for kindergarten readiness and academic success (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013; Porter, 2013; Rafoth, Buchenauer, Kolb-Crissman, & Halko, 2004). The public generally views public school pre-kindergarten education programming through a deficit lens, mostly because the field of early education has not been completely successful in engaging community stakeholders in the process of understanding early childhood development, as well as what developmentally appropriate practices look and sound like. Moreover, if members of the immediate school community do not have a vested interest in preschool children regarding their immediate contribution to society, they may take the view for federal and state funded education programs for children at-risk as a non-essential line item on a strained budget. Brain research, however, shows that at-risk preschoolers who attend a high-quality prekindergarten program are better prepared for success in Kindergarten (Barnett, 2008; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007). Why is this important? During a child's earliest years,

many low-income children do not have the opportunities to learn the knowledge and skills necessary to begin an academic formal schooling environment. It is at this juncture that neuroscience informs us that by solidifying a sound educational foundation, children will have more opportunity for thriving in the K-3<sup>rd</sup>. grade years. High quality prekindergarten programs yield high-impact results, setting a trajectory for a future society that will contribute to economic development. Therefore, if we are to create a just society where cultural, racial, social, and linguistic factors do not deny a right to an equitable education, then we must also continue to create school communities that are well informed and well versed on the importance for early childhood education.

In the wake of House Bill 3, adopted by the Texas State Legislature in 2019, public school districts must be able to meet the demands for providing a high-quality pre-kindergarten program for children ages 3-5, who come from low-income households, do not speak English, come from a military family, are homeless, fostered, disabled, migrant, runaway, or a Head Start participant. Federal early childhood programs and federal policy have been highly impacted through an ever-growing neuroscience body of knowledge that conclusively points towards the need for providing stable and nurturing environments for all children whose families may be experiencing economic and societal hardships (Sripada, 2012). Public school prekindergarten offerings are currently provided mostly within an elementary school program. For public school districts, this entails having the ability to properly comply with high-quality Prekindergarten components which include pedagogical knowledge of early childhood education to effectively oversee curriculum, student progress monitoring, teacher qualifications, teacher/student ratio, family engagement, program evaluation, and progress monitoring. In addition, beginning with the 2019-2020 school year, the revision of the Texas Standards for Principal Certification

requires all public-school principals to take on the added responsibility of Instructional Leader, overseeing all elements that impact curriculum and instruction within their school campus.

### **Autoethnography Through a Self-Reflexive Lens**

For this very personal study that encompasses my career as an early childhood educator, I wanted to construct a personal narrative to seek meaning from events encountered and that I daily engaged in within the field of early childhood education. Through this study, I interpreted my experiences through an autoethnography that allows me to replay certain events in my mind and to reflexively incur meaning from them. Contributing to my autoethnography is the fact that I had a front-row seat to pivotal events happening within early childhood classrooms, administrative planning rooms, state planning events, and national events all in the quest of improving conditions for early learners. In a concise description of “autoethnography”, Kim (2016) describes it as “a form of narrative research that seeks to systematically analyze the researcher’s personal experience all embedded in a larger social and cultural context” (p. 123). Heider (1975), describes “autoethnography” as a method whereby members of a culture offer their account of that culture. Yet another description of “auto-ethnography” describes researchers as those who “conduct and write ethnographies of their ‘own people’” (Hayano, 1979, p. 99). Bochner (2014) responds to the autoethnographic method as a means by which the writer informs and helps to recreate the culture being explored. Autoethnography is about studying one’s own experiences through a reflective and reflexive process (Fine, 1994). I have been embedded into the culture of early childhood education in various capacities, and I am able to recount stories of my “own people” (Hayano, 1979, p. 99). The narratives I tell may sometimes represent a counterstory, which may be quite the opposite of what some educators, politicians, or community stakeholders might understand. In any event, these narratives are shared in the hopes

of correcting and supporting best practices for preschoolers. Through counter stories I can reflect on events that may have created obstacles, sometimes impeding public school teachers from employing developmentally appropriate practices or applying culturally relevant pedagogy leading to what Freire framed as a pedagogy for the oppressed. As early childhood educators we understand neuroscience as well as well-known theorists such as Vygotsky, Dewey, Bronfenbrenner, Bruner, and Piaget. Yet, applied praxis within the classroom may sometimes become a 'performance' for the school principal. Mostly, this type of environment would exemplify the Thorndike example for teaching. If there is a gap in knowledge and preparation for our Instructional Leaders within the realm of early brain development, then we may be able to fill in that gap.

### **My Cultural Identity and Evolution into a LatCrit Early Childhood Educator**

LatCrit Theory is grounded on the premise that many Latine students face inequality in educational settings, are not represented in the school curricula, may experience teaching practices that do not help them make personal connections to their own lives, live and learn in educational settings that do not represent their culture, and yet are expected to succeed academically and emotionally (Cisneros, 2008). The terms LatinX and Latine are synonymous within the Hispanic population, however, most Spanish speaking academics prefer Latine due to its fluidity in pronunciation and grammatically correct Spanish ending (Slemp, 2020, p. 3, 11). Latine teachers serve as models for students facing disadvantages within their lives, specifically at home and at school (DeVarona, 1996). Through counter storytelling, existing disadvantages, and challenging obstacles for students of color become clear, which gives educators an opportunity to repair and resist those gaps (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Throughout my life and career, I have witnessed situations that may not have been intentional but through complacency



on the part of educators, have been damaging towards Latine preschoolers. I begin my story by unpacking memories of the challenging experiences I learned to navigate, solve, and ultimately become an autonomous activist.

In 1984, the 68<sup>th</sup> Texas State Legislature approved House Bill 72 that served as an introductory bill for public school pre-kindergarten. Texas House Bill 72 alerted all public-school districts to comply with directives, as best as they could, and to be ready to initiate public school pre-kindergarten classes by the Fall of 1985. During the previous three to four years, I had worked as a public-school bilingual kindergarten teacher and was experiencing a lack of support and interest for early childhood education within the K-12 educational system. At this time, I worked in a property poor neighborhood in which grandparents took care of their grandchildren while parents worked. This made for a vibrant and cohesive community with very supportive home environments. In turn, Kindergarten teachers embraced the family unit and included their offerings within the planning and developing of lessons with minimal intrusion from the school principal. Access to classroom resources needed to enrich early childhood pedagogy was contingent on the teacher's ability to monetarily provide for. Family members would step in with our requests for recycled household items to recreate storage bins, arts and crafts supplies, or enrich science and math activities. Computers were just being introduced to public school classrooms but only a few chosen schools were afforded the technological equipment. I knew I had to prepare my kindergarteners for the future, so I taught them keyboarding using some old typewriters I rounded up from the school. I had already encountered many such situations when I learned about House Bill 72 and decided to seek employment within a different school district. After five years in a property poor school district with little to no support for early childhood education, I was experiencing burnout. The hope for helping create a state-of-the-art early

childhood program reignited in me when I was hired to work in in a public-school prekindergarten program as mandated by the state. This meant that both monetary and professional development support for a new program model would increase substantially. I had already experienced working with four-year-olds in a YWCA childcare center and had kept abreast of the political initiatives led by early childhood advocates. I felt that I could offer an insight into how young four-year-olds can learn within an exploratory educational environment, a concept I had introduced as a childcare teacher at the YWCA.

Prior to my introduction into the world of early childhood education and care at the YWCA, research in child development within the United States had been gaining momentum; however, research and teaching practices on the cutting edge were very difficult to access. Classroom andragogy in higher education balanced between the professor's lectures and little to no opportunities for observation of children. Lev Vygotsky's work had just been introduced in the United States and Piaget's work was the theorist most valued at the time. Opportunities for praxis stemming from child development theory were lacking. Eisner (2002) wrote about the fact that "educational theories are theory rich but experience poor" with Gore (1993, p. 108) adding "lacking in practical information strategies." During my years as a college student, I had learned about a study on early childhood practices that had been published through the American Association of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators in a publication entitled "Values in Early Childhood Education" (Fuller, 1960), now known as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). It emphasized to the public, the need for building a stronger focus on the developmental stages of preschoolers. This one document guided most of the programming for childcare centers and the few Kindergarten programs available at the time. Most importantly, it offered insight into the theoretical approach to early childhood education

and care. This pivotal publication served to alert the public on the need for establishing educational resources for young children (Fuller, 1960). The research had been conducted within a general population of white middle class children who attended private preschools and Nursery Schools. During this time any research conducted in the field was a gold standard for early childhood educators seeking further knowledge to improve programming. The strategies published by the American Association of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators aimed at developing the whole child in terms of their social and moral development, that would serve to help children become part of American society (Fuller, 1960). This was the best resource anyone could find to help establish early childhood education and care centers, a necessity that came into prominence in the 1970's. In addition, anyone interested in research and practice for further study needed to become a member of the educational organization from which you were seeking research, and then wait for the monthly publication to be delivered to your door. News of additional studies in early childhood education was not easily accessible.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Throughout my teaching career, I have struggled with the fact that in general, early childhood education is viewed through a deficit lens. This view has easily translated a label of non-importance or not necessary within the educational system. Through these viewpoints, early childhood education, specifically prekindergarten, has been minimized in its value and impact in the academic success of the whole child. Early in my career, most studies seeking to find pedagogically appropriate practices suitable for young children focused on the development of social and moral development (Cahan, 1989). Teachers relied on well-known theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bronfenbrenner but lacked access to examples of praxis. Formal publication for Developmentally Appropriate Practices was not published until the 1980's,

therefore, many educators interpreted pedagogical practices for this age group as free play time (American Association of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators, 1960; Cahan, 1989). Almost nonexistent was research for children of low SES families, who spoke languages other than English, and in some cases, came from single parent homes as they struggled to become a part of the American educational system. We therefore relied mostly on Bronfenbrenner's work that treated the family unit as part of the whole child. Therefore, when House Bill 72 was enacted, I hoped for more progressive practices that would guide me into better informed teaching through professional development, nurturing classroom environments, and developmentally appropriate resources. What I found as I began my first year as a public-school prekindergarten teacher was a deeper lack of understanding for children younger than kindergarten age. Additionally, a lack of support from mentors and administrators led to experimenting with various models of curriculum, mostly through action research. Very few educators had formally ventured into the developmental world of how a four-year-old develops in motor skills, cognition, and vocabulary. We had no measuring stick to go by. I thought about how Head Start had created a welcoming and appropriate learning environment for children coming from low SES backgrounds, native speakers of Spanish, and accommodating preschoolers with appropriate equipment. Head Start had opened its doors to the public in 1965, at which time many Hispanic families were excited for a program that met their child's needs as a low SES population. This federal initiative had come to fruition through President Johnson's War on Poverty. This opened opportunities for the establishment of Title I, making funding available for the education of young children of poverty (Elementary and Secondary Education School Act of 1965; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). However, now that the public schools needed some mentoring and assistance to do the same with their four-year-olds, public-school

stakeholders separated themselves from the Head Start organization. Public school educators did not consider Head Start as an equitable partner or mentor because Head Start teachers were not state certified and was also considered a “compensatory program for the poor” (Jeffrey, 1978; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992).

Currently, in response to the rapid growth of the Latine population throughout the U. S.-Mexico border, Texas public school prekindergarten enrollment is increasing in number (Casau, 2022). The terms LatinX and Latine are synonymous within the Hispanic population, however, most Spanish speaking academics prefer Latine due to its fluidity in pronunciation and grammatically correct Spanish ending (Slemp, 2020, p. 3, 11). Likewise, dual language programming is rapidly replacing Bilingual Education in most Texas ISD’s due to the state’s need to offer equitable education for the high percentage of Latine children enrolled in its public schools. In addition, state funding under HB3 is available to help districts prepare and implement the program across all grade levels (Belew, 2019). Today, Texas has the second-most dual language programming in the country (Zabala, 2022). While national organizations such as the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) have laid out protocols for successful early education programming within the nation, district support for many principals facing instructional leadership challenges in early childhood programming is not equally funded by the state. As an advocate of early childhood education in property poor school districts, I now observe implementation practices through the lens of a LatCrit early childhood education teacher, mentor, and advocate. School principals and early childhood teachers need extensive, supportive, and enriching professional development surrounding the systems of learning that will help create equitable programming for marginalized populations.

## **Statement of Purpose**

There is a sense of urgency for improving leadership and management in public school early childhood education programs for at-risk prekindergartners. This has been fueled by the expansion of preschool programs in many school districts (National Association Elementary School Principals, 2014). I have served in the capacity of public-school Bilingual Kindergarten teacher, Bilingual and Dual-Language Pre-Kindergarten Teacher, District Pre-Kindergarten Coach and Mentor, and early childhood advocate representing the state at policy conferences for change in the early childhood and care arena which are held yearly in Washington, D. C. I have also served as an Early Education Coordinator for a private early childhood campus, a university New Teacher mentor, an adjunct instructor at the university level teaching aspiring teachers, and as a tutor working with extremely low SES students in disenfranchised communities.

The purpose of this study is to reflect on my evolution as a LatCrit early childhood educator through experiences I gained with the people, organizations, policies, and praxis I encountered throughout my forty plus years as a teacher, instructional coach, and advocate. Most importantly, I want to recount the challenges I faced in the many and sometimes consistent roadblocks in the Pre-K to 12 system of public-school education, which at times prevented me from adequately carrying out both research-based practices as well as policy implementation for these marginalized populations. I want to reflexively unpack my journey so that it may help other educators, both school principals and their prekindergarten teachers, to reflect on their own perspective for the education of marginalized Latine preschool children.

## **Guiding Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study include:

1. What challenges did I face as an early childhood educator?

- a. Pre-k teacher
  - b. Instructional leader
2. How did I respond to those challenges and what determined my actions?
  - a. Pre-k teacher
  - b. Instructional leader
3. What type of support did I see that school principals and instructional leaders need to know to provide adequate assistance to early childhood teachers?
4. How do we need to improve our understanding of public-school pre-kindergarten programs for Latine preschoolers?

### **Significance of the Study**

In 1983, the federal report on the state of education in the United States, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education), was released to the public. The report was widely covered across all media outlets. Its negative campaign for the restructuring of the school system was widely felt as both a positive and a negative force. “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). In the actions that followed, the educational institution launched a campaign to ‘upgrade’ teaching practices and demand scientifically based accountability measures. The problem was that early childhood education was swept up into the K - 12 system without the inclusion for developmentally appropriate pedagogical practices.

The significance of this study is intended to shed light on pedagogical practices in public school prekindergarten programs that, due to marginalization of Latine preschoolers, is not yielding an equitable education for Latine children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although

significant change in early childhood education policy, funding, and national initiatives continue to evolve, I witnessed that praxis is simply not keeping up with the rapidly growing demand of a growing Latine preschool population. As a bilingual and dual language prekindergarten teacher, I observed the various ways that prekindergarten programs need collective support from district and school campus educators. In many instances, the prekindergarten curriculum was not horizontally aligned with the kindergarten program resulting in a lack for appropriate transitioning into kindergarten. Valenzuela (1999) notes that changing the approach we take towards the education of students may lead to rethinking the status quo of education and therefore the trajectory for success of all students that includes students of color. A school system is designed in a way that does not support students with varying identities, such as culture, linguistic, and economic needs that differ from the affluent culture in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

As stated before, under HB72 (1984), Texas public school principals were faced with the added responsibility of establishing and implementing pre-kindergarten programming for children of low SES backgrounds and/or speaking a language other than English. In a study conducted on principal's needs for inclusion of early childhood programs, it was revealed that as a group, principals did not see themselves as part of the solution for educating all preschoolers. The study concluded by identifying six issues that principals needed for effective inclusion of early childhood programming (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001). Six themes were identified from the study based on feedback the principals had contributed: 1) Where are all these kids coming from; 2) Who has the personnel to teach these children in ECE?; 3) Families must be supported earlier; 4) Collaboration is the key to making changes; 5) Where do we get the training and support to address these ECE inclusion issues?; 6) major pieces of the inclusion



puzzle are missing. Although this article was written two decades ago, school leaders still have the same questions and concerns as they did then (Shue, Shore, & Lambert, 2012).

Several research studies in the areas of neuroscience, brain development, and science-based innovation (Center of the Developing Child-Harvard University), have led to the conclusion that disadvantaged preschoolers must be at the receiving end of a high-quality early learning environment. Countless studies have pointed to the realization that children whose formal education begins in kindergarten are already at a far less cognitive, physical, language, and vocabulary disadvantage than their white counterparts (Neuman & Kaefer, 2018). Guiding research questions will lead me through my reflexive journey by using a narrative analysis method. The questions have mostly led me to ponder and reflect on the state of early childhood education as a social justice avenue for disadvantaged, Spanish speaking, Latine pre-kindergarteners enrolled in Texas public school pre-kindergarten programs.

Finally, after deep reflection of the experiences I share within this autoethnography, I came to the realization that I was now a critical pedagogist, instructional leader, nurturer of children. Characteristics I came to observe within myself reflect that of identifying institutional inadequacies, addressing deficit assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes with educators, pedagogical knowledge of culturally sustaining pedagogy, and most importantly, knowledgeable about how young children acquire and develop not only their first language but that of the second language of schooling.

### **My Positionality**

The purpose of education is accepted by the public as a living ideology that shifts over time in accordance with the needs of society. Foshay (1991), summed up the purpose of education from various contributing groups such as educational researchers, economists,

academics, and the public, as that of “to develop the intellect, to serve social needs, to contribute to the economy, to create an effective work force, to prepare students for a job or career, to promote a particular social or political system” (Foshay, 1991, p. 279). Although education is a constitutional right in Texas, we have continually marginalized Latine children using westernized curricula that does not include their own cultural wealth. It is true that I have come across many pre-kindergarten classrooms that conduct excellent early childhood programming. The difference between the successful schools and those using outdated practices is lack of training, lack of support for programming, and lack of educational resources. I believe that as educators of public-school prekindergarten programs, teachers must also take a reflexive stance using a social justice lens.

My own philosophy continuously changes over time spent as teacher and learner. I always refer to the adage that in education you never ‘get there’ in terms of reaching the pinnacle of your teaching practice. There is always more to learn, more to reflect upon, and more to evolve into. Though teaching and learning is intended to produce a constant evolution of oneself, I found that educators sometimes choose to remain permanent and steadfast in their thoughts and ideas related to teaching practices. Education is about communication and feedback, adapting to new and more complex systems, and evolving with others. In their studies of science, Stengers & Prigogine, (1985) alluded to the fact that when change is not present, we die.

## **Summary**

In Chapter 1, I juxtaposed the early beginnings of education for Latine students as opposed to their White counterparts in the Eastern and Midwestern sections of the United States. While the Common schools continued to move forward and continually progressed in their offerings, Latine children were left to the kindness and concern of a few Latine citizens living in

or around the neighborhoods that needed the most assistance. Based on my own early school experiences in a disadvantaged neighborhood along with my 40 plus years as an early childhood teacher in the public school system, I continued to observe such inequalities in programming for Latine preschoolers. For this study, I chose to write an autoethnography to help recount my experiences and how these experiences have led me to evolve as an early childhood educator of Latine preschoolers. I introduced the reader to the purpose, the problem, and the significance of this study as seen through the lens of a LatCrit early childhood educator.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter provides an overview of early childhood education scholarship. It is constructed as a literature review of experiences I encountered within the work I found unique in applying pedagogical practices for Latine pre-kindergarten age children in border, urban, property poor public-school districts. Although I considered writing this section as an overview of early childhood pedagogy and theory, the encounters I reflect on are unique to the Latine pre-kindergarten population in Southwest Texas. I, therefore, rather than describe the literature found on pedagogical practice for early childhood programs, walk the reader through the historical context and impeding elements present in the education of Latine preschoolers. These events have occurred and, in many cases, continue to occur in the lives of the preschoolers entering our public school system. Along with these adverse encounters in their young lives, I share the various interpretations for praxis coming from a plethora of lenses practiced by other educators and administrators, for the academic success, or not, of these children struggling to enter ‘Kindergarten ready’. Developments in early childhood research, specifically from the field of neuroscience, delineate the various components that need to be nurtured within a public-school prekindergarten program. For that to occur, not only do early childhood teachers need to be highly qualified instructors, so do public school principals who are challenged with overseeing early childhood programming, specifically prekindergarten programs within their elementary school campuses. It is understood in the field that public school early childhood programming was established to give preschoolers from disadvantaged backgrounds an opportunity to begin kindergarten on a more equal footing to their middle-class counterparts. It is because of this reason that I chose to study and reflect on my experiences as a bilingual early childhood teacher

to gain a better perspective about how effective our public-school programs are being managed to create equitable opportunities for young children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The design of this study is framed using LatCrit, autoethnography, and counterstory through reflexive inquiry. This framework will allow me to analyze the experiences I encountered as a Latine public school pre-kindergarten teacher.

LatCrit theory builds upon Critical Race Theory (CRT) which already has an extended literature base (Bell, 1980; Bell, Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, 2017). CRT has contributed to the story that researchers want to tell. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), who introduced us to the field of culturally relevant pedagogy, now known as culturally sustaining pedagogy, used CRT as the vehicle to tell of historically under-represented populations across the educational continuum. Likewise, Solorzano, (1998) introduced us to CRT within the K-12 frame. LatCrit is useful for uncovering racial inequity embedded within our educational system within the Prek-12 educational system, however, I seek to uncover inequities within public school pre-kindergarten programming. Although this age group is mostly treated as an addendum to the educational system, the children enrolled in such programs unknowingly rely on the power and dedication that early childhood teachers must gather or create for each child's future success. Ladson-Billings (2005) cautions scholars about the "uncritical" use of narrative or storytelling (p. 17). She shared her concern as such, "I sometimes worry that scholars who are attracted to CRT focus on storytelling to the exclusion of the central ideas such stories purport to illustrate. Thus, I clamor [sic] for richer, more detailed stories that place our stories in more robust and powerful contexts" (p. 117). Stories and counter stores specifically aid in the telling of situations and events of those in the community receiving

educational theory and practice 2) challenge stories about perceived actions 3) gives the marginalized a view and invitation to the equity of education table, and 4) uses retellings of fact to reconstruct a richer educational environment (Delgado, 1989; Lawson, 1995). In this autoethnography, I reflect on children at the intersection of marginalized backgrounds such as low SES households, Latine, Spanish speaking most often not understanding English, voiceless about their situation, of preschool age, and at the behest of adults in their life. CRT recognizes intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) which alludes to the fact that both oppression and racism can be experienced across sociopolitical and geopolitical contexts (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015).

### **History of Early Childhood Education in the Southwestern United States**

To understand the evolution of education for young Latine children in the United States, a look back into the post signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 is warranted. While Horace Mann had initiated the start of the Common Schools in the Northeastern and Midwestern portion of the United States in the early 1800's, nursery, and kindergarten schools for young Latine children had already been established in private homes, known as *escuelitas* (Goetz, 2020). These schools were created by the Mexican communities themselves, utilizing Mexican customs and rites of passage to inculcate their children in traditional culture, history, customs, and effectively communicate in their Spanish language, thereby building cultural wealth (Gallegos, 1991). However, soon after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Latine families learned that their children of Spanish speaking descent were not welcomed by the public schools established for White children (Gallegos, 1991), mainly because they lacked Spanish speaking teachers. Although Latine citizens were verbally assured by United States politicians that they could continue to conduct business in a language they understood (Oliver, 2017),

Spanish speakers were excluded from the public schools created in the new state of Texas (Oliver, 2017).

In the diaspora of the Latine population in the Southwest, most found comfort in the fact that Jesuits were settling in to minister to the Latine families of the Catholic faith. Catholic schools opened in Latine neighborhoods, welcoming Latine, Spanish speaking children into their schools (Gallegos, 1991). However, most schools did not include a kindergarten grade within their educational system and required a tuition fee which many families could not afford. Hence, local community advocates, some who were Latine suffragettes, begin opening kindergarten classrooms in their homes. This system of formal education for Latine preschool age children continued until the 1940's (Kauffman, 2019, p. 871) even though the Texas constitution had been amended in 1876 to include an education clause (TX Constitution, article VII, § 1) stating that children had the right to an education. Some school districts created separate schools for Latine students, separate from the schools for White students. Indeed, public schools placed Latine students in the lower first grade the first year, and then the higher first grade the second year (Kauffman, 2019, p. 867). This practice continued into the latter part of the 1960's. Children who did not understand or speak Spanish were also placed on the same track simply for having a Hispanic last name (Kauffman, 2019, p, 267). In major Texas urban districts such as El Paso, Dallas, Austin, Corpus Christie, Waco, and Midland, a combination of methods was used to segregate its Latine population. In El Paso, Texas, the Alvarado vs. EPISD case is a prime example of the struggles Latine students faced to attain an education (Alvarado vs. El Paso Independent Schools District, 426 F. Supp. 575, 595, 610 in Kauffman, 2019, p. 869). The original class action lawsuit was filed in 1971 and thrown out for lack of evidence. In 1976, however, the case was resubmitted and ruled on the side of the plaintiffs. EPISD was ordered to

provide transportation to students seeking to attend other schools in the district that were ethnically isolated, schools zones needed to be redrawn to include an equal percentage of enrolled Mexican-American students, each school needed to recruit sufficiently qualified bilingual teachers, and the district was ordered to increase the number of air-conditioned classrooms in Mexican-American dominant schools to equal the number of air conditioned classrooms for Anglo-American students, and finally that all qualified minority personnel receive a promotion in their job assignment. One such school that continues to serve the largely Latine population was Aoy Elementary. It was created through the kindness and concern for those children not able to receive a formal education due to the lack of Spanish speaking teachers, by using his own funds, eventually falling into deep poverty. Olivas Villanueva Aoy went on to eventually establish the school building that housed 500 Mexican students at the turn of the century, where the school campus stands today, now fully rebuilt around the same grounds (Bryson, 1994).

