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## Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy And Qris: Leveraging Systems To Improve Academic Achievement Of Marginalized Students

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CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY AND QRIS: LEVERAGING SYSTEMS TO  
IMPROVE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

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Dean of the Graduate School

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my mom. Thank you for believing in me, inspiring me, and teaching me how to advocate for myself and others. I know how excited you were to watch me meet this milestone. While you may not be here to watch me finish this journey, you have made it possible for me to get to this point. Thank you for your sacrifices, dedication, and unwavering love. I love you and miss you.

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IMPROVE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

by

ELIZABETH NICHOLS, B.A.

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## **Abstract**

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is being utilized to support racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students in some classrooms and schools across the nation. Minoritized students currently have higher disciplinary rates and lower graduation rates. This leads to the question: at what age should educators begin implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) to support positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes in young children? This thesis explores how preschool programs implement culturally sustaining practices in their classroom environments through interactions with students, family/community engagement, and social justice activities. I also examine how the implementation of CSP improves academic, social, and emotional outcomes among minoritized children. CSP is the ideal approach to creating high-quality programs for marginalized students in early childhood programs. Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS), which work with early childhood programs, to improve their quality, provide a potential system that can be leveraged to support the national implementation of CSP. I propose implementing CSP through QRIS will improve the quality of early childhood programs and thus, improve outcomes in early childhood education for minoritized students. In this thesis, I provide background on QRIS and examine the ways QRIS can leverage training, practice-based coaching, and ongoing assessments to further the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy in preschool classrooms nationwide. Implementing CSP in QRIS would establish a need for early childhood coaches who specialize in CSP to provide on-site coaching to early childhood programs nationally. QRIS systems implementing CSP would fundamentally shift the way early childhood thinks about quality and the ways in which we assess quality for marginalized communities.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In the wake of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001), the field of education became weighed down by federal mandates, including the development and implementation of state standards, testing to assess schools to determine what schools are meeting those standards, reporting results of assessments, states being measured against other states and national metrics for their ability to make adequate progression over time. States and schools were also caught under the weight of punitive measures that would be enforced if and when schools failed to meet benchmarks. These mandates resulted in very few substantive changes in academic outcomes (McGuinn, 2012). NCLB focused on assessments, which are notoriously biased towards marginalized populations, because they are developed based on White, monolingual, middle-class children's performance (Perez, 2018). When marginalized students did not perform as well as White peers, it was determined there was a developmental deficit crisis in diverse student populations based on the assessment results (Perez, 2018). With a spotlight on the "crisis" in early childhood education the next administration was eager to find a solution to the perceived problem. The Obama administration developed Race to the Top (2009), which utilized a grant-based process to inspire states to innovate their education systems. Race to the Top provided funding through a specific grant aimed at improving Early Childhood Education—The Race to the Top Early Learning Grant. This grant provided funding for states to improve early childhood programs serving children from birth to five years of age. After Obama's 2013 State of the Union address, urging Congress to expand high-quality preschool to all children, Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS), which were slowly spreading nationwide, expanded quickly to the point that they now exist in most states and United States territories.

## **QUALITY RATING IMPROVEMENT SYSTEM**

The first QRIS was developed in the 1990s in a small number of states, including Colorado, North Carolina, and Oklahoma, as a means to improve the quality of early childhood programs (Mitchell, 2005). While these systems vary by state in their format, they largely consist of similar components. QRIS include sets of quality standards for children birth to 5 years of age covering topics ranging from a program's physical environment, their learning and curriculum implementation, community and family engagement, professional development, and program administration. Quality standards are typically decided with input from a wide range of stakeholders within the state including early childhood professional, childcare providers, the state Department of Education, state-level Head Start representatives, as well as other experts in early childhood education including federal technical assistance specialists working to support state QRIS. Schools demonstrate their programs are meeting QRIS standards via documentation, a range of in-person assessments, as well as demonstrating the completion of specific trainings. Programs assess themselves on the criteria established by that state, develop quality improvement goals, and then participate in training, coaching, and technical assistance as they work on their goals. Programs are evaluated by a range of methods including observations and a review of standards met by a rating entity.

While the efforts to improve early childhood education benefits all children, the impact on minoritized student populations is widely recognized. Many studies have “demonstrated that sustained high-quality childcare experiences can improve cognitive and social outcomes for children from low-income families” (Burchinal et al., p. 167). According to the 2021 Census Bureau data, 15.3% of children live in poverty. Of those living in poverty approximately 19.5% identified as Black, 17.1% as Hispanic, 24.3% as American Indian or Alaska Native, 14.2% as one

or more race, and 9.3% as Asian. These numbers are in stark contrast to the 8.1% of White children who live in poverty. Moreover, low-income children who identify as a racial minority are disproportionately impacted by a lack of access to high-quality early childhood education. According to Gillispie's (2019) report for The Education Trust, "in the 26 states included in this study, only 1% of Latino 3- and 4-year-olds and 4% of Black 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in high-quality state preschool programs" (p. 2). With such a small percentage of racial minorities represented in high-quality early childhood education, it begs the question: how can we improve the quality of early childhood education for minoritized student populations? Research suggests that the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) can address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Therefore, in this thesis, I argue that implementing CSP in early childhood by leveraging QRIS will improve the quality of early childhood programs and thus, improve outcomes in early childhood education for minoritized students. To do this, I provide a review of the literature on CSP and its current levels of implementation in prekindergarten classes. I examine the use of diverse materials, interactions, family and community engagement, and social justice activities with prekindergarten students. I then discuss the impact of CSP on students' cognitive, social, and emotional development. I address the challenges that exist in the implementation of this pedagogical approach in early childhood education, namely within teacher training, longstanding school concerns such as large class sizes and reduced funding, as well as the current social/political climate. Important to note is that the current research on these topics, as presented in the literature review primarily addresses older elementary through high school-age students. I present these studies with the call for more research on these topics to be conducted in early childhood programs.

In total, I propose a unique solution in early childhood education that will support the increasing population of culturally and linguistically diverse learners, and finally, allow them to receive the education that they deserve by using QRIS to support and encourage the implementation of CSP. I explore why QRIS is the most effective route for nationwide implementation. I review the three specific areas of QRIS that will support the implementation of CSP: training, practice-based coaching, and ongoing assessment. Finally, I will discuss how state-level quality improvement systems could benefit from the inclusion of CSP in their approaches to improve the quality of early childhood education for minoritized students.

### **MAKING THE CASE: WHY CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY**

To the detriment of minoritized students, from 1787 to the present time in 2024, public schools have deprived children of color from an education that reflects and affirms their culture. The goal of early childhood is to address the needs of the whole child. The family's culture is an extension of that child and should be approached as a part of their learning experience. In 2013, 49% of children entering kindergarten were culturally and/or linguistically diverse, and that percentage is only expected to grow (NCES, 2013). Furthermore, the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2011) estimated that by 2050, 62% of the nation's children will be Latinx<sup>1</sup> and children of color. These compelling statistics create a sense of urgency to address the educational needs of the large population of culturally and/or linguistically diverse students in education by implementing CSP in early childhood education.

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<sup>1</sup> The term Latino is often used to refer to the larger ethnic demographic of people who originate from Latin American countries. To be gender inclusive, I adopt the term Latinx in this thesis when referencing this population, outside of direct quotations.

## **DEFINING CULTURALLY RELEVANT AND CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGIES**

In 1995, Gloria Ladson Billings introduced culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as a pedagogical approach to support minority students and a response to the persistence of deficit thinking. Deficit thinking refers to the belief that students and families of color or low socioeconomic backgrounds are deficient in some way that prevents them from performing at the same level as their White middle and upper-class peers (Valencia & Black, 2002). Elsewhere, deficit approaches have been described as viewing “languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students and communities of color as deficiencies to be overcome” (Paris, 2014, p. 93).

CRP, in contrast, is an asset-based pedagogical approach that views students cultural, literate, and linguistic backgrounds as a resource or asset that should be honored, explored, and extended (Paris & Alim, 2017). CRP establishes the need for professionals to be aware of their own cultural backgrounds as well as those of their students. Professionals also need to have genuine care for their students and their families. Ladson-Billings lays out three criteria for CRP including an expectation of academic success on the part of all students, the development of cultural competence with students, and finally, the development of critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Morrison et al., 2008). Cultural competence is the “ongoing contextual, developmental and experiential process of personal growth that results in [personal and] professional understanding and ability to adequately serve individuals who look, think and behave [similarly and] differently from us” (Wee et al., 2023). Critical consciousness refers to a larger sociopolitical awareness that allows individuals to critique cultural norms and values as well as the institutions that contribute to the maintenance of social inequality. At the core, CRP strives “to create more effective instructional experiences that [are] more likely to engage students in the

learning and increase academic achievement” (Girchuru et al., 2015, p. 46). As teachers began to answer the earlier charge to implement CRP, the theoretical underpinnings of CRP continued to evolve to address the children who remained undervalued in the system that was designed to educate them (Bennet et al., 2017). This evolution led to the development of CSP.

With firm roots in CRP, CSP (Paris, 2012) seeks to further address the failure on the part of schools to support and sustain student’s cultural and linguistic practices. CSP emerged from the need for a new pedagogical approach that would take the best of CRP and connect it with 21st-century research and practice that described how to value and sustain students’ cultures in the classroom. CSP requires that educational practices support students to sustain their cultural and linguistic practices as part of the educational process while facilitating student learning in the development of “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism” (Paris, 2014, p. 93). In other words, education must embrace a child’s cultural background as a source of valuable knowledge and expertise, while providing access to dominant knowledge. To elaborate, the aim is not to replace existing knowledge, but to expand knowledge with the ultimate goal of social transformation and revitalization (Paris & Alim, 2017). Moreover, CSP makes space for evolving cultural practices, meaning that cultures shift over time as a result of an increasingly pluralistic society. Finally, CSP operates with the understanding that education is “additive not subtractive” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1). An additive educational approach seeks to add knowledge and practices to students' existing cultural and linguistic repertoire rather than subtracting their cultural and linguistic practices to assimilate diverse students. The goal of education cannot be to make marginalized students perform like dominant groups, but instead to sustain and foster cultural pluralism while helping students develop the skills to critically examine their cultural practices when necessary. It is in this

reimagined space of CSP, I turn to consider its current, though limited, use in early childhood education.



