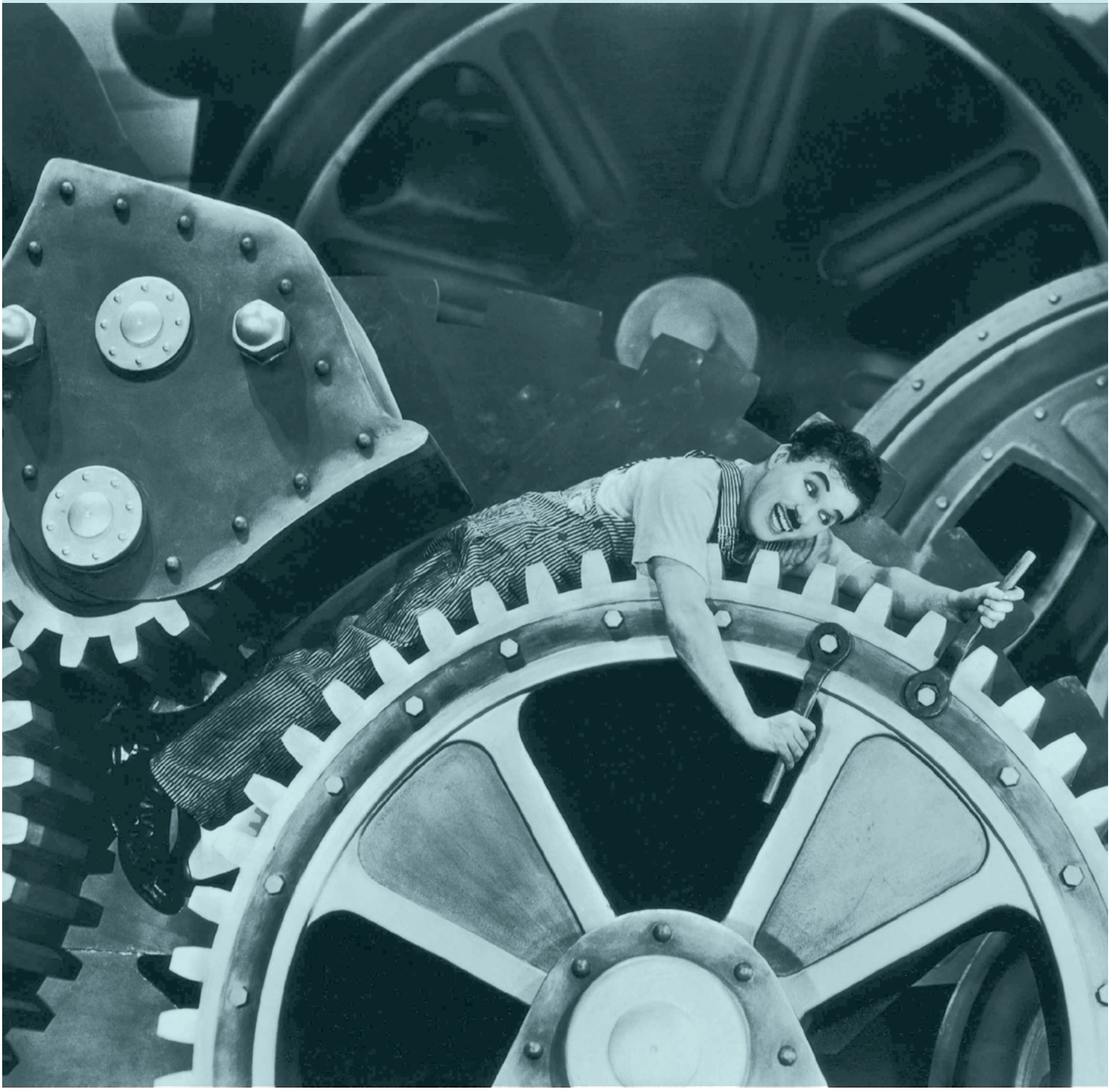
# Reconceptualizing Quality

## Centering Community Wisdom and Power & Putting the Early Childhood Education Technocracy to Bed



**Tech-noc-ra-cy /tek•näkr•sē/**

*The government or control of society or industry by an elite of technical experts.*

*Metropolis*, Fritz Lang, 1927.

# Contents




Portland State UNIVERSITY

Our research mission: To engage in equity-driven research, evaluation, and consultation to promote social justice for children, youth, families and communities.

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# Acknowledgments

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We are likewise grateful to the system leaders who sometimes ventured outside their comfort zones to participate in interviews with us about the current quality support system in Oregon, as well as their hopes and dreams for more equitable and effective approaches. We applaud your courage, critical thinking, and imagination.

We also benefited tremendously from invigorating conversations with the folks facilitating and supporting the Spark redesign process: Ash Mickels, Spark Specialist with DELC and Lauren Peterson, Spark Program Director at TRI. We cheer your efforts to galvanize true system transformation!

We'd also like to thank numerous colleagues across the community who volunteered to confidentially review and offer feedback on multiple drafts of the manuscript as it was developed. Your encouragement and critique was essential to honing the analysis and the fact-checking process. Your enthusiasm for the effort further confirmed our sense that many system folks were having similar thoughts and experiences, yet lacked a forum (or perceived permission) for public discussion. We hope this paper helps open the door to continued transparent and discerning conversations.

Last but not least, our graphic designer, Brandan Kearney, went above and beyond in his meticulous, thoughtful review and editing of the draft manuscript. His partnership was instrumental in refining the final product and further confirmed that these are issues that speak to all of us.

Above all, we appreciate the collective commitment to high-quality, culturally affirming and sustaining early childhood education for all children in Oregon. Together, we are confident we can co-create a more beautiful and just world for all of our children, families and communities.

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## Contacts

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*Dear Reader,*

Before you begin reading the paper that follows, we wanted to set the scene for you and issue an invitation. You might notice right away that this is not your typical research or policy paper. That's intentional — we're hoping this might catch the interest of a broader audience. Likewise, it's not meant to be a top-down, "expert" statement where we supposedly tell you what's true and not true and exactly what needs to be done.

Instead, we invite you to slow down and really reflect on the story we're telling here and the argument we're making. Does it make sense to you? Why or why not? Does it reflect your values? How does it make you feel? What else do you need or want to know about this? What do *you* think we should do about the challenges we've identified?

As much as we value the contributions of so-called "knowledge workers" (ourselves included), we also reject the idea that policymaking is or ever could be simply data-driven, bypassing the democratic process in the name of "truths" determined by allegedly neutral science. That is not to say that we think data (broadly conceived), research and evaluation aren't critical to meaningful policymaking — we absolutely do. But using "science" to silence legitimate differences in values and opinions does a disservice to all of us.

Instead, we think it's vitally important that we all bring a healthy skepticism and strong critical thinking skills to bear on issues so central to the well-being of children, families and communities across the political spectrum. In the same spirit, we push back in this paper on the toxic polarization that we see everywhere around us. With gratitude to john a. powell,[1] we use the ideas of bridging and breaking to help guide this conversation:

Watch the video: john a. powell on 'bridging' with conservative Arthur Brooks.

> [Breaking is] where we turn inward, only to what we know and who we know. This path leads ultimately to a politics of isolation. The other direction is bridging, where we turn outwardly to connect and explicitly work with other groups and seek ways to build common ground. This path ultimately takes us toward belonging and empathy.

To start, we are going to ask you to reconsider some "facts" and ideas that are largely believed to be settled in U.S. early childhood education (ECE). We've put together the following executive summary to whet your appetite. You will see links embedded throughout that will take you to specific sections of the full-length document if you're looking for more.

We also need to state for the record that minoritized communities *already know* deep in their bones — and have been saying for a long time — many of the things in this paper. In fact, our motivation to write this paper came from minoritized communities repeatedly telling us that we needed to address a gigantic elephant in the room before ECE could *truly* begin to move toward equity for all. That elephant is the mainstream definition of ECE "quality" and the corresponding systems intended to facilitate it.

When we interviewed mostly White-identified system experts — folks in Oregon embedded in the mainstream ECE system, with many years of experience between them — we heard a very similar message. The good news in terms of bridging is that

we saw considerable similarity in the concerns that system experts and minoritized communities shared about the current approach to ECE quality.

We offer this paper as one possible tool to jumpstart open discussion of this elephant in the room. We see an urgent need for system transformation around understandings of and approaches to ECE quality, and that it's possible! Some pretty great things are happening already in communities around Oregon that we can learn from and build upon.

For some of us, the analysis that follows might be hard to hear. It can be a little unmooring to have one's basic assumptions challenged. For others, on the margins, it may actually be validating. Contrary to much of the public messaging regarding ECE, there is a *lot* of complexity here. One early reviewer recommended having someone with you to process the feelings (e.g., possible guilt, confusion or defensiveness) that might come up, as well as the content itself. We love this idea and completely agree that this work is best done in relationship.

**Please join us on this journey.**

*With gratitude,*

Lorelei, Beth, Laura, Yumi, Katie, Amber and Alexis

# **Reconceptualizing Quality**
# Executive Summary

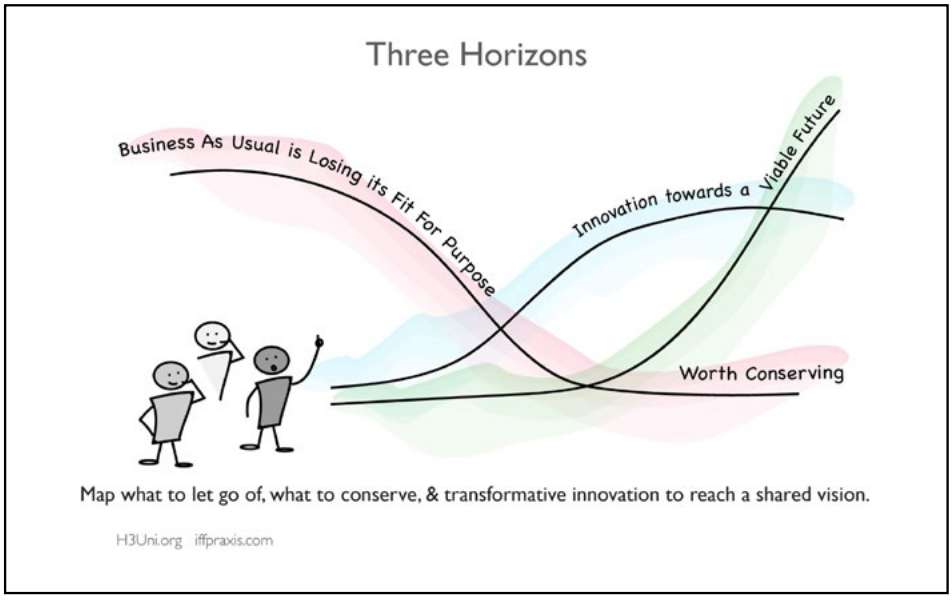
References to quality are literally everywhere in ECE policy and administration. Of course, we all want the best for young children. But what does "quality" really mean?

The quality story is a complicated one, and one with problematic implications both for educators and for the children and families they serve – particularly those who are **minoritized** by race, ethnicity, language, economic status, geography, ability, sex, gender identity and/or sexual orientation.

The way ECE approaches quality can also sound out of touch when we take Oregon's current child care crisis into account. Early childhood educators are paid so poorly they can barely cover their costs, while families struggle mightily to pay for care. Demanding more from this fragile system in the name of so-called quality, without making meaningful change, risks collapsing the whole thing. But just because we've backed ourselves into this corner doesn't mean we can't find a way out together.

In 2023, Oregon's early learning systems related to licensure, quality improvement and child care subsidy were brought together into a single state agency, the Department of Early Learning and Care (DELC). At the same time, Raise Up Oregon (RUO),[2] the "comprehensive state system plan for early childhood, prenatal to age 5," was revised for the next five-year cycle. This is an opportune moment — even a historic opportunity — to examine and reshape the ECE quality narrative and support system.

This paper was commissioned by DELC in association with the federal Preschool Development Grant "aimed at building state and local infrastructure to deliver quality early childhood programs and establish stronger coordination and collaboration across programs and sectors, including strong tribal partnerships" (See https://www.oregon.gov/delc/providers/pages/pdg-assessment.aspx).




**Summary of Methods**

1. Extensive review and analysis of research literature (journals, policy reports, presentations, webinars, etc.)

2. In-depth qualitative interviews with:

   - 13 predominantly White-identified people working in and across sectors of the current ECE system

   - 23 Early Childhood Equity Fund grantees (leaders and staff of culturally specific ECE and parenting programs)

3. Data analysis and cross-validation by racially/ethnically diverse university research team

4. All-day facilitated session with ECEF grantees to co-interpret findings and develop recommendations for supporting culturally specific ECE

## The Three Horizons of Innovation & Culture Change

In thinking about systems change, we've found the Three Horizons (3H)[3] work by Sharpe (2020)[4] to be especially helpful. 3H thinking helps us recognize things that currently aren't working (Horizon 1), find places to innovate (Horizon 2), and move toward system transformation (Horizon 3). The magic is that all three horizons are in play *at the same time*. The 3H framework is both realistic about how complex system change happens and consciously aspirational.

Watch a short introduction to the 3H framework.

To facilitate futures thinking and adaptation for an ECE system in crisis, we used the 3H framework to guide our analysis of current conditions relating to ECE quality in Oregon (H1); identify innovative, community-based strategies for consideration (H2); and generate short-term and longer-term recommendations for approaching system change in support of true quality (H3).

This executive summary summarizes the main elements of the analysis and the full set of recommendations, linking to applicable sections of the full-length document as appropriate. Feel free to jump around and check out anything that calls to you. We encourage you to put your feet up and settle in for a few minutes! You deserve the time to reflect and the opportunity to contribute. *Everybody's hearts and minds are needed here.*

Note: This document uses the terms "educators" and "providers" interchangeably within the context of ECE unless otherwise specified.

HORIZON 1

# Business as Usual Is Losing its Fit for the Purpose

## Beginning with the Oregon Context

Public ECE quality support systems began to emerge in Oregon in the 1980s, in step with national trends. These systems generally follow standards established by national professional associations and are based on the assumption that ECE quality is something that can be measured and quantified. A primary mechanism states have used to support ECE quality is Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), which are intended to help early childhood educators advertise their level of quality through star ratings, and (presumably) allow families to choose programs based on those ratings. The logic is that families will choose higher-rated programs, gradually forcing out lower-quality programs through market-based competition and raising the quality of care overall. Oregon's QRIS is called "Spark" and is currently administered by The Research Institute at Western Oregon University. (In Oregon, the R in "QRIS" stands for "recognition" rather than "rating," reflecting efforts to reorient the system toward a more supportive stance.) Publicly funded early learning programs must participate in Spark; participation is voluntary for other early childhood educators.

For more detail, see this diagram of the various components of Oregon's quality support system.

### Problems with Oregon's current ECE quality system

To better understand how Oregon's ECE quality support system is working, we conducted confidential interviews with people who have extensive knowledge and understanding of the system. Participants:

- ✗ Repeatedly said the system was overly complex and confusing.

Read more about the themes that emerged in these confidential interviews.

- ✗ Struggled to put into words the definition of quality used by state systems.
- ✗ Stated how impossible it is to come up with one definition of quality.
- ✗ Questioned the current system's basic assumptions, priorities and strategies.
- ✗ Identified numerous inequities built into current quality support systems.
- ✗ Noted a mismatch between families' ideas of quality and the system's definition.
- ✗ Emphasized basic issues like the need for workforce recognition, compensation and support.

As one interviewee put it, "I'm not sure that anything [about the current system] is working super well right now; I don't think our system has figured out how to be high-quality yet."

### Quality at what cost (literally and figuratively)?

Interviewees repeatedly drew our attention to the bigger context of the child care crisis. Child care is an essential service — a linchpin for multiple sectors of Oregon's economy. Interviewees said we should be doing everything in our power to attract, support and retain this workforce, not driving people away by creating new requirements, pushing toward higher credentialing expectations and increasing surveillance — all in exchange for minimum wage (on average). There is a disconnect between efforts to optimize ECE at the educator level and the reality of what is widely acknowledged as a broken system. This is especially salient for minoritized educators, who are disproportionately overrepresented in the profession. As one systems interview participant argued:

> If we were going to do one thing that was going to support quality in early learning, it would be to devote every hour and dime we have to making sure that our workforce is cared for, compensated, has insurance, has time off, and has resources for their programs. Because that's what's killing us.

There is a disconnect between efforts to optimize ECE at the educator level and the reality of what is widely acknowledged as a broken system.

Of course, highlighting the urgent needs of providers should not be interpreted as an argument in favor of abandoning basic safety protections. Everyone we spoke with, system experts and community members alike, agreed that there are baseline conditions all programs need to meet: No one is advocating for anything but quality care and education. The point is that underlying structural factors — such as low pay, unaffordability, inadequate supply and anemic public investment — *cannot be addressed by simply creating increasingly complex and burdensome systems to enforce "quality"; that is a sure-fire formula for burnout and attrition.*

### Growing recognition that the status quo is not working

A number of current Oregon initiatives aim to increase accessibility and equity across ECE quality support systems. These efforts are encouraging and indicate a growing understanding that the system is not functioning as we would like. But unless we examine the definition of "quality" itself, they may have limited impact.

One notable exception is the Spark redesign process, which seems to be authentically centering parent, community and ECE leadership in reimagining—not just tweaking—the QRIS system. We are excited and hopeful about what could result from this process and encourage you to learn more about it here.

There is a burgeoning national conversation around these issues as well. Many articles have appeared in recent years, as well as an influential series of explainer videos.[5] The 2023 BUILD conference featured one presentation after another that questioned the mainstream ECE quality narrative and proposed alternative strategies, largely highlighting the need for true family and educator partnership (as noted above, the Spark redesign process aligns with this shift in direction). The time is ripe for change!

## Limitations of the Mainstream Narrative and Evidence Base for ECE Quality

In the United States, a very particular story is told about the importance of high-quality ECE. This story is not a universal one; we see other understandings in other parts of the world, as well as disagreement right here in our own backyards. So where did this story come from? And who should we believe?

The short and grossly oversimplified version is this: In the U.S., ECE scholars and advocates have leaned heavily on the idea of ECE as a kind of science-based "intervention" — particularly for minoritized children — that will mitigate all sorts of harms and save society a lot of money in the long run. The catch is, according to this story, we need "high-quality" ECE to achieve these ends, not just any old garden-variety child care arrangement.

### The early childhood education technocracy

Learn more about the ECE technocracy.

The ECE narrative is bolstered at every turn by references to "the science of early childhood." What's wrong with that? Of course, we'd love for policymaking and practice to be thoughtfully informed by meaningful research. But neither "science" nor scientists are elected representatives. We can't simply bypass the democratic process based on what unelected "experts" tell us to do. That would be a technocracy,[6] not a democracy. In a technocracy, elite experts (doctors, economists, academics, etc.) have an outsized influence on both the policymaking and public administration processes.

Although the people actually doing the work of ECE are overwhelmingly low-income women and disproportionately BIPOC, the ECE policy agenda is increasingly driven by medical doctors and academics.

Although the people actually doing the work of early childhood education are overwhelmingly low-income women and disproportionately BIPOC, the ECE policy agenda is increasingly driven by medical doctors and academics. Nor have families had much of a role in setting the contemporary ECE agenda; instead, the focus has primarily been on "educating" families as to what they *should* want or expect from ECE.

#### The science underpinning the ECE technocracy

What about the science itself? The quality narrative weaves together several threads: notions of scientific management, theories of child development, seemingly dramatic findings from neuroscience, and an essentially economic view of human worth.[7] All of this is grounded in a very particular (Western) understanding and approach to science that has increasingly been called into question as fundamentally incomplete and, sometimes, frankly destructive.[8] Nonetheless, the quality narrative is typically framed in terms of universal, scientific "truths." As we'll see below, we have compelling reasons to be skeptical.