### **The Beginnings of Early Childhood Education for Disadvantaged Latine Children**

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson introduced the first federally funded early childhood program intended for disadvantaged children who were at risk of academic failure (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). Although this early childhood program targeted the goal of ‘becoming the great equalizer’, the parents whose children needed the help were afraid to enroll their children in the educational program. The reason for this hesitancy was that the public had already interpreted the program as a school for those children at risk for retardation (Zigler, 1992, p, 7). The intersectionality that converged for a voiceless, young, Latine, Spanish speaking child coming from a low socio-economic background during the 1960’s was and continues to be a precarious situation for Latine children upon entering formal schooling. In this paper, Latine



students are defined as male or female, Mexican American, Latino, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture (Lozano, Salinas Jr., 2021).

According to research in brain development, children between ages 0-3 may begin to show signs of cognitive, speech, or motor delays at which time intervention through developmental screening should be offered. At its inception, Head Start's goal for early childhood education for the poor was meant to create a pathway for identifying a myriad of developmental needs that had gone unchecked (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). Currently, a substantial amount of brain research has been published on poverty's effect on brain development and has been pivotal for current praxis. It is one of the most integral pieces of evidence for supporting children from poverty as reported by various organizations and evidence-based research (i. e., Zero to Three; Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University; Shonkoff, 2011).

In 1984, the case between Edgewood ISD et al. v. Kirby et al., cited discrimination against poor students in poor school districts by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund against the then commissioner of education William Kirby, in Travis County. This case is of historical significance because property school districts at the time were faced with financial needs in early childhood education. The Texas Legislature had been preparing school districts for the opening of public-school pre-kindergarten programs, specifically targeted for children from low SES backgrounds and/or non-English speakers. Disparities in school finance had existed due to the way in which property taxes were collected and distributed between high SES and low SES communities (Edgewood v. Kirby, 1991). This formula caused a gross imbalance in funding availability for the poorest districts in the state. Research informs us that a family's income has a direct effect on a child's learning, especially during their preschool

years (Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002). Moreover, the federal government heeded the research warnings that children from poverty tend to suffer a higher percentage of developmental delays or learning disabilities than children from middle - and high - income families (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997; Dahl & Lochner, 2012; Duncan, Morris, & Rodrigues, 2011; Duncan, Magnuson, & Drzal, 2014). The Edgewood ISD v. Kirby case, 1991, ultimately impacted the education of many Latino children by affording them a more equitable learning environment. Research also informs us that quality preschool environments are especially significant for children from low SES backgrounds because they are invited to participate in a democratic society within their classrooms (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Additional school funding can equip public school pre-kindergarten classrooms with social and cultural artifacts that allow them to discover democratic issues, leading to a preschooler's agency (Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Poverty in the Southwestern United States**

The most recent United States census finds that over 11 million children are living in poverty (Koball, Moore, & Hernandez, 2021). Poverty rates continue to show disproportionately higher rates for children of color. Compared to their White counterparts who report at a 10% poverty rate, Hispanics fall at the 23% level (Koball, Moore, & Hernandez, 2021, p. 1). Moreover, persistent poverty in Southwest Texas continues to grow (Diaz-Pineda & Mitchell-Bennett, 2019). The good news is that studies have shown that family tax credits are helping exponentially by lifting some families out of poverty (Rockefeller-Harris, L. 2021, p.1). In a fact sheet compiled by the institute, findings revealed that families are mostly using the tax credit for purchasing groceries (Rockefeller-Harris, L. 2021, p. 1). Nutrition for children of poverty is hard to attain, often impeding brain development beginning at mid-gestation through two years of age (Zero to Three, May 24, 2014). In addition, malnutrition affects mental and physical

development. Delays in brain development also have long lasting consequences that lead to behavioral and cognitive deficits, slower language and fine motor development, lower IQ and ultimately poorer school performance (Zero to Three, May 24, 2014). By age 5, 90% of the brain has already developed, signally the urgency for proper nutrition in aiding proper brain growth (Zero to three, May 24, 2014). Food insecurity also leads to chronic health issues as they grow into adolescence. The most common use of the child tax credit has been applied towards purchasing food with 50% use of the total amount, managing bills at 39%, school expenses at 36% and clothing at 35% (Rockefeller-Harris, L. 2021, p. 1). While this federal initiative has lifted some negative effects due to poverty, children still face additional negative effects of schooling such as the lack of internet service, parental support, domestic violence, and environmental toxicity of their physical living space. As of 2021, 59.3% of Hispanic families have received the Child Tax Credit with Black families following at 60.9%, Asian families at 63.1%, and White families at 65.1% (Rockefeller-Harris, L. 2021, p. 1). In contrast, poverty rates as reported by ethnicity through the Annie E. Casey Foundation, reveal poverty rates for Latine families at 26%, African American rates at 28%, and White poverty rate at 9%. This report was last updated in 2021. They reflect statistics that show discrepancies between the percentage of families in poverty by ethnicity, and the percentage of families receiving the Child Tax Credit that ultimately affect a child's home environment and learning opportunities. It is within these communities that children struggle along with their parents to make a living. Many families are homeless, in some families, adults are too ill to work, which takes away hope of ever being able to return to work. The average percentage of loss of employment for Latine adults within the first seven months of 2022 averages to a higher percentage than African Americans and Whites (Kids Count Data Center, 2022).

What poverty does to a child's brain has exorbitant consequences. For children of poverty, a lack of rich and stimulating learning environments suggests that the child is exposed to quite the opposite, which are attributed to traumatic experiences that cause negative instead of positive stimulation to the brain (Blair and Raver, 2016, p. S31). Chronic stressors such as background noise, household chaos, and conflict among family members, causes a high number of stress-related hormones on the developing brain, leading to long-term harm to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral function (Coley, Lynch, & Kull, 2015). Moreover, children of poverty show stress markers that interfere with the development of executive function and the regulation of emotion and attention (Blair, Glynn, Sandman, & Davis, 2011; Chen, Cohen, & Miller, 2010; Evans, 2003).

In 2013, a documentary titled *Stolen Education*, a South Texas school district's mistreatment of first grade Mexican American students is explored. In the 1950's children were retained in the first grade for three years, "not because of failed assessments, abilities, parental choice, or lack of English-speaking skills, but solely because of their racial identity" Mexican children were labeled "retarded" and lied about in their ability to read, write, and speak in English (Aleman & Luna, 2013). Much of Texas' Latino population continues to struggle for equal educational opportunities (Kauffman, 2016). It was not until the late 1950's and early 1960's that poverty was first acknowledged and along with that, the education of the disadvantaged minority students (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). In their race to prove to the world that the United States had a place in a space program, we came to acknowledge the dire poverty within our own country. This prompted politicians to figure out a way to boost the education and achievement level of children in the United States, including those from poverty.

Poverty is the one facet that has the most detrimental effect on child brain development (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). It poses many risks for young children between the ages of 0-5, the period for the most rapid brain growth. There are four primary risk factors for children living in poverty 1) emotional and social challenges 2) acute and chronic stressors, 3) cognitive lags, and 4) health and safety issues (Jensen, 2009). Research studies consistently show how poverty affects certain brain regions involved with stress regulation that respond to environmental stimuli (Luby, Belden, Botteron, Marrus, Hams, Babb, & Barch, 2013). As a result, children of poverty are known to suffer from “chronic stress disorder” stemming from their toxic home environment. In most cases, these children are known to “act out”, lose interest in learning, and ultimately become behavior problems which, when left untreated, only increase in severity (Ford, Farah, Shera, & Hurt, 2007).

Many low-income minority children have poor academic outcomes and limited exposure to educational opportunities necessary to succeed within the school environment (Bassok, 2010; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007a; Magnuson & Shager, 2010), which can contribute to the persistence of academic inequalities in the United States (Ferreira & Gignoux, 2013; Logan, Minca, & Adar, 2012; Martinez & Rury, 2012; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007; Wiggan, 2007).

### **New Migration of Families with Preschool Age Children**

Geopolitical issues have forced millions of people to migrate due to civil wars, famine, and violence from religious persecution. Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are desperate to find alternatives to the dire conditions they currently face in their home countries. UNICEF has recorded migrations from the Central American countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Additionally, the recent migration of unaccompanied children (UAC) from Mexico

and Central America to the United States between 2014-2015 (Rosenblaum & Ball, 2016) have already been exposed to drug-related violence in Mexico, along with poverty, sexual abuse, and harsh political asylum practices. Immigration policy practices only serve to further exacerbate the trauma that many children fled from in the first place. Most recently, Venezuelan migrants have joined the massive migration towards the United States. Mexico's drug wars began nearly 45 years ago, and the violence resulting from these wars has been plaguing the country ever since. A change in 2006 in the strategy used by the federal government aimed to effectively combat the drug cartels, resulted in a dramatic number of people, especially children, that were subjected to trauma. Gorn-Berenson, Solano, Icaza, Basauri, and Reyes (2013) found that violence has increased in such a dramatic fashion within the last decade, that Mexican citizens now consider insecurity and violence as their two biggest concerns, ahead of economic and educational concerns. The effects of this violence have spread from the Northern Mexican states to the entire country as the violence has claimed over 47,515 people from the period of December 2006 to September 2011 (Montalvo, 2012). Although exact figures are unavailable, recent figures estimate there have been an additional 70,000 homicides as a direct result of organized-crime related violence between 2006 and 2010 (Bremer, 2010). Although it is difficult to ascertain with certainty the number of children in Mexico or in the United States who have experienced traumatic drug-related violent events, security experts on the drug-related violence have suggested that children are increasingly becoming the target of criminal elements. The increase in killing and attacking children are being used by the Trans-National Organized Criminal Organization (TCOs) commonly referred to as the Cartels, to terrorize the population and send messages to rivals and the Mexican Government (O'Connor & Booth, 2011, p. 1). One of the primary factors contributing to the sudden and dramatic rise in drug-related violence is

attributed to the disbanding of an unofficial pact between narcotic traffickers and governments controlled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, a political party that controlled the Presidency and much of the country for 71 continuous years (Bussey, 2008). Mexico served as the only transit point for drugs coming in from Columbia but now serves as the main transit, distribution, and production point for all of South America (Carpenter, 2010). Bussey (2008) stated that the spread of drug-related violence has been amplified by the fact that Mexico suffers from “chronic poverty, badly paid police forces, entrenched corruption, and a weak justice system, turning Mexico into a battlefield” (p,2). However, “the difference between now and the past is that now it is much more democratic; you pay everyone from law enforcement agents and political officials from all levels said Erubiel Tirado” (Bussey, 2008, paragraph 7).

The children of Mexico and Central America have been exposed to a level of violence so egregious and gruesome, including beheadings, car bombings, gun battles, assassinations, kidnappings, shootings, and grenade attacks, many occurring in daytime hours (Johnston, 2011). The lack of security, limited access to mental health services, and poverty, has not sparked families to seek or receive mental health services for fear of retribution (Johnston, 2011). Given the level of violence in Mexico and Central America, many families are fleeing just to have an opportunity to save their child’s future. This international border has been recognized as one of the most violent areas of Mexico (Heinle, Molzahn, & Shirk, 2015). With that said, the children and youth that are fleeing the violence into southwest cities along the U. S. Mexico border, come with increasingly more severe signs of mental health illness, showing signs of withdrawal, depression, and attention deficit. These issues are yielding a much higher risk of falling behind academically and not receiving proper mental health care. Such behaviors are not being properly diagnosed once they enter a public school system. Educational institutions do not have PTSD on

the radar and often attribute disruptive behaviors to other less severe diagnosis (Cole, 1991). Moreover, older children who are left untreated will show more aggressive and externalizing behaviors, making them susceptible to acting out in school fights with peers, leading to suspensions and expulsions. Indeed, children and their families coming from Mexico have already experienced both poverty and violence which carries a higher risk of mental and physical problems (Leiner, Puertas, Caratachea, Avila, Atluru, Briones, & Vargas, 2012). In 2018, UNICEF reported that within the course of six months, 24,189 women and children were returned from Mexico and the U. S. back to their home countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, causing them to become displaced once they reached their destination (UNICEF, 2018). Moreover, hundreds of children that were separated from their parents at the inception of the ‘zero tolerance’ immigration policy, have yet to be reunited with their families (UNICEF, 2018; Ramirez, October 9, 2022).

In the Southwest Texas region, hundreds of unaccompanied migrant children were housed at an emergency intake shelter in a federal army base (Ramirez, 2022, October 9, p. 1) as recently as 2018. These children faced emotional distress, self-harm, and panic attacks due to extreme anxiety. Among this group were children ages 5 and younger who had been separated from their parents. Those children who remain unclaimed have been placed in long term foster care (2002, Ramirez, October 9, p. 2) and are now students in our local school districts. As many as 4, 800 children were reported as housed in May 2021, dropping later in June to 1,000 (Ramirez, 2022, October 9, p. 3). Moreover, immigrant children between the ages of 0-4, accompanied by their immigrant parents comprises 29% of all border crossers between 2014-2018 (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2021, p. 1). Adding to this considerable number, more recent crossings by young children, specifically ages 0-4 have continued into the 2022 fiscal year.



Immigrant children that have been placed in foster care are now attending our public schools. Many of these children have suffered extreme trauma, do not speak English, and are finding themselves in a foreign place unnavigable to them (Sanchez, 2022, p. 1). These preschool children, upon enrollment into our public pre-kindergarten school system, will be joining their counterparts who may also be hailing from low SES disadvantaged backgrounds, and facing family trauma as well.

### **Brain Development in Children Ages 0-5**

Brain development begins in the third gestational week and continues until late adolescence (Stiles & Jernigan, 2010, p. 328). Early brain development shows neural connections developing rapidly. Before birth, children's brains are usually quite developed, showing the control of primary bodily functions such as breathing and response to environmental stimuli such as sound, heat, and cold (Eliot, 1999) which are already actively engaged. At birth, the brain of an infant is like a blank slate regarding aspects such as social interaction, analytical thinking, and expression through language (Vegas, Santibañez, & World Bank, 2010). Everything that they expect to learn comes from the degree and quality of responsiveness of the adults they interact with, including their parents, extended family relatives, or any other caregivers (Richter, Lye, & Proulx, 2018).

The most development occurs during the preschool period with 90% of the brain's growth reaching by approximately age 6 (Reiss, Abrams, Singer, & Ross, 1996; Iwasaki, Hamano, Okada, & Horigome, 1997; Courchesne, Karns, Davis, & Ziccardi, 2001; Kennedy & Dehay, 2007; Paus, 2005; Kennedy, Makris, Herbert, & Takahashi, 2002; Lenroot & Giedd, 2006). Brain imaging is a vehicle for providing the scientific community with images of how each stage of brain development is mirrored by specific behaviors in an infant, toddler, then

preschooler (Stiles & Jernigan, 2010). A child's brain develops at 1 million neural connections per second. These connections are a result of positive learning interactions with nurturing parents and caregivers (Fishbane, 2007).

It is an asset for children to learn in play-based environments since playing requires all the senses that naturally connect different areas of the brain, completing the stage for successful learning (Jensen, 2005; Edwards, 2017). Research in neurodevelopment, early intervention, and neurobiology indicated that a child's brain substantially develops between birth and 5 years of age (Koch, Timmerman, Peiffer, & Lauienti, 2013). New findings point towards the fact that early childhood educators and administrators need to understand brain development because such learning confirms the importance of play and the use of developmentally appropriate practice (Zambo, 2008; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gorski, 2013)). If a child is brought up in an enriched environment with engaging associations, the brain grows and acquires more planning and critical thinking skills (Cohen & Manio, 1989; Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012).

Unfortunately, the age of accountability has prevented many public-school pre-kindergarten teachers from implementing best practices for lesson delivery. The use of play-based, project-based learning experiences is often discouraged by school administrators lacking knowledge in child development. Some school principals may feel threatened by noisy pre-kindergarten classrooms that are action-based, and may target the early childhood teacher as a weak disciplinarian discipline (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013). Brain-based learning strategies are often interpreted by school principals as children sitting at a desk completing assigned tasks in a quiet state of concentration (Jung & Jin, 2012). A child's brain is not able to handle that type of stress (Eliason & Jenkins, 2012). The goal at this stage of development is to

provide activities that the child can mentally walk through on their own to develop executive function (Peterson, Forsyth, & McIntyre, 2015). While teacher-led instruction is still very much a part of a pre-kindergarten classroom, lessons should be provided in small doses with plenty of time for experiential learning. Early childhood education can serve as a foundation for children to develop executive function skills relating to mental processing and metacognitive thinking (Peterson, Forsyth, & McIntyre, 2015; Carlson & Moses, 2001; Zelazo, Müller, Frye, Marcovitch, Argitis, Boseovski, & Carlson, 2003). Exposure to early education experiences can help reduce negative developmental outcomes associated with low socioeconomic status (Blair, Raver, & Berry, 2014; Kruk, Prentice, & Moen, 2013). It is extremely crucial that school administrators understand developmental milestones to gauge all children's development as they enter their first year of formal schooling.

Although parental contribution to early childhood education can influence child development and ward off the negative effects of poverty, parents often encounter barriers that facilitate developmental outcomes in their children (Durham & Smith, 2006). Since there are circumstances beyond the control of underprivileged families, the cycle of social and economic disadvantage is maintained by limited access to resources and the social capital necessary to overcome these hardships. Because children who attend high-quality prekindergarten programs learn to face adversities with a more positive outlook, children who do not attend early childhood programming may be missing out on valuable opportunities that help mold the frontal lobe functioning of their brain early in life (Welsh & Pennington, 2009). Therefore, early childhood education can serve as a foundation for children to develop executive function skills that will become pertinent to academic success (Blair, Raver, & Berry, 2014; Kruk, Prentice, & Moen, 2013). Moreover, for children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, participation is

quality prekindergarten programs provides positive experiences that are long lasting and point to later academic success (Bakken, et al., 2017).

Children who participate in prekindergarten have higher school readiness skills and exhibit greater executive function skills than those who do not attend prekindergarten.. Additionally, elementary school grade retention was examined within the context of participation in early childhood education programs. The findings suggest that participation in early childhood education programs does seem to curb grade retention risk. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University cited that the foundation for learning executive function skills begins early in childhood. These early experiences teach the child to focus, pay attention, follow directions through play and support by an attentive parent or caregiver. In addition, the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child describes that because motivation is key to success, it is important to understand how quality nurturing prekindergarten environments can provide stability and an eagerness for learning. They describe the “science behind motivation- the ‘wanting’ system and the ‘liking’ system” and how these systems begin to develop in early age. By exposing young children who come from adversity, we as educators are helping to mold that brain which will be able to overcome later challenges such as addiction, dropping out of school, failure to seek a career or employment (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2018).

Much of Bronfenbrenner’s (1974) work focused on the environments that children come from and how it can have a positive or negative effect towards their learning. His theory about the relationships that children face on multiple levels has crucial consequences for the way public school programs develop their curriculum, learning environments, and even rituals that initiate the beginning of a school year for a young child (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Most children

from low-income status who are not able to readily connect to the content, begin to disengage early in the school year (Mueller, & Wisneski, 2012, p. 87).

### **The Consequences of Trauma on the Developing Brain**

The influence of external environments and daily experiences can positively or negatively influence a young child's brain development. For migrant families and their children, transitions that occur during migration are subject to interfering with normal brain development. Traumatic events a child may experience during transition can later trigger deep seeded emotions of helplessness and fear. Studies have shown that mental health development when negatively interrupted, can lead to a diagnosis of PTSD. The developmental process of intelligence, self-regulation, executive attention, and working memory must be salvaged for those children who are joining the ranks of their peers in the public-school system.

There is a growing understanding amongst psychologists and social workers that infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are at risk of exposure to trauma and the development of PTSD (DeYoung & Kenardy, 2011). Early childhood care and education teachers are not properly trained to better understand the signs and symptoms which accompany mental disorders. In light of the mass migrations currently occurring not just from Latin people but across the globe, the need for an increased focus on policy making for those children going into the public school system must be initiated (Espinola-Nadurille, Huicochea, Raviola, Ramirez-Bermudez, & Kutcher, 2010; Gorn-Berenzon, Solano, Icaza, Basauri, & Reyes, 2013).

Various types of traumas have been identified by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), from acute trauma which refers to a single incident, often occurring suddenly, to chronic trauma which is defined as being longstanding and repetitive (APA, 2013). Additionally, post-traumatic stress disorder, the most severe type of trauma has been defined by the Diagnostic and

Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, as occurring “when a stressor exposes a child or person to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence either directly, indirectly, or as a witness” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271). Childhood trauma, as described by De Thierry (2003) in Table 1 below, develops on a continuum that increases with any life-threatening events that a child is exposed to.

**Table 1**

*The Trauma Continuum*

Type I Trauma	Type II Trauma	Type III Trauma
Single incident trauma	Multiple traumas	Multiple pervasive traumas from an early age that continue over a length of time

Note: *From Understanding the Impact of Trauma on Children in the Classroom*, DeThierry, 2013, p. 97

A study conducted by Lenore Terr (1991), targeted a group of California schoolchildren who were kidnapped from a school bus in 1981. She found that psychologically healthy children could also develop psychopathology because of a traumatic event (Terr, 1981, 1983). Terr (1990) described trauma as occurring when “a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense blow or series of blows assaults the person from the outside” (p. 80). De Bellis (2005) reported that any event that a child experiences, which causes distress is applicable to the label of PTSD. Other mental health issues can also result from trauma-related events. When a child experiences an event that involves a high degree of threat to the child or his/her caregiver, is prolonged, and is aimed directly at the child, then this event can have serious psychological damage (Pine, Costello, & Masten, 2005). Of these descriptors, family separation accounts for the worst possible situation for a child (Teicher, 2018). Armed conflict is one type of event that can have lasting damage in a

child, both physically and emotionally, however, children being pulled from their parent's arms is severely detrimental (Teicher, 2018; Salas, Ayón, & Gurrola, 2013). Young children who have formed attachment bonds with their parents will have difficulty building self-regulation and resilience (Teicher, 2018). The traumatic events of separation endured by these young children leads to consistent early life stress on the brain which interferes with those sensitive periods for development (Teicher, 2018). Ultimately, increased migration across the world has acknowledged that interventions need to be developed to respond to the current situations for children around the world (Papagerorgiou, Frangou-Garunovic, Iordanidou, Yule, Smith, & Vostanis, 2000).

Research on children directly impacted by the drug cartel related violence in Mexico has been limited (Leiner, Puertas, Caratchea, Avila, Atluru, Briones, & Vargas, 2012) but is now seeing a growing interest in the world of academia due to the much-publicized immigration policies and trauma induced family separation orders utilized by a former U. S. administration.

In a 2006 report, UNICEF reported an “estimated total of 2 million children killed and another 6 million left disabled, 20 million homeless, and over 1 million separated from their parents” (p. 14). The rates of PTSD recorded from the Palestine-Israel conflict numbered at around 50% of children, with rates varying by age groups (Altawil, Nel, Asker, Samara, & Harold, 2008). Young children who grow up witnessing verbal conflict or who witnessed family violence have a harder time adjusting to changes and show an increase in disruptive behavior (Levendosky, Leahy, Bogat, Davidson, & von Eye 2006; McDonald, Jouriles, Rosenfield, Briggs-Gowan, & Carter, 2007). Often, simply hearing or seeing unresolved angry disputes between parents can result in trauma and trauma-related symptoms, including PTSD, disruption of health, eating patterns, sleep disturbance, abnormal responding when interacting with adults,

and regression in developmental skills (Bogat, DeJohghe, Levendosky, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006; DeBellis & Thomas, 2003; Scheeringa & Zeanah, 1995; Schore, 2001).

Studies conducted on trauma in children resulting from a parental death found important factors that influence the severity of the negative impact (Graham-Bermann, Howell, Habarth, Krishman, Loree, & Bermann, 2008). Additionally, they reported younger children were especially vulnerable to a traumatic family loss, with symptom development ranging from high emotional reactivity to strong symptoms of intrusion and fear. Scheeringa, Wright, Hunt, & Zeanah, (2006) found threat of harm or death to a young child's caregiver was the strongest predictor of the child meeting full criteria for PTSD 6 months later. These studies highlighted some of the long-lasting impacts the sudden or traumatic death of a parent can have on children, especially when high levels of violence further compromise the sense of overall safety.

