Safeguarding ECE values in elementary school classrooms in the United States: A photovoice-centered inquiry of teachers' beliefs and practices

Emmanuelle Fincham

Carolyn Brennan

Margarita Ruiz Guerrero

Meilan Jin

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Abstrat

Current and consistent trends in the US affecting the field of early childhood education (ECE) threaten the preservation of key ECE values in public elementary schools (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Values that have served as the foundation of ECE, such as embracing play and relationships as the context for learning and centering diversity, are continuously pushed aside with the ongoing "schoolification" of early childhood around the world (Bradbury, 2020). In our work as early childhood teacher educators, our aim is to develop teachers who are prepared with the skills, knowledge, and values that will enable them to protect what they know to be good teaching in the face of ever-increasing pressure for standardization and other threats related to the current political climate.

To understand how graduates of our program fare in their ability to live out ECE values, we conducted five rounds of in-depth photovoice-centered focus group discussions. Qualitative critical analysis revealed significant ways in which ECE values informed teaching. As our participants worked to align the knowledge and practices learned in ECE teacher preparation with pressures faced in public school contexts, they were bolstered by their ability to define themselves as early childhood educators existing in elementary school spaces. This deep connection to ECE values appeared to provide a sense of confidence in their teaching moves and served as an impetus to engage acts of resistance and enact socially just commitments.

Keywords

early childhood education, elementary education, teacher education, social justice, teacher beliefs

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Policy and practices in early childhood education (ECE) have long reflected dominant political and religious powers in the United States (Burman, 2017; Yelland & Bentley, 2018; Yelland et al., 2008). As in the past, both public and private childcare in the modern era are influenced by the same political whims as the economy, the environment, healthcare, and other sectors of American society; the parallels are striking and concerning. These issues are not unique to the United States as far-right policies continue to gain power across the globe,

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bolstered by ongoing effects of neoliberal and neocolonial moves in education and the global development of early childhood programs (Moss, 2017; Nganga et al., 2024). We can tie, for example, school readiness and the "schoolification" of ECE (Bradbury, 2020) to the political forces that celebrate progress at any cost, a belief that has endangered Indigenous peoples, land, and the health of the environment (Cannella, 2008; Wolfe, 2006). These same pressures have resulted in a legacy of education policy focused on standardized outcomes (e.g. Common Core) at the expense of practices that center the learning and social needs of young children, resulting in both teacher burnout and inadequate support for children (Dahlberg et al., 2013), particularly Black and Brown children whose knowledges and experiences are historically underrepresented and devalued in mainstream classrooms. We can also see more obvious connections between government policy and education as the current administration conducts its attack on initiatives designed to celebrate and promote diversity and equity, which result in reduced funding, book bans, and loss of qualified staff (Chin, 2025; Robinson, 2025). Ongoing development of policies enmeshed in political and cultural assimilation continues to harm children and families, particularly from nonmajority cultures.

The current political moment continues to threaten the preservation of key ECE values in public elementary schools (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Drawing on knowledge from the field, the call for this special issue names values that include the "celebrating of diversity as a vital asset in the lives of young children, and prioritizing joy, peace, love, and security as essential to thriving childhoods." These resonate with the fight for the rights of childhood (Caplan et al., 2016; Defending the Early Years, n.d.) and with Moss's (2017) framing of an ECE that everyone deserves, one that "welcomes, values and thrives on complexity and plurality, inclusion and democracy, experimentation and creativity" (p. 12). Practices steeped in these values work to sustain cultures, languages, identities, and knowledges of a diverse population. Though threatened and too often pushed aside, we concur with the call for this special issue that these are the very values necessary for safeguarding a healthy future for all children during these uncertain times and are thus worthy of safeguarding.

In our work as early childhood teacher educators, our aim is to develop teachers who are prepared with the skills, knowledge, and values that will enable them to protect what they know to be good teaching in the face of ever-increasing pressure for standardization and other threats related to the current political climate. We worry, as studies consistently document the preparation-practice gap, both in terms of what teachers retain from their preparation programs and the disconnects teachers perceive between their education and realities of the classroom (e.g., Allen et al., 2017; Ashley, 2016; Liao et al., 2022). To understand how graduates of our program fare in their ability to live out ECE values in public elementary school classrooms, we embarked on a research project to explore perceptions of how their preparation as early childhood educators informs their current and ongoing practices. For this article, we drew on data from that larger study, which involved five rounds of in-depth photovoice-centered focus group discussions exploring their efforts to enact culturally responsive, equitable, and socially just practices, further examining how they saw themselves enacting the practices, beliefs, and ECE values learned in our program in the face of top-down pressure to prioritize standards-based outcomes. Before sharing the details and findings of our

study, we offer some background from the literature to illustrate the importance of early childhood teacher certification and considerations of teachers' acts of resistance as they strive for equity.