#### Scientific management or the factory model of ECE

The U.S. public education system, including ECE, has been highly influenced by a management theory developed in the late 1800s by a man named Frederick Taylor.

Taylorism, or "scientific management," sought to bring scientific principles to the workplace in order to increase efficiency and product quality. Application of this framework to public education occurred shortly thereafter, with many scholars referring to this approach as the "factory model" of education.[9]

Today, few families would embrace the idea of school (never mind child care or preschool) as an assembly line with children as the units of production and teachers as line workers, and yet these assumptions continue to have very real effects as we drive toward standardized curricula, outcomes and assessments, which are often invoked as linchpins for "quality" ECE.

As a direct outgrowth of scientific management and notions of "quality control," QRIS were promoted and incentivized by the federal Administration for Children and Families (e.g., via the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge). But after four decades of implementing QRIS nationally, there is ample evidence that such quality ratings fail to reliably distinguish between programs and are *not consistently correlated with child outcomes*.[10] In Oregon and elsewhere, early childhood educators — particularly those who are minoritized — tell us the system is onerous, inaccessible and biased; most opt out of participation. Indeed, there is widespread agreement that QRIS often *reinforce* rather than mitigate existing inequities. Further, there is little evidence that many families use QRIS to inform their child care decisions. Given the low supply and high cost of early childhood care, how much "choice" do families really have?

After four decades of implementing QRIS, there is ample evidence that quality ratings under such systems fail to reliably distinguish between programs and are not consistently correlated with child outcomes.

Learn more about the disappointing results of QRIS. Also, check out this series of explainer videos.

Regardless, sizable (and mostly federal) funds continue to be directed to the QRIS infrastructure. At this point, we must ask if this is the best use of our limited resources.

### Universalism, the medical model and enduring bias

Another problem with ECE science is that mainstream theories of child development are based on highly unrepresentative samples of White children and families. Good science tells us not to apply research based on one distinct group to everyone, as though that group automatically represents what is normal. This is especially important to remember because so-called "WEIRD" (White, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) groups make up only 5% of the world's population.[11]

Harvard anthropologist Joseph Henrich coined the term "WEIRD" to describe the rather unique cultural traits of this relatively small group. See https://weirdpeople.fas.harvard.edu/overview

In the early 2000s, an especially persuasive scientific rationale for ECE emerged: neuroscience. We all know the story: Crucial brain development happens in the first three years ("1,000 days") of life. If this development isn't supported properly, literal damage to the so-called "brain architecture" may have lifelong negative effects.

This narrative has had a profound influence on the ECE field, effectively **medicalizing** early childhood and cementing the role of the expert — rather than the caregiver, educator or the community — in determining what we want and value for our children. In terms of publicly funded ECE, there has been a particular emphasis on the effects of deprivation on the brains of minoritized children. The insinuation is that without ECE, minoritized children could end up with lasting brain damage.

Visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medicalization for an explanation of medicalization.

A number of prominent neuroscientists[12] challenged this narrative when it emerged, but such critiques were quickly drowned out. And that was no accident. With the help of marketing professionals, there were deliberate efforts to shape the brain science message so that it would be most persuasive to the public and policymakers — a kind of benevolent propaganda.

You might ask, "Well, what's wrong with that? It got an important message out there, didn't it?" We'd argue that there are quite a few reasons to be concerned; you can read about many of them in our full-length paper. Suffice it to say that more than two decades later, considerable uncertainty *still* exists both about the science itself and the applicability of neuroscience to ECE policy and practice.

Emerging research in cultural developmental science and cultural neuroscience also challenges long-standing truisms and recommended approaches within the field. With such high stakes for children and families, we'd like the science to be a little more settled or, realistically, to be applied more cautiously and in more nuanced ways.

Why the "brain science" narrative was and continues to be so compelling to the mainstream system also bears somber reflection. One likely and unfortunate explanation is that it reinforces long-standing beliefs about minoritized children and families; it's hard not to hear echoes of scientific racism and eugenics in this narrative. As White and Wastell (2017)[13] ask, does the brain science narrative feel so "right" — so "common sense" — because it's actually "old wine in new bottles"? And do we really need brain science to "prove" or justify a commitment to the well-being of all children and families?

Follow this link and this link for an expanded discussion of these important questions.

## The problematic "return on investment" argument for ECE

Finally, in pushing for increased public funding for ECE (a priority we unapologetically share), advocates have repeatedly grounded their efforts in the idea of maximizing return on investment (ROI). This means that for every dollar invested in ECE, we should see cost savings (to the state) down the line. In particular, this narrative has focused on averting expected, costly negative adult outcomes for minoritized children such as unemployment or incarceration.

This argument has been reasonably successful with policymakers, though it certainly hasn't resulted in anything like universal ECE. And we find it problematic for a number of reasons. From a values-based perspective, we believe that minoritized children should not be viewed as potential economic liabilities (or criminals), but rather as young people with inherent worth and beauty.

Theoretically, we also challenge the notion that a relatively brief, child-level change strategy (ECE) should be expected to mitigate grave, system-level problems such as racism and growing economic inequality that are at the root of challenges experienced by minoritized communities. Indeed, this fallacy likely explains why we *haven't* seen decreases in overall poverty or incarceration rates following the implementation (and subsequent expansion) of publicly funded ECE in 1975. System-level problems ultimately require system-level solutions.

In terms of the economic modeling itself, the assertion that investments made in early childhood demonstrate a higher rate of return than investments made later in life is not as straightforward as often represented (e.g., some studies find no such relationship at all).[14] As much as we embrace the importance of early childhood and recognize that the very youngest members of our communities are often overlooked or devalued in the United States, we are also concerned that our field may have unintentionally swung too far in the opposite direction in our eagerness to make the funding case.

We know it feels like there's never enough funding to go around and that ECE is underfunded relative to many other public services. But an overemphasis on "the first 1,000 days" can inadvertently give the impression that children over the age of 3 (never mind their adult caregivers) are lost causes, as well as set up a kind of "us versus them" dynamic with our colleagues working across the education and human services spectrum. Ultimately, this kind of scarcity mindset may actually undermine the coalition-building and inclusive messaging needed to facilitate broad-based, meaningful support for *all children, families and communities across the lifespan*.

## So where does that leave us?

The mainstream story told about ECE, no matter how well intentioned, is *not* driven by incontestable science; rather, it reflects particular interpretations informed by particular values and beliefs. As Bruer (2011)[15] observes, "There is nothing wrong with attempts to improve parenting, child care, and social policy through appropriate use of the natural and social sciences. We should look for every opportunity to do so. What we should avoid, however, is selective appeals to science to rationalize what may be only our own preconceived policy ends. This is politics disguised as science."

We must also consider the possibility that we may be pursuing flawed policy strategies, if such policies are grounded in flawed, incomplete or misunderstood science. At the same time, we run the risk of overlooking or potentially *more* impactful approaches to supporting ECE. Both have very real consequences for children and families.

Pragmatically, we again note that the dominant ECE narrative has not actually performed as well with policymakers as we might have hoped. It might feel risky to consider new strategies and potentially jeopardize the gains that have been made, but it's also risky to continue along the same path with an early learning system in crisis. In other words, *the narrative itself* is showing signs of moving toward obsolescence (H1).

And we are starting to hear those calls for alternative narratives and see a shift away from the top-down, technocratic, neoliberal story that we've told. Emerging frameworks such as HOPE (Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences) encourage us to move past damage-centered and fearmongering policy rationales. Of course, families' challenges and suffering are real; systemic injustices are real. That doesn't mean minoritized communities are or should be *defined* or overdetermined by such experiences. Not only is this strategy fundamentally disrespectful and inaccurate, but it also likely activates and reinforces underlying biases as often as it generates empathy and action (indeed, many years of research demonstrate that fear-based public health messaging is ineffective or even counterproductive).[16]

Similarly, The Burke Foundation's 2023 report *Early Relational Health: A Review of Research, Principles, and Perspectives* includes an appendix reflecting on lessons learned from several decades of early childhood communications, examining which messages have been more and less effective, possible explanations for their relative effectiveness, and suggestions for how to pivot moving forward (e.g., scaling back the overemphasis on brain science, the ROI argument and ACEs).[17] We have an opportunity right now to tell a new story, one centered around positive notions of "family freedom and flourishing," shared values (they do exist!) and coalition-building across a broad cross section of Americans. (For an expanded discussion of alternative ECE narratives, you can jump to this section of the full-length paper).

As Dr. Robert Sege said at the recent HOPE Summit, "The hard part is getting policymakers to see people as whole, rather than just problems to be fixed." To what extent has the field actually contributed to this tendency to see people as problems in our choice of advocacy strategies? See https://positiveexperience.org/

See page 67 in https://burkefoundation.org/burke-portfolio/reports/early-relational-health-a-review-of-research-principles-and-perspectives/

# Innovation Toward a Viable Future

Bringing the Three Horizons framework to bear, we see the ECE quality system as a textbook case of H1 (business as usual) moving toward obsolescence and an opportunity for bold innovations (H2) as we envision and move toward system transformation (H3). While we recognize that innovation is inherently challenging for public bureaucracies, we also know that it's not impossible! Indeed, DELC is currently demonstrating this with its engagement in the Spark redesign.

Read some suggestions and encouragement for approaching innovation in public bureaucracies.

We believe some of the best ideas for ECE quality innovation will come directly from minoritized families, educators and communities. By starting at the margins, we facilitate educational justice for those most impacted while also identifying effective strategies for a broad cross section of the population.[18, 19]

It is time for the doctors, scientists and technicians to take a step back, make room for, and resource home-grown priorities and solutions. In that spirit, we elevate the example of Oregon's Early Childhood Equity Fund (ECEF) — both the administration of the fund itself and the approach to quality shared by ECEF grantees.

ECEF provides state funding to culturally specific organizations engaged in ECE and family support programs with minoritized children and families impacted by systemic inequities. About three-quarters of program participants identify as BIPOC, while 25% of ECEF participants are children and caregivers who identify as White, in many cases representing rural/frontier areas of Oregon as well as White-identifying immigrants.

Central to this innovative programming is DELC's unusual approach to fund administration: flexible, responsive and authentically relationship-based. Grantees say that for the first time, they feel trusted and supported by state government to do what they know is right, rather than being told to use standardized approaches that are a poor fit for the communities they serve. In turn, grantees say they are much better able to meet the needs of young children and families with culturally and linguistically affirming programming. The funding stream is virtually unique in the country.

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## Centering the Wisdom and Expertise of Community

In 2022, we invited ECEF grantees to participate in in-depth interviews to help us understand culturally specific ECE and family support programming. Our strategy was to "flip the dashboard":[20] Instead of focusing on decontextualized, aggregated "satellite data" (e.g., test scores), we listened deeply to the nuanced experiences and perspectives of minoritized communities in Oregon. In these interviews, ECEF leaders and staff shared a vision for high-quality ECE that goes well beyond the deficit-based rhetoric of closing "achievement gaps" or the purely economic logic of ROI. We are honored to share these insights with you, and we hope they will jumpstart a broader conversation around quality in ECE and true system transformation.

For more information on "flipping the dashboard," check out this helpful webinar.

### Respecting what is shared

To support this goal, we've made specific choices about how to present the interview

themes and our suggested guidance. But please understand that we are not offering a blueprint for quality that the system can simply adopt in place of what currently exists. We believe that meaningful system change depends on system leaders doing the learning themselves and building their internal capacity, rather than looking to conventional experts to tell them what to do.

It's also crucial not to view this information only (or primarily) from the perspective of what it can offer the mainstream ECE system. Not only would that essentially be **extractive**, but some of this knowledge is indeed proprietary and was shared on the condition that it not be appropriated (i.e., used without permission, credit or compensation) by the mainstream system. For that reason, what we offer here are guiding principles for operationalizing quality rather than the specific pedagogies and curricula currently used by ECEF programs. With this in mind, here are the key elements of quality identified by ECEF grantees:

- ✓ Having staff and leadership who reflect and speak the languages of the communities they serve.
- ✓ Demonstrating accountability, starting with families' and communities' needs and priorities.
- ✓ Understanding emotional/psychological safety as a baseline condition and through line.
- ✓ Providing welcoming, affirming spaces that support positive identity.
- ✓ Centering authentic relationship at every level: co-investment in each other.
- ✓ Using demonstrably asset-based, collaborative approaches to support self-determination.
- ✓ Respect for families as experts on their own lives, first teachers and true classroom partners.
- ✓ Being holistically trauma-informed without pathologizing children, families or communities.
- ✓ Recognizing and being responsive to the inseparable nature of culture and language.
- ✓ Incorporating helpful components of mainstream understandings and approaches.
- ✓ Modifying less helpful components to respond to local cultures and conditions.

Facilitating positive racial/ethnic identity, both for young children and their caregivers, was a fundamental through line for grantees. Research has demonstrated compelling relationships between positive racial/ethnic identity, social-emotional competence and academic outcomes.[21] A number of grantees further highlighted efforts to recognize and affirm intersecting aspects of children's and families' identities, bringing an appreciation for the diversity *within* communities.

Multiple grantees noted that on paper, some of these elements might not seem that different from priorities espoused by the mainstream system. All too often, however, implementation reflects a vast gulf in understanding or even a downright distortion, often due to unrecognized or unacknowledged bias. There is a world of difference between pity and heartfelt compassion, between saviorism and true solidarity.

See https://chicagobeyond.org/researchequity/ for a discussion of harmful research practices.

Here is a much more nuanced exploration of ECEF grantees' understanding of quality; we ask that you to dedicate the time and energy their views merit.

*Above all, we can't forget that minoritized children and families urgently need and deserve greater access to this kind of high-quality programming — right now.* In Oregon, 44% of children 5 and younger are children of color.[22] Using the criteria laid out by ECEF grantees, many — if not most — mainstream ECE settings likely would *not* qualify as "high quality" due to their lack of culturally and linguistically affirming practice.

Minoritized children and families urgently need and deserve greater access to this kind of high-quality programming—right now!

Despite widespread diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts, mainstream systems continue to be stuck in deficit-based thinking and inequitable treatment of minoritized children and families (including disproportionate suspension and expulsion from ECE, identified by the state as a high-priority area for action).

Early childhood is a very short period of time, and *minoritized children do not have the luxury of waiting for mainstream systems to catch up*; they need and deserve access — today — to culturally sustaining and affirming early learning environments that provide a firm foundation for strong self-esteem, lifelong learning and civic engagement.

HORIZON 3

# Broad Applicability of the ECEF Approach to Quality

We think the ECEF approach to quality has broad applicability to Oregon communities. As others have argued, the expert-driven, one-size-fits-all construction is decidedly antidemocratic, unfriendly to the pluralism and sense of liberty that many Americans of all walks of life endorse, and frequently exclusionary to anyone with limited access to privilege.[23]

We are confident the relational, respectful and responsive approaches practiced by ECEF grantees would be welcomed by — and benefit — all children, families and communities. The parallel process DELC has taken to administer ECEF, which is anchored in trust and relationship, would similarly be appreciated and might well prove more effective than the typical emphasis on top-down monitoring and compliance.

Mainstream culture itself is not a monolith; White families in Oregon, especially those living in rural and frontier areas, have similarly pushed back against excessive standardization, overreliance on one-size-fits-all curricula, and assessments that label a large proportion of families as deficient and children as "behind." As one rural grantee shared:

White families in Oregon, especially those living in rural and frontier areas, have similarly pushed back against excessive standardization, overreliance on one-size-fits-all curricula, and assessments that label a large proportion of families as deficient and children as "behind."

> I've seen so many programs come into the community and fail because they came in thinking they were going to solve everybody's problem, which [the community] didn't see as a problem. I would say in general, parents here tend to be very independent. They don't necessarily look for input. ... We really value that we are trying to support our communities where they're at. If that's where they're at, let's just give them the supports that they need, instead of making them feel like no, they're not good enough.

The good news is that how we approach ECE quality is indeed a *public choice* — not a scientific law — with ample room for critical thinking, values, experimentation and

improvement. Instead of narrowly framing children as investments (or liabilities) and education as a routinized technical process, we might embrace (or return to) a more values-based and democratizing vision for early childhood education.

We have ample evidence that early childhood is a formative period of rich learning for our youngest community members. Education itself is associated with numerous benefits across the lifespan. Most pragmatically, we must also recognize that Oregon's families with young children urgently need access to child care that honors and reflects an understanding of what "quality" means to them.

Thus, we invite the "experts" to take a step back and create space — literally and in hearts and minds — for community-generated priorities and solutions. And we encourage you to consider the full set of recommendations below for a course of action based on the Three Horizons framework.

If you're interested in the complete analysis supporting these recommendations, and an in-depth discussion of how ECEF grantees are operationalizing ECE quality, please read the full paper. (The authors also welcome conversation about all of this. Please reach out at any time!)

Many esteemed thinkers have argued that the purpose of education is the sustenance of an informed, reflective, moral and engaged populace, responsible to one another and capable of resisting authoritarianism and injustice.

## Recommendations

True system-change work is complex and challenging. It requires partnership and alignment across multiple entities and roles. Many aspects of the quality support system are not, in fact, under the direct control of DELC (formerly known as the Early Learning Division). DELC neither single-handedly created these challenges nor can be expected to single-handedly address them.

As noted earlier, the current quality support system was built incrementally and often opportunistically, based on funding available at the time and various requirements tied to that funding. Both federal and state mandates played and continue to play a major role, as do the perpetually shifting priorities and investments of state elected officials.

As a state agency, DELC is beholden to parties and policies not of its own choosing or making; it's also constrained by budget allocation decisions made by the Legislature and direction from the Department of Justice. To be clear: The recommendations that follow are *not* intended to hold DELC solely accountable for our shared, collective responsibilities to young children and families in Oregon.

With that reality in mind, we've tried to provide a comprehensive set of recommendations for a broader audience well beyond DELC. In some instances, DELC may be able to move forward independently (indeed, we already see examples of this, for example, the Spark redesign and the trust- and relationship-based approach to ECEF administration). In others, however, sustained efforts to build understanding, grow partnerships and align policies and funding will likely be required to enable DELC and other related entities to truly reconceptualize and support ECE quality in Oregon. In some cases, there may also be a need for longer-term societal shifts in values and priorities in order to build public and policymaker understanding and will.

Three basic, interrelated strategies are central to these recommendations. Remember that all three horizons are in play at the same time. By definition, the process is nonlinear and iterative. In this way, the 3H framework is both realistic about how complex system change actually happens and consciously aspirational.

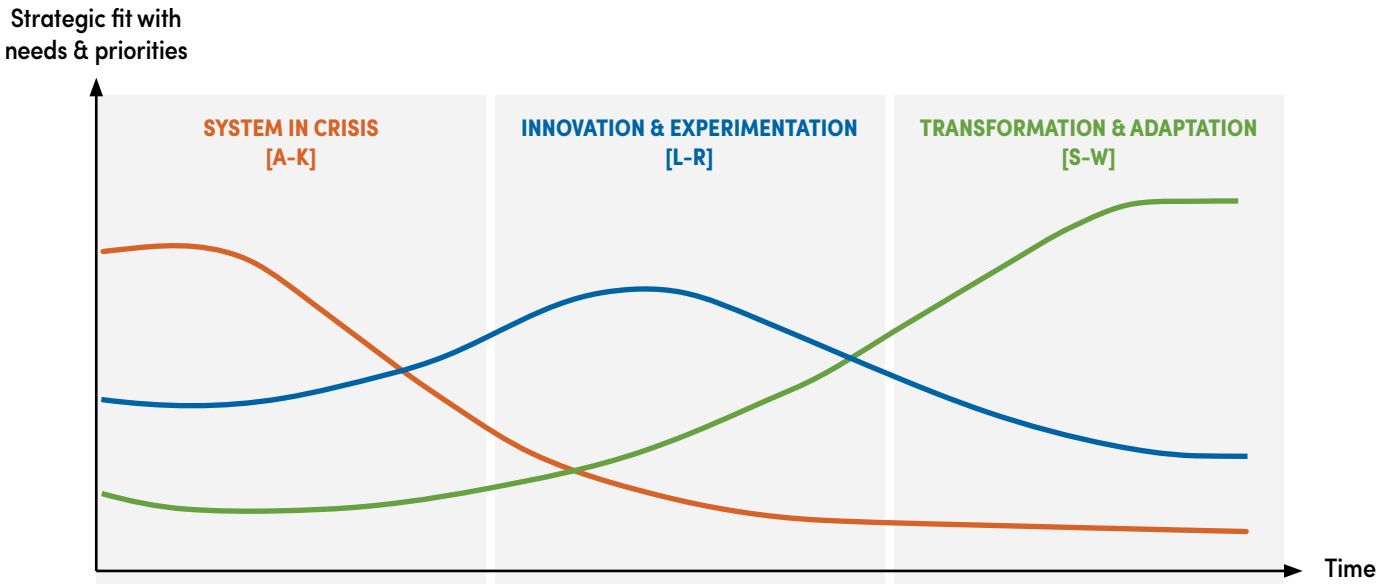
- ✓ Dismantling redundant, less effective, and problematic aspects of the current quality support system.
- ✓ Partnering with families and communities to envision and co-create structures and processes that support true ECE quality.
- ✓ When and where possible, redirecting resources from the bureaucracy toward the community in order to facilitate and support a transformed system.