Lastly, there has been an increase in the percentage of Mexican families reporting that they experienced extortion, robbery, confinement to home because of community violence, witnessed a murder or came across a dead body, learned that a loved one was injured because of violence, or experienced physical assault (O'Connor, Vizcaino, & Benavides, 2014). At least 30% of all respondents reported experiencing one or more of these traumatic events in the last year (O'Connor, Vizcaino, & Benavides, 2014).

There is no doubt that the journey is a perilous one, but of most concern is the humanitarian effort being offered by the receiving or host countries, in this case, those entering through the U. S.- Mexican border. Immigration law does not consider the hardships and mental anguish migrants have already endured. Upon entering as asylum seekers into a processing facility, many migrants are left unattended or left waiting hopelessly. As a result, most people opt to camp out on the bridge or anywhere within proximity to the port of entry, anxiously



waiting to be called. Assumptions of the Theory of Social Construction and Policy Design (Schneider & Ingram, 1993), best exemplifies how immigrants process the information needed to be able to effectively claim asylum. At present, asylum seekers only face confusion, long waits, sometimes months to claim asylum. The stress endured by the families and their children is exacerbated by the lack of basic comforts. The table below delineates the process or stages for each of the three social constructions (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

Punitive actions to thwart the flow of migrants mostly from Central and Latin America, pose immigration policy that may be an important social determinant of health for immigrants and their children in that such policies define belongingness and may racialize new immigrants (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012). The Assumptions of the Theory of Social Construction and Policy Design which was developed by Schneider & Ingram in 1993, delineates the process or stages for each of the three social constructions that immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers experience at the border crossing. The situation that young families find themselves in transfers to high toxic stress for their young children. This stress is exacerbated upon hearing or witnessing mistreatment of their most important bond in life.

**Table 2**

*The Assumptions of the Theory of Social Construction and Policy Design*

<p><b>Method of Individual</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Actors cannot process all the information relevant to make a decision, and therefore rely on mental heuristics to decide what information to retain.</li> <li>2. Mental heuristics filter information in a biased manner, thereby resulting in a tendency for individuals to confirm new information that is consistent with preexisting beliefs.</li> <li>3. People use social constructions in a subjective manner that is evaluative.</li> <li>4. Social reality is boundedly relative where individuals perceive generalizable patterns of social constructions within objective conditions.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Power</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Power is not equally distributed among individuals within a political environment.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Political Environment</b></p>

1. Policy creates future politic that feed forward to create new policy and politics.
2. Policies send messages to citizens that affect their orientations and participation patterns.
3. Policies are created in an environment of political uncertainty.

Note: *From Constructing Citizenship: The Subtle Message of Policy Design* by Schneider & Ingram, 1993

### **State Policy Responding to the Needs of Disadvantaged Children**

On July 18, 2019, the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session voted under House Bill 3, to continue providing funding through state dollars for the implementation of a high-quality prekindergarten program that could serve the education of low-income, at-risk populations. A high-quality prekindergarten program encompasses a set of components that have been created as research has advanced the field. These components have been informed by current and past societal issues, which I refer to as constructs. Constructs such as poverty, neuroscience, learning theories, school resources, home environments, parental support, environmental stress, and access to healthcare all informed what a high-quality early childhood program or public-school pre-kindergartens should have. Texas HB 3 delineates to educators, specifically leadership teams and school principals, that the requirements for an effective program include a nurturing learning environment, well trained early childhood professionals, research based developmentally appropriate curriculum, low student to teacher ratios, student progress monitoring tools, parental engagement programs, and formal program evaluation instruments. The State Center for Early Childhood Development (SCECD) offers much support for the implementation and effective sustainability of quality prekindergarten programming mandated under HB3. The research for providing quality programming and how to overcome adversities for young children has been extremely impactful across the country. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) reports on each state's goals, accountability measures, national quality indicators, and

accessibility for each state's programming components. Currently, Texas falls midway between high quality and low-quality standards, leaving much room for improvement (NIEER, 2020).

### **Texas Goal for Statewide Dual Language Instruction**

Responding to the cultural and linguistic needs of our Latine population, history informs us that measures were approved to move this need forward. In 1973 Governor Dolph Briscoe signed the Bilingual Education and Training Act which ultimately abolished the English-only teaching requirement set in motion as early as 1918. Along with this ruling, Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs became a part of the instructional landscape of public education. Moreover, dual-language programs are essential for inclusion and thereby equitable instruction for language proficiency and academic achievement in a student's first and eventually second languages. It is of great importance to train teachers to identify what classroom culture is and how to create an inclusive classroom that culturally embraces its students. Building on Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW), children enter public school with cultural types of wealth including 1) *aspirational*, 2) *familial*, 3), *linguistic*, 4) *navigational*, 5) *resistance*, and 6) *social capital*. When Latine children fail often educators project a negative stereotype, in a form that attacks a child's cultural capital, family dysfunction, lack of motivation, or the lack of cognitive ability in keeping up with their counterparts (Valencia & Black, 2002). Indeed, it is the educational system's failure for not embracing the cultural offerings that each child brings to the schoolhouse and the ability to effectively implement programming that is meant to embrace certain cultures. In further studies, the concept of *maternal cultural wealth* emerged as a prime motivational tool guiding offspring to succeed to higher levels academically. The phenomenon was derived through narrative analysis of young Latine men entering college for the first time. In their interviews, the term mother was flagged as a high percentage of references made during the

interviews (Arámbula Ballysingh, 2021). Likewise, in a young child's world, the mother is almost always in the background guiding the child through the unfamiliar system of schooling. Mothers are often the first person that early childhood teachers meet before becoming familiar with each child's predispositions towards schooling. Unfortunately, not many family resources are being utilized in elementary school campuses, including early childhood parenting venues.

Currently, children attending public school pre-kindergarten programming are entering an environment that will introduce English to them with Spanish as their anchor language to help them understand instruction. Dual language programming has been on the rise in public school programs (Department of Education, 2018; Park, O'Toole, & Katsiaticas, 2017; Park, Dotan, & Esposito, 2022). Thomas and Collier (2002) projected a 40% growth of Dual Language Learners (DLLs) among the US population for ages 0-8, by the 2030's. An analysis of this growth predicts that 23% of this group will need such services (Park, O'Toole, & Katsiaticas, 2017) upon their formal introduction into the public school system. Currently, Texas House Bill 3 is at the forefront for offering dual language programming throughout the state's public school system (2019).

This programming model helps to support student's academic progress in the areas of language and literacy, social-emotional, science, and mathematics by teaching them in their home language alongside the English language, which reflects the student's second language (Banse, 2019). However, as our preschool population brings us cultural and linguistic diversity, our education system is underprepared for serving Dual Language Learners (Ansari, Fehrer, & Tognozzi, 2018). State public school prekindergarten programming was initially created to serve children from low-income families, due to over enrollment in Head Start programs (K-12 Academics, 2022). State governors then begin formulating and implementing plans for offering

public school pre-kindergarten programming for those children from low SES backgrounds with a high percentage of Latine students. These students face a variety of issue acclimating to school, however, learning of academic English and academic content simultaneously has proven difficult (Park, 2017). The term *Dual Language Learner* typically refers to a child between the ages of 0-5, learning a second language while simultaneously continuing to develop language skills in their first language (Banse, 2019). As numbers of young Latine children continue to increase in the United States, unique considerations need to be addressed for the equitable education of these preschoolers (Figueras-Daniel & Li, 2021). Therefore, in the quest for providing disadvantaged children with the means for a successful future, we are indeed contributing towards a readiness gap in kindergarten.

Studies abound for the preparation of dual language preschool teachers (Ansari, Fehrer, & Tognozzi, 2018; Figueras-Daniel & Li, 2021; Ballantyne, Sanderman, & McLaughlin, 2008; Gort, & Sembiante, 2015; Howard, Sugarman, & Christian, 2007; Howes, Burchinal, Pianta, & Bryant, 2008; Castro, Espinosa, & Paez, 2011) but few for dual language leadership.

In a study by Lachance (2017), dual language school administrators voiced their concern for finding qualified dual language teachers (Loeb, Soland, & Fox, 2014; Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Additionally, school administrators favor dual language programming in that it helps yield significantly increased academic achievement for K-12 students (Escamilla, Hopewell, & Slavick, 2021; Thomas & Collier, 2012, 2014). Various studies continue to point to dual language programming success as falling squarely on a teacher's special preparation (CAL, 2012; Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2005; Thomas & Collier, 2014). However, the significance of well-prepared instructional leaders that meet the demands of equitable learning environments and who can also lead well qualified teachers for pre-kindergarten dual language learners

remains critically understudied (Landry, Assel, Carlo, & Williams, 2019). It is time for the shift of responsibility for successful public school pre-kindergarten dual language programming to turn to the school principal as instructional leader.

New Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (2015), Standard 3 *Equity and Cultural Responsiveness*, delineates the need for the school principal to “*strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.*” (PSEL, 2015, p. 11). In addition, Standard 4 Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment suggests principals should “*develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student’s academic success and well-being*” (PSEL, 2015, p. 12). Likewise, a fundamental tenet of the Texas Administrative Code § 241.15 requires school principals as Instructional Leaders to be responsible for ensuring every student receives high-quality instruction (Texas Administrative Code, 2019). While numerous resources and national initiatives (e.g., National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO), offer critical components to help build capacity for instructional leaders in early childhood programs, insight into praxis is scant.

In 2013, a survey of Early Childhood Education administrators conducted by CEELO, revealed that out of 55 participants in a national initiative to enrich early childhood education programming only 3 identified themselves as addressing development for Pre-K to Grade 3 within their states. The survey was conducted for systems change prioritized by the U. S. Department of Education setting priorities for the Race to the Top-Early Challenge applications (Goffin, 2013). Some states, such as New Jersey, is focused on targeting principals’ content knowledge. Other states, however, have not met the challenge and did not self-identify as

focused on leadership development for early childhood programs. The Center for Early Enhancement of Learning Outcomes have set the goal of “ensuring improved learning outcomes for the nation’s youngest children necessitates leaders who can work at the programmatic and systems level. [Yet] the preparation and professional development of leaders at the state level where individuals must initiate and sustain early childhood policy and initiatives has not been a key focus of workforce development in the early childhood field.” (Goffin, 2013, p. 3) This stresses that the adequate and effective administration for the state’s pre-kindergarten programming is a systemic issue that may not be well equipped to mentor school principals as instructional leaders of dual language pre-kindergarten programs (CEELO, 2011). Although changing the paradigm for focusing on effective pre-kindergarten programming instead of rushing to help students pass the STAAR, principals still need to develop capacity of content knowledge for all grade levels under their watch.

### **Social Justice Intervention Through Critical Instructional Leadership**

*A school principal influence on a teacher’s instructional practice translates to a child’s learning*  
(Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010, p. 1).

Three theories—cognitive constructivism, social constructivism, and socio-cultural theory serve as the contextual framework for early childhood education programs. The research and theory connection are vital to understand. This set of “multilayered and complex” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p. 12) theories helps us to better understand and “clarify the why and the how” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p. 13) of teaching and understanding children’s learning. The specific combination of Piaget’s cognitive constructivism, Vygotskian social constructivism, and Rogof’s socio-cultural theory have long impacted teachers’ roles in early childhood education settings. Leadership must also understand their role as advocate and provider of appropriate learning

environments. Constructivism refers to the learner's activity, but it is also directly related to the teacher's construction of the learning processes in children.

Concerns for successful implementation of early childhood programming within an elementary school campus have been present since kindergarten was brought into the K-12 fold of the public school system (Forester, 1974; Blank, 1985). Some researchers identified the roots for this concern, as the knowledge and attitude of school principals towards the education of young children (Caldwell, 1973; Shane, 1971; Thurman, 1970; Goodlad, 1976). There has existed a clear and well-established path to becoming a school principal through various institutes of higher learning, many in collaboration with the local school districts. It entails a candidate attending a teacher preparation program at a four-year college or university to qualify and become certified to teach in a public school system. After approximately three to four years spent in the classroom, candidates may then enroll in a graduate program for educational leadership and complete the state requirements to become certified as a school principal. Numerous changes have taken place within the last three years which entail a much more robust preparation program. However, not all universities or colleges require the study of human development within this course load. Furthermore, studies have revealed that if a principal is to effectively administer early childhood programming within their school campus, they must have both a working knowledge and experience within the area of early childhood pedagogy (Cross 1981; Robinson, 1982; Justiz, 1985).

Educational leaders in the field of early childhood education have recognized the fact that deficits in a principal's preparation have contributed to this concern (Brown, 1974; Robinson, 1982) at which point recommendations for in-district training have been suggested as the next most effective change agent (Palestini, 1982; Leithwood, 1984; Orlich, 1976). The implications



that a lack of knowledge about early childhood education policy and programming on the part of a school principal, stand in the way of providing adequate resources, teacher support, and professional development for early childhood teachers, all factors contributing to the negative impact of future student success.

Public school leadership needs to reflect on their conceptions of practice in prekindergarten classrooms. The complexity of early childhood education is daunting, especially when a school principal's perception of what it should be, misses the mark when upholding quality standards for what a pre-kindergarten program requires to capture the essence of why early childhood education is crucially important to our young children. Elementary school principals managing prekindergarten programs in elementary school campuses need to understand that child development and early childhood pedagogy differ from public school practices (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012). Moreover, school principals need to understand theories that the field of early childhood education has built pedagogical knowledge upon. Concern for supporting public school principals resonates from leaders in the field of leadership that have developed frameworks for early childhood leadership, specifically the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAEYC, 2014), the Center for Early Education Research, (CEELO, 2013), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020), the Harvard Institute for Child Development, and New America Institute (2015). Presently only nine states require early learning and/or child development coursework under principal preparation policies.

Principals play a very important role in creating positive school climates that show a direct correlation to improved student outcomes (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). International cases studied through the International Successful School Principalship Project, found that effective

leadership practices are greatly affected by political trends, shifts in cultural policy, educational trends, and demographics (Leithwood, Sun, & Pollock, 2017). Three issues were examined across seven countries on how principals addressed culturally responsive practices, organizational leadership, and instructional leadership. In examining culturally responsive practices, researchers studied educational practices that “incorporate the history, values and cultural knowledge of students’ home communities, drawing from Ladson-Billings’ (2005) work on culturally responsive pedagogy” (Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2013, p. 15). Two tenets for implementing culturally responsive pedagogical practices includes 1) to yield student success and 2) promote student cultural competence. This is recognized as leadership for democratic education, rooted in educational leadership, critical theory, and critical multiculturalism (Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2013, p. 15). These constructs focus on using social justice as a way for taking a closer look at educational institutions and their practices (e.g., Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970). Principals in the study shared a need for a “hands-on” approach to leading and the lack of social and professional support. The question for designing, developing, and implementing diversity programs and practices in higher education is currently being researched (Chen, 2017). Challenges for preparing instructional leaders for pedagogical knowledge use in instructional leadership are many and varied (Hayes & Irby, 2020). Leithwood & Jantzi (2005) contend that instructional leaders influence a teacher’s pedagogical content knowledge, instructional practices, and the school’s culture. Moreover, a principal’s instructional leadership stands to influence student learning more than any other rituals a principal regularly encounters (Robinson, & Lloyd, 2008). School principals shared that on-the-job experience has better prepared them to experience and learn about the responsibilities of instructional leadership (Duncan, et al., 2011).

Within the past decade, proponents of early childhood programming have presented evidence for strengthening the pre-kindergarten programming in public school districts by creating a Pre-K to 3 Grade Framework. Research suggests that by including child development science into the study of early years between 3 to 8 years old, quality for improved instructional programming will follow (Halpern, 2013). While some proponents hope this framework would lead to additional funding, advocates hope that by including pre-kindergarten age children in the early childhood education framework will help curtail the gaps found within the first and second grade (Halpern, 2013). Researchers (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Guernsey & Mead, 2010; Kauerz, 2007; Reynolds, Magnuson, & Oh, 2006; Shore, 2009) also agree that by including a Pre-K to 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade framework, educators can identify developmental gains throughout this period, align early childhood school experiences with those of the elementary age group, and focus closer attention on unique developmental patterns in students.

Up until most recently, pre-kindergarten programming has been treated as a separate entity, apart from the K-12 system without vertical curriculum alignment (Halpern, 2013, p. 5). A deep dive into child development would be warranted for school principals when observing pre-kindergarten programming. Many instructional practices utilized in pre-kindergarten programs are developmentally inappropriate for young children (Engel, 2010). Preschool children already feel the pressure for “trying to get it right” (Peters, 2000, p. 12). Some school districts have already required pre-kindergarten schoolteachers to include test preparation as part of classroom instruction (Brown, 2007). To some school principals, the need to observe such activities is crucial for a child’s academic success. Neuman (2006) observed an hour of “chiming, repeating, reciting, or recalling focused on the letter *N*”, she added, “aside from the numbing mindlessness of these exercises and their questionable age appropriateness for these

children, I found this visit most disconcerting because it demonstrated a pattern of literacy learning that has become all too common in the United States” (p. 29). Using those same observations that were distasteful to the observer, Latine children of the Southwest, mostly immigrants who come from a traumatic, disadvantaged environment where even conceptual knowledge is difficult for them to grasp, are being subjected to the same environments.

Exacerbating matters for Latine children, most come to school lagging far behind in language and communication development (Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013); Spies, Lyons, Huerta, Garza, & Reddig, 2017).

In *Tools of the Mind*, Bodrova (2008) commented that “mastery of academic skills is not as good a predictor of later scholastic abilities as the quality of their play” (p. 360). However, school language policy context translates to dual language programming that is successful in the eyes of policymakers and administrators (Ascenzi-Moreno, Hesson, & Menken, 2015; Wiemelt & Welton, 2015; Menken & Solorza, 2014; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011). Effective leadership for early childhood environments, specifically those in dual language instruction offered in public school pre-kindergartens needs to be seriously evaluated. Not only do school principals need to be well-informed on the tenets of bilingual and dual language programming, but to be informed how to avoid dismantling their own progress in dual language programming (Palmer, Hoffman-Longtin, & Walvoord 2015; Johnson & Freeman, 2010). Effective leadership entails a correlation between the school principal, program coordinator, and management team, mostly referred to as the instructional team (Palmer, et al., 2015). Requirements for efficacy by team members includes the ability to advocate for the program, overseeing a model of development, planning, and coordination, foster self-cohesion through professional development, and

appropriately allocate funding (Howard, Lindholm-Leary, Rogers, Olague, Medina, Kennedy, Sugarman, & Christian, 2007, p. 34).

Early childhood teachers have always utilized knowledge of patterns of growth in the early years, specifically between the ages of 0-5 which encompasses the age range for early public-school prekindergarten programming. A teacher's knowledge and intuition about each child's developmental growth includes taking into account each child's cultural background to effectively plan and build nurturing classroom environments. Knowledge of these critical developmental stages have been observed and recorded since the times of Plato. One of the most influential aspects of early childhood pedagogical practices is that of child development theories. These theories as posited by notable researchers such as Pestalozzi, Rousseau, and Froebel, the founder of kindergarten paved the way for further research into a young child's brain development and informed educators on early childhood education models. Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bronfenbrenner are well-known in contemporary program planning and added to the findings of best practices for young children. These pivotal research studies paved the way for the varied early childhood education models that serve early childhood educational programming in both private and public-school institutions today. This therein posits the necessity for school principals as critical instructional leaders to participate in classroom observations and further discussions with early childhood teachers about the complexity of the student population's developmental trajectory. This concept is even more important now in today's societal issues that can serve as the catalyst between child development theory and the socio-political structures that now influence each student's brain development. While recommendations for leading dual language programming is at the root of success, school principals must be attuned to a student's

cultural background and access within the instructional program (Brooks, Normore, & Wilkinson, 2017; Menken & Solorza, 2015; Scanlan & Lopez, 2012).

The National Association of Elementary School Principals was founded in 1921 on the premise of providing a solid foundation of advocacy and support for principals across the nation. The organization recently developed a leadership academy based on evidence-based practices of leadership capacity in the early grades: *Leading Learning Communities: A Principal's Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades (Pre-K-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade)*. Likewise, Texas House Bill 3 embraces early childhood components that delineate the characteristics of a high-quality early childhood education program.

Given the fact that early childhood education in the United States is clearly a staple within the K-12 system, its humanitarian goal for reducing the socioeconomic gap, continues to be researched and supported. However, care and diligence need to be heeded when evaluating the environments that children from poverty attend and a place in which parents hold their hopes in. A more thorough evaluation for the implementation of early childhood programming, specifically public-school pre-kindergartens needs to be researched.

Effective early childhood education programming is defined by the Center on the Developing Child-Harvard University as having “1) Qualified and appropriately compensated personnel, 2) Small group sizes and high adult-child ratios 3) Language-rich environment 4) Developmentally appropriate “curriculum” 5) Safe physical setting, and 6) Warm and responsive adult-child interactions” (2007, p. 17). Similarly, in 2005, The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) published *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*. In this publication, the association describes seven steps that lead to building effective early childhood programming:

1) Embrace early childhood learning, 2) Engage families and communities, 3) Promote appropriate learning environments for young children, 4) Ensure high-quality teaching, 5) Use multiple assessments to further learning, and 6) Advocate for high-quality, universal early childhood education. In addition, NAESP reported that about 60% of public schools now offer prekindergarten as well as some educational programming for 3–4-year-olds. Many of these principals reported as not feeling prepared. (NAESP, 2005). Somehow, there has been a disconnect between what defines early childhood research and what a quality early childhood program looks like. Are elementary school principals adequately interpreting what early childhood programming should be?

### **Developmental Screening as a Critical Tool**

The early childhood document outlining recommendations for use in early childhood programming was released in the 1980's as *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. "Developmentally appropriate practices incorporate the belief that young children need to develop positive dispositions and attitudes for learning as well as concepts and skills necessary for success in school and life" (Phillips & Sturm, 2012, p. 466). These guidelines were developed as a response to the policy document *A Nation at Risk*. At this time the document offered two overarching elements that targeted age appropriateness and individual appropriateness. Cultural consideration for children's background was not considered as important in its impact on learning. A newer edition was made again in the 1990's. This revision "specified early childhood teachers should not only take the developmental norms established by psychology and the specific strengths, interests, and needs of the children being taught into consideration, but should also incorporate the values, beliefs, priorities, and practices shaping the social contexts of their students' lives into their instructional

decisions” (Goldstein, 2008, p. 254). Progress monitoring became an important is an assessment technique that tells teachers how and when to adjust curriculum so that students meet benchmark goals by the end of the year. Under the Texas Education Agency and the Children’s Learning Institute, teachers are required to assess child progress three times yearly.

Much of the research on assessment recommends curriculum-based measurements or CBM. This type of assessment helps the teacher in monitoring a child’s progress based on actual content covered in classroom instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). State funded prekindergarten programs are initiated to offer services to children not having access to necessary resources in the home to aid in brain development. An area of huge importance in early childhood education is the development of language and vocabulary. Progress monitoring assessments should always include monitoring of early literacy skills and in Texas teachers are required to assess the primary domains of Emergent Literacy-Reading, Emergent Literacy-Writing, Language and Communication, Mathematics, and Health and Wellness. Above all, these assessments should align with the kindergarten progress monitoring framework. In addition, Early Screening and Monitoring for Special Needs is of vital importance. Children entering prekindergarten programs may be the recipients of much needed assistance. Most often than not, prekindergarten is a child’s first opportunity for intervention, leading to prevention assistance.

Additional evaluation protocols should be a staple in every prekindergarten program. Many early childhood programs utilize the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) as well as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System. These measures have been put into place to ensure that young children are being exposed to nurturing, high-quality early learning environments. Likewise, Texas HB3 also provides resources to help school principals have the necessary tools for assessing their own public-school prekindergarten environments. They offer



additional support in the Early Childhood Program Self-Assessment tool. Every preschooler deserves to receive quality programming from a qualified early childhood teacher. However, a degree does not ensure a teacher's effectiveness. Along with teacher evaluations and school principal walk-throughs, I witnessed the many intricacies that need to be in place so that all children have equity. This not only includes evaluation of the teacher in the classroom but all the moving pieces that fit into the early childhood program. School principals and leadership teams should have an ongoing progress monitoring tool of the program's components. The Children's Learning Institute provides various resources for administrators in both district and campus positions to utilize for evaluation of their prekindergarten programming (Children Learning Institute). A sample of this evaluation which not only assesses teacher performance within the context of a prekindergarten classroom, also offers resources for evaluation the classroom environment. By making resources easily available to school leaders, I feel that it will make an exponential difference to them and to the students and teachers. As policymakers and educators collectively evaluate programming, we are also paving the way for continued funding. Programs are consistently being scrutinized for cost effectiveness and positive results (Belfield, et al., 2004; Bowne, et al., 2017).