## **Chapter 2: Current Implementation of CSP Elements in Early Childhood Education**

Educators have begun to introduce elements of CSP in public education, and some preschool teachers have utilized these elements with preschool students, albeit in a very small number of preschool programs. The implementation of CSP elements in preschool classrooms looks different than in elementary, middle, or high school classrooms. In a review of current relevant literature on CSP in early childhood and preschool classrooms, there are four categories represented in the literature where elements of CSP are currently being implemented: classroom environments, teacher-student and peer interactions, family and community engagement, and social justice projects. First, I examine the categories where elements of CSP are being implemented. Second, I explore the academic, social, and emotional impacts of a full implementation of CSP on minoritized children. Third, I provide considerations for implementing CSP in early childhood programs. Finally, I discuss how three key features of QRIS including training, practice-based coaching, and ongoing assessments, could be leveraged to support programs in beginning to implement CSP.

### **CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS: SETTING THE STAGE FOR CSP**

Learning does not occur in a vacuum. It takes place in a physical space that includes the furnishings, windows, doors, classroom materials, and even the décor. The physical condition and quality of all these physical items are also considered a part of the classroom environment. All these things have the potential to contribute to the comfort, warmth, and learning experience of the staff and children who are in the space. Yet, research indicates that schools with predominantly Black/Latinx populations have fewer resources than schools with a higher White population and smaller percentages of Black/Latinx students. Nationally, marginalized students receive anywhere between “\$400 and \$1,200 less per pupil than White and economically advantaged students”

(Bryant et al., 2023). This lack of financial resources results in lower quality classroom materials, damaged furnishings and materials not being replaced, outdated classroom materials, a lack of contemporary and positive representations of diverse people, and less classroom décor that can create warm and welcoming spaces for teachers, students and their families. Additionally, these conditions do not create classroom environments that reflect to the children that they are valued and respected, or that their learning experience matters. In contrast, well-resourced classrooms, which are primarily available to White middle-to-upper middle-class students and families, include books, display images, and classroom materials that provide positive representations of White people and the English language.

A classroom environment is a powerful tool that can serve as an additional learning resource in the classroom when executed properly. By using classroom play materials that positively represent students' diverse lived experiences, structuring the classroom to support children's play, and arranging the physical space in the classroom so children can access and explore materials comfortably, teachers create an environment that affirms children's cultural identities. This creates a space for them to learn about and from various cultural lenses. Establishing a classroom environment that is rich in diverse materials is an obvious first step in CSP. Materials such as multicultural literature (Bennet, 2017, Durden et al., 2014), puzzles, toys, dolls, and dramatic play items representing age, racial, and gender diversity (Durden et al., 2014, p. 227); books, dolls, music CDs, and toy people from various cultures (Gichuru et al., 2015) provide a landscape that can support rich conversations about diversity. It also provides a mirror for children to see themselves reflected in the environment, so they feel welcomed and included. Finally, it provides an opportunity for students to see other cultures represented, which fosters

cultural pluralism, a key objective of CSP. In what follows, I present examples of CSP implementation in early childhood classrooms or programs.

In Gichuru et al.'s (2015) qualitative study, they explored the ways children's cultural backgrounds were reflected in seven Head Start classrooms. The researchers looked at culturally diverse classrooms, taught by teachers including four White teachers, two Black teachers, and one Hispanic teacher. Teachers were observed and participated in interviews with the researchers. During observations, the classroom environments, communication, and curriculum were assessed. This included materials that represented children's backgrounds, the use of children's home language, and children being taught about a variety of cultures. During the interviews, teachers were asked for their demographic information, their professional background, descriptions of their communication with parents including challenges they experience, and how they engage families and their interests in the curriculum. Findings suggest that teachers reflected student cultural backgrounds in three key ways—(1) using students' interests in their curriculum, (2) reflecting their diversity in the physical environment, and (3) fostering communication with families. These three means of representing students are illustrative of the goals of CSP-centering students' cultures by including families, providing positive representations of students' identities and providing opportunities for students to exercise their agency. Importantly, as Gichuru et al. (2015) point out, early childhood educators must ensure that classroom materials are relevant to the specific children in that class. Having pictures, dramatic play food, and music representing the Dominican Republic is an important addition to a classroom to promoting cultural pluralism, however, if the student population is largely Mexican or Puerto Rican, that representation does not center the children's cultural identities per CSP.

In MacNevin and Berman's (2017) article, they discuss a part of the larger *Can We Talk About Race* study examining conversations surrounding race in early childhood. Chief among their research study, and pertinent to this thesis, is the question: "What strategies or materials do ECE<sup>2</sup> use to discuss (or not discuss) race with children?" (MacNevin & Berman, 2017, p. 828). The data collection included interviews with teachers, and students aged 2.5-5 years of age who were from a wide range of racial backgrounds. They applied two primary theoretical frameworks to their analysis including Critical Race Theory and Post-Structural Theory<sup>3</sup>. They had two crucial findings: first, materials are not enough to help students foster student's racial identities or develop critical consciousness. They state, "without teachers supporting children's play with diverse materials, children were left to make their meaning, and often this meaning reinforced racist and stereotypical beliefs and patterns of behavior including exclusion" (pp. 832-833). The presence of diverse materials in the classroom provides a good starting point for CSP because they offer the opportunity for minoritized students to see themselves reflected in the classroom environment and help students see positive representations of other racial/ethnic groups. However, in keeping with the aims of CSP, for these materials to foster and sustain children's cultural identities, teachers need to scaffold learning to help students make meaning from those materials. MacNevin & Berman's (2017) second finding was that educators were not always aware what students knew about race and how they used that in play and interactions. For example, MacNevin & Berman point out that nonwhite students were sometimes excluded from play, but teachers stated they

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<sup>2</sup> ECE in this quotation referenced early childhood educators.

<sup>3</sup> Critical Race Theory (CRT) is based in legal studies and proposes race as a social construct that impacts institutions and examines how power structures are enacted in policies and practices based on racist ideologies (MacNevin & Berman, 2017). Post-structural theory argues that discourses surrounding race are linked to the relationships between knowledge and power. In the case of early childhood education, MacNevin & Berman (2017) argue that we can observe the discourses children upon, in their play.

weren't aware if that was racially motivated or not. They also noted that students would play with racially diverse dolls, but they didn't know if they were selecting them based on their own racial identity. It is important for educators to be cognizant of student's cultural awareness to implement CSP, so teachers can select materials intentionally to support student's understanding of the diverse cultural identities in their classroom and beyond.

The words that are used in physical spaces become a part of the classroom environment and they are an important part of sustaining cultures which, historically have had their linguistic practices devalued, dismissed, and often denied to them in educational spaces. Lee and McCarty (2017) discuss how two schools utilized CSP with Indigenous tribes to support their language revitalization efforts. The two schools in their case study included large indigenous populations. The first program was the Native American Community Academy, a public charter school in New Mexico where 95% of the student body identifies as Native American. The school teaches, with the permission of the tribes, five of the local languages including Navajo, Lakota, Kres, Tiwa, and Zuni tribes. The embedding of the linguistic practices of Indigenous students into their daily educational lives sustains their language and their cultures by providing a safe space to use their language in the school environment, where it is valued socially and academically. Lee and McCarty also explored language revitalization at the magnet school, Puente de Hózhó where 27% of students were Native American and 21% were Latinx. This school sought to “connect and valorize the communities three predominant ethnic and linguistic groups” (p. 70) which included Dine (Navajo), Spanish, and finally English. Staff, students, and families embraced the cultural pluralism in their program. For example, students had the option to enroll in the Spanish-English dual-language program and the Navajo dual-language program. The program respected the parent's desires for their children to become literate in both languages as opposed to just one. This

program did not end with the language-rich environment; they extended the representations of linguistic pluralism in the physical environment as well. The school's entrance sign features the school's motto, using the school's three represented languages. The school also includes student-created murals representing traditional practices and displays song lyrics from culturally significant music. A school's ability to include students' linguistic backgrounds sustains home languages rather than eliminating them. When educators and schools create spaces for linguistic pluralism to be upheld as an asset, they sustain children's linguistic practices which will improve their academic performance; I return to this point in chapter 3, addressing implications. In addition to the materials and language of a classroom, the walls surrounding the classroom become an opportunity for educators to affirm and center their students' identities.

The walls of the classroom are a blank canvas waiting to be adorned for any preschool teacher. Educators practicing CSP utilize these spaces for displays such as "instructional charts, classroom procedures, student work, and daily schedules" that feature all languages used in the classroom (Bennett, 2017 p. 247). These displays create an opportunity for children of all backgrounds to make meaning in their environment, so they feel comfortable locating bathrooms, finding their possessions, and knowing where things belong. Educators who use CSP also include pictures of families, messages from families, and cultural pictures that connect children with their home lives within the classroom environment (Durden et al., 2014). Including a child's family in the classroom provides a strong message of inclusion for both the child and their family. As with classroom materials, pictures of culturally diverse children and families are a wonderful resource, but they lose some of their impact when observed without explicit connections being made with students (Gichuru et al., 2015). For example, Gichuru et al. (2015) describe students being excited to see pictures posted around the room of the children with their families. Teachers were observed

talking to students about their family's picture. Yet, teachers were not observed engaging students in conversations about other families, so children could make connections and value differences as CSP recommends. The level of engagement is what makes the physical environment a key feature of the successful implementation of CSP (Sturdivant & Alanis, 2019). Observing a classroom with a single picture of a Black family around a kitchen table in your dramatic play center is a one-dimensional representation that lacks connection for students. That same picture with multiple other types of diverse families, preparing or eating a meal, provides a backdrop for a conversation with a 4-year-old, pretending to cook at the play stove, about how family dinner is similar or different in their home. In sum, a classroom is more than just the walls and materials in the room, it is also the structure that provides an educator the ability to successfully implement CSP.

A preschool classroom is noisy, busy, and full of enthusiasm, but a classroom implementing CSP will be all those things while maintaining a structure that supports its learners individually and communally. In Sturdivant and Alanis's (2019) study, they used a qualitative methodology to examine how a Black preschool teacher named Ms. Violet (a pseudonym), enacted culturally relevant practices for Black students in culturally diverse classrooms. They utilized classroom observations that focused on book times and how the teacher implemented culturally relevant practices. The pair used transcripts from interviews with Ms. Violet to examine her motivation in planning certain activities, challenges she experienced in implementing culturally relevant practices, changes in the children's feelings and behaviors, resources that were accessible to the teacher, as well as photographs from Ms. Violet. Sturdivant and Alanis (2019) determined that the teacher used four significant strategies including fostering an inclusive classroom community, creating a classroom environment that reflects a range of diverse experiences,

integrating lessons that utilized students' interests, and finally encouraging family engagement in the classroom. Their findings provide an example of the level of support needed in an environment that will support CSP. Ms. Violet illustrates the level of intentionality needed on the part of the teacher, who must model what they expect to see and create a structure that nurtures this dynamic. To illustrate this point, the authors discuss Ms. Violet's teaching practices by showing how Ms. Violet validates her student's contributions to the classroom learning experiences in front of their peers. For example, while cleaning up from their small group work, Ms. Violet recognized her student, Brisha's recommendation for how they could clean up the materials, and the other students followed her instructions. This type of community of learners who show respect to each other because they see their teacher modeling respectful interactions that validate individuals is the ideal environment to practice CSP. This simple recognition of the knowledge and ideas individuals bring to the collective group lends itself to the pluralistic environment that Paris and Alim (2015) seek to develop through CSP. I further contend that classroom environments where mutual respect is fostered provides an opportunity for children to practice critiquing the ways we can reproduce discourses that hurt marginalized groups.