Benefits of Birth to 3rd Grade Teacher Preparation

In a recent review of the status of early childhood certification (generally preschool through 3rd grade) in the United States, Fowler (2025) found that while most states offer a specialized license, most teachers serving these grades are prepared in elementary teacher preparation programs that certify teachers to work with a wider range of children (e.g., K-5 or K-8). Fowler suggests that this is driven by the demands of school administrators who value flexibility when hiring teachers. ECE advocates, however, point to key knowledge and skills that are required for working with younger children (NAEYC, 2020). These include the ability to support young children's social-emotional needs so that children can understand their emotions, make friends, and successfully follow school expectations; an understanding of the differences in how young children think and learn compared to older elementary schoolers; and an ability to scaffold young children's learning progress (National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators, 2018). The National P-3 Center (n.d.) further suggests that teachers who can align preschool content to K-3 are better able to support children through this transition.

Literature suggests that teacher candidates take much from their experiences with very young children that are applicable to their work in K-3 settings. In a study of preservice teachers' reflections, Recchia & Shin (2010) found that infant-toddler practicum experiences shifted students' conceptions of teaching as they began to see the value in careful observation, play, and relationships. Similarly, in research conducted with graduates of our own teacher preparation program, Lees & Brennan (2023) found that these practicum experiences influenced K-3 teachers' understanding of the child development continuum, which often built confidence in classroom management, skills of observation, and the role of relationships. Further, teachers suggested that, in contrast to settler colonial views of young children, which perceive them as incomplete while in progress to adulthood, their infant-toddler practicum experience helped them to see very young children as active and intellectual learners. The current article adds to this literature by examining how early elementary school teachers enact the values established in their birth-3rd-grade teacher preparation program.

Equity and Resistance as Foundational to Early Childhood Teachers' Practice

Constant pressures at the policy-level and push of standards-based approaches increase the need to expand understandings of teachers' experiences from preparation to practice as data-driven instruction often blocks teachers' ability to engage practices that serve more equitable and just futures (Cochran-Smith & Reagan, 2022). As a field, ECE has maintained values of equity and justice and is often politicized as the "great equalizer." Head Start, for example, was established under Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 to "break the cycle of poverty" by supporting the educational, social, health, and nutritional needs of children from low-income communities (Ellsworth & Ames, 1998; Greenberg, 1998). The promise of Head Start, however, has long been linked to

neoliberal trends towards the pathologizing of Black and Brown children and families through the use of labels like "at risk" (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Deficit framings inherent in early childhood initiatives do nothing to move us to a more just system.

Teachers come to understand who they are as teachers in the context of an ever-evolving and complexly complicated field. Throughout their teacher preparation and careers, teachers' practices and identities are continuously shaped by dominant discourses that allow for certain ways of being a teacher (Gibson, 2013). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), through its guidance for teachers via "developmentally appropriate practice," has long provided a frame for how teachers understand teaching (DAP; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; NAEYC, 2022). In line with understandings of development, play, as "a sacred right of childhood" (Cannella & Viruru, 1997, p. 124), is taken up in ECE advocacy as not only central to children's learning and development but also a right that must be actively protected. Unfortunately, this protection is often challenged by tensions between policy demands and standardized curricular practices. Dockett (2011) emphasizes that maintaining play-based approaches while experiencing pressures for measurable outcomes is an act of resistance, one that safeguards children's right to learn through curiosity, agency, and joy rather than conformity to standards-based agendas. In these ways, teaching is positioned as a political act where teachers play a crucial role in challenging inequities and dominant discourses in early education while valuing children's cultural identities and whole selves (Ailwood, 2011; Brooker, 2011; Rogers, 2011).

Along with carrying forward a fight for play, the fields of early childhood and early childhood teacher education have taken up a more critical, equity-forward pedagogy in recent years, which now rubs up against politicized attacks on "woke" education and neoliberal effects like kindergarten readiness and global competition for academic test scores (Bloch & Whye, 2024). Teachers find themselves in competing discourses as their established values of equity and social justice contend with dominant discourses that prioritize "quality" and returns on investment in ECE and elementary education. As these powerful discourses produce narrow concepts of education and learning, reliant on standardized measures of learning outcomes, there is an "ever-increasing governing of children and adults in an attempt to achieve the control" needed to demonstrate success (Moss, 2017, p. 19). This then is where agency lies, in the interplay of power and resistance as "people choose among various discourses available to them or act to resist those discourses" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 116).

We make the leap here, then, to suggest that resistance is an essential value for early childhood teachers, particularly those entering the field in elementary school classrooms, as is illustrated in a small but impactful body of literature. Archer (2022) found that across 16 early educators, resistance to political constructions of teaching was common, through subversive acts such as championing play or disrupting the reliance on developmental milestones. Similarly, Leafgren (2018) recounts stories of early elementary educators who defy the expectations for silent, single-file walking in a kindergarten class and a second-grade teacher who collaboratively forms a resistance to the public display of behaviors with her class. In non-elementary early childhood spaces, we also draw on research that demonstrates teachers' everyday acts of resistance to standardized expectations as well as ways they champion immigrant children's agency and linguistic

repertoires while validating families' languages and histories (Adair, 2014; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2010). As Foucault (1978) reminds us, "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95), and as early elementary teachers are constantly mediating various discourses of power, we position resistance as foundational to their ability to uphold and safeguard the early childhood values that are rooted in their understandings of children and teaching.

Methodology

This study engaged data from a qualitative research study using methods of photovoice-centered focus group discussions. As part of a larger study focused on how teachers described their efforts to enact culturally responsive, equitable, and socially just practices, here we aim to identify the role ECE values plays in that work. The findings we present later are guided by this more focused research question: In what ways are early childhood values present in P-3 certified teachers' perceptions of their practice in early elementary classrooms?