### **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy as a Nurturing Tool**

Culturally relevant pedagogy assumes that "when academic skills and knowledge are situated within the experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly" (Gay, 2002). Understanding how to utilize this type of pedagogy entails understanding a child's cultural background, experiences they bring to school with them, and using those key factors to reproduce an environment that is culturally inclusive, an important framework that promotes a

‘strength-based approach’. Just as Bronfenbrenner proposed the idea that each child needs to be seen as a whole package arriving from their home environment, Yosso (2005) also suggests that by including a child’s Cultural Capital Wealth, the likelihood for adjustment into schooling will grow exponentially. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Theory clearly demonstrates the importance of forming a connectedness with the child’s family. Considered the father of Head Start programming, he was a co-founder of the early childhood educational organization that was part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s *War on Poverty*. Urie Bronfenbrenner focused on altering teaching strategies through a curriculum model that changes along with the child’s growth, allowing each individual to personally connect to their educational experiences. This helped the educational field considerably in that he created a system whereby the social sciences were included in the research of studying the child from a “bioecological” approach to human development.

The bioecological aspect of education helps recreate a child’s surroundings around his home and neighborhood. It recreates role playing in supermarkets, libraries, gas stations, bakeries, etc., all components found in their neighborhood environment, thus, helping to construct their lives as they begin to understand and venture out on their own. You will very often see early childhood teachers carting boxes with various items to and from their classrooms. These items change periodically to fit the ‘reconstruction’ of whatever is the topic in the curriculum at the time. Early childhood teachers work tirelessly reinventing items that they bring from home, buy with their own funds, create after school, all in the quest of providing the most fruitful learning environment. Therefore, curriculum guides always stress a variety of topics or themes across the school year. These topics, when introduced and taught properly, will help a child begin to construct a life outside of their home. Many of these strategies are based on

Project Approach (Katz & Chard, 2000; Helm & Katz, 2016), also known as place-based learning, and problem-based learning. These topics are not just introduced but expand over a period of four weeks or more, enough time for a child to fully conceptualize all the literacy, math, science, and social studies skills that are embedded into the lessons. Just like John Dewey, Paulo Freire also supported the idea of education from a constructivist point of view. Children must be allowed to experience learning with the teacher scaffolding and acting as a facilitator. In Freire's view, the *banking model of education* (1968, 1970) had no place in an educational program, especially one that was meant for children who lacked life experiences due to their poor backgrounds. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire felt strongly about the fact that education needed to include the child's history, culture, and background into the educational program (1968, 1970). In doing so, a child is invited to participate in the content of school which will cause a transformation for the child in feeling that they belong (Freire, 1968, 1970). Freire related his studies to the lives of the people of Brazil, his home country. His conceptualization of the differences in culture, class, and the racial ethnicity of the students in Brazil helped educators in the United States to understand minority students sparked a discussion of culturally relevant pedagogy. This view has helped us understand our own at-risk minority students in validating their own identity. "Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success, (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160).

Likewise, Lev Vygotsky embraced the inclusion of culturally relevant artifacts within learning environments. Through cultural inclusion of tools, whether they be symbolic or signs, are created through cultural activities and many other historical conditions (Lantolf, 2000).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory has led the way for several developmentally appropriate strategies that help develop language growth using syntax, rare words, and learning how to use language as a cultural tool (Petrová, 2013). Teaching children how to use metacognitive strategies while allowing them to connect to their background knowledge will enrich their language use capabilities by simply having the cultural tools and artifacts that they can meaningfully connect to. Culturally relevant pedagogy is just that semiotic component that helps children bridge between home and school, thereby fulfilling the whole child's developmental trajectory. Providing opportunities for educational discourse about the powerful use of educational theorists' work within the field of early childhood education needs to be had amongst school administrators, moreover, revisiting these seminal bodies of work would certainly help to solidify the why and how questions that circulate within early childhood classrooms.

### **Central Office Support**

Policy implementation has fallen squarely on the school principal, not on district central office or central office administrators (Honig & Rainey, 2019). While evidence-based programs must be evaluated by central office personnel, the implementation is left at the hands of the school principal. Central office administrative teams often rely on the school campus practitioner's knowledge base (Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2018). In the case of policy implementation programs (Honig & Rainey, 2019) that place school principals as instructional leaders, school principals rely on their instructional coaches for implementation of research based and evidence-based practices. However, the responsibility for training and mentoring principals has now been shifted from district coaches and mentors to that of area superintendents (Honig, 2012). Some school districts across the country have rewritten responsibilities of their

executive-level staff. They are now expected to work intensively with school principals, individually and in small groups, by offering intensive on the site coaching, mentoring and professional development. The goal is to strengthen their knowledge of curriculum and instruction for their student population (Honig, 2012).

To define what instructional leadership entails, researchers offer various descriptors. Instructional leadership involves working with teachers consistently and intensively resulting in the ability for teachers to reflect on their teaching effectiveness (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Heck, 1992; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Evidence for improvement of teaching quality has been attributed to inquiry-based approaches, modeling practice, and praise and feedback (Blasé & Blasé, 1999). Principals have also engaged the assistance of outside coaches to create grade level teams of teachers that focus on specific grade level needs (Graczewski, Knudson, & Holzman, 2009; Mangin, 2007; Portin, Knapp, Dareff, Feldman, Samuelson, & Yeh 2009; Supovitz, 2009). Continuing sustained, job-embedded training, has had a profound effect on time spent on instructional leadership responsibilities such as observing instruction and engaging with teachers outside of the classroom (Augustine, Gonzalez, Ikemoto, & Russell, 2009). This type of support for principals has informed us that principals will not understand these practices in a traditional pre-service or workshop format, instead approaching this in a format that helps principals integrate their ongoing work through sustained support on campus (Galluci, 2007).

Other school districts have continued to use principal supervisors to focus on teaching and learning improvement (Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, Hall, & Simon, 2013; Goldring, Grissom, Rubin, Rogers, Neel, & Clark, 2018; Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). This is a shift from the traditional responsibility of evaluating principals'

performance, monitoring school's compliance, and resolving operational issues (Honig & Rainey, 2019). Principal supervisors are now focused on the teaching and learning excellence for student achievement, especially for those students of color, English Language Learners (ELLs), those living in low-income households, and those who have been historically marginalized (Honig & Rainey, 2019).

Using this strategy for supporting principals' knowledge of curriculum and instruction does have an additional requirement. Principal supervisors need to be mentored and supported by their Supervisors of Principal Supervisors (SPSs) who are also taking a teaching and learning approach. Principal Supervisors must also take the responsibility for continuous learning in the pedagogical practices that instructional leaders need most help with (Honig & Rainey, 2019). Instructional leadership support of school principals is described as mentoring and leading in various on the job responsibilities such as arranging professional development for teachers (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012); managing the school's curriculum and program (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012) developing teacher leaders (Carraway & Young, 2015; Klar, 2012; Nuemerski, 2013) and using data to rule out any biases against students of color (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa & Gooden, 2016; Paris, 2012). Accountability measures as interpreted by many school principals continue to ignore developmentally appropriate practices and assessment strategies appropriate for children of preschool age (Hatch & Grieshaber, 2002). The application of data-driven instruction and curriculum and instructional practices for public school pre-kindergartens is treated as a separate component, outside of the K-12 system. In Texas, the Children's Learning Institute provides an abundance of resources for both central office staff and the school principals they supervise to utilize during their observations and planning meetings.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature on the various obstacles that Latine children face before and upon entering public school prekindergarten. Due to both socio and geopolitical issues, many disadvantaged Latine children have been caught in the crosshairs of our society. The literature provides us a small view with larger ramifications for those children facing pre-kindergarten age at 4 to 5 years old. Their intersectionality of being from a low SES background, Latine, Spanish speaker, and too young to voice an opinion has left them navigating a different world upon entering school. The obstacles that poverty, homelessness, immigration, violence, and family separation cause may be insurmountable for some. The only place of refuge may be their public-school classroom. I hope this chapter serves to give educators, politicians, advocates, a glimpse into what Latine preschool children face. This is what they are viewing through their own lens.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **METHODOLOGY**

Autoethnography can be a reflexive process of telling, constructing, analyzing, and rigorously studying one's own stories for what they offer others (Fine, 1994). It also serves well for checking inequities and oppression in our classrooms (Denzin, 2003), the central focus of this study. In their 2001 research study, Solórzano & Yosso (2011) describe it as "a method of telling the story of those experiences that are not often told (i.e., those from the margins of society) and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power, and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse the majoritarian story" (p. 475). The autoethnographic experience should be shared by both reader and author (Patten, 2004), which at times can be highly personal to the researcher. However, through shared descriptions of events, readers can gain a better understanding of the culture being studied (Sparkes, 2000). My personal experiences will help create a deeper meaning and understanding of the social and cultural contexts of the phenomenon experienced in public school-pre-kindergarten classrooms serving a Latine preschool age population. Richardson (1994) suggests that "writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it" (p. 517). He adds "writing as a way of knowing" (Richardson, 1994, p. 517).

Autoethnography gives the readers an opportunity to learn, analyze, and critique the experiences shared about a specific culture. Opportunities for engaging in the processes described within the study, offer readers a way of participating emotionally, morally, aesthetically, and intellectually through the journey described (Patten, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).



## **Self as a Researcher and Personal Perspective**

I have always held a very strong conviction that children are very capable of creating their own learning trajectory that motivates, regulates, and interests them. To do so, our early childhood education force must be treated as part of the Pre-K to 12 system within our public schools. Offering appropriate resources, training, support, and most of all, understanding is of key importance for those teachers working on the margins of the educational system. Teachers of very young children must be well trained, able to observe of children through a social justice lens and create *culturally sustaining* learning environments that embrace each child's background knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

As a Kindergarten teacher in a bilingual classroom for seven years, followed by twelve years teaching four -year-olds at a time when most educators were not able to understand how to develop effective classroom pedagogy for this age group. I have always pursued a deeper understanding of brain development. Dewey (1906) explored and argued that a young child's world was very distinct from that of an adult. As a result, he implored the public, but mostly educators, to take into consideration a young child's brain development when prescribing a standard based curriculum that did not serve to build on to a child's existing knowledge of the world. Likewise, Vygotsky's (1934) theory on social constructivism complements Dewey's findings that children learn best within a social environment and should be allowed to experience learning with other.

My philosophy is that we as educators are the adults who must advocate for ways in which our most marginalized children's voices will be heard. Throughout my forty plus year tenure as an early childhood educator, I have continuously explored a variety of avenues concerning the pedagogical practices utilized by elementary school teachers. I believe that

teachers daily conduct action-research within their own classrooms as they search for advantageous and challenging ways to engage students. Children who are not engaged will not be motivated to learn.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977) informs us on how a child's socioemotional state must not be detached from the home when entering the realm of the schooling community. His theory focused on informing educators about the small nucleus of important figures within a child's world, bringing the importance of creating a nurturing educational environment away from home.

Gradually over time and as I learned and applied more of the theorists' work, I began to view the practice of teaching and learning through a social justice lens. Through the relationships I developed with other educators in the profession, I came to understand that where there is learning, change follows. Here I refer to the fact that as an educator, I believe that my own philosophy continuously changed over time spent as teacher and learner. I always refer to the adage that in education you never 'get there' in terms of reaching the pinnacle of your teaching practice. There is always more to learn, more to reflect upon, and more to evolve into. Though teaching and learning is intended to produce constant evolution of oneself, I found that educators sometimes choose to remain permanent and steadfast in their thoughts and ideas related to teaching practices. Education is about communication and feedback, adapting to new and more complex systems, and evolving with others. In their studies of science, Stengers & Prigogine, (1985) alluded to the fact that when change is not present, we die.

### **Research Design**

This study will be framed with Latin Critical Theory using Counter-Story as a technique for telling the stories that are usually remain untold (Delgado, 1989). Counter-Story compliments

LatCrit and has been used in both Critical Race Theory and LatCrit studies (Solórzano, Delgado, & Bernal, 2001). Counter-Stories can build empathy for those actors whose marginalized situation needs to be told (Yosso, Villalpando, Bernal, & Solórzano, 2001).

### **Latin Critical Theory**

Latin Critical Theory (LatCrit) evolved from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and examines “racialized layers of subordination based on immigrant status, sexuality, phenotype, accent, and surname” (Yosso, 2005, p. 7). LatCrit theorists contend that racism is about power, and that power creates unequitable spaces of learning for Emergent Bilingual Language Learners (EBLLs), as well as Dual Language Learners (DLLs).

LatCrit is used in this autoethnography to uncover inequalities and injustices that hurt Latine students within the public-school pre-kindergarten programs. Most policymakers and school district administrators do not experience the racism as a construct of power. Many preschoolers attending Title I programming to help overcome student achievement gaps, find themselves attending inferior schools.

Many educators are now using storytelling in LatCrit to shed light on the experiences Latine students face in a school culture that often oppresses them (Ladson-Billings, 1998). These actions by educators themselves may sometimes be because of the organizational socialization process found within some school environments. LatCrit encapsulates the identity of all Latine populations, in this case, those preschoolers attending public pre-kindergarten. The counter narratives deriving from this lens will help educators to better understand the inequalities of educational systems within the context of their own classrooms, curriculums, and behaviors. LatCrit itself has drawn more support through documentation of events using narrative storytelling, in this case, counter narrative (Hernandez, 2013).

## **Counter-Story or Critical Counter-Narrative**

Counterstory is the process of telling a story that would otherwise not be told about those in power (Delgado, 1989). Counterstories have been used in both LatCrit and Critical Race Theory (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). It has been used in various high-profile events such as the 1968 East Los Angeles school walkouts and the 1993 UCLA student strike (Hernandez, 2013) by interviewing and noting the counterstories that Latine students had about the experiences, rather than what was reported by authorities. These types of narratives have helped to change educational policy, theory, and practice by changing current belief systems (Delgado, 1989). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) contend that counterstories can be used as a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” that can “shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (p. 27). Moreover, by “combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical counter-narrative serves as a support for curriculum innovation. Oftentimes, educators approach curriculum implementation with the idea that everything will go as planned. We begin the process with preconceived ideas of how things will go and how children will respond (Meier & Sisk-Hilton 2017, p. 83). Over time, the stories of experience we analyze most often result in counter-stories.

## **Guiding Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study include:

1. What challenges did I face as an early childhood educator?
  - a. Pre-k teacher

- b. Instructional leader
2. How did I respond to those challenges and what determined my actions?
    - a. Pre-k teacher
    - b. Instructional leader
  3. What type of support did I see that school principals and instructional leaders need to know to provide adequate assistance to early childhood teachers?
  4. How do we need to reframe the pre-kindergarten framework for Latine preschoolers?

### **Triangulation**

Autoethnography is an important way for the researcher to share authentic experiences within the field of study, however, Allen-Collinson (2013) contends that some in the field of academia view it with suspicion and skepticism. Although autoethnography has contributed much within the field of research, triangulation offers an added process of collecting information that aids the researcher shift from the personal view to that of a sociological and socio-cultural lens (Allen-Collinson, 2013).

Denzin (2017) refers to four basic types of triangulation. *Data Triangulation* involves space, time, and persons (Denzin, 2017). *Investigator Triangulation* entails multiple researchers in an investigation. *Theory Triangulation* uses more than one theoretical scheme in the interpretation of the phenomenon (Denzin, 2017). Finally, *Method Triangulation* involves using more than one method to gather data, such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and documents. For this study, I will use *Method Triangulation* which involves multiple artifacts, such as journals, photographs, curriculum, emails, presentations, as well as other documents collected over the course of my career. Below is a detailed discussion of the artifacts I intend to use in this study.

## Data Collection

The collected data will be reviewed and reflected over a span of 40 + years in early childhood education. Included in the data collection as well, are journals, memos, lesson plans, progress reports, professional development agendas, student work, power point presentations that I presented at local district and state conferences, and photos of public-school pre-kindergarten classrooms without children present, which were collected over a period of 40 + years within pre-kindergarten level private and public-school classrooms. These artifacts serve to enrich the reflexive narrative of observed details, thoughts, and ideas of everyday pre-kindergarten programming that help relive first-hand accounts of experiences in an early childhood education setting. The artifacts and their purpose and contribution to this study are as follows:

- Self-reflexive journals allow me to make “experiences, opinion, thoughts, and feelings visible and an acknowledged part of the research design, data generation, analysis, and interpretation process” (Davies & Gannon, 2013; Ortlipp, 2008, p. 703). I continuously reflected on the experiences I had daily as a classroom teacher preparing lessons and methods for meeting student needs. I often recorded the learning challenges and resources that needed to be utilized for these lessons, as well as recorded resources that the school had access to and those the schools did not have in their inventory. Daily and special events were chronicled, showing the extensive planning, teacher collaboration, and community involvement entailed for such events.
- Professional Development Journals were an integral part of my daily schedule when I participated as an early childhood staff developer across school districts. These journals will reflect the content that was presented to teachers from various districts and can be very telling of the pedagogical practices embraced by different school districts. In

addition, various logs, calendars, and professional development agendas will augment the content presented for specific early childhood teachers that spoke to the requests made by their school principals. Moreover, documentation of conversations held with pre-kindergarten teachers receiving individualized coaching and mentoring will be of great value for thematization of data.

- Official documents coming from the administrator's office for this study include memos, staff bulletins, newsletters, meeting agendas and minutes, and other official documents that will serve to complete the picture of observations attained by the teacher-practitioner and researcher. They help to enrich the analysis of data that may help to augment theories and themes which may emerge during the study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

### **Data Analysis - Coding the Data Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

Reflexive thematic analysis is an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in each data set (Braun & Clark, 2012, 2015). "The coding process of thematic analysis for information in qualitative research is likened to sorting buttons, in that you select ways in which to identify the buttons and place them into categories" (Bryne, 2001, p. 703). Moreover, Taylor & Usher (2001) argue that "themes do not just lie about waiting to be discovered, they do not simply emerge, but must be actively sought out" (p. 310).

Applying thematic analysis as a method for coding is an accessible and flexible means for recording reflective inquiry coming from a teacher-researcher perspective. It offers a more effective vehicle for analyzing the natural classroom phenomenon by those closest to the setting

and its actors, therefore, providing sensitive and rich descriptions of the educational phenomenon” (Xu & Zammit, 2020, p. 2).

According to Saldaña & Omasta (2016), interviews, documents, and observations must be available to read, edited for accuracy, and ready to be commented on before they are coded and analyzed. The coding and thematization process of data collected will utilize both an inductive and deductive method, a hybrid process used in the field of education (Xu & Zammit, 2020, p. 2). Codes may come from the data itself (*inductive coding*) as well as specific theoretical themes (*deductive coding*) (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). In this case, finding repeated meanings across data sets will be instrumental (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Themes that are of use for this study will consist of any specific pattern that reveals crucial information about the data, in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

- What challenges did I face as an early childhood educator?
- How did I respond to those challenges and what determined my actions?
- What type of support did I see that school principals and instructional leaders need to know to provide adequate assistance to early childhood teachers?

Evolving themes that are crucial to the study will consist of shared topics regarding the area of focus. Obstacles impeding the implementation of culturally sustaining and developmentally appropriate pedagogical practices in public-school prekindergarten classrooms may reveal an interplay between themes, instead of simply summarizing the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this case, inductive coding will be utilized from Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six-step approach will be used to guide interpretation and analysis of the data:

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data – Familiarizing yourself with the data entails the reading and rereading of the dataset to become entirely familiar with it. This is helpful in



identifying the appropriate information relevant to each question. Manual transcription of the data is most useful for this first step. This phase is very time consuming and requires a high degree of patience and time but will help capture the depth and breadth of the data. Including thoughts and feelings about the data and the analytical process is beneficial to the transparency of the process. Some of these notes will be beneficial later in the process of interpreting the finalized thematic framework.

2. Generating initial codes - Using the 'comments' function on Microsoft Word (2016), will offer the opportunity for coding to be noted in the side margin. Any item from the data that is useful in addressing the research question(s) should be coded. As the researcher repeatedly codes, familiarization of the interpreting themes will emerge and at this point it is easy to determine which data may be discarded. The researcher should track the evolution of codes to help with transparency, but also to be alerted to other coding that may not have been helpful. The process of generating codes is non-prescriptive regarding how the data is segmented and itemized for coding. Both semantic codes which uncover meanings on the surface, and latent codes which lead to underlying ideas, patterns, and assumptions, will be used to interpret the data.
3. Searching for themes - After all relevant data has been coded, the interpretation of individual data items shifts to the interpretation of meaning and meaningfulness across the dataset. Coded data is then reviewed and analyzed to begin forming themes and sub-themes. At this point it may be necessary to collapse multiple codes that share a similar underlying concept or feature, to one single code. The researcher must be meticulous about searching for those themes that are relevant in answering the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The number of codes has an impact on the evolving theme(s)

that help to make a final analysis of the data. Too many themes may be hard to contain into a central theme and too few will also result in failing to explore the depth and breadth of the research.

4. Reviewing themes – The researcher must then review all themes in relation to the coded data items and the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2020). Some themes may not be useful to meaningful interpretation and to the research questions. Braun & Clarke (2012, p. 65) propose a series of guiding questions for reviewing potential themes, which follow:

- a. Is this a theme (it could be just a code)?
- b. If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the data set and my research question)?
- c. What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?
- d. Is there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thin or thick)?
- e. Are the data too diverse and wide ranging (does the theme lack coherence)?

At this level of analysis, there are two levels of review. The first level is a review of the relationships among the data items and codes that inform each theme and sub-theme. The second level entails that the candidate themes be reviewed in relation to the data set.

5. Defining and naming theme(s) – At this stage, the researcher must then present a detailed analysis of the thematic framework. Each individual theme that has emerged, and that is related to the research question(s), will be shared through their connection and relationship with the dataset and the research question(s). Each theme should provide a coherent and consistent account of the data that cannot be represented by other

themes (Patton, 1990). A deep analysis of all underlying data is required for defining themes. The researcher should identify which data items can be used when writing the analysis. It is highly recommended that multiple selections of information be included for each theme. The chosen passages will then offer a deeper interpretation and meaning across all data items when writing the analysis. Each extract that is chosen should be interpreted in relation to its theme, as well as the context of the research question(s). This helps the researcher to write an analytic narrative about why this extract is important and interesting to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

6. Producing the report – The final phase is occurring throughout the whole six-step process. The writing of the final report is interwoven throughout the entire process of the analysis because, as codes and themes emerge, they also change over time, therefore, the writing of these changes is reflected in the notes kept throughout the analysis (Braun & Clark, 2012). Care should be taken to establish the order in which the themes are reported. It is important that the themes connect in a logical and meaningful way. Relevant themes should build upon previously reported themes, while at the same time, the writer should be able to communicate how each individual theme could stand on its own validity, also keeping in mind if the information revealed in the data was labeled as latent or semantic codes. Each of these types of codes have significant information to add to the richness of the data, stemming from hermeneutic based personal feelings shared by educators as opposed to policy directives from school administrators. Finally, Braun & Clarke recommend synthesizing and contextualizing data as and when they are reported in the ‘results’ section (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry, Hayfield, Braun, & Clarke, 2017).

Kelly (2017, p. 2), uses the terms “dominant,” “marginalized,” or “minoritized” to refer to three terms that describe the ever-changing demographics in the United States. It also serves to “create empirical basis for socially constructed distinctions between racial groups” (Darder & Torres, 2003). The “dominant” term refers to the historical power structure found in the United States, which represents White, Protestant males. “Marginalized” or “minoritized” refer to people of color with little or no access to power (Kelly, 2017).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This autoethnography study will not involve any human subjects in ways outside of normal work routines; therefore, it will not require IRB Approval. My journals will be included with notes from conversations and formal and informal discussions with others, as well as my reflections and reactions to those encounters. I do not plan to cite names or details about any of the individuals involved to protect them, the organizations, and myself. As appropriate, as in the case of close colleagues, I will refer to them in general terms, such as close friends or colleagues, to protect their identities further, so that one could not identify them by their first names. I intend this approach to minimize my readers’ speculations about whom I am writing.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the selected mode for collection and coding of data helped reveal themes and theories that emanate from the daily practices encountered by both teachers and students in early childhood education arenas. Analyzing data collected over decades allows the reader and the writer to collectively embark on a journey of historical significance within the evolution of early childhood education. The autoethnographic design using counter-story is impactful for bringing stories that are normally untold but are brought to light for inclusion of the many and varied subtleties that impact a more thorough picture of LatCrit education for preschoolers.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The experiences that I share in this study are those that placed me on both sides of a fence that is visible and tangible to many public-school prekindergarten teachers. I was extremely fortunate to have worked in public schools that had strong school leadership within their campuses as well as in school campuses that lacked knowledgeable leadership for the intended target of helping prekindergarten children attain academic success.

The field of early childhood education is very well versed and informed on the necessity for preparing all children to enter Kindergarten ready to learn. What does this mean? It means that those who are selected to work with young prekindergarten level students, need to understand how early childhood education varies from elementary school education in various ways. First, curriculum has to be carefully selected due to peak plasticity in brain development which occurs between ages 0-6; furthermore, early childhood education governance is different, its funding streams vary, and maneuvering policy for these programs requires a different set of skills. It is no wonder that many school principals leave the decisions to the teachers themselves, or no decisions are made at all. The result that I most often observed was that most prekindergarten programs continued to remain isolated within their elementary school campuses.