Note that redirecting resources from the bureaucracy should not be done at the expense of compromising adequate service levels and manageable workloads for DELC staff.

For those who prefer a visual representation of the suggested change process based on the Three Horizons framework, we have created *Figure 3: The Three Horizons of Reconceptualizing ECE Quality in Oregon* (page 14). Only the highest-level recommendations are included in this diagram.

We know you're busy, and we urge you not to bypass the expanded recommendations that follow the diagram; they will likely make a lot more sense when you consider them in context. Our hope, as we've emphasized throughout, is to facilitate the real engagement, reflection and learning that meaningful, collective change efforts require.

**FIGURE 1** The Three Horizons of Reconceptualizing ECE Quality in Oregon




**A.** Stop overusing the word "quality"; it's become an empty buzzword.

**B.** Ground quality discussions in the realities of the child care crisis.

**C.** Stop trying to quantify quality with product rating scales.

**D.** Reevaluate the "evidence base" for quality.

**E.** Legitimate family and community expertise in defining quality ECE.

**F.** Stop repeatedly commissioning the same studies.

**G.** Begin with existing data on family and community priorities for quality ECE.

**H.** Acknowledge and respect the ECE priorities that families identify.

**I.** End blatant inequalities repeatedly identified in existing reports.

**J.** Engage in organizational self-assessment and problem-solving.

**K.** Adopt the quality principles shared by culturally specific ECE programs.

**L.** Begin operationalizing the quality principles shared by culturally specific ECE programs.

**M.** Invite and scaffold authentic partnerships with families and communities to identify, operationalize and evaluate innovations.

**N.** Prioritize innovations identified by these partnerships.

**O.** Simultaneously, start divesting from costly, top-down "quality" initiatives based on faulty assumptions, and....

**P.** Begin redirecting resources divested from the mainstream system toward families and communities at the local level.

**Q.** Co-create mechanisms for research, evaluation and system accountability with families and communities.

**R.** Recruit and support diverse ECE system leadership at every level of the quality support system.

**S.** Make a sustained commitment to a long-term process.

**T.** Embrace an affirming, humanistic rationale for ECE.

**U.** Fundamentally reimagine the current system, moving toward co-creation of a quality system that is based on respect, trust and relationships; prioritizes self-determination for families and communities; is responsive to the needs of all communities; and ensures diverse representation in leadership.

**V.** Complete the transition to a more flexible, equitable funding model.

**W.** Expect the unexpected: Emergent factors will require pivots and additional iterations as the goalposts shift.

## Moving from H1 to H2

Changing mindsets, ending harmful and ineffective practices, and setting the stage for innovation

**A** **Stop overusing the word "quality"; it's become an empty buzzword.**

- **a** This might also galvanize the system to articulate (rather than gesture toward) what "quality" actually means. In RUO 2.0, the term "quality" appears 54 times with only one parenthetical definition: "(culturally responsive, inclusive, developmentally appropriate)." Significantly, the system routinely uses these terms in performative ways.

**B** **Ground discussions of quality in the realities of the child care crisis.**

- **a** ECE educator well-being must be incorporated immediately and supported tangibly as a key dimension of quality, both as a matter of conscience and if we have any hope of retaining educators.
- **b** True respect for early childhood educators would at a minimum include adequate compensation.
- **c** Rather than primarily approaching early childhood educators as empty vessels in need of formal education and training, acknowledge and demonstrate more respect for the existing skills, understanding and experience they bring to their role.

**C** **Discontinue attempts to quantify quality using product rating scales.**

- **a** Ample evidence indicates that QRIS are based in questionable science, have largely been ineffective and consume an inordinate amount of resources.
- **b** The community-driven Spark redesign process is an encouraging reflection of Oregon's intention and efforts to move toward a more meaningful and equitable system of quality supports. We hope to see systemic support for recommendations from community partners.

**D** **Reevaluate the evidence base for quality.**

- **a** Unpack and interrupt the harmful narratives centered on mainstream developmental psychology and questionable neuroscience that pathologize minoritized children and families.
- **b** Move away from the alarmist ROI argument for ECE that frames minoritized children and families as economic liabilities for society.
- **c** Stop using mainstream understandings and approaches as the default standard.
- **d** Elevate the research and scholarship of academics who reflect minoritized communities and whose work centers the experiences, perspectives and understandings of those communities.
- **e** Fundamentally question the usefulness and desirability of technocratic approaches to ECE.

**E** **Legitimate family and community expertise in defining quality ECE.**

- **a** Recognize that families are true experts on their own children and families and that communities know best what quality means for them.
- **b** Start moving from top-down, "expert"-driven policymaking, program design and implementation toward a bottom-up approach to quality.
- **c** Challenge the widespread, often unconscious stereotypes—across systems and branches of government—that minoritized families and communities are ignorant, dysfunctional, don't value education or need "saving" and thus can't be trusted to know what's best for them or to use funds responsibly.
- **d** Recognize that minoritized families and communities are taxpayers and full actors with the same rights to participation and representation as anybody else.

**F** **Stop repeatedly commissioning the same studies that ask families and communities about their ECE needs and preferences.**

- **a** This is fatiguing for communities, reinforcing their sense that their input is not taken seriously as a basis for real change. It's also a questionable use of public dollars, which could arguably be put to better use by serving families directly.
- **b** This underscores the need to build understanding across branches and levels of government. DELC is often mandated by the state or federal government to commission a study regardless of whether relevant data already exists or DELC itself sees a need.

**G** **Instead, begin with *existing* data on family and community priorities for quality ECE.**

- **a** Gather, review and synthesize findings from reports commissioned by DELC and other entities to better understand the documented needs and preferences of diverse families and communities for quality ECE. (DELC's current strategic planning process is a perfect opportunity to engage in just this kind of review and synthesis.)

**H** **Acknowledge and respect the priorities for ECE that families have identified in such reports, e.g.:**

- **a** Families rarely approach ECE as a consumer decision driven by "expert" ratings.
- **b** For the majority of families, neither teacher education, use of specific curricula nor academic outcomes are the highest ECE priorities.
- **c** Instead, families prioritize physical safety; accessibility; trust in the provider; feeling authentically welcomed, respected and cared about; and genuine partnership between the family and provider.

Culturally specific programs serve children and families minoritized by race, ethnicity, language, economic status, geography, ability, sex, gender identity and/or sexual orientation.

d | Especially for minoritized children and families, being truly welcomed and respected, and feeling like your child is not only physically but also psychologically and emotionally safe, is paramount. Currently, this most often occurs in **culturally specific and responsive** programs.

## I

**End blatant inequities repeatedly identified in existing reports. Use this review to identify glaring inequities that could be addressed immediately or in the near term. They are too numerous to list, but here are a few basic examples.**

a | Provide adequate public funding for culturally specific ECE and family support programs to provide the high-quality programming that families need and want right now. In 2021–2023, the Early Childhood Equity Fund received approximately 5% of funds allocated to the Early Learning Account created by the Student Success Act, while 44% of children aged 0–5 in Oregon are children of color.

b | Stop rating programs that do not meaningfully affirm diverse cultural and linguistic identities as "high quality," which continues to minimize key needs of minoritized children and families.

c | End "quality" incentives that disproportionately benefit mainstream programs or force culturally specific programs to assimilate.

d | Redirect those funds to help underresourced programs work toward their self-identified quality improvement priorities.

e | Recognize and pay for the homologation of foreign degrees.

f | Provide adequate funding for translation and interpretation in multiple languages, across all relevant quality support systems and mechanisms. This is a basic issue of accessibility, not an "extra."

## J

**Engage in organizational self-assessment and problem-solving in response to existing feedback from families and communities.**

a | Use this review to spark reflection and organizational assessment: What's getting in the way of implementing these recommendations? Identify possible barriers to organizational change such as existing policies, funding levels, organizational structure, bureaucratic processes, leadership capacity, technical knowledge, organizational culture, staff qualifications, organizational communication, etc.

b | Recognize and interrupt places where the mainstream quality narrative and explicit/implicit biases may be constraining perceived solutions.

c | Engage in creative problem-solving around the identified organizational obstacles.

d | Ensure that adequate time and budget are allocated to facilitate this crucial part of the process; without this piece, demonstrating accountability will be extremely challenging. (We also note that without buy-in and support from the Legislature, this recommendation will be difficult to implement as funding and timelines are often established outside of the agency's control.)

## Horizon 2 recommendations

**K** **Adopt the guiding principles for quality shared by culturally specific ECE programs as a guiding star for reenvisioning quality improvement and support systems.**

- **a** Have staff and leadership who reflect and speak the languages of the communities they serve.
- **b** Demonstrate accountability, starting with families' and communities' needs and priorities.
- **c** Understanding emotional/psychological safety as a baseline condition and through line.
- **d** Providing welcoming, affirming spaces that support positive identity.
- **e** Centering authentic relationship at every level as co-investment in each other.
- **f** Using authentically asset-based, collaborative approaches to support self-determination.
- **g** Respect for families as experts on their own lives, first teachers and true classroom partners.
- **h** Being holistically trauma-informed, without pathologizing children, families or communities.
- **i** Recognizing and responding to the inseparable nature of culture and language.
- **j** Incorporating helpful components of mainstream approaches.
- **k** Modifying less helpful components to be responsive to local cultures and conditions.

## Horizon 2 recommendations

Embracing and facilitating innovation

**L** **Operationalize guiding principles for quality shared by culturally specific ECE programs.**

- **a** Because mainstream notions of quality show up explicitly and implicitly throughout ECE policy and practice, reorienting the system toward alternative understandings requires comprehensive, sustained efforts across multiple areas.
- **b** Fundamental conditions for this transition include:
  - Adequate political will and system champions.
  - Acknowledgment and commitment to the undoing of historic and ongoing inequities embedded in the current system (including personal, interpersonal, agency and systems-levels work).
  - True embrace of the learning process, including tolerance of risk and uncertainty.

## Horizon 2 recommendations—continued

- Creative reimagination of rigid and siloed bureaucratic systems.
- Rejection of "one right way" mindsets. The idea is not to replace one set of prescriptions with another, but to support meaningful ownership and customization by community.
- Experimentation with more flexible, responsive and trust-based approaches.
- Ongoing vigilance regarding the "old wine in new bottles" tendency.

**M** **Invite, scaffold and resource authentic partnerships with families and communities in identifying, putting into practice and evaluating innovative approaches to quality.**

a Families and communities are essential partners in the reconceptualization of quality.

b Clarify the meaning of language used to signal family and community involvement, such as "voice," "input," "listening," "advisory," etc. Be very clear and transparent about where shared decision-making is and isn't being invited.

c Create conditions and supports for **true power-sharing** with families and communities, including:

- Working toward joint identification of system priorities and co-creation of policies and practices.
- Committing to the substantive, meaningful incorporation of needs and priorities identified by families and communities.
- Elevating the value of **lived experience**.
- Investing time and life energy in sustained relationship-building.
- Compensating family and community partners for their time and expertise.
- Accommodating partners' real-world schedules.
- Facilitating partner participation with food, child care and transportation.
- Planning for and devoting adequate time to deep engagement in complex work.
- Honoring commitments and showing accountability for outcomes.
- Ensuring that advocacy isn't penalized with funding reductions.

**N** **Prioritize innovations identified by these partnerships for implementation and evaluation.**

a Reconceptualizing quality is a systemic undertaking, so interrelated opportunities for innovation exist across all areas that touch on ECE. These include approaches to instruction and assessment; workforce issues such as education, credentialing, compensation, professional development; monitoring and compliance; and public financing.

See https://greenlining.org/publications/racial-equity-research-report/ for a useful guide to approaching authentic community research partnerships.

Here is one definition of lived experience: "People with **lived experience** are those directly affected by social, health, public health, or other issues and by the strategies that aim to address those issues. This gives them insights that can inform and improve systems, research, policies, practices, and programs. When we say lived experience, we mean knowledge based on someone's perspective, personal identities, and history, beyond their professional or educational experience."

https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/what-lived-experience

b Avoid "worshiping the problem" by asking partners to rehash existing barriers. Instead, focus on creative, collective problem-solving and identifying innovations to implement.

c Avoid fatiguing partners further by reinventing the wheel; share and build on solutions already identified in the review of existing reports.

d Immediate low-hanging fruit might include expanding ECEF, already shown to be a very promising approach. We would also recommend broader application of ECEF lessons to other DELC programming.

**O** **Simultaneously begin divesting from costly, top-down quality initiatives based on faulty assumptions.**

a As illustrated by the sprawling diagram (*Figure 2*) depicting the many Oregon entities involved in ECE quality, a tremendous amount of time, energy and public resources is currently dedicated to pursuing the mainstream concept of quality.

b When reconceptualizing quality, it's likely that some of the existing structures or mechanisms would be deemed less relevant or useful.

c Identifying redundancies is also strongly recommended. The uncoordinated layering of quality-related initiatives over time has resulted in a costly and inefficient system.

**P** **Begin *redirecting* resources divested from the mainstream system toward families and communities, providing flexible funding to support capacity-building and autonomy at the local level.**

a Of course, the hope is always for more funding. But opportunities also abound for putting existing resources to better use.

b Especially given the child care crisis, direct community investments are likely to have more immediate and meaningful impact than increased investment in bureaucratic oversight.

c Resources freed up by identifying redundancies and inefficiencies in the existing system could be redirected to implement community-identified innovations.

d None of this is likely to be simple or immediate. Funding structures and mechanisms are complex and subject to multiple constraints outside of DELC's immediate purview. This is another place where it will be especially important to build understanding and buy-in across branches and levels of government.

**Q** **Co-create mechanisms for research, evaluation and system accountability with families and communities.**

a Center families and communities as the experts and leaders of the evaluation process; engage university-based and/or community-based researchers as consultants and facilitators of community-led research and evaluation. The Early Childhood Equity Fund Evaluation is a promising example of how this could be done more routinely.

## Horizon 3 recommendations

b | Bring more qualitative approaches to understanding and supporting quality in nuanced, meaningful ways that support growth and reflect family and community values and strengths.

c | Put a stop to extractive and harmful data collection methods and uses.

d | Adjust timelines for expected outcomes so they more realistically reflect growth processes, not simply legislative cycles.

e | Ground research and evaluation in ongoing system reflection, growth and program accountability to families and communities.

f | Dedicate adequate time and resources to this work: There's little use in funding research and evaluation if it doesn't inform changes to policy and practice.

**R** **Recruit and support diverse ECE leadership at every level of the quality support system**

a | Increasing representation of minoritized communities at the supervisory, leadership and administrative levels of the ECE system is critical to creating welcoming, responsive, effective quality support systems.

## Horizon 3 recommendations

System transformation and adaptation

**S** **Make a sustained commitment to a long-term process.**

**T** **Fully embrace an affirming, values-based ECE rationale: We are all deserving and interconnected, working together toward a shared, just future.**

**U** **Fundamentally reimagine the current system, moving toward co-creating a quality system that is based on respect, trust and relationship; prioritizes self-determination for families and communities; is responsive to the needs of all communities; and ensures diverse representation in leadership.**

**V** **Complete the transition to a more flexible, equitable funding model where communities are empowered to do what they know is right (acknowledging the inherent constraints currently facing public agencies).**

**W** **Expect the unexpected: Emergent factors will no doubt necessitate pivots and additional iterations as the goalposts for ECE quality continue to evolve and new H1 challenges arise.**

# Reconceptualizing Quality
Full Report

## Introduction

References to "quality" are literally everywhere in early childhood education (ECE) policy and administration. As one person we interviewed commented:

> Actually, I think I've heard "high-quality" about two times already today [laughs]. In addition to that, all of the technical assistance and training that comes out of the early learning system in Oregon probably has "high-quality" or just "quality" in the title.

In some ways, this laser focus on ECE quality makes sense. Of course, we all want the best for young children. But what does "quality" really mean? How do we know it when we see it? Who gets to decide? The story of how ECE quality has been defined and how it is supported (or enforced) in Oregon is a complicated one, and it has problematic implications both for educators and for the children and families they serve – particularly those **minoritized** by race, ethnicity, language, economic status, geography, ability, sex, gender identity and/or sexual orientation.

A minoritized group is a social group that is devalued in society and given less access to its resources. See newdiscourses.com/tftw-minoritize/

The way quality in ECE is talked about and approached can also sound insensitive or out of touch when we take into account the undeniable child care crisis we're currently experiencing in Oregon and nationally. Early childhood educators are paid so inadequately, they can barely cover their costs, while families struggle to pay for care for even just one child. Demanding more from this fragile system in the name of "quality," without making meaningful change, risks collapsing the whole thing. We routinely hear bona fide despair on the part of educators and families.

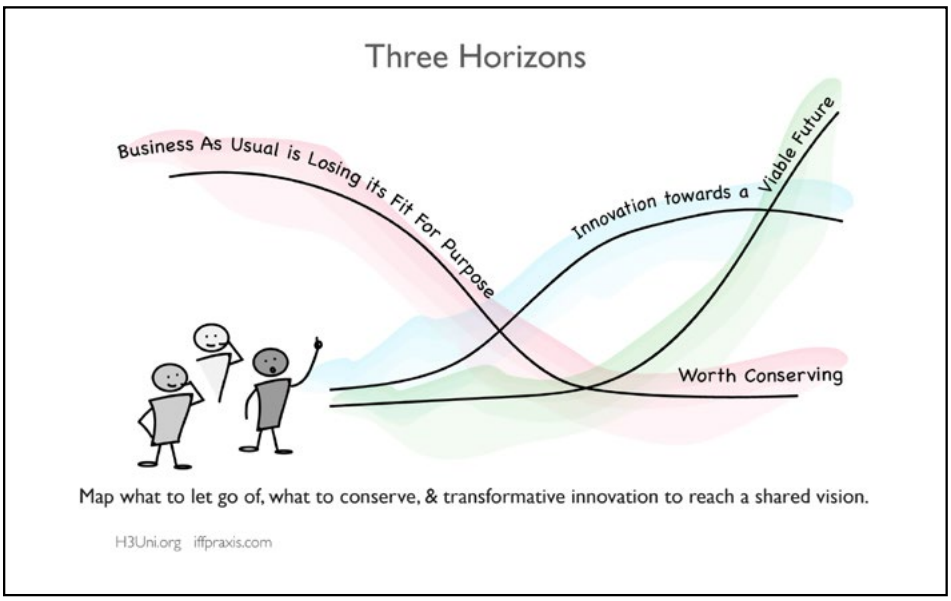
Demanding more from this fragile system in the name of "quality," without making meaningful change, risks collapsing the whole thing.