In Colegrove et al.'s (2021) article, they present their study of a bilingual Head Start classroom with a high Latinx population and two bilingual staff members practicing some elements of CSP. They explore how the teachers ensure children's agency is protected by ensuring they have sustained time to engage in self-directed free play. Utilizing observations and interviews with teachers, parents, and students, they witnessed children engage in a wide range of play that demonstrated problem-solving, sophisticated argumentation, as well as students engaging in negotiations (Colegrove et al., 2021). They recognized the importance of preschoolers being given adequate time, space, and freedom to demonstrate and practice skills they need to develop critical



consciousness. CSP demands a critical consciousness to critique oppression in our institutions (Paris & Alim, 2017). An early childhood classroom that promotes this skill must embrace freedom and reject restriction. A classroom that is too rigid does not provide the opportunity for students to stay with a topic if they are interested. A child conversing with a teacher about why their skin is a different color than their friend's needs flexibility in the schedule to continue the conversation and not be told it is time to clean up and move on to the next agenda item. They need sustained time to be able to develop their play beyond surface-level engagement with classroom materials because it is in the deeper levels of play that richer conversations with educators can occur. The cognitive engagement, relationship building, and community connections that result from those conversations are what marginalized students need in schools so they can center the “dynamic practices and selves of students and communities of color” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 3). Simply put, children require time to create and carry out storylines so teachers can engage in the types of rich conversations that support learning and sustains diverse students. Teachers must be able to provide the freedom for children to explore their environment without unnecessary limits. Preschoolers require uncrowded space to develop their play and to move freely so they can have an inclusive experience with their peers. These circumstances create a classroom that is the epicenter for dynamic relationship-building with children, which helps foster an appreciation for the aim of CSP--cultural pluralism. Classroom environments that include diverse materials, displays that are representative of diverse students, are linguistically inclusive, and are structured to support children’s agency provide the backdrop for interactions that are capable of not only engaging marginalized students but sustaining them.

## INTERACTIONS MATTER: CONVERSATIONS THAT SUSTAIN

Materials are meaningless without the second category—interactions. Reid et al. (2019) remind us that CRP is a “relational construct, one that manifests in the interactions and practices between teacher and child and among children themselves” (p. 984). In their article on culturally responsive educators, Bennett et al. (2017) outline five culturally sustaining practices they observed, “developing a culturally responsive classroom community, family engagement, critical literacy within a social justice framework, multicultural literature, culturally responsive print-rich environments” (p. 242). They provide examples of interactions observed in classes including book talks as well as conversations that go beyond mere academics to center a child’s culture, values, and beliefs (Bennett et al., 2017).

Interactions in the classroom largely take two forms, teacher-student and peer-to-peer. While pedagogy often focuses on the teachers, one would be remiss if they did not take note of how CSP can utilize peer interactions to support student learning. The research provides only a few examples including peer reading (Bennett et al., 2017) and peer to peer play opportunities (Colegrove et al., 2021). Bennett et al. (2017) citing Au’s (2011) book *Literacy achievement and diversity: Keys to success for students, teachers and schools* provides a list of teaching strategies to support diverse student’s literacy achievements, including “book talks, peer reading, and conferences” (p. 243) as a means of producing authentic conversations. CSP’s aim of creating pluralistic communities cannot be realized, without the ability for students and teachers to engage in authentic conversations with each other so they can confront the injustices they encounter together. Similarly, Colegrove et al. (2021) highlights the ways preschooler’s interactions provide an opportunity to support learning. They detail the interactions between several Mexican and Mexican American students, playing in the dramatic play area. Four girls, who are portraying the

daughters and sisters in the family, decide to leave their family in pursuit of their “novios” (“boyfriends”). The three boys are not happy with this and decide to call Guillermo, who was acting as *la policia* (the police) to get them back, but the girls refused. Their teacher, Ms. Lopez joined the play and challenged the boys who believed that the girls couldn’t have boyfriends. Ms. Lopez ultimately makes a phone call to the police chief to report Guillermo, for his attempt to arrest people who weren’t doing anything wrong, rather than looking for people committing crimes. The play experience lasted forty minutes and included 15 of the 17 children enrolled in the class. The interaction took place entirely in Spanish, the primary language of the students in the class. Teachers used children’s authentically developed play to support their learning and challenge their thinking while encouraging their linguistic practices. CSP necessitates the use of children’s interests in learning experiences, and Ms. Lopez provides this by “making space for the children to enact agency in their learning, engage in challenging play, and develop sophisticated capabilities” (Colegrove et al., 2021, p.463). While peer interactions are not widely researched in available literature, it is clearly a form of interaction that provides teachers with an opportunity to deepen children’s cultural competence. Ms. Lopez also provides an example of critiquing cultural beliefs, as she challenges the boys in their belief that the girls should stay at home and not go out. CSP encourages educators to help students engage in critical critiques of injustices they experience in their lives, including in institutions. CSP empowers children, from an earlier age, to become advocates who are capable of interacting and collaborating with others to address injustices together. To develop this level of critical thinking, requires consistent opportunities to practice with teacher modeling and support.

Examples of interactions that support CSP are currently demonstrated with less frequency and depth than is necessary to make a significant impact for minoritized students. MacNevin and

Berman (2017), discussed earlier, also note that while early childhood education has moved towards the inclusion of diverse play materials, the field is “virtually silent on the topic of how race, ethnicity, culture and other dimensions of difference should inform teacher-child interactions or the development of curriculum” (p.827). Materials in the classroom provide the opportunity for interactions to take place, but teachers need guidance on what those conversations can and should look like. The emphasis must shift from the presence of the materials to how those materials are used to support a student’s understanding of diversity. That understanding requires adult interactions to discuss and address misconceptions and expand upon a child’s existing knowledge. An example of this can be found in the widely used assessment tool for early childhood programs.

Harms & Clifford (1980) developed the first Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, (ECERS). The ECERS is a quality assessment tool for 3 and 4-year-old preschool classrooms that evaluates programs in six areas including space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and literacy, learning activities, interactions, and the program structure. The six areas contain 35 items, which involve indicators of quality that evaluators assess over a three-hour observation. When the observation is complete, evaluators respond to the assessment using Yes/No responses to the indicators and then provide a score based on responses. The ECERS has gone through two revisions since the original version was released. The tool gained popularity among early childhood programs and is now used in over 20 countries. Over the years, the ECERS has contributed to a significant increase in the quality and quantity of diverse materials that are present in the classroom. The increase in cultural representations in the classroom as a result, has been a welcomed evolution towards CSP. Within the most recent edition, the ECERS-3, the tool evaluates programs on several indicators related to diversity including if students have access to a minimum of four dramatic play materials that represent diversity, at least ten easily visible

examples of diversity in a variety of ways including displays images, books, and play materials, if “classroom materials include at least four of five types of diversity including race, culture, age, ability, and non-traditional gender roles” (Harms, et al., 2015, p. 65). In addition, materials are evaluated on whether they positively represent diversity. Due to the wide use of the ECERS-3, more programs are ensuring the materials that represent diverse students are present in the classroom, which is an initial step towards implementing CSP. What is often observed in preschool classes is a lack of interactions that specifically and intentionally address those diverse materials and their significance to students. As seen in the previous examples in Sturdivant & Alanis (2019), the positive interactions with students surrounding their cultural and linguistic identities, validates them making them feel a part of the classroom community. Intentional interactions focused on cultural diversity is necessary for an implementation of CSP. In preschool programs, where play-based instruction is implemented, this failure to support students’ interactions with the materials in a substantive way, provides fertile ground for students to draw their own conclusions regardless of whether those conclusions are accurate or not. We must exercise great caution not to confuse minimal displays of diversity with full implementation of CSP, as the current advances do not yield the same results for our diverse learners. The notable gap in guidance for how teachers should interact with children in furtherance of CSP implementation is an area of opportunity for both research and leaders in communities of diverse learners to make an administrative-level change that develops high expectations and ensures consistency.

Wynter-Hoyte et al.’s (2019) article asserts that children need critical safe spaces to foster CSP. Children create knowledge from multiple resources, and teachers must navigate policies to implement practices that utilize students’ cultural referents. The authors’ examination of four studies draws a significant conclusion for early childhood classes. In their study of an African-

American church program, they highlight the significance of “call and response” in the African-American community and highlight how this form of language is highly effective in activating a child’s desire to participate in lessons because it was culturally familiar, and thus children had a high level of confidence in their ability to participate meaningfully. Likewise, their study of dual language learners, illustrated that when students were able to talk about topics of interest to them personally, they were able to communicate in both languages about a wide range of topics. As Wynter-Hoyte et al. (2019) argued, if teachers validate a student’s identity and develop a culturally rich community of learners, students can maintain their own cultural identities rather than attempting to assimilate into schools designed for homogeneity. Critical safe spaces for children should provide the comfort, familiarity, and freedom to be one’s self, while being able to think and discuss critically important issues to children’s lives. Wynter-Hoyte et al. (2019) describe Jesus, a third grade student who immigrated from Mexico, who felt safe to share his experiences about being separated from his father for three years during a class discussion about the book *Let’s Go See Papa* (Schimel, 2011) in which the main character is also separated from their father. The teacher in this class had created a critical safe space, where students could engage in a discussion about parental separation during immigration and how a child might feel about that. This example shows how CSP enable children to learn in an environment that holds space for them. To move beyond sparse examples of interactions, towards a full implementation of CSP in early childhood, we must create critical safe spaces where high quality teacher-student and peer interactions in students play and learning experiences occur within a community of learners.