As a prekindergarten teacher, I and my colleagues often encountered domestic issues that young children get caught up in, such as domestic abuse, toxic home environments, and sometimes homelessness, all the while making sure that the classroom environment served as their safety net. It is at this nexus that teachers encounter difficulty in the decisions that need to be made for curriculum delivery, classroom environments, choice manipulatives and resources

that are created for this fragile brain. The challenge lies in two facts 1) can I do or use what I know is appropriate pedagogy for young children? or 2) will my principal approve of this if I do not ask for his/her view of early childhood programming? These challenging situations are faced daily by the majority of early childhood teachers who most often than not lack the voice for advocacy. My story tells of the experiences I encountered each time new policy, initiatives, or state and federal funding required the knowledgeable perspective of the classroom teacher, but was firmly placed on the lap of the school principal. As an early childhood mentor, helping teachers navigate through these situations varied from one school campus to another, and more so, from one school district to another. I often wondered why one set of directives could be so diverse.

I firmly believe that as early childhood education continues to move further and further into an educational necessity in preparing children to become successful participants, proper lines of communication for implementation need to be addressed. In this personal narrative I reflect on the various instances where I was placed at a crossroads of doing what I was asked to do even though it was not appropriate pedagogy, or find a way to utilize my knowledge base to better the lives of young children.

### **Themes**

As I reflected on the findings for this chapter, I became fully aware of the varying ideas, thoughts, decisions, and circumstances I had encountered throughout my career. I noticed how these ideas became anchors for further action that warranted different avenues to reach an appropriate or successful conclusion. I color coded them and created a more intricate system of assigning categories from which emerged two main themes, that of 1) effective leadership, and 2) knowledge of early brain development. I found that subcategories under leadership included a)

early childhood education policy adherence, b) proper implementation and access to Professional Learning Communities, c) inclusive family engagement support systems, and d) knowledgeable implementation of curriculum practices for early childhood programs Likewise, the Knowledge of Early Brain Development category revealed additional subcategories such as: a) developmentally appropriate practices, b) culturally relevant pedagogy, c) inclusion, d) mental trauma stemming from poverty, or toxic stress, or both, e) curriculum development and usage, and f) teacher autonomy.

The personal experiences that I share reflect my evolution as a critical early childhood advocate as I myself learned to maneuver through challenges stemming from my own activist autonomy. Most of these answers stemmed from my observation of leadership and teacher response to federal policy change, early childhood initiatives, or pivotal literacy research findings. After deep reflection of the experiences I shared within this autoethnography, I came to the realization that the themes describing my evolution fell within the realm of a LatCrit educator. I have become a critical pedagogist, informed instructional leader, and advocate of marginalized children. The characteristics I have come to observe in myself stem from a critical lens where I am able to identify institutional inadequacies.

Although a large number of early educators strive daily to deliver state of the art learning practices and create nurturing environments for children, I still need to continue to advocate for all marginalized children who may not have the benefit of attending school under the guidance of school leadership knowledgeable about early educational pedagogy, or a well-prepared prekindergarten teacher. I came to the realization that no amount of financial assistance can help close the gap of the deficits we encounter with incoming preschoolers enrolling into public school prekindergarten programming if we are not knowledgeable about each student's needs. In

advocating for marginalized preschoolers, I realized that knowledgeable school principals were able to identify and address deficit assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes of others. I also understand that only through early childhood pedagogical knowledge for culturally diverse preschoolers can I and my colleagues learn to advocate for equitable practices. We must be knowledgeable about evidence-based practices that inform how young children attain proficiency in both their native language and English as a second language. Understanding how to navigate school district requirements for professional development is key in leading such awareness for all.

While I follow the yearly trajectory of pivotal moments I encountered, some of the experiences that I share may illuminate a prior event that affected additional decisions about praxis. As a critical observer of educator actions, I always reflected on previous opportunities for improving quality programming, oftentimes, realizing that some of these actions retreated to previous behaviors that we had set out to eradicate. In this case, I begin my journey with the 1984 House Bill 72 which initiated a momentous leap into the actualization of early childhood education for marginalized and disadvantaged students. In reflecting on previous policy initiatives I can offer my interpretation of events under the guise of a social justice leader, with the intent of enlightening public-school principals leading public school prekindergarten programming.

### **The Beginnings of a New Era for Early Childhood Education**

During the Spring of 1985, I was informed of the possibility that school districts in the El Paso area would offer public pre-kindergarten classes during the following school year. The 68<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature had just released their introductory bill for public school pre-kindergarten. I was not only excited about this possibility, but I also wondered how teachers would be formally trained in working with 4-year-olds! In hindsight, now I understand why public-school districts



were asked to comply with directives as best as they could by beginning pre-kindergarten classes in the Fall of 1985.

At the time, I did not quite understand why public-school prekindergarten was opening only for *eligible students* which was made up of children from low-income households or children whose first language was not English. As early childhood teachers working in property-poor school districts, collectively we were not well versed in much educational research for early childhood programming at the time. As a result, districts developed their own pedagogical practices, curriculum content, resource allotment, and next to no professional development for teachers working in low-income marginalized schools (Haas, 1987). School districts were required to provide programming in their community if they were able to identify 15 or more eligible 4-year-olds. I recall assisting with the registration process and some of the risk factors that governed eligibility at the time. Requirements specified qualifying for a free or reduced-price lunch (185 percent of the federal poverty level), or an inability to speak or comprehend the English language (National Institute for Early Education Research, NIEER, 2013). The ANAR (A Nation at Risk) report had served to incite a marginalized view of those less fortunate, leading to a deficit view of low-income, mostly Spanish speaking preschoolers and we were feeling the sting. Through this lens, the *proof of intrinsic deficit* (Harry & Klinger, 2006) emerged for all public-school pre-kindergarten programming across the state of Texas. I was ready for the challenge and excited to be a part of history in helping begin a new era that required much from all of us working in the program. I felt that I already had an advantage in attempting this because I had worked with 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds in a childcare center, simply referred to as ‘day care’ at the time.

As I encountered the first year of schooling for prekindergartners, I very quickly realized that we were literally on our own. Central office personnel had no experience working with four-year-olds and neither did any of the faculty. I did, however, encounter a magnificent school principal. She never pretended to know everything but allowed the staff to partake in the learning and curriculum development process. Although our experiences with our school principal were not always pleasant and positive, we understood that she was there in the best interest of the prekindergarten students we were charged with educating. I began to prepare myself both cognitively and mentally for the challenges ahead.

The next ten years working in a prekindergarten environment were that of excitement, learning, forging support systems, researching, discussing, planning, and gradually experiencing extreme success in the education of four-year-olds. We were very fortunate to have had a leader that allowed us to attend many conferences that focused on early childhood education. We hosted many nationally known educators who brought awareness to our teachers and administrative staff about the *Project Approach*, balanced literacy for prekindergarten children, a famous children's music composer, even the state governor visited our campus. Along with that privilege came the responsibility of training the teachers who did not attend. This symbiotic process continued over the years, from which we were able to plan out action research collaboratively to put many teaching strategies to the test. In this way, we kept adding to our tool belt of effective strategies for both Spanish and English speaking four-year-olds.

Prekindergarten teachers across the state of Texas eventually received an additional tool from the state in the form of 'Essential Elements' for Prekindergarten Curriculum. This was the first time that the state had provided early childhood public school teachers with a developmentally appropriate curriculum guide from which to work with. During the first years of

initiating the program, our school principal always asked for opinions, advice, or suggestions on what types of resources we needed for creating developmentally appropriate classrooms that would help teachers reach goals in the Essential Elements guidelines. We all worked through much trial and error, oftentimes missing the mark on some of the resources we had ordered. None of the teachers had ever worked in the capacity of building a prekindergarten curriculum and learning environment. Parents were extremely involved especially given the fact that this was the first time that children so young were attending a public-school program. I recall having one of the mothers camped out by the classroom window just in case her child needed her.

It seemed that everyone involved in early childhood education had been caught unprepared for the needs that we encountered along the way. As time went on, everyone continued to contribute to those gaps we were encountering. A few publishing companies began to deliver their teaching resources and we started filling up the classroom with literacy tools that we did not have. However, this did cause some disagreements amongst the staff from the Central Office charged with overseeing early childhood programming. It was decided that we would not be using any manipulatives or resources that contained the alphabet. Teachers were appalled at this decision; however, we were careful not to upset anyone, so we complied as told.

During the 1980's, teachers were not as inclined to voice their opinions because we were expected to follow directives. We did not alter any decisions coming from Central Office staff. The instructional framework was being fashioned by leaders not versed in developmentally appropriate practices since college principal preparation programs were not required to offer child development courses specific only to ages 0-5. Aside from these setbacks, teachers collaborated in creating a developmentally appropriate schedule for four-year-olds, developed a well-rounded curriculum, promoted family events, and developed observation tools to gauge

progress. The only resource we had was that all of us had previously taught kindergarten. Although we understood the development of the five to six-year-old brain and not the four-year-old brain, we were able to modify accordingly. We mostly encountered a hesitancy for teacher autonomy, intuitiveness, and ability coming from Central Office leadership. These obstacles emanated from Central Office staff but not from our school principals. We were able to make much progress in fashioning a well-researched curriculum by using action research methods. As a knowledgeable teacher, I understood and learned much more from observing my students than from the directives we were given to follow and to see if any of those would work. Virtually very few efforts would have succeeded if we had not had the type of school leadership we did. Both principal and assistant principals worked alongside us but yielded to our advice on developmentally appropriate practices.

As with any endeavor, a group needs to have a leader that is not fearful of attempting new strategies to reach said goals. Although the faculty had never taught prekindergarten aged children, they had come with experience teaching kindergarten in a public-school setting. We spent hours together figuring out how to appropriately build cognitive skills through active engagement while Central Office staff expected to see these young children sitting at a table for the length of the school day. However, we teachers had made a collaborative effort of adopting various theories that helped move the program forward for disadvantaged second language learners. Following Vygotsky's theory of sociocultural development and Dewey's constructivist approach, we created a project-based environment that was supported through the curriculum we built together while simultaneously teaching it. We created language rich environments without worrying that the children would be too noisy in the classroom. Our curriculum was a multicultural tapestry of the various ethnicities represented at our school. We invited parents as

guests to teach us about their culture. We celebrated special holidays with them while they demonstrated cooking lessons in front of the children. We did not have food allergies on the radar back then, and all types of foods were allowed in public school classrooms. By reaching out to the parent community we were recreating Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory that has proven very beneficial in nurturing children that are just being introduced to their outside community, such as school.

The defining factor in achieving success for the students lay in the response to initiatives and action research from the school principal. As our prekindergarten school began to yield success, those same students went on to attend area elementary schools which then followed our lead in creating nurturing environments. One elementary school campus recreated a small community within the school, where children visited daily to learn about mathematics, language and literacy, science, social studies, and social justice through the 'school court system'. We were slowly aligning between early childhood education, elementary schools, middle schools, and high school as our students went through the Pre-K-12 public school system. Our school feeder pattern reflected the exemplary school leadership that is written about in research journals.

### **Growing as an Informed and Proactive Early Childhood Educator**

I continuously researched through various publications for any form of information that could help advance instruction for our own students. Before 1998, the National Association for the Education of young Children (NAEYC) broke from their traditional view of seeing preschoolers as not developmentally ready for more rigorous literacy activities. As prekindergarten teachers in our school, we had been advised not to display the alphabet in our classrooms because they feared that our children were not ready for any type of symbol-sound association. Teachers were charged with overseeing instructional practices and simply following

guidelines from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), which reflected a difference of opinion between Central Office personnel and TEA. By 1998, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in conjunction with the International Literacy Association (formerly International Reading Association), laid out a ten-point document stipulating best practices in literacy that needed to be adhered to in all early childhood environments. The document was titled *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, A Joint Position Statement of the International Reading Association, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1999)*. I was elated but I had not counted on my own peers as naysayers. At this point in time, I had assumed an active role in ordering professional books as well as authentic children's literature. Teachers would visit my classroom after school to have discussions about approaching the use of big books and using children's literature to guide concept development. I had already begun to introduce a variety of language and literacy practices because I felt that we were not keeping up with the latest research. I then had to provide in-depth training to all faculty on the needs of creating a just and equitable early learning environment for all. I still had not won over all faculty, but I needed to remain strong and firm in my convictions to fight for these children's rights.

I always saw these situations as events that were much bigger than myself. I did not want to let things just go by as they had been or engage in a *laissez faire* type of environment. I began to have two opposing camps: those who believed in change and research, and those who remained steadfast for the way things had always been done. I vividly remember the day that I witnessed the principal's office become a revolving door of opposers to this initiative. I steadfastly stood in the hallway, greeting each one of those teachers who tried to pretend that they had other business with the school principal. In the end, I did meet with my school principal

and together we began to draft an in-depth professional development plan that would fill up the remainder of the school year. I must say, I did have many, many, long days strategizing and planning professional development for teachers, whether individually in classrooms, small groups in the literacy center, or whole school on professional development days. I worked extremely long and intense hours. My school principal decided that I needed to also address prekindergarten teachers from other school campuses. I could see that the need was great, specifically because the district's school population had a high percentage of children living in low-income households. Studies had already revealed that most of these children did not have any opportunity for having books in the home. The next best place, and maybe the only place to introduce them to literacy was in school.

I had already been very involved in delivering professional development to pre-kindergarten teachers within the district, but not on a consistent basis. These may have occurred once a year when their principals were willing to allow them to attend our trainings, but not happy to be paying for a classroom substitute. However, my school principal was a firm believer that all teachers needed to have the same professional development opportunities as the teachers that were under her watch. Again, I emphasized to teachers the need for following early reading research that would help us deliver the best instruction to our preschoolers, helping them to be ready to learn to read. We not only were concerned for all prekindergarten children enrolled, but specifically focused on bilingual reading strategies as opposed to English only reading strategies. I had already explored several pivotal literacy research studies targeting young four-year-old children, which served as the cornerstone of our work. Educating preschoolers was still proving to be an action research project across the United States. There were many interesting theories to

try as well as various strategies that worked well for one language group over another, and vice versa.

The Commissioner of Education convened a working group with educators from across the state of Texas to draft guidelines for a prekindergarten curriculum and I had been invited to join them. It was during this weeklong working session that I was able to voice my experiences in working with Spanish preschoolers who hailed from low-income socioeconomic status. Interestingly, I did have people on board that listened to my suggestions spanning from experiences in working with large numbers of prekindergarten students. There were some aspects of the language and literacy domain that were a little vague for those of us who were working with Spanish speaking children. After much discussion, research in the acquisition of Spanish literacy was revisited and notable researchers in the field were charged with redesigning this domain for Spanish speakers. These set of guidelines addressed nine content areas. It was at this time that I realized that we needed to become a voice for the children who were counting on their teachers to use the most recent pieces of research for classroom application. This event served as an important catalyst in the way that early childhood teachers begin to see themselves within the K-12 framework. Never had we been asked for our opinions or points of view on the best trajectory to use when working with bilingual preschoolers. It also added to the climate that begin to expand opportunities for the early childhood profession. As a result of this work, Texas released the 1999 Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines.

In 2001, the U. S. Department of Education released their publication of evidence-based practices for the implementation of effective early childhood programming. It delineated research for best practices in early literacy. I was invited to join a small group of representatives from each state. Recommendations for vertically aligning Pre-k to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade curriculum were the



focus of the summit (The White House, July 26-27, 2001). Through this summit, I felt that equity for preschoolers was finally getting recognized and attended to, giving everyone equal footing for providing adequate resources for prekindergarten aged children. Not only were our voices for advocacy being heard, but the initiatives were also inclusive of all the children from diverse ethnic backgrounds. I returned to my school campus and district, excited to deliver the new pathways that were being created.

Through all of these major events for advancing the science of child development, teachers within their own school campuses felt the need to receive crucial support from their school principals. I worked closely with my own school principals to open the possibility for inviting principals from other campuses who also had the added responsibility of overseeing prekindergarten programming. It was slow progress. We had begun with a small number of school principals and by the second year implementing prekindergarten curriculum guidelines, we had more principals reaching out to join our collaborative groups. I was convinced that all school principals held their students' best interest in the decisions made within their own campuses, however, I also felt that without Central Office support, not all would be convinced of the necessary changes that needed to occur in classroom practice. I often had teachers come to me for advice on how best to approach their school principal for changes they knew needed to occur. They were caught in the middle between what their own early education teaching philosophy informed them on and the practices their school principal expected of them. By now, we had additional support to help us through by referring to the publication of *Eager to Learn*, published through the National Research Council (1998), as well as the state's curriculum guidelines.

## **Coaching and Mentoring Pre-Kindergarten Teachers**

Another pivotal moment for advancing the instruction of marginalized, Spanish speaking, low-income prekindergarten students in property poor school districts came in the form of a university collaborative. Through this collaboration, school districts joined in helping principals create professional learning communities. Each school campus selected a literacy coach to attend professional development that served as a ‘trainer of trainers’ for their respective campus. I felt like a fish out of water, being the only teacher representing the prekindergarten school population. It was not an easy or comfortable task. You need to remember that early childhood teachers had long been ostracized from ‘real teacher’ conversations. I had to break the glass ceiling by being their advocate. Situations such as these are not easily won over. The most important tool in one’s belt is to be knowledgeable in the subject area. Know your data, conduct the research, present evidence of a preschooler’s abilities through their work, justify your reasoning by inviting people to observe preschoolers at your campus.

I had already accumulated at least 15 professional books on early childhood pedagogy, theory, developmentally appropriate practices, and literacy research! These were published in a field of very scarce options for early childhood research. It was difficult to find books that focused on early childhood education research that also guided teachers through praxis. I could reference pages from each book that specifically talked about phonological awareness, or language development, and other elements for teaching children how to read and write. I learned early on to be prepared for our weekly meetings and to be able to justify to the other literacy coaches why certain components of literacy needed to be taught a certain way to prekindergarten children. This audience of preschool learners included those who were totally unfamiliar with books and writing, as well as those who lacked books in their home. Our membership in the

collaborative stood out because we represented a very large community of children who had long been marginalized within the scheme of the K-12 arena; however, this only served to solidify all early childhood teachers to become a true professional learning community. They created literacy curriculum substantiated by research, met in small groups every week, planned awesome lessons in language, listening, reading, and writing, and to further support the culture, created literacy enriched environments. I must also acknowledge the fact that we worked in groups when researching strategies and developing lessons according to the language of delivery. Why would we segregate our approaches to teaching Spanish and English literacy? Pedagogy for teaching young children developing oral language and vocabulary skills in Spanish was in its infancy within the United States. We begin to look towards pedagogy used in Spain and Mexico. All these efforts also helped to focus on the children whose *cultural wealth* differed from another. Their value and belief systems played into the content we were teaching which augmented meaningful connections for them. In addition, early reading skills vary in their delivery, according to the language being taught. I visited each classroom to offer support and shared ideas and resources between teachers during school hours. After school I met with the school principal daily to keep her abreast of progress, or lack thereof, revisited the school budget to purchase needed resources, and planned events for family engagement. The school community extended to parents and families as well as neighborhood childcare centers needing assistance.

### **2003 – The Texas Early Education Model**

In early 2004 our area school districts were approached by representatives from the Children’s Learning Institute housed under the University of Texas Health Science Center to participate in the Texas Early Education Initiative. The Texas Early Education Model was created in 2003 through Senate Bill 76, authored by State Senator Judith Zaffirini (D-Laredo) as

a bi-partisan supported bill. Through this bill, the State of Texas invested \$10 million for a two-year implementation cycle which would include both non-profit and for-profit childcare centers, public school districts, and Head Start.

The first year of implementation began with 11 communities across the state including Amarillo, Austin, Brownsville, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, Laredo, Raymondville, San Antonio, and Wichita Falls. Expansion for additional communities was passed under Senate Bill 23 during the 2005-2006 school year with an added \$15 million dollars that included a sustainability plan for all community efforts. TEEM continued to procure additional funding through the state's Pre-K Expansion dollars and the Texas Workforce Commission, and funding from private charitable organizations.

To date, the Texas Early Education Model, now known as the Texas School Ready! Initiative has continued to serve communities with at-risk populations. The Texas School Readiness Certification System was initiated in 2006, whereby data collection of early childhood effectiveness was evaluated and researched in compliance with Texas Administrative Code Title 19, Part 2, Chapter 102, Subchapter AA, Rule §102.1002. All grantees for the Texas School Ready! Program were expected to comply with this ruling to continue receiving the amenities such as professional development, a mentoring program, and curriculum resources that were provided to participating classrooms.

Through this grant, I saw further opportunity for reaching a larger audience of public-school prekindergarten teachers. I began working as a grant coach and mentor for the region of El Paso. My role entailed the mentoring and coaching of prekindergarten teachers in several school districts within the El Paso area. Professional development encompassed extensive assessment opportunities in language and literacy, math, science, social studies, and social-

emotional skills (Children’s Learning Institute, 2021). Finally, as part of the ongoing effort for supporting at-risk preschoolers, the Children’s Learning Institute methodically laid out a sustainability contingency plan for all participating school districts. This plan entailed a collaboration between local entities serving pre-kindergarten children to maximize existing resources to ensure that all children entering Kindergarten would enter ready at grade level. In addition, public schools were expected to provide effective and appropriate professional development for their early childhood teachers, provide knowledgeable mentors for new classroom teachers entering the early childhood education force, and implement accountability measures using the CIRCLE Progress Monitoring System.

Although the goals of the grant offered sustainability measures, many acting public-school principals remained unaware of the intricacies of the program and of the necessary components for offering a high-quality program. Likewise, there had been minimal collaboration between the neighborhood public school and child-care centers that also housed four - year - old children with fewer resources in their facilities. While the grant efforts included specific training for public school administrators, it was not a mandated requirement for participation. In essence, the task of overseeing the success of the prekindergarten programs lay with the Children’s Learning Institute mentors assigned to each school campus for the life of the grant. I had been charged to coach and mentor 24 prekindergarten teachers across three large school districts. My knowledge of each district and campus goals rested on the success or lack thereof for the opportunities that this grant was offering their teachers. I met with many school principals across the life of the grant. Some of these principals were interested in the opportunity but were unable to attend professional development sessions targeting early childhood education leadership. They remained loyal but also handed the responsibility of overseeing the program to me. Others I

never saw but communicated to them via email. Their teachers never felt supported or praised for the strides they were making in their classrooms. In some cases, teachers came to me for help, especially when they had been moved from an upper grade level, into a prekindergarten classroom as a form of punishment for yielding low scores on the STAAR. These are the teachers that I spent many extra hours working with. I was frustrated that prekindergarten children were being handed this type of early experience, but glad that I could help a new teacher in the field learn how to meet their needs. I was extremely lucky to have participated in many valuable workshops for developmentally appropriate content helpful in leading prekindergarten programming.

The state and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) continued its efforts in providing monetary assistance for young prekindergarten children in both public schools and child care centers. The Children's Learning Institute was designated as the Texas State Center for Early Childhood Development to direct early childhood research for the state. Moreover, Chapter 790 Section 29.1533 called for the establishment of new pre-kindergarten programming between public school pre-kindergartens and a Head Start or child-care program for the purpose of sharing resources. It also directed the Children's Learning Institute, under Bill 23, to develop a system of accountability measures to guide effectiveness and quality for all programming. The goal was to serve children from low socioeconomic backgrounds and/or those learning English as a second language before entering public school Kindergarten programs.

The Children's Learning Institute would continue research to establish responsive teaching strategies that promoted cognitive development, helped understand comprehensive curricula, implemented a progress monitoring system that assessed each child's cognitive growth, and provided effective professional development for all early childhood teachers across

the state of Texas. During this time, school principals were invited to participate and learn about the effectiveness of their pre-kindergarten programming. In 2008, as literacy coaches for the state, we collaborated in the development of the Texas Pre-Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines-Revision of the 1999 Texas Prekindergarten Curriculum Guidelines.

I was again elated at the prospect of working alongside national and state experts tasked to develop and write new standards for 10 domains. One notable change to point out is that in the area of social emotional development, content for mental well-being was increased from one page in 1999 to twelve pages in 2008. In hindsight, mental health was beginning to play a role in early childhood classrooms.

### **Working with Public School Principals**

As I evolved into a city-wide early childhood mentor and coach, I faced additional challenges that now tasked me with mentoring and coaching teachers under the leadership of school principals I had never worked with. I understood that I needed to approach the introduction of several issues that may have never been discussed within these school campuses. Moreover, I needed to communicate not only with school principals that carried the same district vision and mission within the district we shared, but I also had to approach school principals in a number of other large school districts whose vision and goals I was not well-versed in.