But just because we've backed ourselves into this corner doesn't mean we can't find a way out together. We have an opportunity right now to take a close look at the story told about quality by the mainstream ECE system. What is the underlying logic there? Does it resonate for us? What are the consequences of policies and practices that flow from this story about quality? Are there different ways to think about ECE quality — and potentially change policies and practices — so that the system actually works for everyone?

## The Three Horizons of Innovation & Culture Change

In thinking about this kind of system change, we've found the "Three Horizons" (3H) work by Sharpe (2020)[24] to be especially helpful, so we'd like to share it with you. 3H thinking allows us to recognize things that are currently not working (Horizon 1), interrupt what's not working and identify places to innovate (Horizon 2), and begin to move toward system transformation in response to changing circumstances (Horizon 3). The magic is that all three horizons are in play *at the same time.* By definition, the process is nonlinear and iterative. In that way, the 3H framework is both realistic about how complex system change actually happens, and consciously aspirational, committing us to big-picture visioning and "future thinking."

To facilitate future thinking and the adaptation of an Oregon ECE system in crisis, we used the 3H framework to guide an analysis of the current conditions related to ECE quality (H1), identify innovative, community-based strategies for consideration (H2) and generate both short-term and longer-term recommendations for approaching system change in support of true quality (H3).




HORIZON 1

# Business as Usual Is Losing its Fit for the Purpose

## Beginning with the Oregon Context

To reconceptualize ECE quality and work toward more effective and equitable approaches, we must start by understanding the basic underpinnings of the current system. Structures and mechanisms intended to monitor, support and improve the quality of early care and education programs began to emerge in Oregon in the 1980s, in step with national trends. These systems generally follow standards and competencies established by national professional associations such as National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC); they are based on the assumption that ECE quality can be measured and quantified (i.e., summed up by a number or, in the case of Oregon, a star rating).

Oregon's implementation of these systems has been incremental and often uncoordinated, resulting in a patchwork of quality improvement structures and mechanisms across state and regional entities that have somewhat differing priorities and foci. For that reason, one interviewee referred to the current system as a kind of "Frankenstein."

### Current quality support systems in place

Systems and programs intended to expand the availability of quality early learning and care, and to support quality improvements among the current workforce, include:

A. The Child Care Licensing Division within DELC is responsible for ensuring that child care providers operate in compliance with Oregon Administrative Rules and provide registration and licensure for child care programs across the state. While specific requirements and rules vary by program type, licensure includes such things as ensuring appropriate staff qualifications, monitoring criminal background checks, and monitoring compliance with basic safety, health and other rules.

B. Quality Recognition and Improvement System (Spark). Based in national standards of center- and family-based child care associations and federal policy (NAEYC, NAFCC, Head Start), Oregon's QRIS, known as Spark, evolved from previous projects designed to improve ECE quality (EQUIP, OPQ, Quality Indicators). Currently managed by Western Oregon University's The Research Institute, the system is designed to help early childhood educators "advertise" their level of quality through a system of star ratings. Publicly funded early learning programs must participate in Spark; those that accept child care subsidies (ERDC) and who participate in Spark and receive a star rating are eligible for an additional incentive payment. Participation is voluntary for other early childhood educators.

C. Oregon Center for Career Development in Child Care (OCCD) at Portland State University has been the lead organization for developing and administering the statewide training and educational registry system for professional development in child care for over a decade. OCCD supports quality by providing training (as well as scholarships and resources for training) and by managing the Oregon Registry Online (ORO), a database that stores training and education credentials and is designed to support early childhood educators to engage and advance within a series of professional development steps based on a prescribed set of qualifications, educational level and/or hours and content of trainings.

D. Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies Networks (CCR & Rs) are regional entities managed by DELC, which manage Focus Child Care Networks and provide training resources, professional development opportunities, connection to the Oregon Registry, pathways to higher education, and coaching through Quality Improvement Specialists.

E. Oregon's Early Learning System Initiative (ELSI) supports training and mentoring for early learning coaches within the publicly funded early childhood programs.

F. Various other local, regional and state coaching and technical assistance providers.

Quality improvement support for educators working with children who have special developmental and health care needs continues to be provided through the Oregon Department of Education (OEDI, Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education). Inclusive Partners, funded through DELC with federal dollars, provides additional support for inclusive practices across child care settings. Yet another system, focused on improving provider practices to reduce suspension and expulsion from early learning settings, is just getting off the ground through DELC's Early Childhood Suspension and Expulsion Prevention Program. Finally, preschools that operate within K-12 schools are frequently supported by coaches and inclusion specialists working within local school districts and education service districts.

To support this analysis, we worked with DELC staff to develop a visual representation of the various quality support systems, roles, and organizational entities intended

to support and ensure ECE quality. This exercise was driven, in part, by the frequent refrain heard both from early childhood educators and those working to support them, that the systems are confusing, overlapping and duplicative.

Attempts to clearly articulate and visually organize the respective roles of each entity proved no easy task. The intricacies of how these roles and supports are operationalized at local, regional and state levels is no doubt under-estimated and somewhat oversimplified in the resulting graphic (see *Figure 2*, page 28). Note: To the best of our knowledge, this disagram was current as of January 2024; however, DELC is currently undergoing reorganization and may be structured somewhat differently in the near term. Nonetheless, Figure 2 makes clear the rather overwhelming complexity of the current quality support system and presents an opportunity to revisit and reimagine what might work more effectively and efficiently.

## The Birth of DELC as a historic opportunity

In 2023, Oregon's early learning systems related to licensure, quality improvement, and child care subsidy were brought together into a single state agency, the Department of Early Learning and Care (DELC). At the same time, Raise Up Oregon (RUO), the "comprehensive state system plan for early childhood, prenatal to age 5," was revised and updated for the next five-year cycle. DELC itself will be undergoing a strategic planning process over the next few months, with a plan due to the Governor's Office in June 2024. Together, these developments represent a historic opportunity to examine and reshape Oregon's ECE quality support system: The time is ripe to reconfigure the "Frankenstein" inherited by DELC and bring into being a more coherent and efficient system.

Figure 2 makes clear the rather overwhelming complexity of the current quality support system and presents an opportunity to revisit and reimagine what might work more effectively and efficiently.

To do so, it is essential that we name and begin to wrestle with the evidence base and assumptions underlying mainstream understandings of quality ECE that contribute to the current system's dysfunction. For example, RUO 2.0 includes repeated uses of the terms "quality" and "culturally and linguistically responsive and specific."

The proverbial elephant in the room is that "quality," as currently understood, sits in tension with "culturally and linguistically responsive and specific." Without looking closely at what "quality" means, and how it is enacted via state systems, these commitments run the very real risk of falling short. And without honoring those commitments, we would argue, quality itself is sacrificed. *We need to bring this central contradiction into the open for honest reflection, dialogue and — above all — action.*

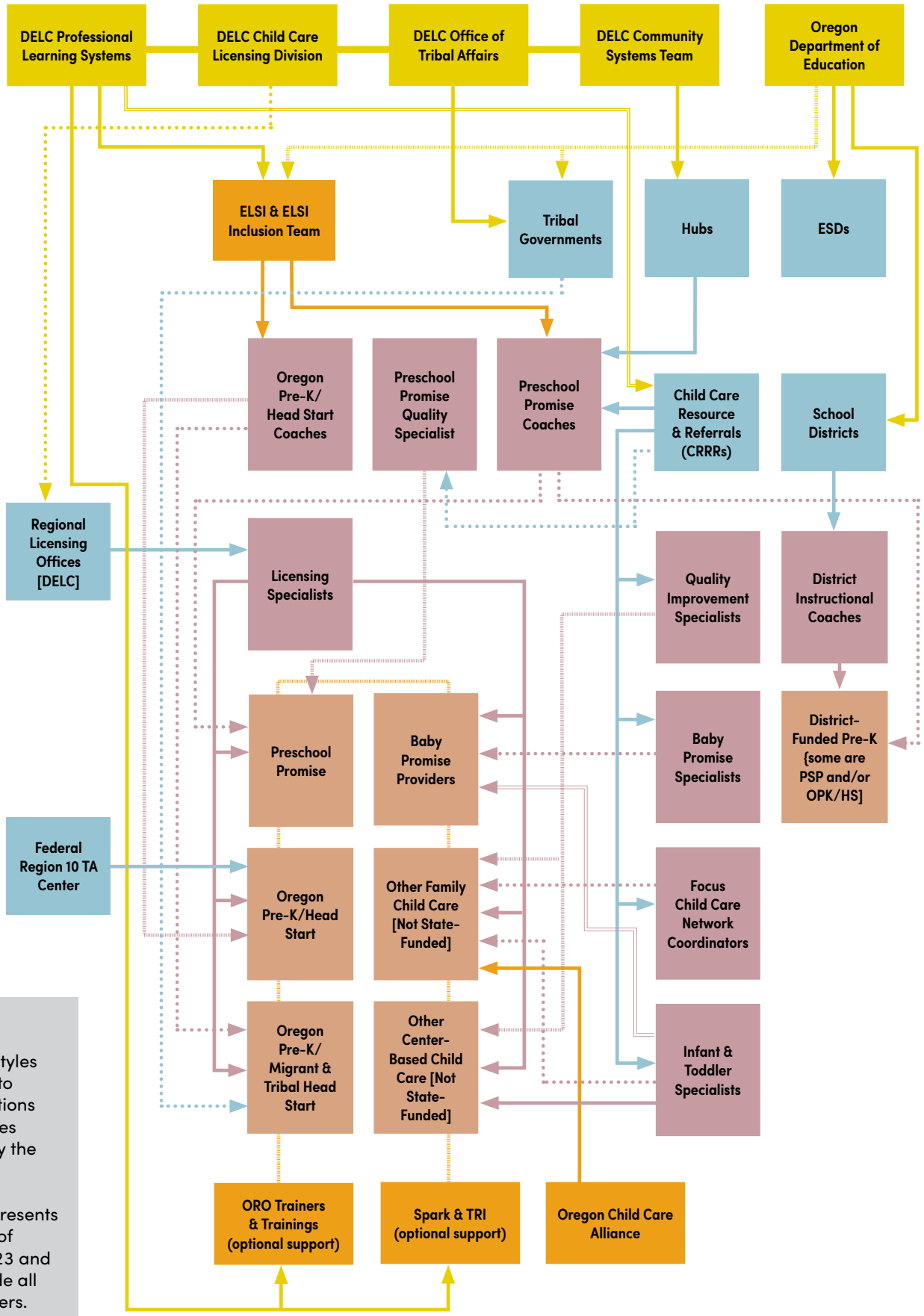
The proverbial elephant in the room is that "quality," as currently understood, sits in tension with "culturally and linguistically responsive and specific."

## Problems with Oregon's current ECE quality support system

To better understand how the ECE quality support system is working in Oregon, confidential interviews were conducted with 13 people identified as having extensive knowledge and understanding of the Oregon ECE system. We asked them to share their understandings of how ECE quality is currently defined and operationalized in Oregon, any tensions they were aware of regarding the mainstream quality narrative, their own reflections and perspectives on ECE quality, and any suggestions they might have for supporting ECE quality in Oregon.

Interviews were conducted using a videoconferencing platform and audio recorded for transcription. Interviews lasted around 60 minutes for each participant. Data collection took place between April and June 2023.

**FIGURE 2** Quality system: General professional development & quality supports for ECE providers




**NOTE**

Different line styles are used only to clarify connections between entities represented by the same color.

This figure represents the system as of December 2023 and may not include all current providers.

Respondents identified multiple, comprehensive concerns and were near consensus that the current quality support system is significantly compromised. Overall, they characterized it as:

- ✗ Top-down, expert-defined, transactional.
- ✗ Failing to reflect what families actually want.
- ✗ Essentially deficit-based.
- ✗ Reliant on one-size-fits-all "checkbox" approaches.
- ✗ Overvaluing "pieces of paper" (formal credentials, assessments, etc.).
- ✗ Devaluing lived experience.
- ✗ Driven by an overemphasis on child academic outcomes.
- ✗ Driven by pressure to demonstrate an economic ROI.
- ✗ Approaching ECE as a consumer product akin to a car or piece of furniture.
- ✗ Less accessible to nondominant educators (along numerous dimensions).
- ✗ Eurocentric; based on "two-parent, college-educated, upper middle-class values."
- ✗ Racially biased and rooted in White saviorism.
- ✗ Disproportionately benefiting educators with more privilege.
- ✗ Having very little in the way of meaningful accountability for quality.
- ✗ Channeling significant public funds to companies selling standardized curricula and assessments.
- ✗ Neglecting basic issues such as the need for workforce recognition, compensation and support.

An in-depth discussion follows.

### Current structures are complex and confusing

Not surprisingly, participants repeatedly referenced the complex, confusing nature of Oregon's ECE quality support system. One participant used the metaphor of "Frankenstein," and another used the term "Byzantine," to describe the often uncoordinated layering of various approaches and components over the past four decades, which were typically implemented in response to specific funding opportunities rather than as part of a coherent vision.

One participant used the metaphor of "Frankenstein," and another used the term "Byzantine," to describe the often uncoordinated layering of various approaches and components over the past four decades.

Even these interview participants who have extensive knowledge of and experience with the system, shared that they were not always certain how the various parts of the system actually relate to one another. Noting that the word "quality" is everywhere, they struggled to articulate the current definition of ECE quality actually used by state systems.

> Honestly, I don't know what the definition of quality is in our early learning system in Oregon. If I were to ask 50 people within the system — "What's a quality early learning program?" — I'd get 50 different answers.

### Quality is inherently challenging to define

In reflecting on the current quality support system, participants consistently talked about the difficulties involved in defining quality. This was a near-universal theme:

> It's a hard conversation to have in a lot of ways. Even as you're asking me the questions, I'm locked onto this one thing. That's someone right outside my office door who might answer that completely differently. I think that's representative of the difficulty of defining what quality is.

Rather than arguing that we need to find the "right" definition, however, participants emphasized the inherently subjective nature of quality:

> The idea that there is a single definition of quality is probably the biggest barrier to the whole conversation. We have to be open to know that there's different ways that this can look. ... That's when we start doing harm, disenfranchizing kids and families, expelling kids.

> These quality conversations are important. It's also important that we not maintain any idea that there's one single road to get there, because there's lots of ways to do well in this work. There's lots of ways to do right by kids.

> Quality is not an objective reality. Quality is a subjective reality, and it is in the eye of the beholder. Because of the subjectivity that's inherent in the meaning of quality, you've got bias, and we're almost all White.

> [Quality] depends on the location and who you ask. If quality is a lot of things we can't totally put our finger on — things we do to be responsive to the needs of children and families — then it's going to be experienced differently by everyone.

> The reality is that every person in the field has their own beliefs and values around what is "high quality." Your beliefs influence your actions, so that exists. You have a multitude of different definitions.

### The system is misaligned with families' priorities

Participants repeatedly highlighted ways in which dominant understandings of quality do not align with what families value:

> What you find over and over is these efforts are designed to change parent behavior, but they're not based on what parents are saying. There's this ongoing disconnect between what we, the experts, want to give parents and what parents are looking for. I don't know of any study that a QRIS has changed parent behavior to any substantial, meaningful extent.

> It's not a good idea to find that single definition because inevitably, it's going to exclude people and families. If you have a young child, who decides what kind of care you want? Ultimately, that's your decision, isn't it?

> I wish we would call it something else because you may do the best job in the world of measuring it, and you call it quality. But if it's not what that parent wants for their child, then they're not going to call it quality.

"There's this ongoing disconnect between what we, the experts, want to give parents and what parents are looking for. I don't know of any study that a QRIS has changed parent behavior to any substantial, meaningful extent."

**Systems Interview Participant**

A number of participants shared what they've heard directly from families about their priorities for quality care and education: basic physical safety; accessibility; a sense of trust in the provider; being authentically welcomed, respected and cared about; and a feeling of genuine relationship/partnership between the family and provider. Multiple participants returned again and again to the theme of relationship — the relationship between the child and the provider, and the relationship between the provider and the family — as the core, defining aspect of ECE quality.

> I remember once with [a parent group] trying to push like, "So, are you worried about what curriculum they use, or what education the teacher has, or what their pedagogical approaches are?" No. For them, all of that will flow out of these basic conditions being met.

> When I make a child care arrangement, it is not making some kind of consumer decision about the best car. I'm carrying out my parenting role, and I'm selecting somebody who I want to stand in my place. Trust is just huge.

> The quality of relationships, to me, is always key. And it's pretty hard to legislate that.

"When I make a child care arrangement, it is not making some kind of consumer decision about the best car. I'm carrying out my parenting role, and I'm selecting somebody who I want to stand in my place. Trust is just huge."

**Systems Interview Participant**

### Multiple inequities are built into the system

Some participants explicitly identified inequities built into the mainstream narrative and quality support system. As noted earlier, they talked about the system centering mainstream assumptions and values as indicators of "quality"; the numerous barriers minoritized early childhood educators face to participating in the current system; examples of blatant discrimination; and the reality that a disproportionate share of resources continues to be directed toward mainstream educators.

> We say we want the children furthest from opportunity and the children that are poor, etc., to receive the highest quality, but their providers can't even participate in the quality system. Those children who are supposed to be the recipients of this never get it because of the way the system was designed.

Many of these challenges have been extensively, repeatedly documented in multiple reports, with seemingly little effect on the existing system. One participant suggested that if the system is serious about its stated equity commitments, it needs to authentically engage with this question of quality:

> It's something that, certainly, if you're interested in anti-bias education or culturally sustaining care, there's always an ongoing discussion about what is quality.

At the same time, participants warned that misguided notions of supporting "diversity" can have unintended, almost absurd consequences. One participant shared the example of a culturally specific program serving an African immigrant community; it was graded down for displaying only photos of children from that community because it didn't align with a checkbox criterion for "photographs representing a diversity of different cultures and identities in the classroom."

The actual intention of that criterion, of course, was to bring greater diversity and representation into mainstream classrooms where White children and experiences are typically overrepresented.

Another participant described a troubling dynamic where culturally diverse educators feel pressured by the quality support system to assimilate, even when the system is trying to be "supportive":

> I've seen this, and it breaks my heart. [Current standards] can unintentionally force other cultures to either stay true to their beliefs, their values, their culture, and accept a lower rating, or feel pressured to give up a piece of who they are — a piece of what they believe — so that they can get some funding or get recognition as being good.

### Inadequate recognition and support of the workforce

Many participants highlighted fundamental structural factors within the ECE field itself, which they said must be acknowledged and addressed before putting additional stress and expectations on early childhood educators. Chronically low wages, lack of benefits, long hours, challenging work, and a profound lack of respect, they said, all contribute to difficulties hiring or retaining ECE staff while also providing little incentive to participate in professional development. Overwhelmingly female and disproportionately BIPOC, early childhood educators are among the lowest-paid workforce in the country; it is not uncommon for educators themselves to rely on public benefits such as food stamps and to work second jobs to try to make ends meet.[25]

> If we were going to do one thing that was going to support quality in early learning, it would be to devote every hour and dime we have to making sure that our workforce is cared for, compensated, has insurance, has time off, and has resources for their programs. Because that's what's killing us.

> We have to pay people. Wages and benefits are huge. I don't know how we'll do it, but it certainly can't ever be taken off the table as a critical structure that is needed. Parents can't pay for it, so it's got to come from somewhere else.

Another participant identified what they see as somewhat perverse incentives currently in place, which drive underresourced, underprepared educators to take on large numbers of children with special needs due to enhanced reimbursement rates, yet with minimal supports and new laws prohibiting suspension and expulsion. Without these urgently needed supports, some characterized the push for quality as irrelevant:

> The quality conversation, to me, is a little irrelevant when we are not creating a workforce that has the ability to fully implement quality, however we define it.

Others pointed out that notions of "quality" that don't include dimensions related to provider well-being are incomplete:

> We have conversations happening around how quality needs to include not only how the children are treated, but how staff are treated, the workplace environment, the well-being of people — those kinds of things.