Students engage in interactions with their peers and their teachers each day. These interactions are opportunities for teachers to engage in culturally sustaining practices. Staff can utilize peer-to-peer play interactions to discuss diverse cultural practices and provide insights and

questions that can support and build upon students' knowledge while helping them develop an appreciation of the diversity around them. As teachers engage with students, they must follow students' interests as part of CSP. By supporting children's agency in their decision-making, they are more likely to feel comfortable and safe which in turn increases their engagement level. Higher engagement in learning experiences and interactions makes it possible for critical safe spaces to be created. High-quality interactions, in critical safe spaces, allow students to develop the skills to critique injustices they experience and observe in their lives. If students learn how to advocate for themselves as individuals and with others, they will be better prepared to engage in larger advocacy endeavors as they get older. While current tools such as the ECERS-3 have led to an increase in diverse materials in the classroom, to move towards fuller implementation of CSP in early childhood, we must also increase the interactions around diverse materials. Classrooms that are rich in diverse classroom materials, and supportive interactions with peers and teachers, will be able to engage families and communities to support students.

#### **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The third category in which we see pieces of CSP being used in preschool classrooms is in family and community engagement, or the ways in which families and communities engage with teachers and schools in support of students. The studies reviewed indicate teachers are utilizing at-home activities such as family assignments, book bags (Bennett et al., 2017), home visits, newsletters, and at-home learning experiences to support children in the classroom (Gichuru et al., 2015). By connecting students' lives at home with their lives at school students can see the value of their culture reinforced in their school environment thus sustaining their cultural identities. In addition, families can see themselves as partners in their child's education as opposed to feeling like interlopers in the process where their culture is viewed as a liability rather than an asset.

Teachers also utilize in-class opportunities to connect families and their preschooler's educational experience. For example, in Ms. Violet's class she invited a student's father, who was a Jazz musician, to play saxophone for the kids. He left his band's CD and she used that CD in the classroom (Sturdivant & Alanis, 2019). The example of Ms. Violet demonstrates how preschool classrooms can implement CSP by centering a family's cultural funds of knowledge and use them in learning. In CSP classrooms, teachers should talk with children about their home life, family activities in the home or community, and even provide translators for families to be able to fully participate in all educational experiences (Gichuru et al., 2015). In order to implement CSP, we must center children's culture within the classroom, which requires educators to connect and build relationships with children and their families, so they can provide mirrors and create windows into the lived experiences of the children so they can develop cultural awareness and appreciation.

Hong et al.'s (2022) study explored the experiences of five teachers and their relationships with students' families. The teachers were from various racial backgrounds including three White teachers, one Dominican-American woman, and one Indian American woman. The teachers taught first, second, fifth, and middle school. The research question guiding the study was: "What is good here?" This question aimed to challenge the "deficit-oriented views of students and families, particularly in urban schools" (Hong et al., 2022, p. 4). As an asset based pedagogy, CSP views cultural difference as positive, and requires educators to do the same. The research team used interviews and observations over three years with the teachers and parents/caregivers about their motivations, beliefs, and experiences working with families. Hong et al. (2022) argues that while research recognizes that family and community engagement provides positive impacts on student performance and experiences in education, the research is impacted by deficit views of marginalized communities. The first-grade teacher, Meagan in her interview noted that initially



strained relationships with Black parents made it difficult to partner, but with coaching on family interactions there was a dramatic shift in her mindset about families and their significance to the school. Megan said, “I think one of the most important lessons for us was that we had to see the families as the fabric of our school, and we had to see them in real and meaningful ways—not just lists of names on an attendance sheet but real people who could teach us what we needed to know about their children” (Hong et al., 2022, p. 18). Julie, a White middle school teacher found ways to not only gain information from families, but to honor their funds of knowledge by inviting families to be co-teachers in a range of activities from family interviews, and oral histories, to cooking activities. Gonzalez et al. (2005) define funds of knowledge as the “strategic and cultural resources” that groups of people possess (p. 47). This centering of families’ cultural identities and funds of knowledge in their learning experiences in CSP is necessary “not as a means to meet the colonized and colonizing objectives of education today, but as the foundations of disruptive and transformative curriculum and teaching” (Nash et al., 2021). The ability to disrupt and transform the way we teach, what and how we learn, develops individuals who will be able to thrive in pluralistic communities as CSP envisions. Julie, found that opportunities to include family members as co-teachers not only demonstrated to students’ their own cultural funds of knowledge but also helped connect their family members, many of whom felt isolated as immigrants. While the students in this study were not in preschool, the concept can be translated for children and families to be supported in early childhood. For example, hosting guest readers, where parents and caregivers can share a book about their culture, can help young children see their cultures represented by a family member and highlight the value of their cultural knowledge for children. While working with parents, teachers can learn more about the child’s culture and use that information to support that child. Early childhood is the most critical period of a child’s growth

and development, with CSP education has the opportunity to help children feel pride in their family's cultural strengths so those cultural traditions are preserved and maintained.

In Harris et al.'s (2020) three-year study in the Republic of Fiji, they aimed to develop CSP practices for fostering preschool children's literacy in their home languages and English in regions where there were no early childhood services. Fiji, a former British colony, is comprised of Indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians, the descendants of indentured laborers, Pacific Islanders and Europeans. This diverse group of cultures includes diverse linguistic practices in student's homes, where languages other than English are spoken, while English was the language of instruction at school. To support student's linguistic pluralism using CSP, the research team sought mentors from within the community to educate them on the practices of the communities. This step centered the students' cultures in establishing what children already know, enabling the research team to develop assessments that are rooted in children's cultural experiences as CSP urges. Researchers worked with 51 children from 44 families in Viti Levu to facilitate student's literacy in their home language and English. Researchers used observations, video recordings, and photographs to collect data in collaboration with the families. They concluded three central findings—first, there must be relationships developed with children and families in order to ensure the space and practices are relevant and responsive to families. Second, that practices should be co-constructed with families, communities, and children for them to be meaningful. Finally, documenting children's learning must also be done through culturally inclusive means to accurately gauge learning. For example, researchers had children create individual books about their life with their families. They went on to create a community book they called “Gaon Mei Saal Ke Karikaram” (“A Year in Our Community”). By including family and community members in their assessment of children's learning, they were able to accurately gauge what the children knew about themselves and their

daily lives. The researchers point out that this community book not only “deepened our knowledge of the community’s cultural context” it also “extended engagement and ownership beyond participating families to the broader community” (Harris et al., 2020, p. 136). Upon deeper reflection, the authors concluded that using CSP creates trust and reciprocal relationships to produce a positive feedback loop resulting in more dialogue about language and literacy with families supporting more meaningful learning experiences. If applied in early childhood context, partnering with families through home visits and volunteering in the classroom can help teachers develop relationships that will be deepened with each learning opportunity that engages families. This level of engagement benefits the students, parents and teachers who are all working together.

In preschool, children’s worlds are inherently tied to their families and community, making it necessary for schools to partner with children’s families and their larger communities. Durden et al.’s (2014) study examined a diverse preschool program with students speaking home languages including English, Spanish, Turkish, Korean, Greek, Polish, Russian, and Chinese. The researchers observed two preschool classrooms over two and a half years. Durden et al. (2014) worked with 28 children, nine parents, 51 teachers, as well as the program director. The preschool program was affiliated with the local university that conducted local, national, and international research so most of the students had one or more parents who was working at the university. The purpose of the study was to examine how teachers felt about implementing CRP in their classrooms. Since CSP expands upon the principles of CRP, I discuss this case study to highlight how teachers engaging with their communities, can sustain cultural and linguistic practices to advance a pluralistic community. Researchers conducted interviews and surveys of teachers and parents as well as classroom observations. With 18% of the student population identifying as Chinese, the program partnered with a local organization to bring a local Chinese teacher to teach

the students Chinese. This provided an opportunity to honor the linguistic and literacy diversity for all students in their program. When asked, teachers noted that students, including students with disabilities, enjoyed the lessons (Durden et al, 2014). Offering opportunities to engage with the larger community helps students begin to recognize the larger social circle that their school and home lives are a part of. That is the first step in developing social awareness that will allow children to build and expand upon its foundation in the future.

It is vital to the success of students that teachers and schools work in collaboration with families and communities. Connecting students' home life with their schooling allows students to see their cultural experiences as valued. CSP calls on educators to center students' cultural funds of knowledge in the learning experiences we provide. By centering students in our learning experiences teachers can challenge and address deficit views of marginalized communities as well. To move towards a full implementation of CSP, teachers should invite families and community members to participate in learning activities in a variety of ways such as playing Jazz music a student's father created, cooking food with a parent for a classroom feast, to inviting community members to speak to students. By creating relationships with students and their families, teachers can engage those families in conversations to ensure learning experiences are co-created, relevant to students' cultural identities, and documented in culturally inclusive ways. Ultimately, CSP creates relationships that are built on trust and can be deepened as families and communities see and feel their cultures are respected and not diminished in educational settings. By infusing students' cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom, students have the opportunity to see their school as a part of their cultural community, rather than a distinct community that is disconnected from their culture. When students begin to see the ways their home, school, and larger communities are interconnected and feel confident and successful in acquiring the

knowledge, skills, and dispositions in their school experience, they can see the ways communities can work together to address inequities.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Paris and Alim (2017) point out that while we must decenter the White gaze that keeps our education system from embracing the cultural practices of minoritized students, we must also “work with students to critique regressive practices...and raise critical consciousness” (p. 10). Developing critical consciousness, a tenant of CSP, informs the final domain discussed in the research—social justice. The research on social justice work in early childhood education is very limited.

Hawkins (2014) worked with 2 preschool directors, a preschool teacher, and two preschool assistants in two Australian preschools to examine strategies to teach for social justice in their early childhood classrooms. The team focused on the use of picture books to “experience difference and diversity, critical thinking and moral and ethical study” (Hawkins, 2014, p. 728). Their research question focused on how to use children’s literature to develop cultural competence and critical consciousness so they could identify social justice issues. Hawkins’ (2014) refutes the popular belief that theorists and researchers including Piaget (1968), Nicholls (1978) and Kohlberg (1984) put forth suggesting that “very young children have little capacity for developing social understandings and competencies, and therefore little capability for developing an awareness of, and sensitivity to, social justice issues” (p. 724). She stated that not only are children active participants in the social construction of their world, but that early childhood is formative in children developing their understanding of how to act and their morals as they are exposed to the attitudes and beliefs of their social groups. She outlines how prejudice, racist discourses, as well as racial differences and negative attitudes towards specific groups have already been

demonstrated by preschool (Hawkins, 2014). Based on these theoretical assumptions, the researchers observed how the teachers in the two classes used guided questions to facilitate a group discussion about a text, drawing student's attention to the social justice issues. In School A, the students read *A Piece of String*, and after discussing how the man is nice because he shares, the teacher asked students how they can share, which led the children to identifying sharing their toys with those less fortunate. Students then wrote a letter to their parents with the help of the teacher to donate clothes and toys (Hawkins, 2014). This example illustrates the ways in which literature and guided discussions with preschool children can create opportunities for children to develop critical consciousness that helps them advocate for social justice.