Theoretical Framing and Research Design

Conceptualizations of research as responsive, relational, and grounded in lived experience guided our methodological choices and study design (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). We use critical pedagogy (Freire, 1974, 2000; Giroux, 1985) to ground this study in the understanding that school and curricular choices are not neutral but are influenced by power dynamics based on the reaffirmation of dominant culture. Further critical perspectives, including Black and Chicana feminisms (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012; Calderón, 2014; Collins, 2019), guide our decision to center lived experiences to raise community knowledge as a vital source of insight. In ECE, such frameworks acknowledge that teachers are more than technicians as their thinking, experience, and action are inextricably linked. Taking up a critical stance validates often-diminished teachers' realities, lived experiences, and observations, re-positioning these as mobilizing insights that lead to unearthing inequities (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Saavedra & Pérez, 2012). In this study in particular, these critical frameworks support the upholding of teacher experience and knowledge as we collaborated with teacher-participants to examine pedagogical choices in relation to their lived experiences in contention with systemic powers of schooling.

We were able to establish this collaborative research community of teachers and teacher educators by designing a focus group study that utilized methods of photovoice. Participants composed and presented photovoice submissions during each focus group session, pairing images, reflexive writing, and dialogue. These spaces, where we could hear directly from participants and engage with their thinking, valued their perspectives as critical forms of knowledge as they had the opportunity to reveal systemic barriers and interrogate inequities while articulating identities and generating counter-narratives rooted in resistance, resilience and hope (Carrillo & Dean, 2018; Collins, 2019; Lichty, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997; Pérez, et al., 2016). The development of these sessions and photovoice data is described more fully in a later section.

The frameworks guiding this research are intimately connected to our aims as teacher educators to intentionally center and embrace multiple perspectives such as Black and Chicana feminisms (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012; Collins, 2009), critical race theory (Crenshaw, 2013), Dis/Crit (Annamma, et al., 2013), anti-colonial work (Tuck & Yang, 2012), reconceptualist

scholarship (Bloch, Swadener, & Cannella, 2018), and critical pedagogies (Freire, 1974, 2000; Giroux, 1985) as these compel our deep commitments to equity- and justice-focused education. The work of engaging critical scholarship to ground majority white students (and in this study, our participants) in equity and justice work is imperative (Nyachae & Pham, 2023) but also brings challenges compounded by our identities as teachers and scholars. Two of us are transnational scholars who cross multiple cultural, racial, and geographic borders. Two of us engage in this work as white women with overlapping settler identities and traces of generational immigrant experiences. Engaging the work of Black and Chicana feminisms, we acknowledge that none of us or our participants are Black, only one of us is Latina, and many of the privileges bestowed upon us by characteristics inherent in our intersectional identities separate our lived experiences from the theorists whose work we engage. We also bring our awareness to the systemic injustices that Black and Latina scholars in the U.S. have worked to disrupt and the benefits we access within and alongside educational institutions.

We recognize that teaching white students in this context is not about guilt, but about expanding capacities for listening, equity, reflexivity, and solidarity; knowing that "racism and other forms of oppression are learned and can be unlearned, and it is never too early to start or too late to begin" (Arnold & Swadener, 1993, as cited in Swadener, 2010, p. 22). As urged by many Black scholars (hooks, 2003; Mentor & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021), this work must be taken up with and by white educators in order to enact the critical pedagogies of just, anti-racist, anti-colonial futures and develop an ongoing critical consciousness that serves to reveal and resist layers of power that hold transformative change at bay. We endeavor to apply these theories not only in our teaching and research, but in our daily interactions both in and outside of the institution, centering anti-racist attitudes and promoting the potential of schools to provide centers of joy and deep reflection.

Research Context

We are faculty in an early childhood teacher preparation program at a regional state university on Coast Salish territories in the Pacific Northwest of what is now called the United States. Our program is situated across campuses in two divergent geographic locations, and our research group represents faculty from both campuses. Our participants are public elementary school teachers who graduated from our program, and our data represents stories from prekindergarten (Pre-K) to third-grade classrooms. Our program faculty and students are predominantly white and female, which reflects the demographics of elementary school teachers in the state and in the majority of the U.S. While important to name these statistics, we are mindful that they often mask the experiences of many students and teachers of color, present in both our program and across the field as we engage in the collective work of growing a more diverse teacher workforce.

Prioritizing the development of teachers' critical consciousness, our program strives to center equity and has been recognized nationally for success towards this endeavor (citation blinded for anonymity). To prepare early childhood educators grounded in equity and justice, our program seeks to move beyond deficit models by recognizing children's intersecting identities, cultural assets, and community knowledges (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018), within four curricular strands that run through our courses

(knowledge of child development from birth to third grade, inquiry- and play-based methods, diverse family and community partnerships, social and environmental justice). Through a cohort model, students cultivate a sense of collective responsibility and mutual support, reflecting the relational and communal epistemologies emphasized in our frameworks. In the first year, students explore the foundations of ECE and infant–toddler development through critical and culturally sustaining perspectives; in the second year, they deepen their understanding by engaging with

preschool communities, emphasizing partnerships with families and the broader environment. Practicum experiences throughout the program intentionally bridge theory and practice, allowing students to reflect on their own positionalities while learning from the lived experiences of children, families, and communities (Delgado Bernal, 1998; hooks, 1994), culminating in a two-quarter internship in an elementary school classroom.