### Interest in a different vision for ECE quality

In light of these concerns, participants shared a substantially different vision for supporting ECE quality in Oregon — one that centers the voices and real decision-making power of families, educators and communities rather than state administrators.

"If we were going to do one thing that was going to support quality in early learning, it would be to devote every hour and dime we have to making sure that our workforce is cared for, compensated, has insurance, has time off, and has resources for their programs."

**Systems Interview Participant**

Participants seemed to be in consensus that basic measures to ensure safety of the ECE environment were important to retain. Beyond that, however, there was considerable appetite for revisiting the current definitions and mechanisms in place and engaging in some creative thinking about more meaningful, equitable and responsive ways to approach quality.

> What's good for kids in a particular family, a particular community? We've got to ask that question and then understand what that is and then go do that.

> Even looking at, and rejecting, the idea of top-down. Really respecting the teacher as a decision maker in collaboration with families, rather than experts always telling you. Because the teacher has that local knowledge.

> I feel like part of how we can do this is to bring more of a focus around equity and belonging and creating space for people to be who they are, how they are, and share their beliefs and values, and to find ways to have more inclusive definitions of quality where it's not "this is *the* way." Allowing that to be OK, to not feel we have to control everything and it has to align with our very specific narrow view. It's good, it's OK.

> I think we do have to be more open rather than defining it as one set of things. [We need to ask] what's the purpose of education? What's our image of children? What do we think of their capacity for doing things? What are the cultural and linguistic differences?

> Again, it gets back to a very basic level. Is my child engaged there? Do I feel welcomed when I go in there? Is my child happy? Is my child learning? Do people talk to me? Can I go there anytime I want? Those more basic levels.

Several participants expressed optimism that the state was starting to wake up to these questions and was moving in the right direction, albeit over the longer term:

> [The state is] becoming clearer in their commitment to equity, in their definition of quality, and even coming to question the word "quality" and what that is. They've had a lot of great conversations that may or may not be public around "what does this look like?" There are a lot of promising strategies that I see starting to get traction, but it takes a while for people to stick with things, for people to learn, for systems to grow, to be nimble. We've got to give it some time. We have a lot of the ingredients to do that in the years to come.

> Some years ago, there was a sense that quality could be defined definitively. The shift is moving away from that idea that we can figure out a universal definition of quality. As I talk and listen to people in early learning in Oregon and beyond, the tone has started to shift.

> I see people pushing back on the definition of quality, especially with projects that we do locally because it doesn't fit well with the things that we're doing. There's a desire to move more toward how things look and feel in our environment.

Others expressed the need for a substantial overhaul and a greater sense of urgency:

I think that if the current system isn't thrown away, you will not get providers of color to participate, or providers that don't speak English as their first language to participate.

### Fear of challenging the mainstream quality narrative

When asked what might be standing in the way of more fundamentally reconsidering the mainstream ECE quality narrative, a number of participants shared their perception that questioning the dominant understanding was fraught and frequently unwelcome in mainstream ECE settings. (There was even some stated hesitancy to engage in these protected, confidential interviews.)

Publicly, people don't really talk about this. In small, closed-door conversations, yes. But publicly, no. I feel like I'm often like, "How do I approach this conversation?" You know what I mean? Because it feels like nobody else is willing. Maybe they've seen other people get pushed out because they are challenging.

What I'm encountering is people are … I don't want to say fearful. Let's say uncomfortable — that it's creating a lot of discomfort when it's this idea of letting go of control.

When I was [a director], we were accredited by NAEYC. Maybe 10% of the time [spent on that] was worthwhile to us, and then the other 90% was distracting us from doing the things that would have improved quality in that center. At the same time, I don't know what the solution to that is. To not have accreditation and not be QRIS-rated? I'll get chucked out of the profession if I say that. I'm not going to say that.

We shared with regional managers how there was a lot of racist practices in licensing, uneven application of writeups, etc. They had a forum about that and providers shared that nothing happened. There was some retaliation from licensing directly after that.

Several participants reflected on what they see as dysfunctional dynamics around power in ECE:

I would say, the people who traditionally work within the child care system — the CCR&Rs, the Early Learning Division — they hold onto the rules and standards, saying, "This is just the way it is." And there's not a whole lot of effort to change them. There's been almost like — "I drank the Kool-Aid and I believe [the rules] right." It's incredibly controversial for a person to speak up, and it's not welcome.

I think when you're in the know, you have the tool, and you know how to use that tool, you're now the expert. That feels good. Something I've always thought about — specifically here in Oregon, but I think for all of early childhood — is that early childhood is a very disrespected, underfunded, unstable field. People have been stepped on, treated like garbage, treated with little respect. Once they finally get a little bit of respect, they [do the same to] everybody else. I see that so often in this field, and I think it's because it's so heavy.

"I think that if the current system isn't thrown away, you will not get providers of color to participate, or providers that don't speak English as their first language to participate."

**Systems Interview Participant**

### Disillusionment with the ROI argument

A number of interview participants also questioned the value of continuing to center the economic return on investment argument in ECE.

> We do need to have some concept in our minds of education that is worth supporting. [Right now] it's almost like a product narrative [laughs]. I want high-quality furniture. That just doesn't seem right. So often with early childhood, it's like we get caught up in the capitalist metaphors of investing in child care or what's the economic output if you educate a child for a year. I understand why [advocacy organizations] do that because it changes politicians' minds, but... It's nothing to do with defining quality.

> It's what children deserve: an environment in which they're going to be able to be active learners. That's respectful, that's beautiful. It's where there's no harm happening to them — where they can participate and they feel welcomed and belonging. They deserve that regardless of whether it results in less juvenile delinquency or something later on in their life.

> We're still focused on the dollar and the return on investment. It seems to be fueling that pressure to be able to define and demonstrate what high quality looks like, what it costs, what the benefits of it are. It's not about society asking what each child needs, or even accepting that children have rights, because currently in the United States, we don't do that. [laughs]

### Questioning current funding priorities

Another participant shared the perception that a disproportionate share of resources are being expended on upholding the mainstream approach to ECE quality:

> So many companies got rich off the idea of quality. All the assessments, all the people that were smart enough to design plug-and-play curricula, and then systems marketed that to providers because providers didn't know how to find out what quality was for them.

### Implications for ECE quality in Oregon

The themes that emerged from key informant interviews were unusually consistent and clear. As one participant put it:

> I'm not sure that anything [about the current system] is working super well right now. I don't think our system has figured out how to be high-quality yet.

In other words, Oregon's quality support system seems to be failing — on multiple fronts — to meet its intended purpose. In fact, there is reason to believe that it may even be exacerbating some inequities. Considering the significant resources invested across the system, it seems high time to revisit and reflect on the structures, definitions and mechanisms currently in place.

To some extent, this is not news to the people administering the system. Efforts are currently underway to increase accessibility and equity across professional development and quality support systems. Such efforts are an encouraging development, signaling an understanding that these mechanisms are compromised and a dawning recognition of multiple inequities built into current approaches. At the same time,

"We're still focused on the dollar and the return on investment. It seems to be fueling that pressure to be able to define and demonstrate what high quality looks like, what it costs, what the benefits of it are. It's not about society asking what each child needs, or even accepting that children have rights, because currently in the United States, we don't do that."

**Systems Interview Participant**

we caution that without reconsidering the quality narrative itself, these efforts may not have the full, desired impact. For the most part, we heard that such efforts are focused on making adjustments to the current system rather than questioning its underlying assumptions, and that so-called "experts" continue to drive these processes (albeit with some fledgling efforts to involve communities).

One notable exception is the Spark redesign process, which seems to be authentically centering parent, community and early childhood educator leadership in revisioning the QRIS system. Participants have been invited to imagine a system oriented around what families and educators say they need and want (for example, culturally and linguistically affirming care that is inclusive of all social identities). Given the high visibility and outsized influence of Spark, especially for publicly funded ECE programs, the redesign has the potential not just to benefit educators and families in the near term, but also to facilitate broader changes in understanding, policies and practices. We are excited to see what results from this process and hopeful that this analysis will provide additional support for a truly transformed quality support system.

## Limitations of the Mainstream Narrative and the Evidence Base for ECE Quality

### After 40 years, QRIS disappoints

Oregon is not alone in reconsidering its QRIS; such systems have increasingly come under fire over the last several years. Because QRIS is one of the primary mechanisms by which states have been incentivized by the federal government (under Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge) to gauge and facilitate quality ECE, it is important to understand the central critiques of QRIS — not just locally, but across the country.

QRIS are typically based on standards established by national associations (NAEYC, NAFCC, Head Start). Oregon's QRIS is known as "Spark" and is currently administered by The Research Institute at Western Oregon University. Publicly funded early learning programs (such as Head Start, Preschool Promise, Baby Promise, Oregon Oregon Prenatal to Kindergarten) must participate in Spark; participation is voluntary for other educators. QRIS are designed to provide information that can help early childhood educators advertise their level of quality through a system of star ratings, and presumably, to allow families to choose programs based on those ratings. The logic is that families will choose higher-rated programs, gradually forcing out lower-quality programs through market-based competition and raising the quality of care overall.

#### QRIS does not accurately measure or reflect ECE quality

QRIS systems in many states have come under criticism by both mainstream and nondominant researchers, as well as community-based advocates.[26, 27, 28] After four decades of implementing QRIS in the United States, there is ample evidence that quality ratings under such systems fail to reliably distinguish between programs and are *not consistently correlated with child outcomes*.[29]

After four decades of implementing QRIS, there is ample evidence that quality ratings under such systems fail to reliably distinguish between programs and are not consistently correlated with child outcomes.

Reasons for this failure likely include reliance on easily observed and quantifiable aspects of ECE rather than on what research overwhelmingly shows matters most: teacher-child interactions; collapsing multiple dimensions of quality into a single number, obscuring important variations in quality within programs; and flattening

individual experience by attempting to measure the "average" child's experience, failing to account for differences by race, language, income and disability.[30] Indeed, there is reason to believe QRIS implementation has incentivized early childhood educators *away* from focusing on dimensions of quality shown to positively influence outcomes.[31]

### QRIS is fundamentally inequitable and actually exacerbates inequities

From an equity perspective, there are significant concerns with typical QRIS approaches as well. Dr. Kelly Etter of Policy Equity Group (2022)[32] points out that many of the basic underpinnings of QRIS models reflect unquestioned mainstream culture assumptions (e.g., that all educators have equal access to resources and opportunities, if only they're motivated enough); that there's "one right way" to provide early education (based on dominant culture values and biased research); and that "experts" know what's best for early childhood educators and families (paternalism and saviorism).

As Nzewi (2022)[33] reflects, "Mostly driven, designed and influenced by highly educated white women, QRIS resulted in tools and a system that uplifted a eurocentric view of care, while diminishing the expertise and value of care that Black women had provided for centuries-first as enslaved caregivers, then domestic workers, and now as child care program owners, directors, teachers and assistants."

"QRIS resulted in tools and a system that uplifted a eurocentric view of care, while diminishing the expertise and value of care that Black women had provided for centuries-first as enslaved caregivers, then domestic workers, and now as child care program owners, directors, teachers and assistants."

**Nzewi (2022)**

Unsurprisingly, then, we have repeatedly heard that many early childhood educators — particularly those who are minoritized and those working in family-based settings — find QRIS significantly off-putting. Not only is the quality rating process experienced as inaccessible and onerous, but the embedded values and "one right way" approach can feel exclusionary and demeaning. Those who are given the choice most often opt out of participation.

Paradoxically, it also appears that the system disproportionately benefits (in very tangible, financial ways) educators who *already* have greater access to resources.[34] Nationally, lower-resourced educators, educators of color, and home-based or family child care providers are often ineligible for enhanced reimbursement rates, coaching and professional development resources provided via QRIS.[35] Zooming out, we also see that QRIS systems fail to take into account systemic factors that disadvantage minoritized educators such as disparities in generational wealth and discriminatory practices by lending institutions.[9] In other words, the QRIS approach actually seems to *widen* already existing resource and opportunity gaps for minoritized educators.

In this way, "QRIS, though good in its intentions, has caused much harm since its inception, driving many talented and skilled caregivers from the profession.…In turn, families have fewer options for child care that affirm their home language, culture, food, or even just their work schedules."[36] This is particularly disturbing when we recall that the stated intention of QRIS was to squeeze out ostensibly "lower-quality" programs from the marketplace. In practice, does that literally mean driving minoritized early childhood educators out of the field?

"QRIS, though good in its intentions, has caused much harm since its inception, driving many talented and skilled caregivers from the profession....In turn, families have fewer options for child care that affirm their home language, culture, food, or even just their work schedules."

**Nzewi (2022)**

Most recently, scholars and advocates have noted that the criteria states use to rate program quality typically lack any measure of cultural or linguistic responsiveness and/or potential bias experienced by children and families.[37] Assessors themselves may bring their own biases to the quality rating process, compromising the validity of such ratings and contributing to a sense of feeling unfairly "policed." Disproportionate

rates of suspension and expulsion from ECE have also continued alongside QRIS implementation, suggesting that QRIS has done little to address implicit and explicit bias toward our very youngest children. Ultimately, QRIS may end up exacerbating existing inequities between minoritized and more privileged children.[38]

### QRIS does not drive child care decision-making

At the most basic level, there is little evidence to suggest that most families even use QRIS in making their child care decisions. As one systems interview participant here in Oregon observed:

> Parents aren't telling us that they don't know what they're looking for; they know what they want. They want to know, 'Are my kids safe? Are they being treated with kindness? Can we trust this relationship?' They aren't saying, "We're looking for kindergarten readiness."

Even if Oregon families *wanted* to consult QRIS ratings, that might be a dead end for them, as a small minority of ECE programs actually participate in QRIS and are star-rated (~19%). In Oregon, only publicly funded programs (Head Start, Preschool Promise, Baby Promise, Oregon Prenatal to Kindergarten [OPK]) are required to participate in QRIS – and these programs make up the majority of star-rated programs (58%). Head Start programs, which account for over half of the Spark-rated, publicly funded programs, are automatically assigned a 5-star rating by default.

Ultimately, only about 8% of early childhood educators in Oregon are star-rated and don't receive public funding.[39] This means that if a family goes looking for a star-rated program in their community, they are pretty unlikely to find one, let alone have the opportunity to comparison-shop. They might have more luck finding a star-rated program if they're eligible for a publicly funded option, but that begs the question of how much choice is actually involved for those with limited resources.

Indeed, the QRIS strategy may in fact be rather irrelevant when viewed from the perspective of the low supply and high cost of early childhood care — how much "choice" is really involved? More often than not, child care decisions are constrained by pragmatic rather than philosophical considerations. In a recent nationally representative survey, families rated "reliability" and "available hours" as the top two criteria used in choosing a child care arrangement.[40] Cost was identified as the number-one barrier, followed by availability of slots; only 18% of respondents indicated that quality was a barrier to finding care.

More often than not, child care decisions are constrained by pragmatic rather than philosophical considerations. In a recent nationally representative survey, families rated "reliability" and "available hours" as the top two criteria used in choosing a child care arrangement.

### QRIS fails to consider the realities of the child care crisis

Similarly, without funding to support fundamental basics such as a living wage for early childhood educators, mechanisms like QRIS can look performative or downright punitive. Recent state-level reports have repeatedly documented the extreme crisis in child care: Early childhood educators and families with young children consistently use words like "despair" to describe their situations.[41] Families can't find or afford care, while educators continue to be shockingly undercompensated, overburdened, and to leave the field in droves.[42]

Even within an extremely underpaid profession, minoritized early childhood educators receive less compensation, with Black ECE providers paid on average $0.78 less per hour than their White counterparts.[43] As another systems interview participant shared:

> It really speaks to the unraveling of our whole social fabric; early childhood is unwell right now, just like the rest of our society.

Child care, as was dramatically demonstrated during the pandemic, is an essential service — a linchpin of multiple sectors of the economy in Oregon. Arguably, we should be doing everything in our power to attract, support and retain the workforce, not driving people away by creating new requirements, pushing toward higher credentialing expectations and increasing surveillance — all in exchange for minimum wage. There is a fundamental disconnect between the effort to "optimize" ECE at the educator level and the reality of what is widely acknowledged as a broken system. This is especially salient for minoritized educators, disproportionately overrepresented in the profession.

Of course, this is not an argument in favor of abandoning basic safety protections. Everyone we spoke with agreed that there are some baseline conditions that need to be in place for all programs. No one is advocating for anything but quality care and education. The point is that underlying structural factors such as low pay, unaffordability, inadequate supply, and anemic public investment *cannot be addressed by simply creating increasingly complex and burdensome systems to enforce "quality"; that is a sure-fire formula for burnout and attrition.*

Despite these significant limitations, sizable funds continue to be directed to the infrastructure supporting what has been called the "quality industrial complex":[44] the point comes when we must ask if this is the best use of our limited resources. Many argue that if we really care about quality, we should be proactively and directly investing in the early educator workforce, rather than in burdensome, biased and seemingly ineffective monitoring systems such as most QRIS. Instead of continuing to prop up or tweak QRIS, some scholars and advocates have suggested dismantling the whole thing. Uncritical perpetuation of dysfunctional systems — even if they've been around for a while — is simply unsound public policy.

In the case of Oregon, it will be very interesting to see what recommendations come out of the Spark redesign process and, in turn, what changes are made to the system currently in place. There is great potential for this process to be a model for other states grappling with similar challenges and complexities.

## Where did we go wrong? Technocracy, questionable science, neoliberalism and racism

In the United States, a very particular story is told about the importance of high-quality ECE. This story is not a universal one — we see other understandings in other parts of the world, as well as disagreement right here in our own backyards. So where did this story come from? And what should we believe?

The dominant quality narrative in the U.S. weaves together several threads: notions of scientific management, mainstream theories of child development, seemingly dramatic findings from neuroscience, and a fundamentally economic view of human worth.[45] This narrative is typically framed in terms of universal, scientific "truths," with ECE effectively offered as a primary solution to grave social ills such as systemic racism and growing economic inequality.[46]

"It really speaks to the unraveling of our whole social fabric; early childhood is unwell right now, just like the rest of our society."

**Systems Interview Participant**

Underlying structural factors such as low pay, unaffordability, inadequate supply, and anemic public investment cannot be addressed by simply creating increasingly complex and burdensome systems to enforce "quality"; that is a sure-fire formula for burnout and attrition.

Although the people actually doing the work of early childhood education are overwhelmingly low-income women and disproportionately BIPOC, the ECE policy agenda is increasingly driven by disproportionately male medical doctors and academics. Families have had little role in setting the contemporary ECE agenda; instead, the focus has primarily been on "educating" families as to what they *should* want or expect from ECE. And systemic biases are implicit or explicit in much of this narrative.

There's a lot to unpack here!

Although the people actually doing the work of ECE are overwhelmingly low-income women and disproportionately BIPOC, the ECE policy agenda is increasingly driven by medical doctors and academics.

## The early childhood education technocracy

This mainstream ECE quality narrative is bolstered at every turn by references to "the science of early childhood." What's wrong with that? Why would a bunch of researchers flag the use of science as a concern? Well, for a couple of reasons: Yes, of course we'd love for policymaking and practice to be thoughtfully informed by meaningful research. But it needs to be said that neither "science" nor scientists are elected representatives. We can't simply bypass (and avoid the messiness of) the democratic process based on what designated experts say is the correct thing to do. This was, in fact, the explicitly utopian vision offered in the 1960s by some of the first program evaluators: supposedly conflict-free policymaking and social engineering driven purely by logic and systematic experimentation.[47]

"Between science and policy lie ethical and moral opinions about social justice, about what is fair, ideas on what constitutes human dignity and what is democracy."