In Bennett et al.'s (2017) article on culturally responsive literacy practices introduced earlier, they examine the use of critical literacy in early childhood to develop critical consciousness that leads to social justice. The authors define critical literacy as "an active and reflective approach to reading texts that involves exploring and constructing knowledge in order to better understand and challenge unequal social relationships" (Bennet et al., 2017, p. 244). What they find in examining educators use of critical literacy are often missed opportunities to develop critical consciousness. For example, when asking students studying about space if they wanted to be an astronaut, a child's response that they were not old enough, forced the teacher to evaluate her physical environment and recognize that all the pictures of astronauts displayed were of older people. This was a missed opportunity for the staff members to engage in conversation about diversity in science, lack of representation by marginalized communities, and engage in discussion around how that can change. For early childhood to engage in CSP they must be prepared to identify opportunities to recognize and utilize children's engagement in a social justice topic, to engage them in deeper conversation.

In Christ & Sharma's (2018) study of 17 preservice teachers in an urban community center servicing 28 children from Kindergarten through eighth grade. Twenty of the students were African American, eight were Latinx. Of the teachers, 13 were female, four were male, and all were white. The teachers conducted interviews with their students about their cultural backgrounds, used that information to source culturally relevant books, and then designed and implemented a culturally relevant literary unit. The teachers implemented the lesson plans in small groups or individually for five weeks. Christ & Sharma (2018) found that despite teachers' initial pushback, they were able to learn more about their students, select relevant books, and create culturally relevant lessons. They concluded that this approach was able to "improve students' outcomes because they help students anchor to their identities and personal experiences via a specific subset of prior knowledge. (Christ & Sharma, 2018, p. 58). While this study addressed cultural relevance rather than CSP, if we build upon these practices, we can meet the features of CSP. Christ and Sharma's (2018) study specifically addresses the fact that the development of critical consciousness is often ignored. When the authors reflected on the teacher's failure to address challenging topics that developed social action. They realize that they had not modeled how to have these conversations with the teachers. With this in mind, they point out that this aligns with Ladson-Billings (2017) findings, which Paris and Alim (2017) seek to address with CSP, the development of skills to engage in social justice work. With this in mind, Christ & Sharma state that educators must be intentional in their use of "conversations focused on race, equity, and social justice" to help develop critical consciousness (p. 66). If CSP is to lay the foundation for students to engage in social justice, early childhood must be ready to implement CSP fully.

Early childhood has begun to include culturally diverse materials in their environments,

but they must make strides forward in engaging in rich interactions about diversity with preschool children, develop meaningful relationships with families and communities so they can draw upon those relationships to support their children's cultural identities and learning experiences, and offer learning activities and experiences that offer children the opportunity to think about bigger issues, and finally teachers must be prepared to engage in the conversations that support these skills. In chapter three I examine how moving towards a full implementation of CSP will impact preschool children.



### **Chapter 3: Impacts of CSP on Child Development in Early Childhood**

Hatfield et al. (2015) explore a report by More for Four, indicating that Prekindergarten students who attend publicly funded preschools had positive child outcomes indicating that investment in high-quality preschool programs is vital for positive child development. Incorporating diverse materials, high-quality interactions, engaging family and community members in culturally relevant activities, and using these to fuel social justice activities are hallmarks of a high-quality program. High-quality preschool programs must also yield positive child outcomes. When discussing the implementation of any pedagogical approach, the ability to produce positive learning outcomes for early childhood students is understandably at the forefront of professionals' minds. The body of evidence on the use of CSP in early childhood, while still in its early stages, is indicating positive cognitive, social, and emotional development in preschool students.

#### **CSP & IMPLICATIONS FOR COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT**

In Hawkins' (2014) research study, introduced in the previous section, she explored how children's critical consciousness can be developed over time. After conducting initial observations in which preschool students demonstrated stereotypical and exclusionary behavior, the team conducted 11 weeks of active research. Each week, two texts with social justice messaging were read and recorded at each of the schools. Teachers would ask guided questions to illicit critical conversations around texts to highlight the social justice messages for preschool students. The research team would then meet to identify themes, keywords, phrases and critical moments that could be built upon for the next session. By the end of the 11 weeks, they found preschoolers had increased cognitive and language development. They could engage in conversation about texts, their meanings, and their messages. The students were provided with engaging, intentional

opportunities to think critically about texts and as the weeks progressed, they were able to engage in higher-level discourse as evidenced by their development of new vocabulary including “‘unfair’, ‘not right’, ‘it’s what’s in your heart that matters’, ‘it’s okay to be different’, ‘don’t leave her out’, ‘let the boys dress up. It’s okay’, ‘we shouldn’t be bullies’” (Hawkins, 2014, p. 733). Further, the children developed a social justice project using literature that “encouraged critical discussion regarding poverty and ownership” during which the preschool students “demonstrated transformation through their articulated thoughts” and “through their actions.” Children’s language evolved from exclusionary statement such as “All people should be the same” to inclusive statements such as “it’s okay to be different” (p. 733) as well as engaging in more inclusive play with fewer power struggles between boys and girls or children excluding others. Hawkins’ study provides clear evidence that children’s language and thought processes can be developed using CSP.

Daucet (2017)’s article examines how multilingual students are impacted by deficit perspectives and how CSP can support multilingual students. He suggests six commitments for teacher educators to model and encourage in preservice teachers. I will examine these commitments in greater detail in a later section where I explore teacher training. Here, I focus on how CSP supports cognitive development. Daucet utilized two conceptual frameworks including humanizing practice (Freire, 1985), and CSP (Paris 2012, Paris & Alim, 2014) to examine what early childhood classroom look like for diverse students. Daucet (2017) argues that supporting bilingualism in students increases cognitive abilities. Using children’s language not only supports their cultural awareness but also develops their brains in a way monolingual students do not. Presenting their 37 years of longitudinal research on dual language education, Collier & Thomas (2019) declare, “in our research findings, the two most powerful outcomes of dual language

programs are higher cognitive development as measured by school tests and higher engagement with learning” (p. 99). Denying children their linguistic practices, deprives them of developmental skill and their lens for making sense of the world. As Reid et al.’s (2019) state, “it is culture that provides the tools for organizing and understanding our worlds in communicable ways” (p. 978). Our youngest learners, who exist predominately within the context of their family culture for the first 5 to 6 years of their life, demand the use of their culture in order to learn and make sense of the world around them.

In Brenner’s (1998) study of Native Hawaiian children, she utilized social, cultural and cognitive theory as a three-dimensional framework to examine how to improve mathematics instruction for Native Hawaiian children using their cultural background. Her research took place in the KEEP lab program, a privately funded school designed to support Native Hawaiian children. Despite being the largest ethnic group in the local schools, the Hawaiian student population underperformed academically in comparison to their White peers. Brenner (1998) first utilized ethnographic fieldwork to identify cultural practices wherein children had the opportunity to develop mathematical concepts. She identified several areas and chose to use grocery shopping as the cultural practice of focus because her ethnographic fieldwork had revealed it as a common practice for children to be involved in. She then utilized interviews, observations, and assessments of children to determine if the culturally based practices impacted their understanding of mathematical principles. Specifically, she observed the Native Hawaiian children shopping at five stores in Oahu and Honolulu and conducted interviews with the parents of 20 working-class urban preschool children and 24 Native Hawaiian children in kindergarten and second grade. She surveyed 100 Hawaiian families about the shopping practices of their students ranging from kindergarten through the third grade. In her assessments of children’s mathematical knowledge,

she used culturally sustaining methods including using children’s native language to ask questions, a topic that was culturally relevant—grocery shopping, and interactive methods of assessment including having students use puppets to act out math problems. She ultimately found that “children had basic skills, practical knowledge, and linguistically encoded knowledge about mathematics that differed from what was taught in schools” (Brenner, 1998, p. 236). For example, when students were asked to use money to purchase a five-cent sticker in a pretend store, 49% were able to select a nickel to pay when offered pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and a one-dollar bill. None of the students selected insufficient funds to pay for the sticker. By using learning experiences that are rooted in students’ cultural experiences their understanding of content can be better ascertained. Brenner went on to utilize her findings to develop and implement, in partnership with the classroom teachers, a culturally relevant curriculum. To extend their mathematical skills, students created a school store, where students could use their knowledge of shopping to further their math skills in a practical setting where they were already experienced. In response, she reported “children made larger cognitive gains and had positive reactions to the new curriculum” (p. 236). Knowing that children will make larger cognitive gains with the implementation of CSP and yet, failing to use CSP practices and curriculum constitutes a breach of professional and public responsibility to educate all students.

### **CSP AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS’ SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The social and emotional development of children is as important as their cognitive functioning. Social/emotional learning is “a process of gaining the knowledge and skills to manage emotions, achieve goals, show empathy, and make responsible decisions to build the capacity for establishing and maintaining healthy relationships” (King et al., 2023, p. 4). When educators use CSP, students develop complex problem-solving skills, the ability to engage in sophisticated

discourse, and negotiate with peers and adults (Colegrove et al., 2021). Using CSP fosters students social and emotional development, so they feel comfortable, confident, validated, and even empowered to take responsibility for their own education (Bennett et al., 2017). In short, children develop social and emotional skill sets because they feel rooted in the safety of their culture. Bennett et al. (2017) further contend that students who are given the opportunity to gain recognition for their abilities see themselves as not only represented, but successful. This shift in self-confidence produces children who are more likely to remain engaged in more meaningful conversations.

Elias and Haynes (2008) examined 282 third grade students (46% boys, 54% girls) from six elementary schools in a Northeastern urban community. Of the 282 students, 172 were Black/African American, 27 were Hispanic/Latino, one identified as Native American, two identified as Caucasian, and three identified as Other. Seventy-seven students did not identify themselves with any racial/ethnic group. The team noted that 60% of the student population received subsidized lunches, the crime index was twice the national average, environmental health was in the lower 20% nationally, half of families had single mothers, and the community unemployment rate was 9.2% (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Students and teachers completed a modified version of The Survey of Children's Social Support (SOCSS) (Dubow & Ullman, 1989) which measures perceived social supports. The survey posed questions such as: "Do your teachers make you feel important?" and "Do you think your teachers care about you?" (Elias & Haynes, 2008, p. 480). Students completed the survey at the beginning of the year, and teachers completed the survey about each of their students. Students completed the survey again at the end of the year, but that information was not shared with teachers to ensure accurate results. Students' academic performance and attendance was also monitored and tracked. Their primary goal was to examine

the relationship between students' social emotional competence, perceived in class support, and school outcomes. The results determined that "social-emotional competence affects academic performance of children in at-risk, high neighborhood disadvantage communities" (Elias & Haynes, 2008, p. 487). If students' social emotional competence impacts their academic achievement, this indicates a need for developing this skill in earlier years. CSP provides students from diverse backgrounds the chance to develop those social/emotional skills by creating spaces where children feel safe, included, and respected.