Participants

We recruited participants teaching in public elementary schools by contacting graduates of our program to garner interest. After emailing over 100 graduates and posting on social media, six participants maintained continuous involvement and contributed to the production of data. The small group of participants allowed for deep and relational conversation in focus group meetings. Funding for this research allowed for teachers' time and participation to be compensated, which reflected the value we placed on these teachers' participation and knowledge.

Participants taught in different districts and graduated from our early childhood teacher preparation program between 2011 and 2022. All participants earned their bachelor's degree in ECE from our institution, and three of the teachers had gone on to obtain master's degrees. Table 1 identifies years of teaching, education, and grade level for each participant, all of whom identified as white women.

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	Number of years teaching TK-3rd grade	Level of education	Classroom at time of study
Daphne	12	Masters	Third grade
Fiona	6	Masters	Kindergarten
Olivia	8	Masters	Kindergarten
Maddie	4	BA	First grade
Kate	6	BA	First grade
Ella	1	BA	Transitional Kindergarten

Data Collection & Analysis

Data sources included focus group transcripts as well as the images and writing that composed participants' photovoice submissions. Before each focus group meeting, participants were given specific prompts and asked to submit a "photovoice," which paired evocative images with narrative text in response. Each of five sessions focused on a particular theme: identity, partnerships, diverse ways of knowing and being, state-wide Indigenous sovereignty curriculum, and perceived supports and barriers to sustaining their preparation to enact culturally competent, equitable, and decolonizing practices. Themes were paired with brief prompts, such as "how do you incorporate

multiple knowledges in your practice?" to guide participant responses.

During the focus group meetings, each participant had the opportunity to present their photovoice submission and invite comments, questions, and discussions, encouraging a collaborative exchange of ideas that enriched the understanding of each contribution. This interactive dialogue fostered a vibrant community of reflection and learning among participants. To accommodate the diverse schedules of the teachers, participants were typically organized into two small groups, with the exception of the second meeting, when the entire group met together. Overall, our comprehensive data collection is composed of 57 photovoice images, 29 pieces of participant reflective writing, and Zoom recordings and transcripts that encompass over 25 hours of focus group discussions. As findings are presented in the following sections, examples from the data are noted by participant (pseudonym) and source, whether from focus group transcripts (FG) or photovoice writing (PV).

All amassed data sources were organized to facilitate a thorough, collaborative analysis. Using constant comparison analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), each member of the research team worked to code and categorize the data before coming together to establish common threads and identify preliminary codes. Through subsequent rounds of coding, we engaged in ongoing discussion as our understanding of the role of early childhood values in these teachers' practices developed. Then, within the data coded by these broader themes of values, we engaged a new level of analysis to attend to participants' perspectives and center their lived experiences with their students. Engaging a critical analysis that positions pedagogy with/in political and cultural systems of power (Giroux, 1985), we aimed to examine the intersections of these early childhood values with teachers' beliefs, practices, and experiences as they contend with layers of power in schooling.

Findings

Our collective reading of the data found that ECE values informed teaching in significant ways. As our participants worked to align the knowledge and practices learned in teacher preparation with pressures faced in school contexts, they were bolstered by their ability to define themselves as early childhood educators existing in elementary school spaces. This deep connection to ECE values appeared to provide a sense of confidence in their teaching moves and served as an impetus to engage acts of resistance and enact socially just commitments. In this section, we separate these inherently intertwined ideas (an internalized ECE identity and external acts of resistance) to closely examine the evidence for each one.

The "Early Childhood Teacher" Identity in Elementary School Spaces

Participants voiced the ways ECE values informed their work, and even more deeply, were established as vivid foundations of their identities as teachers. The first prompt of the study asked teachers to share a photovoice about their teacher identities. As researchers, we did not foresee how many of these identities would be framed with the ECE values prioritized across our program. Themes that arose in that first session continued throughout the study as teachers discussed the role of play and relationships and their use of a social justice lens to cultivate classroom communities, and adapt curriculum to center diversity and inclusion.

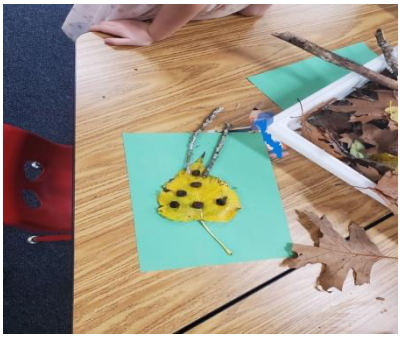
"We Know What's Best for Kids": Play and Relationships as Foundational Practice

Throughout the focus groups, participants discussed their deep understandings related to the role of play and relationships in children's learning, and lamented their struggles in finding the time, curricular space, and administrative support for incorporating them in the classroom. Comments, such as Daphne's - "I know how kids do their best learning, I know that play based learning is part of our foundation" (FG3), so "why do we have to justify what we're doing when we know it's how our kids learn best?" (FG5) - suggest that participants saw themselves as early childhood teachers working to enact their knowledge within elementary school settings that functioned with different understandings of teaching and learning. This sentiment was bolstered by the comments they made regarding the benefits of attending the focus groups, which provided an opportunity to be around teachers with similar backgrounds. Fiona, for example, expressed that the groups helped remind her about "all the different things that we know about early childhood, and what's appropriate, what's best for kids" (FG3).