**Vandenbroeck & Olsson (2017)**

A fundamental problem with this vision, however, is that the so-called "experimenting society" would be a *technocracy*,[48] not a democracy. In a technocracy, it is elite technical experts (doctors, economists, academics, etc.) who drive public decision-making, not the people. That's too much unquestioned power and too little accountability. (This critique goes well beyond ECE, as other areas of education and human services have embraced similarly technocratic understandings and approaches.)

And should our trust in scientists really be that absolute? We have numerous examples of truly terrible things being done in the name of science, especially to minoritized groups. For that very reason, we now have institutional review boards and protections in place for research participants, intended to guard against such abuses. Science can be a very powerful tool to inform public policy, but without bringing ethics, shared values and democratic structures to bear, it can be very dangerous as well. It is also clear that scientists — as human beings — *inevitably* bring their own beliefs and values to bear on the research process. The most responsible option is to be aware of and transparent about that, rather than claiming a special "objectivity" that supposedly privileges one's opinions.[49] As we illustrate in this paper, there are numerous examples of such biases driving the research typically used to bolster ECE policy and practice recommendations. Is it any wonder that minoritized communities often express skepticism and/or fear regarding research?

Science can be a very powerful tool to inform public policy, but without bringing ethics, shared values and democratic structures to bear, it can be very dangerous as well.

Furthermore, science *by definition* is always grappling with uncertainty and working with successive approximations of what might be "true" or "not true," given available technologies and current understandings. As such, it is always under revision. We should neither simply "believe" nor automatically *not* believe what scientists tell us, but be informed, critical consumers of the information—including its limitations. As a recent editorial by a social psychologist[50] reflected:

Our teachers and officials may think the public simply can't handle uncertainty, and maybe that's why they project so much confidence, even when the science is faulty. But the best way to cultivate informed citizens is to give them the evidence that we have, not the evidence we wish we had.

Indeed, it's clear that much of the public is running out of patience with this top-down approach, something we may come to regret. If anything, it seems to have contributed to the widespread erosion of trust in science itself.[51] The reflexive dismissal of science is also dangerous (e.g., we recently saw the wholesale rejection by much of the American public of basic public health recommendations based on science).

Finally, it is important to note that the ECE technocracy is also grounded in a very particular (Western) understanding of and approach to "science" (aka positivism) that has increasingly been called into question as inherently incomplete and sometimes frankly destructive.[52] A full treatment is well beyond the scope of this paper, but two central critiques include the fallacious positioning of researchers as separate/removed from the "subject" under study; and the attempted control, reduction and decontextualization of complex phenomena to supposedly universal mechanistic principles.[53] Traditional knowledge, or nondominant ontologies (the nature of reality), epistemologies (what constitutes knowledge), and methodologies (how you generate knowledge) are gaining credibility in mainstream research settings.[54] These perspectives pose significant challenges to long-standing assumptions regarding the scientific method itself. This is not a frivolous or simply academic debate. It again speaks directly to how confident we should or shouldn't be that mainstream ECE experts have all the answers, or are even asking the right questions.

We may well be on the brink of what Kuhn (1962)[55] characterizes as a scientific revolution, the tipping point when the assumptions underlying dominant science are fundamentally called into question by enough people that they fall out of favor and are replaced by a distinct, new paradigm for doing science.

Even in medicine, largely based on the so-called "hard" sciences, we see a movement away from mechanistic cause-and-effect understandings, with the growing emphasis on social determinants of health, shift toward personalized medicine, and incorporation of complementary and traditional medicine into mainstream practice. In our eagerness to borrow authority from the hard sciences, ECE may actually be out of step with emerging paradigms. If we are sincere about bringing science to bear on ECE practice and policy questions, we need to have a more sophisticated understanding of science itself and move away from our habit of simply invoking experts. The information and analysis that follows is provided in that spirit.

If we are sincere about bringing science to bear on ECE practice and policy questions, we need to have a more sophisticated understanding of science itself and move away from our habit of simply invoking experts.

### Early childhood education … as a factory assembly line?

One of the main places technocratic logic impacts ECE is in the application of management theory to classroom structures, instructional practices, assessment and teacher training. The U.S. public education system, including ECE, has been highly influenced by a management theory developed in the late 1800s by a man named Frederick Taylor. Taylorism, or "**scientific management**," sought to bring scientific principles and technologies to the workplace in order to increase efficiency and product quality. In effect, the question Taylor sought to answer was, how do we make more products, of higher quality, with consistency, in the least amount of time and at the lowest cost? (If you are picturing an assembly line in your mind, you are correct!)

Maybe you've seen the classic 1950 movie *Cheaper by the Dozen*? en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheaper_by_the_Dozen_(1950_film)

Application of this framework to public education occurred shortly thereafter, with many scholars referring to this approach as the "factory model" of education.[56, 57] In the 1990s, however, things really took off with the enthusiastic application of business management doctrines like "Total Quality Management" (TQM) and "Continuous Quality Improvement" to government, health care and education: "Consultants came along to develop metrics for quality and to cite the oft-repeated maxim *what gets measured gets done*."[58]

TQM went hand in hand with the movement to downsize and privatize government functions (i.e., to manage public administration like a business). Today, few families would embrace the idea of ECE as a factory assembly line with children as the units of production, or as a business focused on maximizing outputs and reducing costs. But these ideas continue to have very real effects as we drive toward the standardized curricula, outcomes and assessments that are often invoked as linchpins for quality ECE.

Today, few families would embrace the idea of early education as a factory assembly line with children as the units of production, or as a business focused on maximizing outputs and reducing costs.

The wholesale movement toward standardization in support of quality has also had a profound impact on expectations for teachers and the practice of teaching. Once viewed as professionals who were trusted to use their discretion and make judgments about curricula and assessment, teachers are increasingly viewed as technicians who must be trained to faithfully apply predetermined technologies in the service of particular outcomes. [59] Reinke et al. (2019)[60] argue that the modern teacher is treated as an "empty vessel" perpetually waiting to be filled up with expert-provided knowledge and to serve as a conduit for canned lessons. Freire (1970)[61] calls this the "banking" method of education, in which passive students are simply filled up with knowledge.

Is it any wonder that we keep seeing stories in the media about the near-term role of robots/artificial intelligence in teaching? Or that teachers are increasingly miserable, leaving the profession in droves and entering in smaller and smaller numbers? A number of factors contribute to this phenomenon, but teachers consistently report feeling disrespected, dissatisfied and disillusioned due to the overemphasis on standardization.[62] It's important to keep this context in mind when we reflexively invoke the word "quality" in ECE. Are we sure the factory model is what we want for our children? It's not too late to change our minds!

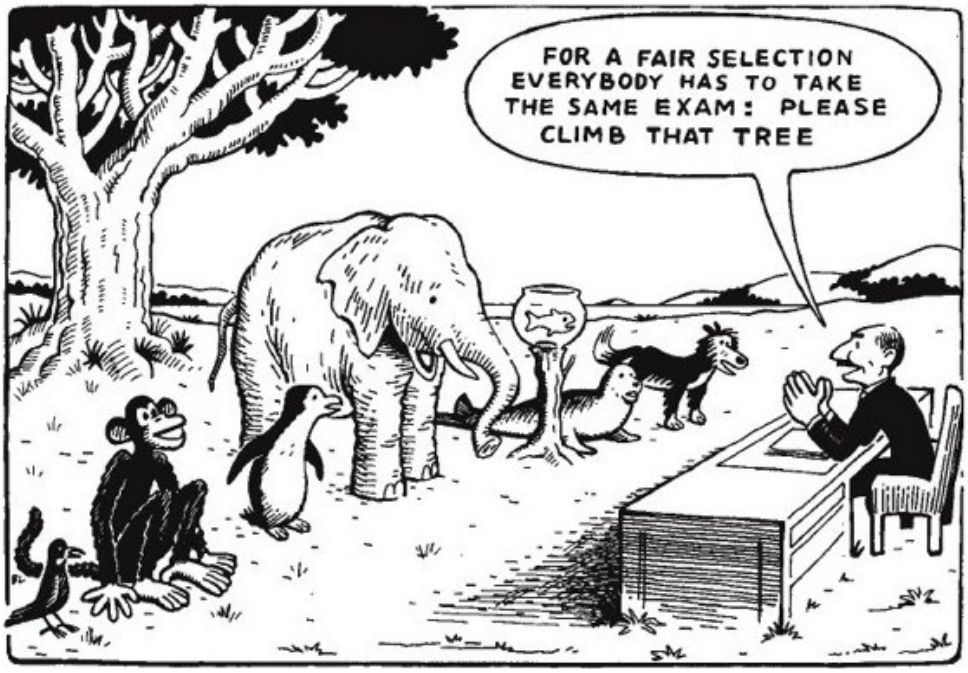
Most importantly, perhaps, has this approached actually worked as intended? We hear a lot about "accountability" in relation to the need for standardization, and yet educational outcomes in the United States continue to disappoint, despite wholesale eforts to identify and implement one-right-way teaching "technologies." It seems unlikely that more of the same will produce different results.

### Child development … universal processes or just WEIRD?

The mainstream ECE quality narrative is anchored in widely cited child development research and theory. But outside the U.S., much of this research is strongly contested.[63] For one thing, the vast majority of developmental psychology studies are conducted by White researchers using White and economically privileged samples.[64] The principles of good science tell us not to apply research based on one distinct group to *everyone*, as though that group automatically represents what is "normal."

The vast majority of developmental psychology studies are conducted by White researchers using White and economically privileged samples.

As Nielsen et al. (2017)[65] caution, "Failure to confront the possibility that culturally specific [in this case, White] findings are being misattributed as universal traits has




broad implications for the construction of scientifically defensible theories." The default centering of research with White samples is especially striking when we recognize that White, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD) groups make up *only 5% of the world's population*.[66] Do we actually consider 95% of the world's population to be abnormal?

Do we actually consider 95% of the world's population to be abnormal?

Research in the emerging field of cultural developmental science offers very good reasons to believe there is neither a single, universal model of child development[67] nor a single, universal model of adult personhood — the presumed goal of normative development. Cultural developmental scientists urge us to consider the logic of evolutionary fitness: Given the great diversity of cultures and environments around the world, it would actually be *maladaptive* for the human organism to have a single blueprint for child development (and by association, for parenting or education).

To be successful, children need to develop in synchrony with their particular cultures and environments, with parenting and education reflecting and supporting what is appropriate to that context.[68] Privileging the norms and expectations of one culture — let alone one that actually represents a distinct global minority — gives rise to a bizarre, nonsensical scenario in which 95% of the world's children are presumed to be "at risk" simply by virtue of being born into a non-WEIRD culture. As Wang (2018)[69] notes, "Research seeking to understand human development outside the cultural context risks drawing false and ethnocentric conclusions."

"Research seeking to understand human development outside the cultural context risks drawing false and ethnocentric conclusions."

**Wang (2018)**

We need a radical departure from this kind of cultural arrogance and ignorance. As advocates have repeatedly shared, and science confirms, culture is neither a side note nor an add-on to otherwise universal processes: It is an essential through line with profound and nuanced implications for child development, parenting and education. It is time in the United States to engage seriously with cultural developmental science and new frameworks for understanding how cultural, environmental and biological systems interact in complex ways to support adaptive development to a child's specific ecology.[70, 71]

## Revisiting the holy grail of neuroscience

In the early 2000s, an especially compelling scientific rationale for ECE emerged: neuroscience. You all know this story: Crucial brain development happens in the first 3 years ("1,000 days") of life. If not supported properly, there may be literal damage to the so-called "brain architecture," with lifelong negative effects.

This narrative has had a profound influence on the field, effectively medicalizing early childhood and cementing the role of the expert, rather than the caregiver, the educator, and/or the community in determining what we want and value for our children. From the perspective of neuroscience, ECE is reframed as a specialized ("quality") intervention, designed and implemented by experts, intended to guard against this dire threat. In terms of publicly funded ECE, there has been a particular emphasis on the effects of deprivation on the brains of minoritized children. The insinuation is that without ECE, minoritized children could end up with lasting brain damage.

As this narrative started to gather steam, it also had its critics, in particular noted neuroscientist, John T. Bruer, author of *The Myth of the First Three Years* (1999). Bruer argued convincingly that the available science was being significantly misunderstood, overstated and/or distorted (including, for example, oft-repeated statements about synaptic growth, critical periods in brain development and the necessity of providing children with "enriched" environments). He also argued that it was far too soon to claim direct links between the neuroscience in question and specific outcomes for children or concrete implications for parenting, educational pedagogies and public policy.[72] (These critiques remain equally valid today: we encourage everyone to read at least the first chapter of Bruer's book.)

Critics of the emerging brain science narrative were quickly drowned out, however, by high-visibility efforts such as Rob Reiner's celebrity-forward "I am Your Child" campaign; the 1997 White House Conference on Early Development and Learning, hosted by then-President Clinton and Hillary Clinton; and the 2000 publication of the National Research Council's *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Child Development*.[73] In the ensuing decades, it has become de rigueur to ground every ECE discussion — in public policy, advocacy, higher education, professional development, etc. — in references to the unquestioned "brain science" of early childhood, often in sensationalized ways (e.g., a set of photos showing ostensibly atrophied brains — photos, by the way, that don't quite stand up to closer scrutiny).[74]

And this was no accident. As it turns out, there were very deliberate efforts to craft and shape the brain science message so that it would have maximum impact, both with the public and with policymakers. Indeed, those at the forefront of this effort (the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard) published a scholarly article in 2011 explaining how they partnered with marketing professionals to devise and test the most effective communication strategies. From their perspective, this partnership was so effective that they hoped it would be instructive for others interested in "innovative" approaches to science communication.[75] In the article, the authors do briefly acknowledge a lack of consensus regarding the science in question, but seem to dismiss that concern as relatively unimportant. Instead, they argue in favor of what others have termed "pragmatic reductionism," or the oversimplification of complex and often inconsistent bodies of research in order to meet the perceived need for emotionally persuasive sound bites.[76]

You might ask, "Well, what's wrong with that? It got an important message out there,

"Images of parts of the brain that appear to 'light up' cannot self-evidently be translated in educational or social policies. Nor can animal research be directly translated to the growth of the baby brain. In between stand theories and conceptions of human nature, ideas about what a society needs, ideologies about parental responsibility and the role of the state, and—ultimately—an image of what a child is."

**Vandenbroeck & Olsson (2017)**

"Whether or not a child becomes a toxic or nontoxic member of society is largely determined by what happens to the child in terms of his experiences with his parents and primary caregivers in those first three years."

**Rob Reiner, addressing the National Association of Counties, quoted in Bruer (1999)**

didn't it?" We see quite a few reasons for concern but will address just a few of the most obvious ones. First, there is the problem with the science itself. At the same time Shonkoff and Bales were celebrating the success of their messaging efforts 10 years after *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, other prominent scientists continued to characterize the science as fundamentally incomplete. For example, Belsky and de Haan (no lightweights themselves) argued in 2011[77] that "the study of parenting and brain development is not even yet in its infancy; it would be more appropriate to conclude that it is still in the embryonic stage." More than a decade later, considerable uncertainty still exists about the applicability of neuroscience to ECE.

In fact, the field was recently upended by the publication of a reanalysis of 56 studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which challenged both the replicability and predictability of the brain imaging invoked in ECE discussions: "The problem is that the level of activity for any given person probably won't be the same twice, and a measure that changes every time it is collected cannot be applied to predict anyone's future mental health or behavior."[78]

In plain language, this means if we take a picture of your brain while you play with blocks on Monday, and then take another picture on Tuesday — same brain, same blocks — those two pictures might look pretty different, and neither one seems to be particularly useful in predicting how you will play with blocks on Wednesday. Any kind of direct line between fMRI and specific recommendations for effective parenting, ECE or public policy was already largely speculative, but this reanalysis fundamentally challenges any such hypothesized relationship.

At the same time, we've also seen increased research and growing understanding in the area of cultural neuroscience, an emerging field that "seeks to understand how key features of culture, including beliefs, values, and practices, may get embrained and embodied in neurobiological systems through socialization."[79] In other words: How do brain structures and functions develop to ensure attunement and adaptation to specific cultural environments? Neuroimaging across cultural groups suggests brain differences between those groups relating to understandings of self, cognition, emotion and motivation.[80] This goes one step further in challenging the universal model of child development: We now understand that healthy, normative brain structure and functioning may look somewhat different — though not better or worse — across cultures for completely functional, adaptive and nonpathological reasons.

As with the discussion above regarding cultural developmental science, this argument makes perfect sense. It would be evolutionarily maladaptive to have only one "correct" blueprint for brain development, regardless of the specific context. Logically, using our WEIRD lens, that would imply that 95% of the world's children are somehow born into the wrong environment for healthy brain development. If that were true, we'd have a hard time surviving as a species. A more likely explanation is that unrecognized or unacknowledged cultural biases are embedded in the dominant ECE brain science narrative.

With such high stakes for children, families and educators, we would like the science to be a little more settled — or, realistically, to be applied more cautiously and in more nuanced, respectful ways. The dominant early childhood brain science narrative reads more like benevolent propaganda than credible evidence. As White and Wastell argue, "[This] does not provide a particularly distinguished exemplar of the

"Legrenzi and Umilta, two renowned neuroscientists who often stood up against the misuse of neuroscientific arguments, narrate an interesting experiment conducted at Yale University showing that psychology students more readily judged a message as true when it was accompanied by images of brain scans, even when these had nothing to do with the content of the message"

**Vandenbroek et al. (2017)**

"This way of using brain research leads to universal claims and remedies, ignoring cultural preferences, political histories and social contexts, a fortiori ignoring the local voices of parents and practitioners on what early childhood education is for or what is desirable."

**Vandenbroeck & Olsson (2017)**

"The myth [of the first three years] had become the national and international gospel of parenting and early childhood policy. To question the gospel became heresy."

**Bruer (2011)**

public use of science. Rather, science has been conscripted to grant authority to the cause of early intervention. … This is bolstered by the strong belief that the moral message is bigger [more important] than the science."[81] From an advocacy perspective, the payoff might seem worth it, but there are important ethical questions to consider, not the least of which is the very real possibility that we may be doing a disservice to children and families if current policy priorities are actually grounded in flawed, incomplete and/or misunderstood science. Simultaneously, we run the risk of overlooking or failing to consider potentially more impactful approaches in our zeal for the "brain science" narrative.

## The problematic "return on investment" argument for ECE

Finally, in pushing for increased public funding for ECE (a priority we unapologetically share), advocates have repeatedly grounded their efforts in the idea of maximizing return on investment (ROI). This means that for every dollar invested in ECE, we should expect to see cost savings (to the state) down the line. That sounds great, right? And this argument has been reasonably successful with policymakers, though it certainly hasn't resulted in anything like publicly funded universal ECE.

### *Questionable science (again)*

Let's unpack the research behind this assertion, as well as the underlying logic. Economic modeling based on two longitudinal, randomized controlled trials of ECE programs implemented in the 1960s and 1970s concluded that participation in ECE reduces the likelihood of negative adult outcomes such as substance use, incarceration and unemployment, resulting in substantial cost savings to the public. For every dollar invested in ECE, it is said, we get about $7 back (more recently revised up to $13). Unfortunately, it's unclear how much confidence we should have in these numbers. For one, the economic modeling itself has a hard time standing up to scrutiny. A key component of the argument is that investments made earlier in life have significantly higher returns than investments made later in life, but Rea and Burton (2019)[82] recently found no such relationship in their own analysis. And cost-benefit analyses of more contemporary ECE programs have found much more modest returns on investment.[83] For example, a simulation published in 2023, which looked at state-based pre-K programs, estimated that ECE participation could increase total lifetime earnings by only $16,000.[84]

As a number of critics point out, this actually makes a lot of sense when you take a closer look at the underlying assumptions and evidence base. The ROI estimate is based on two small-scale studies that were implemented a half-century ago, with a very specific population, under significantly different social conditions. The studies themselves were not without their own methodological flaws (e.g., differential attrition from the experimental and control groups).[85] Further, the intensive, university researcher-designed early childhood programs in question cannot be said to represent typical ECE models. For example, one of the research studies (the Carolina Abecedarian Project) reportedly had an annual per-child cost of $19,000 per year in current dollars.[86, 87] The average annual per-child cost of Head Start — arguably much more comprehensive than most ECE — is only $10,000.[88]

Other commentators have observed that if ECE had such a profound effect on broad societal outcomes, we should expect to see improvements in relevant indicators over time. Unfortunately, we have not realized (for example) decreased economic inequality

since the implementation of publicly funded ECE for economically disadvantaged children. Instead, "it is difficult to discern any impact [of Head Start] on child or adult outcomes for the USA as a whole," as inequality has in fact grown exponentially despite implementation of such programs.[89]

Nor have we seen a decrease in the rate of incarceration over the past 50 years. Currently, "nearly 2 million people, disproportionately Black, are living in prisons and jails instead of their communities. Compare this to the figures of the early 1970s when this count was 360,000."[90] The dramatic increase, of course, is due in large part to the War on Drugs and the disproportionate impact on BIPOC (particularly Black) communities.[91] This is a perfect example of the ROI model's failure to acknowledge or factor in macro-level factors such as racism and harmful economic policies.