In 2013, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a multidisciplinary collaborative of professionals dedicated to social emotional education for children, released the CASEL report. CASEL examined 23 top-performing schools, serving Prekindergarten through fifth grade students, who were implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula. In Garner et al.'s (2014) article they examine the CASEL (2013) report by explicitly looking at the programs which were utilizing culturally grounded SEL programs. They defined culturally grounded programs as utilizing culturally based content in intervention programs in either peripheral, sociocultural, evidential, linguistic, or constituent-involving ways (Garner et al., 2014). They noted out of 23 schools with culturally grounded SEL programs, 11 schools had academic-related gains, 21 had enhanced social development outcomes, and 17 programs demonstrated an increase in emotional development of students. Three programs showed improvements across all three domains. When educators ground their work in student's cultures, as CSP recommends, they can positively impact children's social and emotional development. Christ and Sharma (2018) state that it is necessary to "sustain students' language and culture—their ways of being in the world (e.g., social interaction, language patterns)—through our pedagogy, which improves motivation and engagement as well" (p. 58). Through CSP, educators

not only provide a culturally supportive environment but also develop learners, from all backgrounds, who possess the social and emotional competence to work with others as they engage in the social justice efforts in our increasingly pluralistic society. This task is critical to marginalized student's success, and it comes with significant obstacles which must be addressed if we are to successfully implement CSP in early childhood education. In the following chapter, I examine the significant obstacles, and provide a means to address large scale implementation.

## **Chapter 4: Utilizing QRIS to Advance the Implementation of CSP**

As demonstrated in chapters 1 elements of CSP are being successfully utilized in some early childhood classrooms. In chapter 2, we see how CSP benefits the cognitive, social, and emotional development of marginalized children. In this chapter I will first discuss some of the obstacles to implementing CSP. Second, I examine the importance of training to CSP and how QRIS training requirements could be leveraged to develop culturally sustaining practices in educators. Third, I look at the benefits of practice-based coaching and share how QRIS' coaching system could be expanded to include CSP. Finally, I look at how ongoing assessments currently exist within QRIS and how they could be expanded to evaluate CSP's implementation in early childhood programs.

### **OBSTACLES FOR IMPLEMENTING CSP IN EDUCATION**

CSP being implemented in preschool classrooms would have cognitive, social, and emotional developmental benefits for children, specifically students from marginalized communities. There are some obstacles to consider for schools and teachers to effectively and more fully implement CSP. Early childhood programs exist across the nation in a variety of political and social climates. Some states across the nation have engaged in a war on cultural “wokeness.” This war is creating a backlash on diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice efforts. In many states, this backlash is resulting in state laws and district policies that are confusing and blur the line between what is permitted to support students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds and what is not. Daucet (2017) correctly concluded that schools are a microcosm of society where their treatment in society is foreshadowed. To effectively implement CSP, early childhood needs to address the current political and social climate in states where restrictive laws related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, are being passed.



Another obstacle to the implementation of CPS in early-childhood education is inequity in access to high-quality programs, especially in low-income communities where most children of color live (Hatfield et al., 2015). High quality early childhood programs are better situated to provide the materials, highly qualified teachers, and resources to implement CSP. However, QRIS often provide more financial incentives to programs that are already at higher levels of quality. In their examination of North Carolina's QRIS, Hatfield et al. (2015) posed the research question: "who is privileged by a system that allows children to be cared for and educated in programs at varying levels of quality?" (p. 316). Hatfield et al. (2015) used a cross-sectional design and a wide range of sources:

"including regulatory and administrative data from the North Carolina DCD, observational data from the North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project, survey data from the United States Census Bureau, and administrative data from the North Carolina State Head Start Collaboration Office and the North Carolina Office of School Readiness" (p. 318).

The research included 8,903 licensed early care and education programs in North Carolina. The study concluded that while higher socioeconomic areas received less funding from Head Start or subsidized funding from the state, they still had higher quality programs than low socioeconomic areas. Moreover, the authors note that North Carolina provides tiered reimbursement, meaning that the higher a program is rated, the larger their subsidized funding. This further exacerbates the quality gap since it directs additional funding to already high quality schools, taking away potential funding from under resourced schools. This is significant because families from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who would benefit from high-quality early childhood academically, do not have the same level of access, putting them at a greater disadvantage. With obstacles to implementing CSP including the social/political war on "wokeness," and inequitable access to

early childhood, early childhood requires a solution that address the access to high quality programs while simultaneously incorporating CSP.

What the field of education is currently lacking, is the ability to reach a larger group of children to advance CSP at a national level. Race to the Top (2009) funding for QRIS allowed 49 of the 50 states as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and The Virgin Islands to develop and implement their own QRIS. Given the ubiquity of QRIS in early childhood programs across the nation, utilizing QRIS as a vehicle to support the implementation of CSP would provide a strategic way to reach schools across the country. This is because QRIS utilizes three key features that research indicates supports teacher's implementation of CSP: training, practice based coaching and ongoing assessment. As such, leveraging QRIS would address the need for training of educators on cultural competence and critical consciousness, provide the ability for states to monitor schools ongoing progress, and provide the on-site coaching necessary to support implementation of CSP. These three features are built into QRIS systems in their professional development requirements, the rating process which evaluates programs on several dimensions of quality at regular intervals, and most importantly in their system model which heavily relies on on-site coaching, consultations, and technical assistance with trained early childhood professionals. In the following sections, I will explore how QRIS training, practice-based coaching, and ongoing assessments should be leveraged to advance the implementation of CSP.

#### **TRAINING IN QRIS: DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE WORKFORCE**

Currently, within QRIS nationwide, training is a component of quality standards for educators. Training offered within QRIS covers a wide array of topics including curriculum implementation, social-emotional development, and screening and evaluation tools. While the standards in some QRIS do include cultural competence as an area of professional development

for teachers, the number of trainings is limited, and only scratches the surface of cultural competence. Because training related to cultural competence is limited, QRIS needs to evaluate the trainings provided to educators before they enter the classroom and during ongoing professional development. I begin with an exploration of the importance of training to CSP, then examine cultural competence training in QRIS as a means of developing culturally sustaining practices in the workforce and conclude with recommendations and considerations for a reimagined training approach to cultural competence using CSP in QRIS.

### **Importance of Trainings to CSP**

Girchuru et al. (2015) explain that teachers need to “develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to effectively work with culturally diverse children and their families,” (p. 49). We do a disservice to students, families and communities by not preparing teachers to support children within the cultural context of their family and communities. Providing pre-service teachers with training on how to sustain students’ cultural backgrounds in their teaching practices, would provide the opportunity for teachers to practice these skills before entering the classroom rather than waiting for teachers to learn this valuable information after they are in the classroom. Daucet (2017) proposes six commitments for preservice teachers as a framework for teacher education programs:

- Increase knowledge about diversity;
- Build the classroom as a community of trust;
- Involve families and communities;
- Combat prejudice and discrimination;
- Address diversity in its full complexity; and
- Promote global perspectives (pp. 198-200)

By providing existing teachers the opportunity to learn these commitments in professional development opportunities, educators would be better prepared to implement CSP. QRIS could help facilitate this process by establishing required training for existing teaching staff to include a culturally sustaining pedagogical approach. By formalizing an approach to prepare teachers to implement CSP, as Daucet (2017) suggests, we can ensure continuity between new and experienced educators so that are able to effectively implement CSP in their classrooms.

In their article on the professional development needs of early childhood professionals, Banerjee & Luckner (2014) surveyed 574 teachers. The respondents consisted of 96.8% female respondents, 93.9% spoke English as their primary language. The remaining respondents spoke Spanish or another language as their primary language. Of this total number of teachers, 1.9% identified as African American, 2.7% identified as Asian, 11% identified as Hispanic, 82.3% identified as White, and 2.2% identified as “other.” Teachers also identified the geographic communities in which they taught and self-reported as teaching in urban areas, with a population greater than 50,000 people (47.4%), suburban, with a population between 2,500 and 49,999 (39.8%) and rural, with a population under 2,499 (12.8%). The research team focused on four research questions around : (1) the perceived training needs of professionals working with children who are culturally and linguistically diverse, (2) teachers’ knowledge and preparedness, (3) what teachers felt were the most pressing needs and challenges for working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners, and (4) what recommendations teachers had for teacher preparation programs so that new teachers would be better prepared to work with this population of students and their families. Findings suggest that it is imperative for graduates of teacher preparation programs to be prepared to work with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. They noted while 48% of participants identified themselves as knowledgeable or very

knowledgeable about families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, 29% stated they were not knowledgeable. In addition, 35% of the teachers stated that their training didn't address diversity or it was inadequate. Findings also included teachers' recommendations that teacher training should include "understanding culture, biases, and stereotypes and strategies for working with children and families" (Banerjee & Luckner, 2014, p. 55), address multiethnic perspectives as part of all coursework, and encourage preservice teachers to identify their cultural identity while becoming aware of the diversity of the families they are working with. Toward this end, the authors posit that specific tools and strategies must be explicitly taught like, selecting culturally appropriate materials, culturally relevant instruction, how to work with interpreters, selecting and conducting assessment, and sharing results with families. These training topics are integral to developing educators who are culturally competent so they can engage students, families, and communities in a way their cultures are honored and included in the classroom.

In their case study Brown et al (2023) examined five preservice teachers from a Midwest university's teacher preparation program. Two of the preservice teachers identified as White, one identified as Black, one as Indian, and one as Spanish/Mexican and German. The five preservice educators were seeking prekindergarten through sixth-grade teaching credentials as well as a second language endorsement. The preservice teachers took courses that included reading which highlighted culturally sustaining practices and how to address injustices. Throughout their program, the teacher candidates were also placed in field experiences in two urban school districts which served 130 thousand students with significant Hispanic student populations in grades prekindergarten through sixth grade. The research question focused on the experiences that these educators had in engaging with CSP in their teacher preparation programs and what challenges they experienced in implementing CSP in the classroom. The researchers conducted interviews at

the conclusion of the first, second, and third semesters, using a qualitative analytic method to code interview data. Findings demonstrated that it is important that preservice teachers are aware of the importance of CSP and have space and time to implement CSP. In order to achieve any of these, it is vital we include professional development for early childhood educators on CSP. For example, a preservice teacher commented how important their role was to the social and emotional development of the children, and that this is dependent on teachers seeing their students as people not just numbers. Another preservice teacher described how important it is to set aside math work to make space for a student who is struggling emotionally. She stated this helps to strengthen the classroom community. This illustrates the importance of professional development and what it means to sustain students and why we need to develop educators who can nurture the relationships that are so critical to engage in CSP.