Participants' takes on play went beyond its benefits on learning and highlighted creativity, engagement, and expression as vital in children's lives. Ella's identity photovoice exemplifies this as she shared an image of natural materials (leaves, sticks, etc.) and a child's playful art construction (Figure 1), accompanied by a statement that located this open-ended, inquiry-based, playful experience within her own teaching identity and positioned play-based experiences as more important than more "conventional," close-ended pedagogies. As a transitional kindergarten teacher, Ella perhaps had more opportunity to follow through on these practices in her classroom, but others also spoke of the importance of play in their teaching across grade levels. Fiona, a kindergarten teacher, named her "favorite thing about teaching" as "those moments where you can just be silly and have fun with the kids" (FG1). Beyond the potential for learning here, playful joy is elemental to her identity. This sentiment was echoed by Daphne, third-grade teacher: "I just love to play with my kids…, it doesn't matter how old you are, playing and learning through play is so impacting" (FG1), later expressing her longing for dramatic play, which is not present in third grade as it was when she taught kindergarten.

Figure 1

Ella Photovoice 1



Relationships and care are also foundational to understandings of early childhood education, particularly in birth-3 spaces. Too often, though, these aspects get removed, or at least heavily shadowed by more technical aspects of education, as children get older and become more easily measured in the name of outcomes (Moss, 2017). Our participants spoke widely about the role of relationships and respect for the child, desiring others to also see their students as more than just reading and math scores, as illustrated with the images below (Figures 2 and 3). In Figure 2, Daphne shared a photo of a vibrant orange mushroom hidden under an overpowering white-ish gray fungi, which she connected to

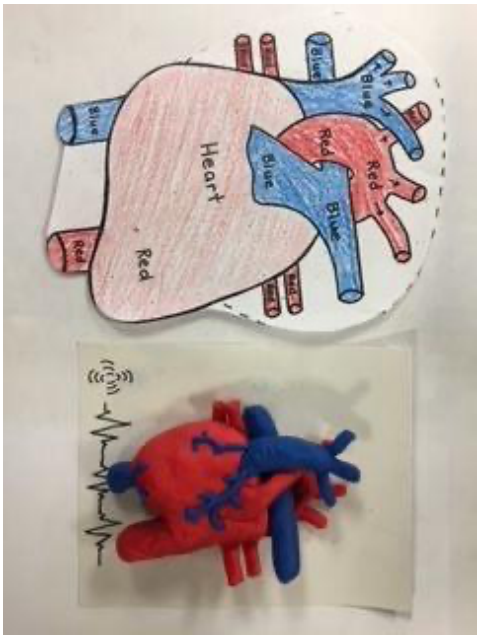
"getting to know all of who [your students] are and letting others see the parts of us that we hide to build connections" (Daphne, PV1). Daphne drew on her identity as an avid outdoorsperson and forager to highlight that in the shadow of everything you might hear about a child (from other teachers, what information you get with a class list, etc.), she "makes sure we see the whole picture, and sometimes we have parts of us that are hidden. But then, when we can, when we feel safe, we can let people see all of us, and it helps us build connections" (FG1). Relatedly, Maddie's images of the anatomical heart (Figure 3) connected the "heart" she brings to her relationships with students and the analytical side of addressing her students' needs, later offering examples of her students "on paper" and expressing her surprise when students connect and develop strong relationships across their diverse needs. Across the study, all participants spoke to the mediation of understanding children based on needs (often defined by data points) and knowing them as people in context.

Figure 2

Daphne Photovoice 1

Figure 3

Maddie Photovoice 1



Participants wrote and spoke about how they viewed relationships and connectedness as essential, before they could attend to the academic curriculum. They considered the relationships they build with their students, the ones students build with each other, and the relationships they can help students create with the curriculum. In our first focus group, Ella stated, "I think my favorite part [about teaching] is building relationships with the kids, especially the kiddos that are tough" (FG1), speaking to the ways participants saw positive relationships as basic to children's needs in support of their learning. Fiona adds to this as "students help each other do their very best in academic learning and learning about friendship and human connection" (PV2), positioning her students as important partners in her classroom. Later in the study, Ella brought these values of play and relationships together in a story that illustrated how incorporating more hands-on, play-based learning into a class "that had a lot of [behavioral] issues in it" (FG4), led to more

positive learning outcomes and engagement. Though it may not seem so, holding onto play and relationships in early elementary classrooms today can be seen as quite a radical practice, and in this way, we see these aspects of teachers' identity inherently linked with their moves towards social justice.

"When do we get to work on liberation?"