Throughout the time I spent working with school principals managing prekindergarten programming within one school district, I experienced a period of professional growth within myself. I had been extremely fortunate to have worked with school principals that were eager to understand early childhood development and agreed to create additional support systems for their prekindergarten teachers. Those campuses experienced a spike in state assessment results at the third-grade level. The culture that had been created in these campuses were petri dishes for

action research based on the most recent research available. Book studies had been created for both students and teachers. The students dwelled in a community of readers and writers while teachers continued adding to their knowledge base. School teachers were networking across campuses and meeting in group work sessions alongside their school principals. The biggest accomplishment I felt that I had reached was the fact that I was able to meet with school principals to share pedagogical practices that have historically stemmed from child development theory. This finally had given prekindergarten teachers a voice to justify why early childhood practices differ from that of higher grade levels. Not only were these teachers able to understand how early literacy emerges, but they were also applying pedagogical practices contingent for either Spanish or English language learners. I believe that this was a pivotal time of change that finally accepted prekindergarten educators into the K-12 educational system. Alongside pedagogical content, the social emotional arena was beginning to take prominence within those campuses that fomented cultural activities. Campuses added cultural content in the form of cultural school celebrations and multicultural children's books.

I had never actually given a thought to how school principals were mentored, coached, or offered professional development especially when implementing new federal or state policy within our educational system. I, along with a couple of my colleagues who had been tasked by the state to establish state funded early childhood programs were trying to figure out the best way to approach separate school leadership entities in another school district other than the one we had been nurtured in for most of our teaching careers. We were afraid of feeling defeated or deflated by the outcome. I had already nurtured concerns over the way in which policy for grant funding had not been followed in the school district we were assigned to. I had also been aware of the poor conditions that some classrooms were in, as opposed to the nurturing children's



environments I had already visited. What troubled me the most was the complacency I observed from the teachers as exhibited in their lack of urgency for improving their practice. Some teachers had received very minimal training regarding early childhood pedagogy simply because their schools favored training the STAAR accountability grade levels. Upon being charged with introducing the amenities stemming from the grant, we met with a group of school principals who managed early childhood classrooms. We begin the presentation with a PowerPoint explaining the simplest and most basic need of setting up a prekindergarten classroom. This meant that we needed permission to mentor at their campus. Unfortunately, we were met by a storm of negativity with questions such as “Who do you think you are, coming here to tell us how to run our programs? to “The teachers already set up their classrooms and now you want them to start over again? and, ”I want you to take back the comments you made about the teachers needing support!” We left with only having covered two slides. That school district proved to be a non-complier, aggressive, and whose teachers refused to attend professional development. They went so far as to call the state center to let them know that they did not want to participate and that they were already working for their school district and not the state! I believe these teachers were the most uninformed and isolated teachers in the early childhood community. This was the most egregious event I have experienced. We felt that we were not going to make headway with them so the state decided that we would not include them in the grant. I was insulted, upset, and appalled at how little thought they entertained at the possibility for improving their craft. How could teachers such as these be charged with our most precious commodities? I now understand that they were only responding to the school culture that their own school observed. My anger turned to understanding and sadness. These are the inequities we need to build courage and stamina to battle. After all, if we take a backseat on these severe cases,

then why do we even bother to accept funding from the state for classroom materials, professional development for teachers, or curriculum resources for children?

As a coach and mentor, I realized how important it was for leadership to understand that everyone working with children also comes with needs that will help them fulfill dreams of their own. We need to be cognizant of their state of mind when coming to mentor and educate our children. These tools were tantamount in my quest for meeting with school principals and likewise, yielding positive outcomes for not only the teachers and their practice, but also for the students who were the recipients of these offerings from the state.

Some of the issues I encountered with the new teachers I was mentoring, was the fact that they rarely attended professional development within their school campus which was geared towards the needs of prekindergarten children. They also were rarely allowed to participate in the purchasing decisions for materials and resources that were specifically targeted for young children. Either some classrooms went without, or they received used equipment sometimes handed in from another classroom. Thankfully, this was limited to only a few campuses. As a result, many teachers were unresponsive to training, avoided working on their classroom environment, and practically refused to implement new strategies. At times such as these I was ever so thankful for the extensive training I had received in coaching which included *cognitive coaching*, *directive coaching*, *non-directive coaching*, and *collaborative coaching*. I also realized that not only knowing how to coach but also understanding how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as well as the Women's Ways of Knowing Model, which focuses on the needs of the women workforce, was necessary. As insiders in the world of early education, we understand that early childhood education and care has been a predominantly female workforce and exhibits remnants of feminist theory. Yet, because we are creating a more diverse community of early childhood

educators, we also need to understand the male's way of thinking and knowing. Each person performs according to their social standing and their needs within the larger society. I focused on opening up avenues for communication between myself and the teacher I was mentoring. It may have taken a lot longer before introducing pedagogy, but I learned that by listening to their teacher's needs first was the only practical plan for moving into meeting the students' needs.

In 2016, the Meadows Foundation and Miles Foundation, along with the Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium compiled a report on the longitudinal scores for pre-kindergarten children during the 2010-2011 school year and compared them to the same 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student's scores for the 2014-2015 school year outcomes. Findings revealed that districts that provided quality pre-kindergarten programming by spending more per student, showed stronger positive correlations between Pre-K enrollment and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade STAAR Reading scores (TPEIR, 2010-2011, 2014-2015). School principals begin to see the necessity for supplying prekindergarten classrooms with appropriate materials.

Many of the specific components outlined and implemented through the Texas School Ready! grant, a replacement for the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM), have now been written into law through House Bills 3. Each school district is required to adhere to a set of components that will aid in developing high quality programming in prekindergarten classrooms. Although the Texas Education Agency has offered waivers for school districts experiencing delays in the implementation of the various components, the deadline for most of these essential elements is already in sight.

### **2019 Texas House Bill 3**

On July 18, 2019, the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session voted under House Bill 3, to continue providing funding through state dollars for the implementation of a high-quality prekindergarten

program that could serve the education of low-income, at-risk populations. A high-quality prekindergarten program encompasses a set of components that have been created as research has advanced the field. These components have been informed by current and past societal issues, which I refer to as constructs. Constructs such as poverty, neuroscience, learning theories, lack of school resources, home environments, parental support, environmental stress, and access to healthcare all informed what a high-quality early childhood program or public-school pre-kindergartens should have.

Texas HB 3 delineates to educators, specifically leadership teams and school principals that the requirements for an effective program include a nurturing learning environment, well trained early childhood professionals, research based developmentally appropriate curriculum, low student to teacher ratios, student progress monitoring tools, parental engagement programs, and formal program evaluation instruments. SCECD offers much support for all the components that all school leadership should support. The research for providing quality programming and how to overcome adversities for young children has been extremely impactful across the country. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) also reports on each state's goals, accountability measures, national quality indicators, and accessibility for each state's programming components. Currently, Texas falls midway between high quality and low-quality standards, leaving much room for improvement (NIEER, 2020). A detailed description of the requirements laid out for Texas House Bill 3 prekindergarten programs may be found as Table 4 under Appendix A. It offers a perspective for school principals to view each component of Texas House Bill 3 with the most current Domains required for Texas School Principals to follow. These domains are those by which school principals are evaluated in the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS, 2020). Each domain in the table is addressed with the

particular components that appear under the Texas House Bill 3 for prekindergarten programming, along with resources, links, and a description of what each component entails. Using this table will ease a principal's efforts into understanding how policy aligns with a school principal's daily practices.

The need for both administrators and teachers of young children to effectively implement appropriate programming components continues to grow in urgency. Efforts, initiatives, grants, and additional federal and state support continue to be available to help advance the field. I have also continued to be present as an advocate of early childhood education needs for those minoritized populations. A myriad of advocacy groups has focused on a variety of needs. One particularly stands out in my mind. In 2011, I joined a group of early childhood leaders who hailed from a variety of backgrounds. Some represented the business community, others represented children with disabilities. The focus for this group was to bring awareness on early childhood trauma most of which was concentrated in a very low-income largely Hispanic neighborhood. I learned about the horrific traumatic events that some very young children had experienced throughout the drug wars incited by cartels in Juarez, Mexico across the U. S. Mexico border. We quickly worked on support systems for each of the public schools and childcare centers in the area.

The level of outcry from these children led me to understand and realize how important it is for educators to be well-versed on the ramifications of trauma on the young brain. We launched several workshops for teachers, some specifically targeted at handling aggressive behavior. I learned that some children had experienced death of a parent or loved one while they hid behind a door or under a bed. I learned that families had fled their home with nothing but the clothing on their backs as they made a run for the border. I learned that public school teachers

did not have the knowledge base to understand and attend to such severe trauma. I then begin to deliver a series of workshops on brain development in young children and the advances the field of neuroscience has made. It was then that I made a personal commitment to inform and educate student teachers, practicing teachers, and leadership teams on the interception of cognitive learning caused from severe trauma. Since then, I am ever present to inform and understand the numbers of children that are coming across the border, traveling with their parents for long distances. As I speak about these issues, many educators are jolted by the impacts that these experiences are having on each child's future. They now understand that we need to create mental health awareness before we can help build cognitive success.

The alignment of best practices required for a high-quality early childhood program as recommended by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). These organizations' recommendations may be viewed in Table 4 under Appendix B. In this table, I provide a horizontal alignment between recommendations made by these reputable early childhood educational organizations that have been instrumental in providing evidence-based practices for national initiatives created to help inform school principals of the necessary components in an early childhood education program. Each organization has expended monetary and human capital in creating guidelines that support our public and private school leaders.

I regularly referred to these organizations when introducing public school principals with the various support systems they could refer to. I arrived at the conclusion that none of the principals asking for further information had any knowledge of these organizations. School principals should not only educate themselves on state policy but should also be made aware of

the country's trajectory and efforts for improving early childhood education. This can substantially help move a school principals attitudes, beliefs, and actions toward advocating for young children.

### **Summary**

I have delineated four decades of early childhood initiatives and educational policy that has played a role in the development of early childhood education policy. All policies and initiatives were driven by substantiated research during my years as an early childhood practitioner. These actions taken by policy makers and advocacy groups were meant to improve circumstances for children that may not have had a voice in their own education. I urge current district leaders, school principals and leadership teams to familiarize themselves with the most current efforts to continue improving opportunities for academic success for all preschoolers.

Since the late 1960's educational theorists and researchers in the field of educational leadership have been calling for a support system to aid school principals managing early childhood programming. At that time, kindergarten was the new frontier and its inception was also being met with skepticism and fear of the unknown. Concerns for successful implementation of these programs have called for better school principal preparation programs for early childhood education but also central office support through professional development and coaching components. I have seen very slow progress with these endeavors as high-stakes testing continues to rule as the answer for educational accountability.

## CHAPTER V

### ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Theorizing a LatCrit framework for the success of Latine public school prekindergarten students led me to share my experiences through this autoethnography. I shared my personal experiences as an observant teacher of both pedagogical and andragogical knowledge. Growing up in a minoritized neighborhood myself, I experienced and witnessed how many of my childhood friends were marginalized in school. I do not think that as small children we realized what constituted the meaning of marginalization and its ramifications in predicting our future success. Yet, as an early childhood teacher and growing into a knowledgeable practitioner, I came to understand the harm we create for our young Latine children when we do not fully comprehend child development, its nuances, and the experiences that may lead to interruptions of learning in the young brain. Aside from understanding or keeping abreast of research such as neuroscience, sociology, or psychology, educators must also understand that the achievement of Latine students begins in the early years as they first encounter formal schooling away from their nurturing *familial* and *maternal cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2006; Ballysingh, 2019) We also know that pathways to student achievement stem from quality curriculum and teacher interaction led by knowledgeable school principals as proven decades ago (Heck, 2000; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, 2005), to the current knowledge offered through brain research which proposes instructional leadership skills as the foundation for improving schools (Wallin, Newton & Jutras, 2019)

As I analyzed the emerging themes that were revealed from my journals, calendars, remnants of children's work, coaching notes, agendas and programs for professional development sessions, state and national initiatives, work group meetings, and additional notes



and cards from teachers, I begin to code these themes into subcategories. Above all, the theme that most surfaced was that of leadership. In this context, the leadership characteristics that emerged solely targeted early childhood programming. Subcategories emerging under the theme of leadership were about building and leading positive school cultures. Examples of this can be tied to the extensive professional development opportunities whether through whole school sessions, small grade level sessions, or individualized mentoring and support.

As I reviewed the categories in depth, I employed a critical reflexive strategy of drawing valuable teaching points that reflected the differences between the various schools I visited as an instructional coach as well. There are various subcategories that stem from the type of leadership I observed. Anyone seeking a principal certification can hail from any grade level and most school principals have origins as either elementary or middle and high school teachers. It is extremely rare for school principals to have initiated their administrative career in the education field as early childhood teachers. I will briefly answer each of the questions I initially posed for my thorough reflection, which will be followed by a lengthy discussion of those elements, challenges and triumphs I experienced. These will be substantiated through research findings so that we may be able to move forward on applicable theories, research, and finally, policy to praxis.

The questions I reflected upon follow:

1. *What challenges did I face as an early childhood educator?*

As a prekindergarten teacher I was very fortunate to have had a good leader at the helm of the school campus I worked in. However, because we were initiating a new policy directive, district personnel were inclined to control every decision the teachers were making. Most of the central office administrators were not well versed on child development theory or

Developmentally Appropriate Practices (NAEYC, 1984) since they had just been published following the *A Nation at Risk* publication (1983). The most important obstacle I observed was the lack of teacher autonomy. This tight oversight by administrators interrupted many developmentally appropriate activities, and the teaching staff was very much inclined to follow their lead for fear of repercussions later. Eventually we fell into the theory of *organizational socialization* which alludes to that fact that faculty and staff eventually do as they are told; we followed what the district had as their instructional strategies for meeting state goals.

Issues that I mostly confronted as an instructional coach for public school prekindergarten programming was the lack of knowledge that many early childhood teachers lacked. I attributed this to the fact that these teachers were mostly the only representative for prekindergarten classrooms. They were basically an addendum to the school. They lacked professional development, adequate age-appropriate resources, and supplies, and received no mentorship for that age group. These teachers were basically left alone to maneuver and implement a prekindergarten program. However, the most difficult aspect of the position I held as the only prekindergarten coach and mentor, was convincing some principals of the much-needed professional development that their teachers were asked to meet for appropriate practices to occur in these prekindergarten classrooms. Some principals rarely made themselves available to meet with me to gauge their teacher's progress in curriculum implementation, progress monitoring, and classroom management. They often skipped leadership meetings intended for the prekindergarten programming that they were tasked with. In other cases, principals were unwilling to spend additional funds on purchasing furniture, resources, or any additional resources for teacher development.

2. *How did I respond to those challenges and what determined my actions?*

As a prekindergarten teacher, I became my own advocate and began attending professional development opportunities on my own. I gradually purchased many professional books based mostly on research and praxis. Teachers with whom I planned, also began to attend professional development sessions, purchased additional resources or subscribed to professional organizations for their monthly magazine subscriptions. Many teachers of young children very often purchased additional resources if their classrooms or schools did not provide additional resources other than the materials included in the state adopted curriculum.

As an instructional coach, I faced the most need for students in dual language or bilingual programs. The problem was the lack of resources that each teacher received or that were available on the market. I began to plan how and when I could meet with the principals of the schools I was mentoring and coaching in. I had already been advised by the teachers in these campuses on the list of resources or classroom materials that they so urgently needed. I began dropping off literature on child development, offered internet links for them to view, all of which were very short clips. I figured that this would be the gateway to helping them carve a little time out of each day to dedicate to child development and learning theories. There were times when this did not work and then I simply gave them a review of the requirements for the mentoring grant I was delivering services under. All these unplanned meetings occurred within a five-minute time frame. It took a lot of effort and perseverance but eventually I was able to walk into their office before leaving their school campus after each coaching and mentoring visit.

3. *What type of support did I see that school principals and instructional leaders need to know to provide adequate assistance to early childhood teachers?*

School principals and their leadership teams need guidance on how data and curriculum need to be aligned between the Pre-k to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade instructional program. Indeed, many national organizations have developed a framework for leading student success through frameworks that are inclusive of the early years. Brain development findings applied for these ages should be vertically aligned in the form of curriculum development. Using a framework of inclusivity will help school leaders understand how various learning theories along with neuroscience can have a lasting impact in a Latine student's learning trajectory. Learning about theories such as Vygotsky's theory of sociocultural development and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological systems theory can be a catalyst in understanding culturally relevant pedagogy. Both educational giants in the field of child development fit into the LatCrit Framework in that they embrace a child's cultural wealth.

#### *4. How do we need to reframe the pre-kindergarten framework for Latine preschoolers?*

As with many other constructs within the field of education, we can easily identify several evidence-based frameworks that can be applied to implement and manage effective early childhood programming; however, I am more interested in the *how* and the *why*. For principals to apply the necessary components that may be amiss, they need to observe early childhood education for Latine students in a Title I public school program, through different lenses. Most importantly, school principals and their leadership teams need to invoke a social justice lens. Advocacy plays a major role in the belief systems that will help move the foundation for a successful educational experience of minoritized and marginalized students.

### **Conceptualizing the LatCrit Framework**

In conceptualizing the LatCrit Framework for interpreting my experiences, I noted that one of the hallmarks of prekindergarten programming is the expectation that leaders respond to

the need for creating nurturing environments for Latine preschoolers. Early childhood education programs that were developed and initiated under Title I policy have a purpose to serve preschoolers coming from disadvantaged situations, whether through income, incomplete family units, or non-English speaking. These are not programs created for children who are doing well or are ready to enter formal schooling, but rather to offer equitable advantages to ALL children. In a prominent study conducted a few decades ago, it was revealed that the number of words heard, understood, or participated in with two-way conversations, varied widely between that of a professional status home of higher income to that of a lower-income family unit. The disparity between the usage of new words has created a 30-million-word gap (Hart & Risley, 1990). Although the results of this study have been highly contested in recent years, early childhood curriculum programs continue to rely on its findings. Our Latine community lags in book reading that plants the seed for language and literacy outcomes. In addition, field trips that teach children about their community add opportunities for language growth, but these opportunities are absent from their lives. The number of two-way quality conversations with parents and other family members is also lacking. These are the existing obstacles these young children face when they enter public school prekindergarten.

As I analyzed the emerging themes that were revealed, I began to code these topics. Above all, the theme that was mostly spoken about or surfaced the most was leadership. In this context, the leadership characteristics that emerged solely targeted early childhood programming. Upon looking at the whole sum of the parts, effective leadership for early childhood programming can erase any inequities or concerns that emerged from recorded experiences I had with prekindergarten teachers and their school principals.

Currently, many school principals in public schools are trying to grapple with the amount of work needed to achieve positive results in state accountability assessments. Apart from that, the mental health of both students and teachers is at a breaking point. In addition, central office support has been declining over the years. Job related stress has gauged about 48 % of school principals facing burnout (Sullivan, 2022). Research is showing that these difficulties are manifesting themselves in a lack of motivation or a lack of direction for the job at hand. Schools that have well-trained prekindergarten teachers were able to use a distributed approach towards overseeing the essential components that effectively support prekindergarten programming. Most of these teachers have taken the mentorship role within the campus, however, this extra effort has depleted their time for planning instruction and classroom environments. Meanwhile, Organizational theory is alive and well in public school systems Weick, (1976). I have observed opposing management styles such as that of *tight and loose coupling* which can be a good or a bad school management characteristic for the children at the receiving end of an educational program (Weick, 1997). The danger of uninformed leadership towards pedagogical practices, governance, or funding venues, can end up affecting each child's educational trajectory. I will delineate how.

In my experiences as a teacher, after the state had mandated House Bill 72, we experienced extreme oversight from central office personnel who had been tasked with overseeing the newly minted program. It consisted of daily observations, note taking about our teaching strategies, decisions for daily scheduling and curriculum content. These examples denoted very *tight coupling* in our school. Teachers were not allowed to make developmentally appropriate decisions concerning curriculum development or lesson planning. First and foremost, a leader needs to discern the level of competence a teacher exhibits by allowing them to voice

their point of view. The teachers hired for this new policy initiative had already experienced high levels of success in their previous school campus but felt stagnant and undervalued by Central office staff. In addition, this circumstance occurred decades ago which varies distinctively from the mannerisms and behaviors that teachers now exhibit given the fact that we have many educational resources at our fingertips. When this initiative was begun in 1984, we had very little research to draw from other than what we had learned at the college level and that which we had gained from experience. Therefore, in that case, experience was key to understanding the early childhood theories and processes that needed to be heeded. Teachers deserve to have autonomy in curriculum decisions as long as their school principals continue to fill their well of substantiated research in the field through targeted professional development.

On the other hand, teachers who experience “loose coupling” within their organizations, are often left out of the K-12 conversations. These are the nomads within the field. I became very cognizant of the fact that some of these teachers were being left behind by their counterparts who were teaching at other campuses and whose principal devoted much to early childhood development. Some of these ‘left-behind’ teachers were the sole prekindergarten teacher at their campus which resulted in minimal to no professional development or appropriate teacher resources and conversations for advancing the knowledge base for them. They very often expressed concern about their lack of professional resources and were also put in very uncomfortable positions when working with other prekindergarten teachers. These actions by their school leaders resulted in a feeling of inadequacy and deflated their motivation and passion for teaching. These marginalized teachers began to perform through outdated strategies and were embarrassed to admit that they knew no other strategies. I always tried to help them reignite their passion for the field and often shared a variety of resources and strategies with them. I listened to

their stories about feeling left out within their school campus community. Unfortunately, these issues persevere. I continue to receive phone calls and pleas for advocacy in changing their circumstances regarding their valued, or undervalued, positions within the early childhood arena. Why are prekindergarten teachers continuously left out of the K-12 educational system?

As I pointed out earlier, research on the perils of improperly trained preschool teachers and inadequate learning environments hinder the fragile brain of a child that comes from trauma or poverty. Studies on the effects of toxic stress has led to the understanding that the ‘normal brain’ develops most of the language and literacy skills, begins to build executive function, and begins to find motivation and excitement in learning between the ages of 0-3. The brain of a child under duress from the environment, poverty, and endangerment now shows evidence of its *window of plasticity* for those same skills, now closing within two years’ time. The reason for that is that the brain is accelerating very rapidly to develop the skills to survive. These children’s *windows of brain plasticity* are now operating on a two-year time frame that will determine their future academic success (Hensch & Bilimoria, 2012).

Moreover, teachers lacking instructional support most often end up using their version of what they feel is an appropriate application of practice by relying on their own outdated memories of how they were raised or how they were taught in school. They end up imposing their own views and belief systems about what school should look like for a four-year-old (Bernstein, 1986, 1987). School principals need to be cognizant of the fact that teaching in a classroom with 22 children and no assistant can be an insurmountable task as I have witnessed in some prekindergarten classrooms. While the debate on class size is still inconclusive, we do know that one-on-one assistance to a child reaps grand rewards. In a study conducted of tutoring pre-k students, the effects demonstrated the importance of having a paraprofessional in the



classroom. This enables the teacher to focus on smaller group of children while the paraprofessional can work to solidify prior learning (Nickow, Oreopoulos, & Quan, 2020).

I also observed instances of a *tight coupling* system within the campuses I mentored in. This can be the most detrimental if the school principal or the leadership team are not willing to learn or to understand child development. In many instances, to keep everyone under a tight ship, prekindergarten teachers are asked to create classroom environments that are not developmentally appropriate for four-year-olds. This may come in the way of children having to sit at a desk all day, lining up and walking with their hands behind their back which poses an injury problem, or not allowing children to have breakfast because they were a few minutes late. These are events I observed that have no place in the halls of education. *Tight coupling* can be a control mechanism for both the school principal and the leadership team to control the curriculum for the whole school. In the case for creating developmentally appropriate, nurturing environments that can help a child coming from toxic stress, lack nutritional supplements for proper brain growth, hailing from a low-income household where living conditions may be crowded, and not understanding the language of school, may well be going down a very precarious road that policy and practice are trying to deter.

Bernstein (1986, 1987, 2004) argued for a well-trained teaching force. He was specifically concerned with children from the working class who needed to be included in fair and equitable educational opportunities. While teacher autonomy is important, equally important is the fact that this step takes a knowledgeable leader and leadership team to loosen the reins but to also be well versed in the nuances of child development, its theories, the main tenets. I experienced these very trying circumstances that exposed school principals or leadership teams further marginalizing students from disadvantaged backgrounds, most often unaware of the

possible damage they were causing to a child. I witnessed a teacher that perpetually berated her four-year-olds simply because she did not have the patience or the appropriate pedagogical practices to deliver a well thought out plan for each student. This teacher had been placed in a prekindergarten classroom for not yielding high scores in the fourth-grade classroom assigned to him. These type of internal practices reflect the *labeling theory* (Bernstein, 2000) which relates to how a teacher responds to a child's appearance, speech patterns, language proficiency, the use of slang, and the social skills this child exhibits, that speaks about his/her cultural background. Children learn through modeling and look up to their role models in the classroom. They vicariously learn from their teacher's behaviors about how to treat others. In turn, these behaviors and signals observed by the other children will be utilized against those same students as well. This ultimately serves as vicarious punishment exhibited by classmates that contributes to the further marginalization of a child's identity and sense of self. Inevitably, children in the class may also begin to display these tendencies towards the *other* when interacting student to student, student to instructional content, and student response to teacher.