Logically, we really shouldn't expect that an individual-level strategy such as ECE would somehow neutralize the lifelong systemic barriers experienced by minoritized children and families. Such an expectation invokes the **bootstrap fallacy** and assumes a level playing field that we *know* does not exist. As Moss (2019)[92] observes, "Achieving a better society is a complex process, requiring serious political commitment to social justice; *there is no technical fix or 'magic potion' that can do the job*" [emphasis added]. We cannot expect ECE alone — as a technical fix — to address societywide, structural racism and economic inequality. System-level problems require system-level solutions.

See www.naspa.org/blog/themyth-of-the-bootstrap for an explanation of the bootstrap fallacy.

### *Children as credits or debits*

We find the neoliberal framing of children as "human capital" to be particularly dehumanizing. Neoliberalism, or the application of economic theory to all areas of human experience (also sometimes called the "commodification of everything") gained ascendency in the 1980s. According to this paradigm, children are valued for their future economic contribution rather than for their intrinsic worth as human beings.[93] Minoritized children in particular are pathologized and framed as an economic burden on society, and thus in need of remediation. But do we *really* want to treat children as credits or debits on a balance sheet?

Indeed, we have heard many advocates in Oregon express discomfort with this framing, including some of the people interviewed for this paper. And as Benner and Pastor (2021)[94] remind us, neoliberalism is simply a *belief system* about how best to organize society; it's not a set of scientific "laws" (no matter how intimidating the associated mathematical modeling may be). Economists themselves do not have a special claim to the truth (they're actually somewhat notorious for making inaccurate predictions). We could, in fact, center a different set of values and beliefs in building support for ECE that might actually resonate with a broader cross section of Americans.

### *Limited impact of the ROI messaging*

We also note that the ROI argument has not actually performed as well with policymakers as some might have hoped. One of the authors recently attended a meeting in which an influential Oregon ECE advocate expressed deep-seated frustration and confusion regarding the apparent failure of the ROI and brain science messages to gain traction with certain important audiences. As well-known ECE policy expert Elliot Haspel recently observed in *Early Learning Nation*, the ECE advocacy community may have bumped up against the limits of the economic argument: "At certain

Watch this interview with Elliot Haspel: "Beyond the Economic Argument for Child Care" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHdjNdJm6q8

times I worry we've gotten just about as much mileage [over the past 20 years] out of them as we're going to. I don't know how many people are left who are persuadable by economic data, who aren't already persuaded."[95]

Other commentators and advocates have pointed to the need for a broad-based political movement — one that centers families — to bring pressure to bear on policymakers. Katherine Goldstein argues that "the child care movement has all the evidence and sound arguments it needs. What it lacks is the political money and the voting blocs to force policymakers to care about and act for child care."[96] For example, the organizations lobbying in favor of Build Back Better (BBB) literally spent 1.4% of what was spent by the business groups *opposing* BBB. This speaks to larger dynamics at play in our political system and the need for *new and different strategies*: The reality is that repeated appeals based simply on technocratic logic have had limited impact.

#### *The danger of "us versus them" arguments*

As much as we (the authors) embrace the importance of early childhood and recognize that the very youngest members of our communities are often overlooked or devalued in the United States (we are, after all, the only country in the world that has yet to ratify the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child), we also worry that the field may have swung too far in the opposite direction in our passion to advocate for early childhood funding. The flawed brain science narrative combined with the ROI argument seems to have convinced many well-meaning advocates that *literally* no phase of life matters as much as ages 0–3. As one highly valued partner recently said to us, "I mean we know it's *all over* by age 3, right?"

Thankfully, no. The evidence does *not* suggest that it's all over by age 3; children are by no means "fully baked" at age 3. Humans demonstrate enormous capacity for learning, adaptation and neural plasticity across the lifespan.

Children are by no means "fully baked" at age 3. Humans demonstrate enormous capacity for learning, adaptation and neural plasticity across the lifespan.

We know that it feels like there's never enough funding to go around and that ECE is underfunded relative to many other public services. But this overemphasis on "the first 1,000 days" can inadvertently give the impression that children *over* the age of 3 are lost causes, as well as set up a kind of "us versus them" dynamic with our colleagues working across the education and human services spectrum. Ultimately, this scarcity mindset may undermine the kind of coalition-building and inclusive messaging needed to facilitate broad-based, meaningful support for *all* children, families and communities.

### Especially harmful implications for minoritized children and families

Well-intentioned child advocates may feel the need to use the prevailing paradigm to make the funding case for ECE, but this kind of "ends justify the means" argument can have unintended consequences, particularly when developed by dominant system helpers (most often White) removed from the communities in question. Below, we describe some major implications of the mainstream ECE advocacy narrative for minoritized children and families, understanding that this only scratches the surface of the deep-seated implicit and explicit biases often in play.

Well-intentioned child advocates may feel the need to use the prevailing paradigm to make the funding case for ECE, but this kind of "ends justify the means" argument can have unintended consequences.

#### Deficit-based and assimilationist

At the center of this narrative is a particularly problematic organizing theme: the so-called "achievement gap" between minoritized and more privileged children.

Indeed, the foundational studies cited as evidence for the effectiveness of ECE — such as the Perry Preschool Project and the Carolina Abecedarian Project — specifically targeted children deemed "at risk" (i.e., low-income and Black children). Many of the assumptions driving this narrative have been called into question as pathologizing, reliant on biased assessment tools, centering dominant culture norms, and ignoring fundamental factors such as systemic racism and classism.[97, 98] Conventional notions of ECE quality, they argue, are "exclusionary, rooted in White monolingual and monocultural values and experiences, and apply deficit paradigms to frame the developmental trajectories of multiply minoritized children."[99]

Conventional notions of ECE quality are "exclusionary, rooted in White monolingual and monocultural values and experiences, and apply deficit paradigms to frame the developmental trajectories of multiply minoritized children."

**Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol (2018)**

Seen from this perspective, the goal of mainstream ECE is essentially assimilationist: "Closing the "gap" implicitly means making nondominant children look and act more like affluent White children, the default norm.[100] As discussed earlier, these critiques are rooted in indisputable facts: The frameworks and research favored by mainstream systems are based on and reflect WEIRD experiences and understandings. Unless one wants to argue that the WEIRD perspective is actually the correct one, these critiques must be taken seriously by the mainstream ECE system.

### A dangerous flirtation with eugenics

In the drumbeat around neuroscience, it is hard not to hear echoes of scientific racism and eugenics, especially earlier claims regarding supposed differences between races in skull size and intelligence. The foundational Carolina Abecedarian Project itself characterized low-income Black children as being at high risk for "mild mental retardation" (what we would today term intellectual disability), a key detail that has gotten lost over time.[101] Logically, the "brain damage" narrative also implies that today's minoritized adults who did not have the benefit of ECE as children may be intellectually disabled. That's a pretty stark assertion when said out loud. Is that really something ECE advocates want to hang their hats on?

"Brain science, even if we add in behavioral science, cannot tell us how to raise a scientifically correct child. Parents should realize that children thrive in a wide variety of physical and cultural environments and learn and benefit from experiences throughout their lives. Being highly critical and skeptical of any claims to the contrary is one of the best things parents could do for their children."

**Bruer (1999)**

Why the dominant brain science narrative was and continues to be so compelling to the mainstream system, policymakers and funders alike, is something that bears somber reflection. One unfortunate but likely explanation is that it reinforces long-standing racist beliefs about minoritized children and families. As White and Wastell (2017)[102] ask, does the brain science narrative feel so "right" — so "common sense" — because it's actually "old wine in new bottles?" We have plenty of examples of these enduring beliefs re-emerging time and time again in slightly different manifestations. For example, in her new book, *Torn Apart*,[103] Dorothy Roberts brings us back to the 1980s and what has been characterized in hindsight as the "hysteria" around so-called "crack babies." Despite the dire predictions for children born to mothers who used crack cocaine during pregnancy — they would be permanently "brain-damaged" and emotionally disturbed (sound familiar?) — neonatologist Hallum Hurt found no significant differences in development or long-term outcomes in her 25-year longitudinal study comparing exposed and nonexposed children.[104] Yet, the "crack baby" narrative provided a compelling rationale at the time for the War on Drugs that disproportionately harmed Black communities and swept untold numbers of minoritized children into the public child welfare system, the devastating impacts of which continue to reverberate today.[105]

If we're not careful, the neuroscience narrative could contribute to similarly harmful public policy. We need to be very cautious about the potential ripple effects of damage-centered research embraced in the name of "helping" or advocating

Oregonian.

WOMAN'S AND SPECIAL FEATURES

OCTOBER 5, 1913. NO. 40.

OREGON BABIES MAKE NEAR-PERFECT SCORES AT COUNTY EUGENIC TESTS

Polk County Boy, Two Years Old and Son of Woman 40 Years Old, Lead All Children of State With Score of 99.6 Per Cent.

FROM all parts of Oregon and in fact from the entire Northwest there come reports of "better babies" contests. The eugenics tests are the rage; "the only thing" just now, and their great practical value, their appeal to common sense will keep them in the public favor when all the fancies and fashions of this day are long forgotten. The old variety of mere beauty baby shows, of fluffy frocks, and blue and pink baby ribbons are a thing of the past. The mothers nowadays know their little ones are pretty only when they are healthy in body and mind, and, judging by the way in which they flock to the eugenics contests, it will not be long before every little tot in the community has been examined and scored.

The attendance at the tests held at the local county fairs has broken all records and shown conclusively that these Western babies are the finest in the land.

Dallas Babe Scores High.

Read more about the relatively recent history of eugenics-inspired forced sterilization of minoritized women in the United States: www.nytimes.com/2022/06/08/magazine/eugenics-movement-america.html

on behalf of minoritized groups.[106] As Bruno and Iruka (2021)[107] observe: "Much is discussed concerning evidence-informed and evidence-based policy. When that evidence is based upon racist assumptions, the policies based upon it will logically be as well. This is particularly relevant when policies are put in place to address the mechanisms hypothesized to account for the associations found between race and children's outcomes."

We need to be very cautious about the potential ripple effects of damage-centered research embraced in the name of "helping" or advocating on behalf of minoritized groups.

A similar argument could be made for class-based narratives that pathologize low-income and/or rural families. Indeed, eugenicists viewed poverty itself as evidence of genetic inferiority, especially as regards intellectual capacity. Surely this is not a stereotype that ECE advocates would want to unwittingly perpetuate.

### Minoritized children as a danger to society

Historically, eugenicists also believed that brain differences (i.e., deficiencies) resulted in a greater propensity for violence among people of color and poor people. In the ROI argument, we hear echoes of this belief that minoritized individuals are at "higher risk" for being violent.

According to ROI modeling, some of the largest social costs avoided by ECE participation are those associated with incarceration. From this perspective, young minoritized children are fundamentally framed as a latent danger to society.[108] In fact, recent research consistently shows that early childhood educators do perceive very young nondominant children — particularly Black children — as being dangerous in the classroom and are more likely to suspend or expel them from care.[109]

We also know that young Black children are more likely to be perceived as older than they are and much more likely to be harshly disciplined in educational settings for the same behaviors exhibited by other children.[110] Ultimately, and tragically, Black

children are 6 times more likely than their peers to be shot to death by the police.[111] (Remember that Tamir Rice was only 12 years old.)

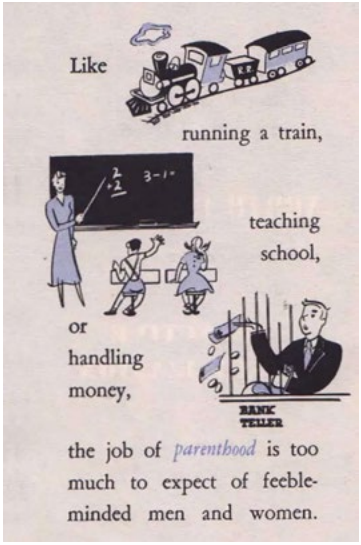
As we mentioned earlier, a less dramatic but similarly toxic narrative frames minoritized children as a danger to the health of our economy (e.g., as future burdens on the welfare state and criminal justice system). ECE is promoted as a primary strategy to avoid these outcomes based on the underlying logic that it's minoritized children who need to be "fixed," rather than the systems that minoritize them. What would it look like to instead advocate from a position that recognizes the inherent worth of minoritized children, and asks what we need to fix the system so that it truly meets everybody's needs?

What would it look like to instead advocate from a position that recognizes the inherent worth of minoritized children, and asks what we need to fix the system so that it truly meets everybody's needs?

### Disproportionate use of "drill and kill"

A parallel but very different narrative, specific to affluent children, runs alongside the alarmist rationale for ECE with minoritized children. For more privileged children, ECE is much more likely to be framed as an opportunity for free play, exploration, intellectual development, self-actualization and innocent joy – not as an "intervention" to protect children and/or society from dangerous harms.

This is a long-standing theme in American education. For example, Native American children were being forcibly removed from their families and brutally "educated" in boarding schools at the very same time privileged families were embracing the highly romanticized kindergarten movement.[112] To this day, abundant evidence shows that minoritized children in mainstream educational settings experience more rote "drill and kill" approaches to education in the name of closing "gaps."[113]




A 1950 pamphlet of the Human Betterment League of North Carolina via the North Carolina State Documents Collection, State Library of North Carolina.

Low-income families are especially reliant on publicly subsidized options with highly standardized approaches to defining and assessing quality, which some have termed "technologies of surveillance and control."[114]

ECE policy circles were rattled in 2022 when the evaluation of Tennessee's publicly funded pre-K program for low-income preschoolers unexpectedly found *negative* effects of participation. This finding is decidedly atypical, not reflecting the vast majority of ECE research.[115] The lead researcher, Dr. Dale Farran of Vanderbilt University, attributed the finding to the program's excessive seat time ("lecturing") and worksheet-heavy approach: "One of the biases that I hadn't examined in myself is the idea that poor children need a different sort of preparation from children of higher-income families. … Higher-income families are not choosing this kind of preparation."[116]

As Hammond (2015)[117] argues, the heated rhetoric around "gaps" and the hyperfocus on standardized test scores has often facilitated the proliferation of lower expectations and *less effective* teaching strategies with minoritized preschoolers. Even using mainstream understandings of quality, 85% of classrooms included in the Tennessee evaluation failed to reach the level of "good" quality.[118] This double standard likely results in part from the alarmist narrative that sees minoritized children as a danger to society, touching off latent beliefs about the need for more directive, controlling and remedial approaches for such children.

### What choice? Whose choice?

The free market approach to quality would argue that families are empowered to

choose the ECE setting that works best for them, ostensibly avoiding the unfortunate scenario described above. In reality, such choices are frequently unavailable to families due to low supply, the high cost of ECE and the ongoing shortage of publicly funded options.

Granted, minoritized families do exercise choice within their limited options. However, dimensions of ECE known to be important to minoritized families are not necessarily reflected in mainstream QRIS conceptualizations. Further, program characteristics identified by QRIS as key to quality may be a relatively low priority for some families. Despite concerted efforts on the part of experts to "educate" families on these supposed characteristics of quality ECE, it's not clear that such considerations are the primary driver for families or that American families have relinquished their own sense of what feels like a good fit for their children: "They want their children to be safe. They care nothing about these rubrics that [the state wants] to invest so much money into. Quality is subjective, and for many Black and often poor families, quality is quantified in the personal character of those caring for their children."[119]

"Quality is subjective, and for many Black and often poor families, quality is quantified in the personal character of those caring for their children."

**Lenore Emanuel, quoted in Swartz (2022)**

Studies that compare families' quality ratings to expert ratings of ECE programs consistently find that families "overrate" programs compared to experts.[120] Minoritized families are especially likely to use home-based or family child care, typically characterized as lower-quality in the literature and likely to receive lower QRIS ratings.[121] In part, this is due to reduced access to and unaffordability of other types of programs. An often overlooked driver, however, is families' *preference* for culturally responsive environments and approaches, an aspect of quality that is neither reflected nor measured in existing assessment tools:

> QRIS takes into account few aspects families would use to define quality care. This results in the care mostly provided by Black, Indigenous, immigrant, multi-lingual and other women of color, and by default, home-based care, being characterized as lacking quality. ... When families chose my grandmother as their caregiver for their children, it was because she was warm and caring, provided homemade food, and provided care right in the neighborhood when they needed it most.[122]

Central to the mainstream narrative is the belief that minoritized families and communities simply don't "value" or understand the importance of education, a toxic stereotype that has repeatedly been debunked.[123] What the mainstream system also seems to miss is the significant harm that minoritized children and families *routinely* experience (see emerging research regarding **school-induced, race-related trauma**) in mainstream settings that the system characterizes as "quality."[124] From this perspective, opting to go with a trusted friend or family member makes all the sense in the world.

What the mainstream system also seems to miss is the significant harm that minoritized children and families routinely experience (see emerging research regarding school-induced, race-related trauma in mainstream settings that the system characterizes as "quality."

Watch this webinar for more on school-based racial trauma: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMgqJhGXWHM

## Fessing up: Yes, Values Come Into Play in Science and Public Policymaking. And They Should!

The takeaway here is that the mainstream story told about ECE, no matter how well intentioned, is not driven by incontestable "science." Rather, it reflects particular interpretations informed by particular values and beliefs. As Bruer (2011)[125] observes:

> There is nothing wrong with attempts to improve parenting, child care, and social policy through appropriate use of the natural and social sciences. We should

look for every opportunity to do so. What we should avoid, however, is selective appeals to science to rationalize what may be only our own preconceived policy ends. This is politics disguised as science.

Truthfully, we all bring particular perspectives and values to this work—even supposedly objective research scientists. There is no such thing as a utopian technocratic state based exclusively on data and rationality. And we should be careful what we wish for, as that sounds suspiciously like a form of authoritarianism.[126] Further, as White and Wastell (2017)[127] ask, do we really *need* science to "prove" or justify a commitment to the well-being of all children and families? Isn't this a priority we could embrace as a society, based solely on our shared values and morals?

What do brains actually add to the argument? If a brain were normal, does this mean the child should stay in adverse circumstances? Is the idea of a miserable life in need of a brain image to take it seriously?

Given the large role that values do play in both policy and practice, maybe the goal is to work toward the identification of *shared values* — toward bridging — while holding space for a diversity of experiences, preferences and needs. As john a. powell encourages us to recognize, "The reality is that we're not separate. We are deeply connected to each other, but how do we actually learn to celebrate that, to exercise that muscle, to recognize it? … When we pretend we're not connected, we're in the process of othering. We're in the process of denying not only someone's humanity, but our own humanity."[128]

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**john a. powell**

Do we really embrace the idea of the United States as an inclusive multicultural society with room for many ways of understanding and being — one where everyone truly belongs? Or are we unconsciously (or privately) holding onto the "melting pot" ideal, in which we expect minoritized groups to abandon their cultures and home languages in order to be "accepted"? Even if they were on this soil first, or if their ancestors were forcibly brought here and enslaved? And even knowing that no matter how much some folks play by the rules, or achieve recognition from the dominant culture, they are never seen as **truly belonging**? This is a crucial and largely unresolved debate that lies just under the surface of the mainstream ECE quality narrative.