We hope and expect our program to prepare teachers who honor diversity and promote social justice. The data offered examples of how participants hold these values, with some seemingly able to venture into more critically just spaces than others. This difference might suggest the influence of a larger school culture and support, or lack thereof, for this work. For example, two of our participants acknowledged the positive move of "equity teams" established at their schools that provided basic training and materials like diverse books, but these moves were often seen as inadequate. Daphne expressed this frustration clearly, "if they're gonna push for equity, then we need to do better with equity!" (FG 4). Teachers may enter the field with a social justice lens, but often do not find adequate support for carrying that work forward when a focus on "equity" remains at a basic level and resists moves towards dismantling barriers that continue to prevent truly equitable and just experiences for children in schools (Souto-Manning & Epley, 2024).

Socially just commitments appeared to be woven into teacher identities, like Kate's, whose image of her "work lanyard" covered in flair represented a public display of her values. A button with the phrase "Choose to Include" and another naming her pronouns were pinned alongside others she was given by students and colleagues, representing "the importance of community" and "connection with her students" (PV1). Relatedly, Fiona used an image of three children's overlapping hands (Figure 4) to show how children from "varied backgrounds and experiences" (PV2) were viewed as partners in her classroom. Maddie saw diversity among her students as an asset: "that's what I really love about teaching, being able to see all the diversity and learn from them" (FG1) while also noting how deficit-based framings linking diversity with need perpetuate the status quo as "all the structures and partnerships kind of focus on [families'] struggles, but… there are so many strengths that come with it all" (FG2).

Figure 4

Fiona Photovoice 2

As Rowan et al. (2021) suggest, there is a difference between teaching about diversity and teaching for diversity, and our participants appeared to waver on this line as they spoke of the importance of diversity, how they supported children in learning about diversity, and started to critique larger practices in terms of meeting the needs of students. Some participants expressed more pronounced awareness and moves towards action as elements of their identities. Mentioned earlier, Kate and Daphne both articulated disappointment with their districts' approaches to equity work, including staff meetings and repetitive trainings "where nothing gets accomplished" (FG5). Referring to a highly circulated image illustrating reality, equality, equity, and liberation, Kate wondered

""when will we get to work on liberation?" (PV5; FG5). While participants varied in their abilities to teach for social justice, they all held it as a value and understood, as Olivia articulated, that "as a teacher, I am required to meet the needs of all my students… it is my job to provide access to the curriculum and meet their needs as an individual" (PV3). It is pertinent to remember, though, that access alone is not equity, as it only serves to provide access to an already inequitable system where needs are constructed in whiteness (Souto-Manning & Epley, 2024).

As they sought to change curriculum and support students in connecting to their learning and each other, these teachers were not yet venturing into more liberating spaces but were desiring more equitable practices. Our participants aligned themselves with early childhood education in these ways; however, their talk of play, relationships, and a social justice lens in their teaching was almost always situated within discussions of the many barriers that interfered with the work they want to do as teachers. As we look in the next section at ways these teachers resisted and took action, we draw on Britzman's (1992) conceptualization of identity as "a struggle for voice amidst voices that are not our own" (p. 32), seeing how these teachers are actively negotiating competing discourses and beliefs in their classrooms.

Resistance and Action in the Safeguarding ECE Values

In the previous section, we saw teachers strongly affirming the values of play and relationships as central to children's learning and development, emphasizing these as rights of childhood as well as context for growth. In this section, we look at how ECE values fueled action and resistance. While some teachers demonstrate public acts of non-compliance (Leafgren, 2018), many teachers are more likely to engage in "implicit activisms," often relegated to the private spaces of classrooms where they desire to challenge injustices but are limited by sanctions or potentially fear of losing their jobs (Zembylas, 2013). As Archer (2022) demonstrated, these "often inconspicuous" (p. 436) acts help teachers maintain an appearance of the status quo, which can feel easier. As we looked at how teachers in our study took action and resisted, we saw this leaning towards "safer" acts while voicing desires for more. Data examined here illustrates how teachers fought for their values, justified their priorities related to play and relationships, and made moves towards social justice, all in the face of top-down administrative practices and policies that continued to devalue the knowledge of early childhood professionals.

Fighting for Play and Relationships

Data analysis suggested that participants were prepared to enact child-centered values and practices learned in their teacher preparation programs but faced resistance and doubt from administrators. Aware that their efforts were under scrutiny, their commitment to protecting play and relationship-building activities positioned them as activists engaged in a fight for their closely held beliefs.

Maddie, for example, shared,

> *if a principal walked in my classroom and we were like playing, I feel like I need to justify myself, like this is why we're talking you know we're doing this, this is why we're moving around our classroom, this is why we're not sitting in our chair, this is why our voices are not at level zero. I feel like I have to justify myself when I shouldn't. (FG5)*

Relatedly, Ella passionately shared frustrations as she expressed her concerns about the enforcement of standards, regardless of the unique needs and circumstances within her classroom.

> *What is up with admin these days?! Cause we were sitting there and… one of the teachers was talking about this fabulous lesson that she did with her fourth graders and it was very engaging it was very interactive and the principal goes well that's nice… but what standard does that support… Can we just stop talking about the stupid standards? I'm over it and then I was thinking to myself I've been reading ever since we went to common core standards in this country everything has gone to hell so it's like when are we going to realize that, no it's not working it's not. (FG5)*

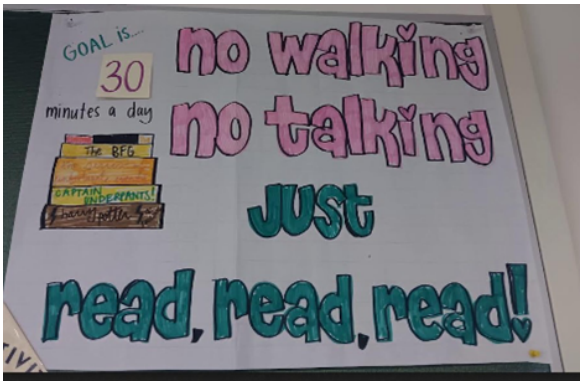
Maddie's and Ella's frustration spoke to the governing they experienced as teachers, both from administration and within a system of top-down mandates (Moss, 2017).