While evidence is often difficult to fathom, an uneducated teacher as well as uninformed principals can often harm a child's identity simply for lack of support in the form of professional development, coaching and mentoring. These behaviors can easily manifest themselves under the purview of the uninformed leader. *Pedagogical practices theory* (Bernstein, 1986, 1987) does not just entail how a teacher delivers instruction but how that teacher develops a culture of inclusivity. By not fully understanding instructional approaches for young children, we may be contributing to the marginalization and failure of our Latine students. In 1992, (Spidell-Rusher et al.,) a study about three belief systems was conducted, naming a) academics, b) child-centeredness, and c) activity issues as those areas of most concern that teachers felt more

strongly about. It also revealed that teachers believed that school principals leaned more towards district policy that was less child centered, less favorable toward activities especially appropriate for young children, and more favorable toward academics. More importantly, for teachers whose views differed with that of their principals' regarding teaching practices, teachers were found to "1) be true to their personal beliefs, by closing the classroom door and working in secret noncompliance; 2) modifying their teaching practices to reflect district policies, creating cognitive dissonance for themselves; or 3) left the profession altogether (Spidell-Rusher et al., 1992, p. 293). School principals also need to be knowledgeable of the theoretical base that frames early childhood education. Critical conversations for educational discourse about the powerful use of theory and practice within the field of early childhood education needs to occur amongst school administrators, moreover, revisiting these seminal bodies of work would certainly help to solidify the *why* and *how* questions that circulate within early childhood classrooms.

We now know that school leadership effectiveness is directly related to teacher attrition (Kaiser, 2021). Helping retain our qualified early childhood teachers now turns to educating our school leadership and leadership teams on early childhood pedagogical practices.

As I stated before, as a child advocate, I have been placed in precarious situations where a school principal or instructional coach simply have no knowledge on how to manage or plan instructional support for early childhood teachers in public school prekindergarten programs. I observed that by informing principals and their leadership teams on the *how* and *why* of critical leadership, we can make great strides as they learn how to navigate and what to look for during their daily *walk-throughs*. In 1992, (Spidell-Rusher et al.,) a study about three belief systems was conducted, naming a) academics, b) child-centeredness, and c) activity issues as those areas of

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Addressing curriculum misappropriation, Bernstein (1990) points to the fact that most curriculum content is written for middle-class children. Publishing companies tend to aim towards the middle group across the nation wherever said curriculum is distributed. In this sense, mass production of curriculum products usually misses the needs of our students, tying into the message that Freire's work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* delivers. Views from additional researchers agree that this is a persistent problem across the globe, and that the low-income children (oppressed) are not given equal footing in the process of schooling. Bernstein goes further into depth, stemming from the *symbolic control theory*, that teachers use various *symbolic actions* whereby they will uplift the gifted child and ignore the low-achieving child, though sometimes unknowingly or subconsciously. Therefore, selection of curriculum programs needs to be taken seriously and judged for its pedagogic effectiveness and not the luster of the product. I observed prekindergarten teachers selecting the curriculum that was the most colorfully packaged, contained beautiful hand puppets, and with no merit for its literacy base. Quality multicultural children's books should be the first point of review for educators. Choosing curriculum resources that speak to the needs of DLLs, ELs and bilingual children should be a priority. These adoption protocols have emerged into political agendas in some cases. We need to be wary.

School campuses with a positive school culture were able to discuss these inadequacies when striving for student achievement. An environment of learners can be fashioned by implementing the framework of Professional Learning Communities. Some campuses needed further guidance in this aspect. Some PLC meetings have turned into informational sessions for upcoming events. Building a positive school culture is one of the most difficult aspects for a school principal. You have little control over the minds, beliefs, attitudes, and goals of each

person within your school. I believe my former school administrators were able to achieve this through the cohesive collaborations and district support that was ever present. Staying informed of classroom cultures can be addressed through Professional Learning Communities that most area school districts implement within their own campuses. It is imperative that school principals also become knowledgeable about the goals for achieving effective Professional Learning Communities within their school campus. I experienced sessions where teachers openly discussed obstacles, challenges, and successes, through their scheduled professional development sessions, especially in schools populated by low-income, disadvantaged students. It is imperative that both school principals and teachers have open conversations about students' needs and continuously seek to improve campus community culture. Culture has a deeper meaning within the field of education. It encompasses belief systems, values, language, customs, and learning ways to navigate through society (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963, p. 81). PLCs are the cornerstone to embracing differences in both the faculty and staff as well as the student population we strive to lead towards success.

I have participated in many PLCs since they were developed in the 1990's. PLC's gave teachers a safe environment to voice their opinions whether it served to bring up an evolving problem, student scores, sometimes included difficult issues that needed to be discussed, all with the purpose of improving student achievement through sustained school improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Fullan, 2005; Louis & Marks, 1998; McLaughlin & Talber, 2001; Newmann, 1996; Reeves, 2006; Saphier, 2005; Schmoker, 2005; Sparks, 2005). Issues such as using formative assessments to identify students needing additional support, established a time frame to collectively monitor student learning and revisit curriculum standards to make sure all students were moving along with the same equity in learning knowledge and skills. These

organizational teams created within the school campus served to guide, lead, or question anything that seemed to be impeding student learning. These practices have been recognized by various organizations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals, The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, and The National Association of Elementary School Principals. They were, and in many schools continue to serve as a cornerstone of the educational organization. There have been various publications that have given a deeper insight into the inner workings of this concept. The problem I most recently faced with PLC's is the fact that many elementary school campuses do not include Pre-K in their weekly meetings.

Bernstein speaks of the various actions that both the educational institution and educators as part of the institution, have intentions of helping students build social capital but instead depress a specific class of students. Following Dewey's lead, he addressed the very important fact that as adults, we decide what will be taught and when. School districts have and continue to rely on scope & sequence documents that are prepared to make sure that the whole district is moving along in tandem, delivering instruction of similar or the same topics at certain points in the year. For young, disadvantaged students, this action does not bode well. A better outcome for children comes in the form of utilizing developmentally appropriate strategies, Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, Dewey's constructivist approach. Not all children think alike and when welcoming those who have never attended a public school before, the environment needs to be controlled by the children. Curriculum resources, especially those that are created and packaged very appealingly tend to create lessons by using the state curriculum guidelines as a compass, need to be modified to accommodate a child's learning trajectory (NAEYC, 2020). Following a prefabricated curriculum poses a danger of failure. School districts are large organizations trying to run their schools in an orderly fashion that will offer safe and rich environments for all

students. When school administrators and teachers are in constant communication, these issues can be easily resolved through effective PLCs.

I have observed lessons where *code theory* could be observed. *Code theory* is a phenomenon that occurs between teachers and students during oral interaction while delivering or creating instructional opportunities. Coding is language used for various purposes regarding the context of the subject or topic. This is a phenomenon that can occur when the state adopted curriculum is not modified and a situation in which the teacher may not be knowledgeable enough to use a different context to attain the skill in question. For students who come from low-income classes, the retrieval of language called for within the context of the topic can sometimes cause discomfort or alienation. Often the academic language of marginalized children varies from that being taught; the language found in text usually reflects that of middle-class students' level of understanding. Teachers need to be trained in strategies typically called for when teaching second language learners. With necessary teacher training, students from disadvantaged backgrounds can be properly guided on how to communicate thoughts or ideas in the context of the topic. Whereas children from low-income families may have *maternal and familial cultural wealth*, their schema may cause the brain to fire up a different context based on the intricacies of the Latine culture, specifically aimed at how the young children are raised. In the Latine culture, evidence of culturally embedded skills manifests through familial and maternal contexts through *aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance* forms of knowledge (Yosso, 2005). I witnessed this knowledge of these constructs through children's conversations during discovery and exploration activities. As I observed in classrooms, I scribed children's conversations that helped me gain a better insight into their cognitive development. Most evident within the Latine population are *aspirational* comments such as "*iCuando llegue a mi casa, mi*



*papa me va llevar al parque a jugar beisbol. Yo voy a ser un beisbolero!*” (“When I get home my daddy is going to take me to the park to play baseball. I am going to be a great baseball player!”) as well as cultural wealth which is manifested when a child helps the younger sibling learn to read, or that of family holiday gatherings. Young children carry familial culture within their subconscious because to them it is a form of security. It is no wonder that prekindergarten classrooms should always have opportunities for group play where they recount or replay events that they have been a part of.

Embedding this type of play integrated with skill building is of utmost importance, yet not many school principals understand the complexities of early childhood pedagogical practices, especially in marginalized communities. A form of resistance often shows up early in these young children when expressing themselves. Although prekindergarten children are not fully capable of understanding *resistance culture* regarding their marginalization, they do however, notice these differences in the illustrations presented in teaching resources. I recall this as a young child. I was learning to read with the *Dick and Jane* books, and I could not make any meaningful connections to the family, their home, or the way they dressed as illustrated in these books. I yearned to have a home that had a garage, a green lawn, and a father that came home from work wearing a suit! These characters wore their Sunday best every day. As a young impressionable child, that type of instructional resource does not bridge connections between what they see and their own lives. Digging deeper into this type of practice, without further explanation or visual resources, the content does not penetrate the area of the brain slated for later retrieval from long term memory, thereby losing its instructional value. It is extremely important for teachers to create a classroom environment that reflects the cultural wealth that children come with, to help them make meaningful connections to the lessons. When children

can accept new information into their existing schema, then that information is ready to move into long term storage in the brain. Research studies emphatically agree that DL teachers need to possess enhanced linguistic and pedagogical skills, therefore, professional development must be a constant occurrence in their yearly schedules (Christian, 1996; Valdes, 1997; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Tinajero, et al., 2009).

Lastly, when I encountered school principals, instructional coaches, or teacher mentors absent from a teacher's support system, *organizational socialization* would set in (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Teachers needing support from school leadership can either give up trying or be influenced by others, into unsatisfactory performance. *Organizational socialization* was always a phenomenon that I observed when new teachers were not supported by their mentors. I found early on that when mentoring a new teacher, I asked the school principal for the onboarding manual. I wanted to make sure that before I mentored on the complexities of curriculum delivery, classroom management, progress monitoring, that this teacher was settled into her role as a participant in the instructional practices of the school, rather than an uninformed onlooker. I witnessed countless times when teachers were berated for not following the school schedule, not reporting to a grade level meeting, or arriving late for the student's lunch break when indeed, they were not informed of the protocols. These unintended mistakes by the teacher could have been totally avoided and saved time and self-esteem in the process. Teachers then became so frightened of any little misstep and would eventually lose their sense of self and confidence in being able to fulfill their job responsibilities.

Some teachers I had met over the years did fall into these pits and pulling them out of that mentality proved extremely difficult. Most of these teachers simply would end up transferring to another campus. In cases like these I understood that school principals were not the only

mediating factor between a successful and an unsuccessful campus. It takes a team to work and manage an efficiently run school that focuses on instruction for student success. Likewise, I also witnessed school campuses that had extremely effective communication systems in place.

Protocols for weekly meetings were laid out, teachers understood the topic at hand ahead of time came to the meetings ready to participate. The PLC sessions smelled of coffee complimented by a Danish or cookie; they were a reprieve from being in the classroom without people to bounce off ideas from. These schools had established a community of learners. Walking the halls, I observed many ‘footprints’ left behind by evidence of student work. I could easily identify the work that each grade level was focused on. Students acknowledged that this school belonged to them; their work and their voices greeted any visitor. These schools screamed of being a happy place that nurtured their students. I loved visiting these campuses and most of them were created through PLC meetings.

### **Increased Focus on Equity**

In a study on student achievement of second language learners, (Gándara, Brumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, and Callahan, 2003) researchers found that seven elements within their school district influenced a child’s opportunity to learn: 1) inappropriately trained teachers; 2) lack of appropriate progress monitoring; 3) lack of professional development opportunities; 4) inappropriate use of instructional time; 5) inadequate school facilities; 6) lack of diverse student population; and a tendency for segregating students at high risk of failure. While some of these aspects also contribute to a Latine preschoolers’ success, their segregation from the rest of the school manifests itself in additional forms. A lack of oversight by a school principal can lead to the use of developmentally inappropriate curriculum content and delivery, a lack of understanding the dangers of toxic stress, trauma and poverty in the developing brain, lack of

screening to identify developmental lags in special needs children, and absent in the need for creating nurturing environments for children are appropriately furnished, and well equipped classroom environments (Nicholson, Maniates, Yee, Williams Jr., Ufoegbune, & Erazo-Chavez, 2022). I could see the juxtaposition between some schools. These are all detrimental effects in a young child's cognitive, social emotional, motor, and language and literacy development. Vigilance of systemic disparities must always be at the forefront of a social justice and critical instructional leader.

Young Latine preschoolers too often encounter disparities of classroom environments within low-income property poor school neighborhoods. Absent are those advocates or those with the loudest and clearest voices, that stand up for this voiceless group. These preschoolers who begin their education in the poorest of poorest environments often continue going through the rest of their elementary and high school years in often dilapidated, lead and mold infested environments. Aside from being housed in old school buildings, classroom resources, manipulatives, books, or electronic equipment are often outdated, incomplete, or non-existent. New teachers coming into the early childhood workforce often experience less than effective teaching resources and resort to improvising or purchasing their own equipment. Countless early childhood teachers have spent thousands of their hard-earned dollars to build a classroom library that closely exemplifies recommendations made by leading reading and literacy organizations. In response to such continued inadequacies, a group of astute district leaders in Washington D. C. have taken up the social justice cause of addressing these inequities by conducting equity audits within their schools. These audits range in topics from staff ethnicity, classroom resource allocation, extra-curricular activities, data analysis of student achievement, and suspension rates, to name a few examples. As we move forward under the enlightening climate of critical race

theory, additional practices that inform on inequities are quickly being included in daily monitoring and goal planning initiatives. Although California, Texas, New York, and Florida have had much experience with educating ELLs, there are still many states that are just now experiencing the growing needs of an ELL population (Horsford & Sampson, 2013). As of 2010, 45 states out of the 50 included in the nation had already been the recipients of an equity lawsuit (National Access Network, 2010). States that have decided to fund ELL education have a number of ways to do so. This funding is available through block grants, weighted formulas, “lump sums” or by adding more funding per student (Horsford, Mokhtar & Sampson, 2013). However, we seem to have already journeyed down the wrong path in that we have focused more on accountability measures than on resources. States face the added difficulty of trying to decide which programs will get funding, how much, and whether or not these funds will translate into positive student achievement. With this in mind, it is ever more important to prepare school principals to begin addressing disparities of low achievement in students that hail from low-income backgrounds, are entering the public school system as a preschooler, and are struggling to develop vocabulary in their own native tongue. By addressing issues of inequitable resources beginning at the preschool level, we may be able to thwart equity lawsuits before these issues become insurmountable.

Although it is very difficult to bring these issues to the forefront, I do it to inform educators as well. Sometimes we get caught up in our busy worlds and fail to notice these inadequacies. Sometimes we are afraid to speak up. However, we must have mental fortitude to correct these inadequacies for children who are too young to understand what it truly means to come to a nurturing environment.

As I mentioned before, themes emerging from the challenges I faced with prekindergarten teachers under their school principals mirror the evolving themes from the above-mentioned study. I reflect on the characteristics of the leader that differed from former school principals I had worked with in the past. The school principals as well as assistant principals I worked with over the years, were not afraid to show the love and compassion they felt for the children they were charged with. They were always present, ready, and available for any staff or faculty member. It was highly unlikely not to meet them daily in the school hallways or greeting the children and their parents. As positive role models, they created a culture of learning and acceptance. In hindsight, we were nurtured as teachers as well. I also recall that as leaders working in a solitary position, they were able to forge authentic relationships with other school principals from the same feeder pattern. They often discussed progress or lack thereof and began providing professional development amongst their schools. Below, I provide a table created for the inclusion of various elements useful in leading as critical instructional educators and advocates of and for marginalized children. I often relied on the descriptors of leadership that are outlined at various levels of development. This model was inspired by a group of critical pedagogists who found the *why* and the *how* to approach difficult topics within a school campus. A short description of each level follows for your understanding.

**Table 3**

*Reculturing Instructional Leadership*

<b>Level 1: Institutional Level</b>	<b>Level 2: Pedagogical Level</b>	<b>Level 3: Personal Level</b>
Identifying and addressing institutional inequities	Critical Instructional Leadership for leading Title I programming	Self-examination and transformation of deficit assumptions
Assuming an “advocacy stance” as leaders	Pedagogical Knowledge	Addressing deficit assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes with teachers
	Sociocultural Knowledge	

	Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy	
	L1/L2 Language and Literacy Acquisition and Development	

Note: From *Reculturing Instructional Leadership Using a Sociocultural Lens* by Mendoza-Reis, Flores, and Quintanar, 2009)

Level 1: Institutional Level equates to advocacy leadership. School principals cannot rely on a one size fits all model due to the growth in a diverse population (Mendoza Reis, & Smith, 2013). This level entails a skill set in advocacy and cultural proficiency, leading to the belief for a high quality and equitable public-school education for all (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

Level 2: Pedagogical Level equates to instructional leadership. Principals should be knowledgeable in pedagogy to effectively support teachers (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Levine, 1991; Robinson, Lloyed & Rowe, 2008).

Level 3: Personal Level equates to ideological clarity. Principals should be able to identify deficit assumptions about its student population and help to transform and reculture the school’s social, political, and personal environment (Flores, Cousin, & Diaz, 1991).

Along with defining and nurturing characteristics of a LatCrit leader and advocate by applying practices such as those delineated in the aforementioned table, suggestions for further study describe additional areas for consideration and implementation. Action research can be utilized when approaching any of the three suggestions described below. Each description is matched with a table that may be found in the Appendices.

## **Suggestions for Further Study**

### **1) Understanding state policy for early childhood programming.**

Guiding school principals to conceptualize what instructional leadership entails is of great importance. I found that most school principals I worked with still thought about the principalship as a managerial occupation. Most often, principals who lack the vision for understanding pedagogy, research, and practice, leave the responsibility to their instructional team or the teachers themselves. The state of Texas has provided numerous support systems through the Texas Education Agency's website. Creating a set of online modules or district led professional development sessions is key to embedding the district's mission, vision, and goals to effectively align vertical instruction across the early grades of Pre-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Furthermore, by using Table 1 in Appendix A, principals can begin to utilize the resources themselves. Addressing state requirements for prekindergarten programming can lead towards further implementation of programs for children ages 0-3. Opportunities for working with the community families of small children can lead to early screening for developmental delays before entering public school.

### **2) Addressing leadership skills that cover various aspects of early childhood programming.**

Early childhood education leadership entails an understanding of curriculum development, teacher professional development, screening, monitoring and assessment, developmentally appropriate materials, among many additional pedagogical necessities. However, the lack of service alignment for children of special needs is an urgent matter. School principals need to become well versed about the nuances of early childhood policy, governance, funding streams, innovative programming, and community resources which serve as an



extension of the home and school. Most often than not, principals need to have an awareness of these issues that differ from that of the K-12 public school framework. In addition, the National Association of Elementary School Principals is collaborating with the National Association for the Education of Young Children in creating pathways for special needs children. Often children receiving special services between the ages of 0-3 do not have the opportunity for continuing services after three years of age. By collaborating with childcare centers and special needs preschools, public schools have the opportunity for identifying children in need as they exit from the 0-3 years special needs services into public school services. Children leaving the 0-3 programming assistance are now able to transition into the new prekindergarten programming for children 3 years of age offered through HB 3.

**3) Theoretical foundations of early childhood development can enhance classroom environments.**

Not all school principals are familiar with child development theory. This is highly evident by the fact that some principals do not like ‘noisy prekindergarten classrooms’, don’t understand the reason behind active play, or may not see the advantage to utilizing authentic activities that may yield ‘scribbles’. In their eyes, children are at school to sit, get, and learn. The added advantage for understanding early learning theory may come in the form of Instructional Design. If school principals can understand what prekindergarten classrooms look and sound like, teachers may be able to execute action research that will help reach a more conducive learning environment to better fit the needs of the prekindergarten student population they serve.

**4) Building upon a young child’s extreme resilience in the face of adversity is the social justice responsibility of all educators.**

Over the previous four decades studies on resilience in children have been recorded giving us an idea of how and why some children on through adulthood are able to create successful lives in spite of the dangerous situations they faced. Some insights reveal that this resiliency may be due to individual differences that help children do well under dangerous conditions, while others may fall deeper in mental health illnesses (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Studies focused on developing intervention strategies that have also led to policy development for preventing these circumstances in the first place. In keeping with our necessary path as social justice advocates and critical leaders for the marginalized groups within our educational system, it is evident that collectively we must look towards implementing and sustaining practices that will tangibly and spiritually raise a child's current outlook in life. In keeping with these goals, the concept of *critical hope* (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) is a viable source for educators to apply within their teaching practices.

Educators are cautioned against promulgating false hope within underserved communities that may manifest itself as *hokey hope*, *mystical hope*, and *hope deferred* (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). These types of misguided hope are some of the most toxic and major contributors of poor health amongst underserved populations. However, by making a concerted effort in understanding the mechanisms that can actually create cracks within this 'concrete jungle', we can give rise to *material hope*, *Socratic hope*, and *audacious hope* within these marginalized student populations and their extended families. President Obama dared us to act on "radical transformation" of disenfranchised schools by emphasizing on "recruitment and training of transformative principals and more effective teachers" (Obama, 2006, p. 161). I implore that all educators take a deeper look into the concept of *critical hope* to build social emotional strategies around it (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

## Summary

This critical reflexive narrative exposes the implications and consequences that result from a lack of support for campus prekindergarten teachers. Eventually they become invisible within their school campuses. Of greater consequence is that public school prekindergarten teachers are tasked with a fragile population of marginalized three- and four-year-olds coming from low-income, disadvantaged backgrounds, may have just immigrated into the United States, have experienced extreme trauma and toxic stress and whose brain development has been altered. These teachers need to be a part of an inclusive community so that they may effectively provide critical assets necessary to improve brain development. Effective policy implementation by school districts in the form of school principal support can further a prekindergarten's transition into kindergarten. These issues were made clear in the themes that emerged as I reflected upon my artifacts. Evidence has come in the form a variety of authentic documents and documentation, along with a host of teacher experiences that I still hold on to in my memory. Many teachers continue to plea for equity, inclusion, and respect for the profession. We understand that principals have a direct impact on student achievement, as well as the fact that the principalship has become increasingly complex regarding accountability for student achievement. Likewise, our DLL and EL prekindergarten children have the insurmountable task of adjusting to a new environment, build secure relationships with teachers and peers, develop their first language as well as learn a new language, and navigate social norms while internally carrying their own maternal and familial wealth. It has been made abundantly clear, not just through my observations, but through evidence based practices, theoretical frameworks, federal initiatives from both private and public entities, and teacher opinion that school principals leading early childhood programming must receive appropriate preparation in the field of early

childhood education, must be supported by central office administrative personnel, and must heed state and policy requirements for proper implementation of early childhood programming.