### **Developing Culturally Sustaining Practices with QRIS Trainings**

In Porterfield & Scott-Little's (2019) qualitative study they examined how QRIS could incorporate requirements on cultural competence into their systems. The research study utilized three focus groups of 28 QRIS staff from a southern state in the United States. Of the participants, 76% identified as White, 5% as Latinx, 14% as Black, and 10% as multiracial. Ten percent identified as multilingual. Porterfield & Scott-Little (2019) used the focus groups's recorded interviews and analyzed them using the constant comparative method. Focus groups addressed questions including their experience with training on cultural competence, their recommendations for supporting the cultural competence of educators, their thoughts on training requirements at baseline and advanced levels of cultural competence, development of plans or goals related to the development of cultural competence. The study organized their finding into four categories: QRIS requirements; system alignment; program administrator training; and teacher trainings and

technical assistance. They concluded that QRIS should include training opportunities around cultural competence. The authors note, that during their discussions, focus group two was concerned about required training being viewed as another thing to “check off” but the group concluded it “was a good starting point for cultural competence development” (Porterfield & Scott-Little, 2019, p. 12). Cultural competence is a foundation for implementation of CSP. The current early childhood workforce consists of educators with varying levels of cultural competence, so starting with these foundational trainings would be necessary. QRIS would provide the initial training on cultural competence as a starting point. QRIS is also well situated to offer advanced training options to ensure training opportunities can grow with programs as educators develop in their cultural competence. Advanced trainings would focus on building upon educator’s cultural competence with culturally sustaining practices such as developing relationships with culturally diverse families, designing assessments for culturally and linguistically diverse preschool students, and creating and implementing lessons and that center students’ cultural identities. With budgets designed for providing professional development for early childhood professionals, QRIS systems are poised to develop these trainings and roll them out to the educators, if they can be provided with some guidance on where to start.

### **Recommendations and Considerations for a Reimagined Training Approach in QRIS**

Given the ubiquity of QRIS to early childhood programs across the country, I argue QRIS should include a range of trainings that help educators:

- Learn about their own cultural identity.
- Explore the ways in which cultures intersect and how those intersecting identities impact a child’s learning experiences.
- Understand why students’ cultures are important to their educational experiences.

- Discover ways to create a learning environment that reflects the children, families, and communities they serve.
- Learn how to provide interactions that center students' cultural identities.
- Develop ways to engage students' families and communities in learning activities.
- Develop methods to engage preschool students in social justice activities
- Understand how educators participate in and reproduce inequities
- Understand how our education system and other systems participate in and reproduce inequities.
- Critically reflect on problematic aspects of our cultures.

Through ongoing training opportunities, educators can begin to develop their cultural competence, learn how to implement CSP in their classes, and most importantly understand ways the education system perpetuates inequalities and their ability to make changes within it through their reimagining of the purpose of education. Educators must engage in CSP not “claim to be doing equity work without having to consider inequity, and their roles in perpetuating it” (Schmeichel, 2012, p. 227-228). For teachers to address injustices they observe in the classroom, it is crucial that they be able to identify ways they participate in and sometimes benefit from inequities. To do this, teachers need to be provided an opportunity to reflect on social inequalities and how they contribute to them in a supportive coaching relationship. This would allow teachers to engage in higher-level reflective questions while processing information that might be new to many teachers. Training alone does offer the level of introspection needed to address internal biases. I propose training coupled with practice-based coaching, discussed in the next section, will help educators reach this level of critical consciousness. Educators should be trained in CSP as an approach that builds upon their cultural competence, so they understand their role in providing students with



learning opportunities that center students' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge in ways that preserve knowledge as opposed to replacing it. These trainings would need to be offered by qualified trainers with expertise in the field of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice education. Introductory training series to develop cultural competence should be offered in a series of regular intervals with time between to allow for independent self-reflection and implementation of strategies. By situating CSP within the QRIS, educators could receive training coupled with on-site coaching that allows for education, practice, self-reflection, and feedback to provide a comprehensive experience for educators to develop cultural consciousness, critical consciousness and the practices necessary to implement CSP. In the next section, I examine how practice-based coaching in QRIS can help develop teachers and programs capable of implementing CSP.

#### **PRACTICE BASED COACHING: IMPLEMENTING CSP WITHIN QRIS**

Practice-based coaching (PBC) provides an opportunity for teachers to receive focused support in processing what they learn in training about cultural competence, critical consciousness, culturally sustaining practices and to reflect on their developing implementation of CSP practices. PBC is the “cyclical process that starts with collaborative partnerships and then uses shared goals and action planning, focused observation, and reflection and feedback to improve effective teaching practices” (Kranski & Steed, 2022, p. 1589). Kranski & Steed illustrate how PBC can be utilized to improve teacher's effective implementation of culturally responsive practices in their study. Kranski & Steed (2022) addressed three research questions:

Is there a functional relationship between the implementation of a workshop plus PBC and teachers' increased use of culturally responsive practices in their early childhood classrooms? Which culturally responsive practices improved from baseline to post-

intervention? How did teachers and administrators perceive the goals, procedures, and outcomes of the workshop and PBC? (p. 1590).

They utilized the Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale (CRTSE), a self-assessment consisting of 40 items that relate to “one of four components of culturally responsive practices: curriculum and instruction, classroom management, student assessment, and cultural enrichment” (Kranski & Steed, 2022, p. 1592). They also used the Culturally Responsive Practices in Early Childhood (CRP-EC). This checklist evaluates teachers’ classrooms using ten questions divided into two categories—culturally responsive materials and culturally responsive interactions. Kranski & Steed (2022) surveyed four White teachers using surveys at intervals throughout the coaching experiences, which were conducted by a psychologist, a White woman who had years of experience coaching professionals working with culturally diverse students. She began with baseline sessions in which she completed checklists. Teachers then completed a 1-hour workshop on culturally responsive practices followed by one-on-one PBC focused on culturally responsive practices two times per week for three weeks. Her first coaching session included establishing a relationship with the teachers, describing the coaching process, and selecting a focus for their coaching within culturally responsive practices. The coach and the teachers then selected one of the areas that they scored low in on the checklist and created a goal that was related to the culturally responsive practice the teacher selected. The pair discussed teacher’s concerns, needs, available resources, and area of focus for the coaching. They developed an action plan with deadlines. For example, one staff member decided she was going to “learn and implement positive encouragement statements in Korean for a Korean speaking student” (Kranski & Steed, 2022, p. 1594). During the coaching process, the coach conducted a series of observations followed by 20 minute reflective sessions one to three times a week. Reflective sessions included reviewing a

summary of the observation, the teacher reflecting on the observation and concluded with constructive feedback from the coach. The coach continuously encourages teachers to self-reflect and problem solve through open-ended reflective questions and comments. The coach also provided targeted support on specific strategies and supplies resources as needed. The pair continued working on the goal until it was reached. The coaching experience concluded by reviewing goals, celebrating accomplishments and identifying ways to sustain growth. Kranski & Steed (2022) concluded that “using a workshop plus PBC shows promise to improve early childhood teachers' culturally responsive practices” (p. 1605).

In Storie & Coogle’s (2023) study, they surveyed nine early childhood teacher candidates about the materials they selected for literacy and mathematics lessons. The teacher candidates in the study were enrolled in a college course on language, math, and literacy development in early childhood. For their field experience, teacher candidates were placed in one of six bilingual preschool classrooms with two teachers, one English-speaking and one who spoke both English and Spanish. Storie & Coogle (2023) used a qualitative content analysis to address what aspects of diversity teacher candidates consider when selecting materials, how teacher candidates’ perceptions about material selection are influenced, and how that changes over time. Teacher candidates were assigned to read an article on representation of diverse students in classroom materials and its impact on student learning and then respond to the article in a class assignment. Researchers had teacher candidates complete a questionnaire to determine how they selected materials at different points during the semester. They examined the teacher candidate’s responses to the questionnaires to determine how the selection of materials for students evolved as they learned about the impacts of cultural representation on children and their learning, in their class reading assignments. When teacher candidates were selecting materials to be used in their

classroom the teacher candidates indicated the course readings and assignments impacted their selection of materials (Storie & Coogle, 2023). The researchers concluded that educators must be provided opportunities to engage in reflection while learning and applying what they are learning in the classroom. They found that teacher candidates field experiences related to diversity, equity and representation were more productive when coupled with reflection and discussion. Teacher candidates were able to process their experiences and make modifications to their lessons based on their reflections. They also noted that “we must continue to move toward action and advocacy to break the cycle and improve realities for diverse children” (Storie & Coogle, 2023, p. 139). Learning opportunities coupled with reflective opportunities impacted these teacher candidates’ ability to be a change agent for supporting diverse learners. QRIS provide educators and administrators with practice-based coaching opportunities. This makes QRIS an ideal place to merge training and practice-based coaching, when working with schools, to help them understand CSP and implement these strategies in their preschool programs.

### **Leveraging PBC in QRIS to Implement CSP**

PBC is a cornerstone of QRIS efforts and would help support teachers developing CSP. PBC provides an opportunity for teachers to begin to implement and receive feedback on their progress in understanding of CSP, implementation of CSP practices and development of critical consciousness, in a supportive coaching relationship. Within coaching relationships, teachers can have open, honest dialogue that allows them to reflect on their practice, and their biases, and make changes with the guidance of a trained professional. Such coaching relationships would necessitate coaches who are experts in CSP implementation in ECE as well as proficient at coaching, engage in self-reflection, and have critical consciousness. Banerjee & Luckner (2014) argue that

“[m]ultiple doses of ongoing training are necessary for EI/ECSE<sup>4</sup> professionals to master and refine required changes in practice” (p. 55). Similarly, for teachers learning CSP, they will need ongoing training coupled with their coaching experiences. As teachers develop skills related to their implementation of CSP, their professional development needs will evolve with them. With onsite coaching, teachers needs related to CSP can be monitored so new training opportunities can be made available as teachers grow. Coaches can also provide new resources to teachers as their needs change. Developing coaches with these skill sets would be a commitment on the part of states, but one that could help teachers as they begin to implement culturally sustaining practices. The challenge of such a model within the QRIS, is first in getting QRIS to invest in CSP as a system wide approach. Second, isolating practices that they would like coaches to focus on. A third consideration is finding coaches with the necessary training in diversity, equity, inclusion, social justice, antiracist/anti-bias practices, in addition to training in coaching, adult learning principals, and education. The development of a coaching model to support the implementation of CSP in preschool programs, would allow QRIS to support educators as they work with marginalized children.