Despite feeling limited by the administrative gaze, teachers pushed back with efforts to best support their students. When Ella shared images of loose-parts play, she described how students were meeting math standards in their conversations about their constructions (PV2), showing how play was a natural balancer of academic standards and meeting children's needs. Ella's work demonstrated the effectiveness of ECE values and practices towards reaching learning goals shared by the administration.

Another example of this is Daphne's story of the "no walking, no talking, just read read read!" poster (Figure 5) that was required as part of a mandated reading curriculum, reflecting demands of 30 minutes of silent, independent reading each day (PV5). Firmly disagreeing with this practice, Daphne prioritized relationships and connection among peers as part of their literacy and school experience, sharing how she instead used this time to incorporate more partner reading and movement with her students, noting that this meant "having my door closed a little bit more, and then I feel like people leave me alone" (FG5). Recalling other ways she prioritized classroom relationships in the past, Daphne risked getting "behind" in curriculum when making more time in a kindergarten class for discussions and social-emotional learning, validating her choices because "when we take the time to hear our kids and let them be heard, we just build such better relationships" (FG1). These examples fit in a broader discussion among participants and beyond of how the lack of time and space for relationships in elementary classrooms contributes to behavioral issues.

Figure 5

Daphne Photovoice 5



Teachers' experiences reveal the tension between administrative expectations and teachers' informed, relationship-based assessments of the needs of students, particularly in diverse classroom settings.

Teachers pushed back against these pressures, advocating for more flexible, relevant, and personalized educational practices that prioritize the whole child, including their emotional and academic needs. This resistance appeared to be rooted in a desire to create a more meaningful and effective learning environment for all students, not just teaching for the standard, and we saw practices of resistance as teachers were determined to do what they felt was best.

Teaching towards Social Justice

As described earlier, a social justice lens was present in the participants' identities. At a basic level, teachers valued diversity as an asset to relationship-building within the classroom community. Fiona's photovoice of the three sets of children's hands (Figure 4 in the earlier section) is a clear illustration; she discussed the layering of children coming from generational settler families and newcomer, immigrant families in her classroom. She found it "so important to be intentional in giving each student the opportunity to share their cultures and backgrounds" (FG5). Lacking a more critical eye, however, teachers' conceptualizations of diversity can be coded in settler moves to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Another example was a school mural Maddie shared, representing the inclusion of both the local military and native communities. While Maddie celebrated the recognition of these distinct components of her school community, she did so in the absence of recognition or critique of the historical tensions that exist on these lands, or how those tensions might impact current relationships.

Some teachers, however, took steps from acknowledging the importance of knowing about diversity to establishing practices closer to teaching for diversity, desiring a more just future by engaging critical analysis of the past and present (Rowan et al., 2021). Two teachers offered salient critiques of mandated curriculum materials. Fiona, when provided with a Native American curriculum unit, took note of how her students were being taught about a tribe located over a thousand miles away, while her school was not implementing the local Indigenous curriculum that would better represent the occupied land they inhabited (FG4). Relatedly, in Daphne's call out of the mandated reading curriculum, she expressed that "a lot of programs, I feel like, are created in communities that aren't what ours are. They're not the friends I serve" (FG5). These comments emerged amidst larger conversations, pointing towards teachers' understandings of barriers to equity when mandated materials are already situated in inequity.

Engaging children in this learning, Kate shared experiences with a school-wide canned food drive to support people experiencing poverty. In a school she named as overwhelmingly affluent, the canned food drive was part of the school-wide curriculum to promote "generosity." As an example of her stance as a teacher to help children "unlearn preconceived notions about people different than them," Kate described how she used the canned food drive as an opportunity to engage in more critical conversations with her students about people experiencing homelessness. After hearing stereotypical assumptions voiced by her young students, like their family does not eat canned food because "it's for people who live outside" or "people are homeless because they watch too much [television]," Kate invited them into collaborative inquiry where they learned about how mental illness and high cost of living were the main causes of homelessness (PV2). While this may feel like a small step, there is movement here in Kate's practice that shifts towards deeper learning about social justice

issues and can create an opening for children's development of critical thinking related to social justice issues.