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APPENDIX A

**Table 4**

*Crosswalk for §241.15 Texas Standards Required for Principal Certification and the Texas Education Agency’s Pre-Kindergarten House Bill 3 Programming Component Guide for Public School Administrators*

<p><b>§241.15 Texas Standards Required for Principal Certification</b></p>	<p align="center"><b>Texas Education Agency Pre-Kindergarten HB 3 Programming Component Guide for Public School Administrators</b>  <a href="https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/government-relations-and-legal/government-relations/house-bill-3">https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/government-relations-and-legal/government-relations/house-bill-3</a></p>
<p><b>Domains I-VI Competencies 001-0011</b></p>	<p>Chapter 102. Educational Programs          Subchapter AA. Commissioner’s Rules Concerning Early Childhood Education Programs  <a href="http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter102/ch102aa.html">http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter102/ch102aa.html</a></p>
<p><b>Domain 1: School Culture (School and Community Leadership)</b></p>	<p><b>TEC §29.166-29.172</b>          Implementation of a Two-Generational Approach to Family Engagement Plan for Early Childhood Populations  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kXCOGvrTPc&amp;feature=youtu.be">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kXCOGvrTPc&amp;feature=youtu.be</a></p> <p><b>TAC §102.1003 (e)</b> A school district or an open-enrollment charter school shall develop, implement, and make available on the district, charter, or campus website by November 1 of each school year, a family engagement plan to assist the district in achieving and maintaining high levels of family involvement and positive family attitudes toward education. An effective family engagement plan creates a foundation for the collaboration of mutual partners, embraces the individuality and uniqueness of families, and promotes a culture of learning that is child centered, age appropriate, and family driven.</p>
<p><b>Competency 001:</b>          Leadership          The entry-level principal knows how to establish and implement a</p>	<p><b>TEC §29.166-29.172</b>          Implementation of a Two-Generational Approach to Family Engagement Plan for Early Childhood Populations  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kXCOGvrTPc&amp;feature=youtu.be">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kXCOGvrTPc&amp;feature=youtu.be</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Family Engagement Program</li> <li>➤ Facilitate family-to-family supports systems.</li> <li>➤ Establish a network of community resources.</li> <li>➤ Increase family participation in decision-making.</li> </ul>



<p>shared vision and culture of high expectations for all stakeholders (students, staff, parents, and community).</p> <p><b>Competency 002:</b> The entry-level principal knows how to work with stakeholders as key partners to support student learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Equip families with tools to enhance and extend learning.</li> <li>➤ Develop staff skills in evidence-based practices that support families in meeting their children’s learning benchmarks.</li> <li>➤ Evaluate family engagement efforts and use evaluations for continuous improvement.</li> </ul> <p><b>Seek Public/Private Community Early Learning Partnerships:</b> (Now legally required) when requesting full-day exemption.</p> <p><b>TEA Partnership Guidebook:</b> <a href="https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/early-learning-partnerships">https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/early-learning-partnerships</a></p> <p>May use Regional Early Childhood Education Support Specialists (RECESS) Grant for Prekindergarten Partnership Initiative <a href="https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/recess-loi">https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/recess-loi</a></p> <p><b>Child Care Center Partnership requirements:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Texas Rising Star Program provider,</li> <li>➤ Nationally accredited</li> <li>➤ Texas School Ready participant</li> <li>➤ Comply with Department of Protective and Regulatory Services under §42.042, Human Resources Code</li> <li>➤ <b>Meet TEC §29.1532 Prekindergarten Program Requirements:</b></li> </ul> <p>(a) A school district’s prekindergarten program shall be designed to develop skills necessary for success in the regular public-school curriculum, including language, mathematics, and social skills.</p> <p><b>Head Start Partnership requirements:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) FSP funding (which now includes the early education allotment) and</li> <li>(b) Head Start program funding; check TEA Partnership Guidebook available at: <a href="https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/early-learning-partnerships">https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/early-learning-partnerships</a></li> </ul>
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<p><b>Domain II: Leading Learning</b></p>	<p><b>Implementation of full-day High-Quality Prekindergarten Curriculum:</b>  <b>Per TEC §29.167 (a):</b> A school district shall select and implement a curriculum for a prekindergarten program; and</p> <p><b>TAC §102.1003 (c):</b> A school district or an open-enrollment charter school shall measure: [student progress three times a year using a progress monitoring tool included in the commissioner’s list of approved prekindergarten instruments that measures social and emotional development, language and communication, emergent literacy reading, emergent writing, and mathematics</p>
<p><b>Competency 003:</b> The entry-level principal knows how to collaboratively develop and implement high-quality instruction.</p> <p><b>Competency 004:</b> The entry-level principal knows how to monitor and assess classroom instruction to promote teacher effectiveness and student achievement.</p>	<p><b>Learning Education Agencies (LEA’s) are required to implement a curriculum in their prekindergarten programs that address all ten developmental domains in the 2015 Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Social and emotional development</li> <li>➤ Language and communication</li> <li>➤ Emergent literacy reading</li> <li>➤ Emergent literacy writing</li> <li>➤ Mathematics</li> <li>➤ Science</li> <li>➤ Social Studies</li> <li>➤ Fine Arts</li> <li>➤ Physical development and health</li> <li>➤ Technology</li> </ul> <p><b>High-Quality Prekindergarten Components: Curriculum</b>  <a href="https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/PPT_Curriculum.pdf">https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/PPT_Curriculum.pdf</a></p> <p><b>High-Quality Prekindergarten Checklist – Curriculum</b>  <a href="https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/HQ_PK-Curriculum-Checklist.pdf">https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/HQ_PK-Curriculum-Checklist.pdf</a></p> <p><b>LEA’s are required to implement a Vertical Alignment Plan for Ages Birth-Grade 2</b>  <a href="https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/vertical-alignments">https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/vertical-alignments</a>  Alignment Information for Language and Literacy, Health and Wellness, Physical Development, Technology, Fine Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Texas Early Learning Guidelines</li> <li>➤ Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines</li> <li>➤ Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) K-2</li> </ul> <p><b>Data Driven Instruction in Early Childhood Education:</b>  <a href="https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/data-driven-instruction-in-early-childhood-education">https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/data-driven-instruction-in-early-childhood-education</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Requirements</li> <li>➤ Tool Selection</li> <li>➤ Best Practices and Professional Development</li> </ul>

**Commissioner’s List of Approved Prekindergarten Assessment Instruments**

[https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/App\\_H\\_Pre-K\\_Recommendations\\_acc\\_6-20.pdf](https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/App_H_Pre-K_Recommendations_acc_6-20.pdf)

The following Student Progress Monitoring Tools assess in both English and Spanish:

- CIRCLE
- DIAL-4
- Ready, Set, K!
- GOLD
- Frog Street Assessment

Selected assessment instrument must align with Kindergarten progress monitoring framework.

**Student Progress Monitoring**

LEA’s are required to monitor the progress that their prekindergarten students made using an assessment tool on the Commissioner’s List of Approved Prekindergarten Assessment Instruments. Students are to be assessed in the five primary domains of development:

- Emergent Literacy-Reading
- Emergent Literacy-Writing
- Language and Communication
- Mathematics
- Health and Wellness

**Per TEC §29.167 (a) (2):** A school district shall select and implement a curriculum for a prekindergarten program that measures the progress of students meeting the recommended learning outcomes.

**TEC §29.169 (a) (1):** A school district shall select and implement appropriate methods for evaluating the district’s program classes by measuring student progress.

**TEC §29.169 (c):** An assessment instrument administered to a prekindergarten program class must be selected from a list of appropriate prekindergarten assessment instruments identified by the commissioner.

**TAC §102.1003 (d):** Each teacher of record in a high-quality prekindergarten program must be certified under the TEC, Chapter 21, Subchapter B, and have one of the following additional qualifications:

- (1) a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential,
- (2) a certification offered through a training center accredited by Association Montessori Internationale or through the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education,
- (3) at least eight years’ experience of teaching in a nationally accredited childcare program,

	<p>(4) a graduate or undergraduate degree in early childhood education or early childhood special education or a non-early childhood education degree with a documented minimum of 15 units of coursework in early childhood education.</p> <p>(5) Documented completion of the Texas School Ready Training Program (TSR Comprehensive).</p> <p><b>High-quality Prekindergarten Checklist – Student Progress Monitoring/Assessment</b>  <a href="https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/HQ_PK_Student-Progress-Monitnoring-Checklist.pdf">https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/HQ_PK_Student-Progress-Monitnoring-Checklist.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Early Screening and Monitoring for Special Needs §102.1002 Prekindergarten Early Start Grant Program</b>  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_209cVC1Sic&amp;list=PLYCCyVaf2g1s2vvE_2wvD9v1Vty7wGdnp&amp;index=2&amp;t=0s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_209cVC1Sic&amp;list=PLYCCyVaf2g1s2vvE_2wvD9v1Vty7wGdnp&amp;index=2&amp;t=0s</a></p> <p><b>School Boards are required to adopt plans in:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Early Childhood (EC) Literacy and Math</li> <li>➤ 60% of all students reach the state’s “Meets” standard EC Literacy and Math by 2030 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade STAAR Assessment</li> </ul>
<p><b>Domain III: Human Capital</b></p>	<p><b>Teacher Qualifications Per TEC §29.167 (b)</b></p>
<p><b>Competency 005:</b> The entry-level principal knows how to provide feedback, coaching, and professional development to staff through evaluation, supervision, knows how to reflect on his/her own practice, and strives to grow</p>	<p><b>TEC §29.167 (b)</b> Each school district is required to employ prekindergarten teachers who are appropriately certified to teach prekindergarten and who have an additional qualification that is early childhood education specific.</p> <p>Each teacher for a prekindergarten program class must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ be certified under Subchapter B, Chapter 21; and</li> <li>➤ have one of the following additional qualifications:</li> <li>➤ a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or another early childhood education credential approved by the agency,</li> <li>➤ certification offered through a training center accredited by Association Montessori Internationale or through the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education,</li> <li>➤ at least eight years' experience of teaching in a nationally accredited childcare program,</li> <li>➤ be employed as a prekindergarten teacher in a school district that has received approval from the commissioner for the district's prekindergarten-specific instructional training plan that the teacher uses in the teacher's prekindergarten classroom; or</li> <li>➤ an equivalent qualification.</li> </ul>

<p>professionally.</p>	<p><b>Teacher to Student Ratio</b>  Per <b>TEC §29.167 (d)</b> A school district must attempt to maintain an average ratio in any prekindergarten program class of not less than one certified teacher or teacher’s aide for each 11 students.  <b>TAC §102.1003 (i)</b> a school district or an open-enrollment charter school shall maintain locally and provide at the TEA’s request the necessary documentation to ensure fidelity of high-quality prekindergarten program implementation.</p> <p><a href="https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/PPT_Teacher-Student_Ratio.pdf">https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/PPT_Teacher-Student_Ratio.pdf</a></p> <p><b>High-Quality Prekindergarten Checklist – Teacher Qualifications</b>  <a href="https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/HQ_PK-Teacher-Qualifications-Checklist.pdf">https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/HQ_PK-Teacher-Qualifications-Checklist.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Early Screening and Monitoring for Special Needs</b>  <b>TEA-ESC Region 13 Texas Statewide Leadership for Autism Training (TSLAT)</b>  <a href="https://www.txautism.net/">https://www.txautism.net/</a></p>
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Note. Crosswalk for §241.15 Texas Standards Required for Principal Certification and the Texas Education Agency’s Pre-Kindergarten House Bill 3 Programming Component Guide for Public School Administrators adapted by Cynthia Chavez, 2023

APPENDIX B

**Table 5:**

*Evidence-Based Practices for Quality Public Funded Pre-Kindergarten Programs*

<b>Evidence-Based Practices for Quality Public Funded Preschool Programs</b>		
<b>NAEYC-National Association for the Education of Young Children Developmentally Appropriate Practice</b>	<b>NAESP-National Association of Elementary School Principals Recommendations</b>	<b>NIEER-National Institute of Early Education Research</b>
<p><b>Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum to Achieve Meaningful Goals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Desired goals that are important for young children’s development and learning in general and culturally and linguistically responsive to children in particular have been identified and clearly articulated.</li> <li>The program has a comprehensive, effective curriculum that targets the identified goals across all domains of development and subject areas.</li> <li>Educators use the curriculum framework in their planning to make sure there is ample attention to important learning goals and to enhance the coherence of the overall experience for children.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Competency 3: Embrace and Enact a Pre-K – 3<sup>rd</sup>. Grade Vision</b></p> <p><u>Strategies</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish a schoolwide culture that Pre-K, inclusive of the different learning opportunities children have prior to kindergarten, is a fundamental anchor to the school’s mission and student success.</li> <li>Align curriculum and instructional practices across the Pre-K– 3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum to ensure that they are comprehensive and differentiated for students along the developmental continuum.</li> <li>Ensure that instruction, interactions, and learning environments in the</li> </ul>	<p><b>Benchmark 1: Early Learning and Development Standards</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Must have clear and appropriate expectations for learning and development across multiple domains (Bornfreund, McCann, Williams &amp; Guernsey, 2014); Bowman, Donovan, Burns (2001)</li> <li>High-quality teaching by and Early Childhood Education certified teacher is present.</li> <li>Formal and informal professional development is sustained for early childhood teachers</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators make meaningful connections a priority in the learning experiences they provide each child.</li> <li>• Educators collaborate with those teaching in the preceding and subsequent age groups or grade levels, sharing information about children and working to increase continuity and coherence across ages and grades.</li> <li>• Although it will vary across the age span, a planned and written curriculum is in place for all age groups.</li> </ul>	<p>primary grades (K–3rd grade) reflect child development and are designed to build on the gains made in Pre-K.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Align schoolwide policies, programs, and initiatives to ensure coherent support for Pre-K–3rd grade.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Demonstrating Professionalism as An Early Childhood Educator</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and involve themselves with the early childhood field and serve as informed advocates for young children, families, and the profession.</li> <li>• Know about and uphold ethical and other early childhood professional guidelines.</li> <li>• Use professional communication skills, including technology-mediated strategies, to effectively support young children’s learning and development and to work with families and colleagues.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Competency 5: Share Leadership and Build Professional Capacity</b></p> <p><u>Strategies</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share leadership for Pre-K–3rd grade with individual teachers and teacher teams based on their expertise.</li> <li>• Provide supportive, rigorous, aligned, and ongoing professional learning opportunities that reflect current knowledge of child development and of effective, high-quality instructional practices.</li> <li>• Use knowledge of the developmental continuum to make informed</li> </ul>	<p><b>Benchmark 3: Teacher Degree</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher must possess a bachelor’s degree with specialized knowledge and training in early childhood education (Bowman, et al., 2001)</li> </ul> <p><b>Benchmark 4: Teacher Specialized Training</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers must receive specialized training that includes knowledge of learning, development, and pedagogy specific to preschool-age children (Bowman et al., 2001; Han, J. &amp; Neuharth-</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage in continuous, collaborative learning to inform practice.</li> <li>Develop and sustain the habit of reflective and intentional practice in their daily work with young children and as members of the early childhood profession.</li> </ul>	<p>decisions about hiring and placement of teachers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster the health and well-being of teachers and staff (and oneself) to be able to support students and families in times of stress.</li> </ul>	<p>Pritchett, 2010; Heisner, Lederberg, 2011; Kagan &amp; Cohen, 1997).</p> <p><b>Benchmark 5:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assistant Teacher Degree</li> <li>Teacher assistant must possess a Child Development Credential (CDA) (Pianta, Downer, &amp; Hamre, 2016; Weiland, 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2013).</li> <li>Formal and informal professional development is sustained for early childhood teachers</li> </ul>
<p><b>Teaching to Enhance Child’s Development and Learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development and learning are dynamic processes that reflect the complex interplay between a child’s biological characteristics and the environment, each shaping the other as well as future patterns of growth.</li> <li>All domains of child development-physical development, cognitive development, social and emotional development, and linguistic development (including bilingual or</li> </ul>	<p><b>Competency 1: Understand Child Development and its Implications for High-Quality Instruction and Interactions, Pre-K to 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade</b></p> <p><u>Strategies</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deepen knowledge of and stay current with research on child development (including social-emotional development, executive function, and effects of toxic stress).</li> <li>Emphasize and prioritize relationships among</li> </ul>	<p><b>Benchmark 6: Staff Professional Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers and teacher assistants are required to have at least 15 hours of annual in-service training; ongoing coaching and mentoring are required.</li> <li>Preschool programs follow appropriate early learning standards.</li> </ul>



<p>multilingual development), as well as approaches to learning – are important; each domain both supports and is supported by others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play promotes joyful learning that fosters self-regulation, language, cognitive and social competencies as well as content knowledge across disciplines. Play is essential for all children, birth to age 8.</li> <li>• Although general professions of development and learning can be identified, variations due to cultural contexts, experiences, and individual differences must also be considered.</li> <li>• Children are active learners from birth, constantly taking in and organizing information to create meaning through their relationships, their interactions with their environment, and their overall experiences.</li> </ul>	<p>students, teachers, staff, and families.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish learning environments and instructional practices that promote student engagement and voice.</li> <li>• Understand the implications of child development for students’ social and emotional experiences along the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preschools offer at least a full day of school.</li> <li>• Evidence-Based Curriculum is utilized.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each member of the community is valued by the others and is recognized for the strengths they bring.</li> <li>• Relationships are nurtured with each child, and educators facilitate the development of positive relationships among children.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Competency 4: Ensure Equitable Opportunities</b></p> <p><u>Strategies</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop critical self-awareness and knowledge of oppression, privilege, and cultural competence.</li> <li>• Establish a school climate that is open, inclusive, and affirming of</li> </ul>	<p><b>Benchmarks 7 and 8: Maximum Class size and Staff-Child Ratio</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class size should be limited to at most 20 children; classes should have no more than 10 children per teaching staff member (Bowman et al., 2001; NAEYC, 2005; Perlman,</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each member of the community respects and is accountable to the others to behave in a way that is conducive to the learning and well-being of all.</li> <li>• The physical environment protects the health and safety of the learning community members, and it specifically supports young children’s physiological needs for play, activity, sensory stimulation, fresh air, rest, and nourishment.</li> </ul>	<p>differences (for staff, students, and their families).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine school data sources and stakeholder feedback to identify disproportionalities and disparities.</li> <li>• Differentiate resources and strategies to ensure students, teachers, staff, and families have equitable opportunity to succeed.</li> </ul>	<p>Falenchuk, Fletcher, McMullen, Beyene, &amp; Shah (2016); Reynolds, Hayakawa, Mondì, Englund, Candee, &amp; Smerillo, 2017).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessments are developmentally appropriate and ongoing.</li> <li>• Data is regularly collected and used to inform practice.</li> <li>• Maximum adult-child ratio of 1:10</li> </ul>
<p><b>Standard 4: Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children’s Development and Learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observation, documentation, and assessment of young children’s progress and achievements is ongoing, strategic, reflective, and purposeful.</li> <li>• Assessment focuses on children’s progress toward developmental and educational goals. Such goals should reflect families’ input as well as children’s background knowledge and experiences.</li> <li>• A system is in place to collect, make sense of, and use observations, documentation,</li> </ul>	<p><b>Competency 4: Ensure Equitable Opportunities</b></p> <p><u>Strategies</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop critical self-awareness and knowledge of oppression, privilege, and cultural competence.</li> <li>• Establish a school climate that is open, inclusive, and affirming of differences (for staff, students, and their families).</li> <li>• Examine school data sources and stakeholder feedback to identify disproportionalities and disparities.</li> <li>• Differentiate resources and strategies to ensure students, teachers, staff,</li> </ul>	<p><b>Benchmark 9: Screenings and Referrals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preschool programs ensure that children receive vision and hearing screenings as well as referrals when needed (Meisels &amp; Atkins-Burnett, 2000; Shonkoff &amp; Meisels, 2013).</li> <li>• Assessments are developmentally appropriate and ongoing.</li> <li>• Data is regularly collected and used to inform practice.</li> </ul>

<p>and assessment information to guide what goes on in the early learning setting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The methods of assessment are responsive to the current developmental accomplishments, language(s), and experiences of young children. They recognize individual variation in learners and allow children to demonstrate their competencies in different ways.</li> <li>• Assessments are used only for the populations and purposes for which they have been demonstrated to produce reliable, valid information.</li> <li>• Decisions that have a major impact on children, such as enrollment or placement, are made in consultation with families.</li> <li>• When a screening assessment identifies a child who may have a disability or individualized learning or developmental needs, there is appropriate follow-up, evaluation, and, if needed, referral.</li> </ul>	<p>and families have equitable opportunity to succeed.</p>	
<p><b>Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections</b></p>	<p><b>Competency 4: Ensure Equitable Opportunities</b> <u>Strategies</u></p>	<p><b>Benchmark 10</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each State should require a Continuous Quality Improvement System (CQIS) for continuous</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators take responsibility for establishing respectful, reciprocal relationships with and among families.</li> <li>• Educators welcome family members in the setting and create multiple opportunities for family participation.</li> <li>• Educators work in collaborative partnerships with families, seeking and maintaining regular, frequent, two-way communication with them and recognizing that the forms of communication may differ for each family.</li> <li>• Educators acknowledge a family’s choices and goals for their child and respond with sensitivity and respect to those preferences and concerns.</li> <li>• Educators and the family share with each other their knowledge of the particular child and understanding of child development and learning as part of day-to-day and other forms of communication (e.g., family get-togethers, meetings, support groups).</li> <li>• Educators involve families as a source of information about the child (before program entry and on an ongoing basis).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop critical self-awareness and knowledge of oppression, privilege, and cultural competence.</li> <li>• Establish a school climate that is open, inclusive, and affirming of differences (for staff, students, and their families).</li> <li>• Examine school data sources and stakeholder feedback to identify disproportionalities and disparities.</li> <li>• Differentiate resources and strategies to ensure students, teachers, staff, and families have equitable opportunity to succeed.</li> </ul>	<p>improvement. State policy must require that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1) data on classroom quality is systematically collected,</li> <li>• 2) local programs and the state both use information from the CQIS to help improve policy or practice.</li> </ul>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators take care to learn about the community in which they work, and they use the community as a resource across all aspects of program delivery.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators take responsibility for establishing respectful, reciprocal relationships with and among families.</li> <li>• Educators welcome family members in the setting and create multiple opportunities for family participation.</li> <li>• Educators work in collaborative partnerships with families, seeking and maintaining regular, frequent, two-way communication with them and recognizing that the forms of communication may differ for each family.</li> <li>• Educators acknowledge a family’s choices and goals for their child and respond with sensitivity and respect to those preferences and concerns.</li> <li>• Educators and the family share with each other their knowledge of the particular child and understanding of child development and learning as part of day-to-day and other</li> </ul>	<p><b>Competency 2: Develop and Foster Partnerships with Families and Communities</b></p> <p><u>Strategies</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage intentionally with families, especially those who have been traditionally marginalized.</li> <li>• Establish relationships and support collaboration with early care and education (ECE) programs in the community.</li> <li>• Ensure smooth transitions for students and families not only between the variety of ECE programs and kindergarten, but also across the full Pre-K–3rd grade continuum.</li> <li>• Facilitate linkages with community supports and services to meet the needs of Pre-K–3rd grade families.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Family Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools offer a strong support system for children with special needs.</li> </ul>

<p>forms of communication (e.g., family get-togethers, meetings, support groups).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators involve families as a source of information about the child (before program entry and on an ongoing basis).</li> <li>• Educators take care to learn about the community in which they work, and they use the community as a resource across all</li> <li>• aspects of program delivery.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each member of the community is valued by the others and is recognized for the strengths they bring.</li> <li>• Relationships are nurtured with each child, and educators facilitate the development of positive relationships among children.</li> <li>• Each member of the community respects and is accountable to the others to behave in a way that is conducive to the learning and well-being of all.</li> <li>• The physical environment protects the health and safety of the learning community members, and it specifically supports young children’s physiological needs for play,</li> </ul>	<p><b>Competency 6: Promote a Culture of Continuous Improvement Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop an understanding of appropriate uses of student assessments in Pre-K–3rd grade.</li> <li>• Rely on multiple sources of data to inform improvement efforts.</li> <li>• Build and support collaborative inquiry among teachers and others in the school community.</li> <li>• Engage families and community members in reviewing data and planning continuous improvement.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Benchmark 10</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each State should require a Continuous Quality Improvement System (CQIS) for continuous improvement. State policy must require that 1) data on classroom quality is systematically collected,</li> <li>• 2) local programs and the state both use information from the CQIS to help improve policy or practice.</li> </ul>

activity, sensory stimulation, fresh air, rest, and nourishment.		
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Note: Recommendations from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) by Cynthia Chavez, 2023

## Appendix C

**Table 6**

*Theoretical Assumptions About Child Development*

Theory	Prominent Theorists	Assumptions About Child Development
Maturationist theory	Gesell	Human traits are determined primarily by genetics. Children simply mature with age; environment plays a major role.
Behaviorist Theory	Skinner, Watson, Bandura	Human traits are acquired through experiences within the environment. Adults can purposefully shape desired learning and behavior through positive reinforcement.
Psychoanalytic Theory	Freud, Erikson	Emotional development stems from an ability to resolve key conflicts between desires and impulses and pressures from the outside world. Adults can promote children's emotional health by providing appropriate opportunities for the gratification of drives.
Cognitive Development Theory	Piaget	Intellectual development is internal and personal. Knowledge is constructed actively by learners, who struggle to make sense of our experiences. Learners assimilate new ideas into what they already know but also adjust previous thinking to accommodate new information.
Sociocultural Theory	Vygotsky	Adults and peers can "scaffold" children's learning by asking questions or challenging thinking. Through social interaction and verbalization, children construct knowledge of the world.
Ecological Systems Theory	Bronfenbrenner	Development is influenced by the personal, social, and political systems within which children live. Interactions between the family, school, community, social and political systems, and the individual child will determine developmental outcomes.

Note: Theories of Child Development Author: Jeffrey Trawick Smith



## VITA

Cynthia Chavez has worked in the field of early childhood education in various capacities. Cynthia spent her career working as an early childhood educator with the Ysleta Independent School District. After retiring, she contributed to the implementation of the Texas School Ready! Grant in the El Paso area, mentoring early childhood educators from various El Paso area public school districts. After serving as a multi-district early childhood coach and mentor, Cynthia then took a lead educational position with the Ysleta Pueblo Tribe to develop an early childhood program that was geared towards meeting the needs of the Native American population in the El Paso and New Mexico area. Ms. Chavez has had the opportunity to advocate at the local, state, and national levels for the importance of early childhood development and education. She continues to advocate for the youngest of our children within both the teaching and educational administrative roles.

As an educator, Ms. Chavez was a finalist as a Texas state teacher of the year and has trained early childhood providers and educators at the state and national level. Even though she has retired, she continues to advocate for her cause, stepping in as the voice for marginalized and disadvantaged preschoolers. Cynthia is planning to continue advocating for the youngest as an early childhood policy advocate in Washington, D.C., representing this population's needs from both local and state levels.