#### **ONGOING ASSESSMENT: EVALUATING CSP WITHIN QRIS**

Early Childhood Programs complete their improvement cycle with a formal assessment process determined by each state’s QRIS system. The assessment process typically involves programs submitting documentation that demonstrates their ability to meet QRIS standards as well as on site formal observation using evaluative tools. Documentation of standards met by programs requires schools to collect specific documentation related to a standard, submit the documentation to the rating entity for the state, and then a program will receive credit for each item they submit

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<sup>4</sup> EI: Early Intervention; ECSE: Early Childhood Special Education.

that meets the predetermined set of criteria by the state's QRIS. Documentation points collected are supposed to correlate to a program's quality level when relayed to programs and families. However, the cumulative totals relayed do not indicate how many documentation points come from standards that demonstrate culturally sustaining practices are being implemented in a preschool program. Some QRIS have begun to include standards that assess for practices that are culturally sustaining such as having policies encouraging the use of home languages, collaborating with community partners to support parents and families, schools hosting events that are reflective of the cultures represented in demographics, as well as teachers engaging in training related to cultural competence and diversity (GNJK Standards Document, 2015). However, these standards are very limited and do not do enough to determine a program's commitment to culturally sustaining practices. A program having a home language policy is a start, but it does not demonstrate if a program is actually centering children's linguistic practices in learning experiences for preschool children, using their language in the classroom and with the family, and showing students that all languages are valuable and respected in the classroom and the program as a whole. The very limited focus on programs' culturally sustaining practices in the way QRIS presents school's quality can minimize its importance to children, their families, and communities. QRIS must expand the number of standards they assess programs on that relate to culturally sustaining practices including 1) identifying the cultural and linguistic diversity in their program, 2) demonstrating how the classrooms center their students' cultural and linguistic diversity, 3) demonstrating how lesson plans center students' cultures in the learning activities offered, 4) demonstrating how programs are engaging students in social justice experiences in the school and in their community, and 5) demonstrating ways that programs engage family and community members in their classroom and school events. QRIS also need to find a way to highlight this

information as they provide programs ratings. This will allow parents to determine if a school is offering a learning environment that is going to help their child grow academically, socially and emotionally by centering their cultural and linguistic backgrounds in their education by teachers who are trained to sustain cultural practices. In addition, parents will know they can expect a learning community that will engage the families in school learning experiences and activities to help highlight and sustain their cultures.

In most QRIS, there are standards related to diversity, inclusion, and representation of marginalized communities, that are optional for programs to demonstrate when they are formally assessed. By creating new standards related to CSP, modifying the existing surface level standards, and establishing these standards as mandatory rather than optional, QRIS can begin to support programs in implementing CSP. This step will demonstrate the magnitude of CSP's importance to minoritized students' academic, social and emotional well-being in early childhood. Culturally sustaining standards are important to assess on an ongoing basis to ensure schools are using students' cultures in the classroom environment consistently and in ways that are focused on their value and contribution to our society so their cultural traditions, practices, and beliefs are sustained. As Porterfield and Scott-Little (2019) point out in their study, "additional measures and other strategies should be developed to help programs and the QRIS as a whole evaluate progress toward culturally competent programs and systems" (p. 20). QRIS must consider creating higher level standards for programs to pursue as their teachers develop culturally sustaining practices to implement CSP, such as developing social justice projects or developing mission statements related to their commitment to sustaining student's cultural identities.

In order to support CSP within QRIS, we must first adopt this approach within QRIS, train teachers on how to implement CSP, and then provide ongoing assessment to evaluate its

implementation. We need tools that can evaluate culturally sustaining practices that are occurring. There is currently no validated tool for assessing implementation of culturally sustaining practices, in early childhood education. Existing quality evaluation measurement tools include minimal assessment of diversity practices in early childhood. The primary tool used for evaluating program quality in the United States is the ECERS-3 (Harms et al., 2015). This tool contains one item within the scale entitled “Promoting the Acceptance of Diversity” (Harms et al., 2015, p. 65). This single item within the tool, assesses for the presence of specific diverse materials including three dolls of different races and ten different visible materials from four of the five types of diversity identified by the authors (race, age, ability, non-traditional gender roles, and culture). While this item addresses the presence of diverse materials in the classroom in indicator 3.1, it makes no mention of whether those materials represent the students in the classroom. Having a Black, White, and Hispanic doll in a classroom, does not provide representation for a Chinese child. In indicator 7.2, this item also looks for one example of teacher interactions with students in which the teacher discusses with a child why it is beneficial to have people who are similar and different. We find no mention of whether we challenge students’ bias that can be expressed in play. Finally, in indicator 7.1 the item looks for one example of “the inclusion of diversity...as part of learning activities” (Harms et al., 2015, p. 65). Both of these indicators only require one example, which is not enough to address the multitude of diverse learners in a classroom. Also, indicators 7.1 and 7.2 do not occur until programs reach an “excellent” score on the ECERS scale. This means a classroom can receive a score of “minimal” or “good” without even discussing diversity in a classroom that could be full of preschoolers from marginalized populations. This level of “promotion of acceptance of diversity” falls woefully below what students from diverse cultural and linguistic students deserve. The ECERS-3 does not address other critical pieces of CSP



including family and community involvement nor social justice education opportunities. QRIS must examine the tools they use to assess quality and ensure they are supportive of minoritized students' cultural backgrounds in order to use them to implement CSP. QRIS must also expand the selection of tools to include tools that focus on sustaining cultural and linguistic practices in preschool programs.

Souto-Manning & Rabdi-Raol (2018) argue for the intentional positioning of practices, knowledge, values, and experiences of minoritized young children, families and communities as a necessity to redefining quality in early childhood education. This effort would move us away from assessing “developmentally appropriate practice” which is rooted in Eurocentric beliefs (Souto-Manning & Rabdi-Raol, 2018, p. 204) and towards education system that sees children and their families cultural and linguistic diversity as assets to their educational experiences and the learning community they are a part of. Valuing cultural and linguistic pluralism is critical to the implementation of CSP, therefore, QRIS need methods of assessing how effectively families and the larger communities are being engaged in the schools. I contend, the intentional centering of cultural and linguistic practices of students is the consistently missing piece of the conversation in quality improvement measures and will be the key to unlocking improved outcomes not only for early childhood, but all learners.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

CSP seeks to sustain the cultures of students and their families in support of a pluralistic society. This asset-based pedagogy is a sharp departure from older aims of educating children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to “fix” them, because of the belief that minoritized children and their families are inferior (Kranski & Steed, 2022). CSP shifts the goal of education from assimilation to the advancement of marginalized students, while preserving and sustaining their cultural and linguistic assets. CSP provides an approach that honors and extends children’s cultural identity making their educational experience richer because they are not being severed from the familiar embrace of their culture in pursuit of knowledge. As the research indicates, children from marginalized backgrounds are less likely to experience high-quality early childhood education. As the percentage of students from diverse backgrounds continues to grow, our education system cannot afford to continue attempting to create a homogenous citizenry.

The research indicates that some aspects of CSP are being utilized successfully in preschool programs through classroom environments, interactions, family and community engagement, as well as social justice activities. These efforts, though minimal, are creating classroom environments where student’s cultural backgrounds are represented positively, teachers are engaging in rich, meaningful conversations with children and families, and communities are invited to participate in school and classroom learning experiences. These are the types of early childhood programs that can help preschool children from diverse backgrounds thrive, embrace their agency, and use it to advocate for themselves and others.

Research indicates that when implemented, CSP supports children’s academic, social and emotional development in early childhood programs. There are some obstacles for implementation of CSP within early childhood education including current social and political climate in some

areas of the nation that have led to restrictive laws for schools around teaching topics related to diversity and inequitable access to high quality early childhood programs in low-income areas. Despite the obstacles that must be addressed, CSP provides the shift in approach to education that will result in high quality early childhood education for marginalized students, who have and continue to be disadvantaged in our current education system. In order to support the implementation of CSP in preschool programs through QRIS, these systems must first embrace the aims of CSP. QRIS must move beyond the handful of optional standards that exist related to diversity to more substantive standards. The increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse children passing through preschool programs cannot afford to wait for optional trainings on diversity to make an impact on program quality. QRIS can provide guidance and support to early childhood programs, trying to improve the quality in their programs, by developing standards that demonstrate the importance of centering each child's cultural identity in their education.

Three key features of QRIS could be effectively leveraged in the implementation of CSP: training, practice-based coaching, and ongoing assessment. These three features support CSP in isolation, however their coexistence within QRIS, strengthen their impact (Valentino, 2018). QRIS have the ability to provide levels of training as teachers develop deeper understanding of CSP. QRIS could provide onsite practiced-based coaching to support teachers as they implement CSP so educators are constantly reflecting on their progress and setting new goals for themselves. QRIS have the ability provide ongoing assessments as they engage in continuous quality improvements. This will ensure CSP is being implemented consistently throughout a program so all children experience the benefits. Leveraging these QRIS features in the implementation of CSP, will help schools begin to address our responsibility to our culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

While the possibilities are exciting to contemplate, existing QRIS have some challenges to consider including the limited number and scope of available trainings to help early childhood professionals develop cultural competence. QRIS must address their quality standards. It is important that systems take a firm stance on which standards are required for early childhood programs, adding additional standards related to programs social justice efforts, and finally critically evaluating existing standards and challenging those that reinforce hegemonic outcomes. QRIS will need to increase the number and depth of trainings provided to educators so they can develop cultural competence, learn how to partner with families in the creation of lessons that use their cultural identities, and how to engage preschool children in social justice work in their schools and communities. QRIS must develop a significant number of qualified coaches who can provide the practice-based coaching necessary to support early childhood professionals in implementing CSP. Finally, QRIS have to expand their assessment tools to include evaluative tools that explicitly assess implementation of CSP.

QRIS are the only systems, with national reach that are accessible to preschool-aged children in public, private, and Head Start classrooms. The simultaneous creation of high-quality and culturally sustaining early childhood programs would revolutionize the way our youngest learners emerge into the education world. Successful results in early childhood programs, would provide the basis to expand CSP implementation in elementary, middle and high school programs. Such a fundamental shift in how we think about education, partner with families to design curriculum that centers culture, will require QRIS to partner with researchers to examine how implementation and assessment would support teachers implementing CSP.

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## **Vita**

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