Another aspect where we saw teachers grappling with this critical work was in their practices around the state-wide Native sovereignty curriculum that was mandated for K-12 education in 2015 and then teacher education programs in 2018. Out of our participants, only the more recent graduates had experience with the curriculum in our teacher education program, and those who graduated before 2018 had little knowledge of or experience with the curriculum. This affirms recent research suggesting that not many districts across the state are following the mandate to implement this curriculum (Conrad & Hardinson-Stevens, 2023). Ella, the most recent graduate, was actively working to "bring indigenous voices into the classroom. One of my favorite ways to do this is through read-aloud experiences that I can tie hands-on learning with, videos, and hopefully in the future learning trips to the [the local tribe's museum] and children's park" (PV4). She also shared photos of materials from her student teaching lessons from the Indigenous curriculum, which sparked conversation and ideas among the other teachers to incorporate similar ideas into their classrooms. Others shared how they embedded Indigenous materials from the curriculum website into an already established school day. Maddie found connections to her required literacy curriculum by listening to Indigenous stories, but named the necessity of adapting these materials "to meet the Common Core Standards for literacy" (PV4), which highlights the limitations teachers felt in doing this work. Daphne pushed a little further to find spaces outside of "instructional" time, like during snack, to listen to stories and engage in a mapping inquiry around tribal lands (PV4), showing the duality of participants' commitments to the ECE field.

Like some of the participants, Daphne's knowledge of the Native sovereignty curriculum was self-learned, only finding out about the curriculum from a student teacher she hosted in 2021, six years after this curriculum was mandated state-wide. Two of our participants were learning about the curriculum for the first time as part of our study, and expressed a newly found desire to learn more and enact the curriculum. While some schools seemed to be just starting the conversation about incorporating the curriculum school-wide, most of the teachers received no guidance or support for this work. Though teachers desired to implement the Native sovereignty curriculum and strongly believed in the necessity of representing local Indigenous perspectives in their teaching, the disconnect between their practice and the lack of shared vision with their schools and administration both frustrated and limited teachers in what they were able to do. Like teachers' attempts to enact their values around play and prioritizing relationships, their endeavors to teach for social justice often happened when they "went a little bit rogue" (Ella, FG4). This resistance is not just about challenging authority but about advocating for practices that are more connected to what they see as the real needs of students and visions for a way of teaching that promotes more socially just futures.

Conclusions and Future Directions

This study illuminates how early childhood–prepared teachers working in elementary settings draw on foundational early childhood education (ECE) values—play, relationships, and diversity—as expressions of

their commitment to social justice. Through photovoice images, written narratives, and focus group discussions, participants described how their teacher preparation shaped enduring beliefs about play-based learning and relational practice. They viewed play and relationships not only as pedagogical approaches but as affirmations of children's rights, agency, and individuality. These commitments also served as acts of resistance against data-driven, standards-based mandates that often marginalize ECE perspectives. Teachers' discussions reflected an emerging critical consciousness toward teaching for diversity and equity (Souto-Manning & Epley, 2024), as they sought to build inclusive and caring classroom communities while questioning superficial or tokenistic equity initiatives. Although their advocacy often occurred quietly within classroom walls, these teachers enacted implicit forms of activism (Zembylas, 2013) by adapting curriculum, protecting play, fostering authentic relationships, and engaging students in critical conversations about culture and justice.

Our qualitative methodology is not meant to draw generalizable conclusions, and while we acknowledge the limitations here, we are also hopeful that these teachers' experiences are somewhat representative and felt in the field. A small sample of participants represented a fraction of program alumni, limiting our ability to make claims about the efficacy of our program. However, it also enabled us to build relationships across small groups and engage in rich conversations in which participants revealed truths that may not have come out in larger settings or more conventional methods. We found it notable that some participants offered more in-depth contributions than others, a reality that may have skewed our understanding of how all members were thinking. These differences in contributions raise new questions about how and why some teachers develop stronger desires to engage in resistance while others appear less inclined. We must also note that while teacher perceptions of their work provide meaningful insights, questions remain about their practice. Future research may benefit from classroom observations of teaching practice.

We believe this representation of teacher ideas and experiences provides valuable insights for teacher preparation and the field of ECE. Findings revealed the simultaneous struggle and ongoing commitment to justice, sustained by educators who recognize the intersections of identity, culture, and community as central to children's learning. Findings also suggest that when envisioning ECE as a space for solidarity and liberation rather than assimilation, we embody acts of hope and resistance (Saavedra & Pérez, 2012). Demands of elementary school settings may create barriers to enacting practices learned in ECE teacher preparation programs, but this study suggests that values instilled during this transformative time remain. We saw how teachers' commitments to ECE values supported their developing critical consciousness, as efforts to safeguard these values were often the impetus for resistance and furthering critical awareness. These complementary commitments appeared to be bolstered during the study as participants inspired one another to continue the work, demonstrating that ECE professionals are not passive recipients of policy but active agents shaping more humane and just educational critical consciousness (Jung & Zhang, 2016; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2010). Administrators and others interested in promoting socially just teaching should consider providing opportunities for teachers to engage in communities of practice, draw on the knowledge of early childhood educators, and advocate for

early childhood specific teaching certifications (Fowler, 2025).

We honor those theorists, scholars, and teachers whose courage, imagination, and work have provided the language and vision through which we continue this collective work. We commit to sustaining this transformative momentum through ongoing reflexivity and accountability. Drawing on participants' insights, we find renewed hope, solidarity, and collective empowerment within our ECE community's ongoing pursuit of equity and justice. The teachers in this study give us hope for this pursuit, showing that the fight for play, as the fight for justice, is not a closed chapter but a living movement continually renewed by those who teach, research, and advocate.

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