## Moving past the ECE inferiority complex

We encourage ECE workers to own and celebrate the bona fide knowledge, skills and wisdom they bring to the table without needing to be propped up or legitimized by outside experts. There has long been a power difference between so-called "hard" sciences (e.g., physical sciences) and "soft sciences" (e.g., social sciences), with the latter typically being considered less rigorous or credible. There is also a clear gender divide between the hard and soft sciences, with men overrepresented in the former and women overrepresented in the latter (putting aside the complexities of gender for a moment and simply noting the absurdity of this gendered "hard/soft" language).

See numerous examples of minoritized (especially Black) celebrities, highly successful professionals and elected officials being subjected to the same kinds of profiling, microaggressions and violence as their less prominent peers.

It is widely acknowledged that ECE has been devalued in part because of its association with women and what is seen as women's biological imperative to care for children, rather than as a skilled profession worthy of recognition, respect and appropriate compensation. Historically, the work of child care has also been put — and continues to be put — disproportionately on the shoulders of minoritized women, further

ensuring the literal and figurative devaluation of this work.[129]

Using methods employed by male-dominated fields in order to build credibility and status for female-dominated fields is an understandable strategy, and one we see replicated in allied fields such as social work and psychology. This is a classic tactic of White liberal feminism: showing the boys we're just as good as they are at their own game. But as we've already discussed, we have good reasons to question and be concerned about the technocratic approach to ECE. In its enthusiasm to embrace the "science of early childhood" and borrow the authority of the medical profession, ECE has devalued some of its most important assets, including the enormous wisdom and experience of early childhood educators, and failed to demonstrate baseline respect for families' self-defined needs and priorities. We also run the risk of compromising our own integrity and self-respect when we lean so hard on what is actually questionable science.

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Trying to model ECE on disciplines with greater status is an essentially assimilationist strategy that may reinforce rather than challenge current inequitable structures and belief systems. For example, White women, with their greater proximity to power, have a much higher chance of actually being validated by the dominant system using conventional measures. Case in point: Requiring that early childhood educators have a bachelor's degree in order to elevate the profession's perceived status systematically favors economically advantaged White women, who have much greater access than minoritized women to higher education. It also runs the risk of further eroding respect for the many minoritized women providing excellent care and education *without* a degree. (Neither of which is to suggest that minoritized educators shouldn't be fully supported and encouraged to pursue a degree, should they so choose.)

This same dynamic holds for numerous aspects of our current quality support system, famously prompting advocate Keisha Nzewi of the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network to declare on a national webinar that "QRIS is racist." Working toward equity means *challenging* the rules, not just getting better at playing the game.

Working toward equity means *challenging* the rules, not just getting better at playing the game.

One of the system insiders we interviewed reflected on how the desire for recognition and validation within the ECE field can manifest in toxic ways:

> I think when you're in the know, you have the tool, and you know how to use that tool, you're now the expert. That feels good. Something I've always thought about — specifically here in Oregon, but I think for all of early childhood — is that early childhood is a very disrespected, underfunded, unstable field. People have been stepped on, treated like garbage, treated with little respect. Once they finally get a little bit of respect, they [do the same to] everybody else. I see that so often in this field, and I think it's because it's so heavy.

It may seem as though we've strayed from the topic of quality. But the reality is that ECE is implemented in a larger social context at the complex intersection of race, class and gender. *True* system transformation requires consideration and negotiation of such complexities, as it is the water in which we all swim. Naming and grappling with power is foundational to opening the door to *authentic* solidarity with educators and families in order to co-create truly high-quality ECE for all of our children.

# Innovation Toward a Viable Future

## Making the Dream a Reality: A Responsive Bureaucracy

Having made the case that the existing ECE quality support system in Oregon is moving toward obsolescence (H1), we now turn our attention to H2 and H3: innovation and system transformation. The good news is that how we approach ECE quality is indeed a public choice — not a scientific law — with ample room for critical thinking, creativity, experimentation and improvement. This could be amazing!

Innovation, of course, can be challenging for publicly funded bureaucracies such as DELC and associated systems, which are typically oriented around rules and standardized procedures to ensure equal treatment across system users. In some situations, this is a strength of bureaucracies, but rapidly changing contexts also require nimble, adaptive systems. As Perrin (2023)[130, 131] points out, "Rules and procedures are basic to bureaucracy. But these can be rigid and inflexible and, too often, may take on a life of their own, with the original rationale for these forgotten, and often creating significant unintended consequences."

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**Perrin (2023)**

The courage to invite innovation — and to adjust calcified rules, procedures, structures and funding priorities — will require some important shifts in mindset on the part of system leaders (defined broadly to include agency administrators, elected and appointed officials, and the judicial branch), including a readiness to bring a critical lens to the holy grails and orthodoxies of the mainstream ECE quality narrative. Reexamining our internalized beliefs and value judgments about what is "true" or "right" for children and families is likewise essential.

Wrestling with the complexities of your identity, role and power as a technocrat may be both personally and professionally challenging; that's certainly been the case for the authors. Envisioning and experimenting with new ways of doing business requires ego strength, a learning orientation, self-reflective capacity and the willingness to tolerate risk – in other words, it takes true leadership.

We're confident that Oregon's sincerely well-intentioned and committed early learning system leaders can and will make these important shifts. We also recognize that we don't need to wait for mindset shifts to occur for every person before moving ahead with innovation; indeed, social psychologists tell us that mindset shifts often come about as a *result* of taking action or directly experiencing new ways of doing things. If a critical mass of system leaders step up to champion and model this pivot for others, real system transformation will be possible.

It is also important to reiterate that true system change is nonlinear and requires sustained efforts. Realistically, this is going to take a little while. In the meantime, we don't need to sacrifice progress on the altar of perfection. No doubt, any number of relatively small bureaucratic changes could bring some measure of immediate relief to families and educators; these can and should be pursued. (This is a perfect example of H1, H2, and H3 operating simultaneously.) What is crucial is that we remain vigilant toward the "old wine, new bottles" tendency. In other words, will these

smaller changes actually begin dismantling dysfunctional structures and processes to make room for transformative strategies? Or will they serve to prop up the status quo by adding yet add another layer to the "Frankenstein"?

See the Recommendations section for some more specific thoughts on how to guard against such a scenario. The abridged version is — you guessed it — listen to and share real power with communities. As another systems insider interview participant suggested:

> Try and use your position of power not to be that academic person that can say, "According to this study and that study," but to make space for others. You don't have to know everything; try to create spaces where many truths can coexist.

"Try and use your position of power not to be that academic person that can say, 'According to this study and that study,' but to make space for others. You don't have to know everything; try to create spaces where many truths can coexist."

**Systems Interview Participant**

Last, but not least, it bears repeating that true system-change work is complex and challenging. It requires partnership and alignment across multiple system entities and roles. Many aspects of the quality support system are not, in fact, under the direct control of DELC. DELC (or the Early Learning Division previously) neither single-handedly created the challenges described in this paper nor can be expected to single-handedly address them. Both federal and state mandates played and continue to play a major role, as do the perpetually shifting priorities and investments on the part of state elected officials. As a state agency, DELC is beholden to parties and policies not of its own choosing or making, as well as significantly constrained by budget allocation decisions made by the Legislature and direction from the Department of Justice. To be clear: this analysis is neither intended nor should be used to hold DELC solely accountable for what are shared responsibilities to young children and families in Oregon.

## Learning from the Oregon Early Childhood Equity Fund

### ECEF background

The ECEF was created in 2019 as part of the Student Success Act. ECEF provides state funding to culturally specific organizations engaged in ECE and family support programs with minoritized children and families impacted by systemic inequities. Many program participants identify as BIPOC, while 25% of ECEF participants are children and caregivers who identify as White, in many cases representing rural/frontier areas of Oregon as well as White-identifying immigrants.

Many program participants identify as BIPOC, while 25% of ECEF participants are children and caregivers who identify as White, in many cases representing rural/frontier areas of Oregon as well as White-identifying immigrants.

Fundamental to this innovative programming has been DELC's unique approach to fund administration: flexible, responsive and authentically relationship-based. Grantees say that for the first time, they feel trusted and supported by state government to do what they know is right, rather than being told to use standardized approaches that are in fact a poor fit for the communities served. In turn, grantees say they are much better able to meet the needs of young children and families with culturally and linguistically affirming programming. The funding stream is near unique in the country.

Four broad areas of programming are eligible for ECEF funding: Parenting Education, Parent-child Interaction, Kindergarten Transition, and Tribal Language Preservation and Revitalization. The Fund allows a high degree of flexibility, both in terms of the specific programming implemented and the use of funds to support programming.

There is no required curriculum and grantees are encouraged to think outside the box in responding to community needs. Twenty-five grantee organizations serving minoritized families received funding in the 2021-2023 biennium. Fifteen counties were represented, including urban, rural and frontier counties: Clackamas, Clatsop, Deschutes, Douglas, Gilliam, Hood River, Jefferson, Lane, Marion, Malheur, Multnomah, Polk, Washington, Wheeler, and Yamhill. Funded entities included community-based culturally specific organizations, lead organizations of collaboratives or coalitions, Tribes, and culturally specific early learning programs within school districts.

### Centering the wisdom and expertise of community

We believe that some of the best ideas for ECE quality innovation will come directly from minoritized families, educators, and communities. By starting at the margins, we not only facilitate educational justice for those most impacted, but also identify effective strategies for a broad cross section of the population.[132, 133] It is time for the doctors, scientists and technicians (ourselves included!) to take a step back, make room for, and resource home-grown priorities and solutions. As john a. powell reminds us, "Belonging means more than just being seen. Belonging entails having a meaningful voice and the opportunity to participate in the design of social and cultural structures. Belonging means having the right to contribute to, and make demands on, society and political institutions."[134]

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**john a. powell**

The expression "data-driven" has become ubiquitous in the 21st-century realm of policymaking and governance. In many ways, the push for data represents a bona fide interest in accountability. When it comes to data regarding educational outcomes for minoritized children, however, conventional data too often are used to tell an incomplete and biased story about minoritized children and families. Typically, policymakers rely on "satellite data," or high-level general measures such as test scores and graduation rates, yet these metrics by definition collapse complex circumstances and experiences into a single number that frequently lends itself to deficit thinking and reinforces existing biases. For that reason, Safir and Dugan (2021)[135] encourage us to "flip the dashboard":

> We consider whose voices are habitually included, tokenized, or silenced as we pursue "improvement" inside a broken model. We also choose the margins, flipping the dashboard upside down to center the experiences of those who matter most: not policymakers and certainly not test makers but the families, students and educators who breathe life into learning.

The focus is on nuanced, localized understandings that can only emerge from on-the-ground conversations with real people. The so-called "technology ethnographer" Tricia Wang[136] calls this "thick data": "It's the sticky stuff that's difficult to quantify. It comes to us in the form of a small sample size and in return we get an incredible depth of meanings and stories. Thick Data is the opposite of Big Data. … For Big Data to be analyzable, it must use normalizing, standardizing, defining, clustering, all processes that strip the data set of context, meaning, and stories. Thick Data can rescue Big Data from the context-loss that comes with the processes of making it usable."

Watch Wang's TED Talk: www.ted.com/talks/tricia_wang_the_human_insights_missing_from_big_data?language=en

This paper flips the dashboard and utilizes thick data, centering the wisdom and expertise of culturally specific early childhood programs funded by the ECEF in conceptualizing and operationalizing quality. Representing a "pocket of the future in the present," ECEF both points to a vision for a better future (H3) and provides

tangible opportunities in the present for innovation and experimentation (H2). We are confident there is significant potential for system transformation that would be welcomed by a broad cross section of families, educators and administrators alike.

### Approach to data collection and analysis

In 2022, every ECEF grantee was invited by our team to participate in an in-depth interview to better understand culturally specific ECE and family support programming. Twenty-three grantee organizations agreed to participate, sometimes including multiple participants from each organization (sometimes including parents as well). After the interviews were completed, the CCF/PSU team met weekly over a four-month period to engage in in-depth qualitative analysis and identify preliminary themes to bring back to the grantees for co-interpretation.

From April 2023 to June 2023, 10 grantee organizations and CCF/PSU worked together to deepen the analysis, expand the themes, and correct any misinterpretations on the part of the CCF/PSU team. In September 2023, the group convened in person for an all-day meaning-making retreat to further develop and refine the analysis, as well as generate recommendations.

## A transformative vision for high-quality ECE

From the interview and co-interpretation processes emerged a thoughtful, informed and equitable vision for ECE quality that goes well beyond the deficit-based rhetoric of closing "achievement gaps," or the purely economic logic of ROI. Although acceptance of culturally specific approaches seems to be growing in the state, it's still common to hear concerns voiced about whether such programming truly meets quality standards.

The data from our interviews with ECEF grantees suggest that culturally specific ECE programs may well provide *higher* quality programming than that found in many conventional settings. Indeed, the ways that ECEF grantees define and operationalize quality are actually quite consistent with pedagogical frameworks considered by many educators to be the gold standard in ECE, such as Reggio Emilia or the Finland HEI model.

Meek et al. (2022)[137] similarly highlight the alignment of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies with **Ideal Learning Principles**. In their recent reflection on the Carolina Abecedarian study, Bruno and Iruka (2021)[138] note a crucial but generally unacknowledged aspect of the program: Black teachers. According to Bruno and Iruka, the original Abecedarian investigators failed to consider a key variable:

> Namely the culturally responsive and sustaining practices the Black teachers likely brought to their work with the [Black] children. The fact that many of the teachers lived in the same community as the children and the families that participated in the study has important implications that should be considered as this aspect of the children's experiences may very well have contributed to the positive effects on children's outcomes.

Ironically, perhaps, the Abecedarian study, repeatedly cited as evidence of ECE effectiveness, may well be one of the most methodologically rigorous studies demonstrating the effectiveness of culturally specific ECE. We also note an often overlooked central component of the Reggio Emilia approach: *regional leadership and customization*.[139] Even

Although acceptance of culturally specific approaches seems to be growing in the state, it's still common to hear concerns voiced about whether such programming truly meets quality standards.

For a description of the Ideal Learning Principles, see trustforlearning.org/explore-ideal-learning/principles/

The Abecedarian study, repeatedly cited as evidence of ECE effectiveness, may well be one of the most methodologically rigorous studies demonstrating the effectiveness of *culturally specific ECE*.

within Italy, the expectation is that programs will — by intention — look different from region to region and be responsive to community priorities.

***Respecting what is shared***

With permission from the grantees, we are honored to share the ECEF vision for quality with you, and hope that it might jumpstart the broader conversation we are inviting around quality in ECE and true system transformation. Consistent with that goal, there are some specific choices we've made about how to present the interview themes and some suggested guidance we'd like to offer.

In particular, please understand that this is not intended to be a blueprint for change, ready for implementation. Indeed, we believe that meaningful system change is dependent on system leaders *doing the learning themselves* and building that internal capacity, rather than simply looking to conventional experts to tell them what to do. This is essential to participation in all three phases of the Three Horizons change process. For that reason:

- ✓ We're asking you to engage with this material in all its complexity and nuance. There are no shortcuts to understanding here. Please demonstrate respect for the grantees by reading through this entire section, rather than just the bullet points below.
- ✓ The grantees specifically asked that we be clear that there is no "secret sauce," no "one right way" and no formula for doing this work. It is an expansive, not a reductionist vision.
- ✓ Please try to bring your whole self to this, rather than simply looking for a technical fix. This is also feeling work; indeed, it's spiritual work for many.
- ✓ If that sounds silly or unscientific to you, rest assured that an incredible amount of thought, research, reflection and intentionality goes into these programs—just as much, if not considerably more, than goes into most mainstream programming.
- ✓ Please consider suspending disbelief and opening yourself up to hearing and taking seriously deep wisdom from traditions and perspectives that may be unfamiliar to you.

It is also crucial to view this information not *only* (or primarily) from the perspective of what it can offer the mainstream ECE system. Not only would that essentially be **extractive**, but some of this knowledge is indeed proprietary and was shared on the condition that it not be appropriated (i.e., used without permission, credit or compensation) by the mainstream system. For that reason, what is offered here is more along the lines of guiding principles for operationalizing quality than the specific pedagogies and curricula currently utilized by ECEF programs. With that in mind, key elements of quality identified by the ECEF grantees are summarized below.

See chicagobeyond.org/researchequity/ for a discussion of harmful research practices.

## Key elements of ECE quality shared by ECEF grantees

- ✓ Having staff and leadership that reflect and speak the languages of the communities served.
- ✓ Demonstrating accountability: starting with families' and communities' needs and priorities.

- ✓ Understanding emotional/psychological safety as a baseline condition and through line.
- ✓ Providing welcoming, affirming spaces that support positive identity.
- ✓ Centering authentic relationship at every level: co-investment in each other.
- ✓ Using authentically asset-based, collaborative approaches to support self-determination.
- ✓ Respect for families as experts on their own lives, first teachers and true classroom partners.
- ✓ Being holistically trauma-informed, without pathologizing children, families or communities.
- ✓ Recognizing and being responsive to the inseparability of culture and language.
- ✓ Incorporating the helpful components of mainstream understandings and approaches.
- ✓ Modifying less helpful components to be responsive to local cultures and conditions.

Multiple grantees noted that on paper, some of these elements don't sound that different from the priorities articulated by the mainstream system. And yet all too often, there is a vast gulf in understanding and/or a downright distortion when it comes to implementation, often due to unrecognized or unacknowledged bias. There is a world of difference between pity and heartfelt compassion, between saviorism and true solidarity. The grantees themselves showed an uncommon humility, noting their own challenges as well as their strategies for "walking the talk" and staying authentically accountable to families and communities. In ways that the mainstream system may not always fully appreciate, this is complex, highly skilled work requiring considerable self-awareness and ego strength — with or without a college education or graduate degree.

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*Above all, we cannot forget that Oregon's minoritized children and families urgently need and deserve greater access to this kind of high-quality programming — right now.* Forty-four percent of Oregon children 5 and younger are children of color (RUO 2.0). Using the criteria laid out by ECEF grantees, many — if not most — mainstream ECE settings likely would not qualify as "high-quality," typically because they lack crucial elements of culturally and linguistically affirming practice. Despite widespread diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts, mainstream systems continue to be stuck in deficit-based thinking and inequitable treatment of minoritized children and families (including disproportionate suspension and expulsion from ECE, identified by the state as a high-priority area for intervention). Early childhood is a very short period of time, and minoritized children do not have the luxury of waiting for dominant systems to "catch up"; they need and deserve access — today — to culturally affirming early learning environments that provide a firm foundation for healthy self-esteem and lifelong engagement in learning.

### Going deeper: Understandings of quality offered by the ECEF grantees

We describe each quality principle identified by ECEF grantees in further detail below. This summary by no means represents the full breadth or richness of the grantee interviews and is only intended as a starting point for further learning and

discussion. In places, we also provide complementary references from the research literature on what has alternately been termed *culturally relevant, culturally responsive, culturally affirming and culturally sustaining pedagogy*.[140,141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147]

### *Borrowing what's useful; leaving what's less relevant or harmful*

Across the board, grantees articulated a serious commitment to providing what they define as high-quality services and to participating in ongoing professional learning and development.

The passion grantees bring to supporting young children and their families was palpable in our interviews. They endorsed and described implementation of many conventional understandings of high-quality learning environments and positive parenting practices, and programs were also pragmatic about the need to develop the skills required to navigate mainstream systems. In short, any notion that programs might be trying to circumvent quality standards can safely be put to rest.

At the same time, grantees stressed that participation in dominant ECE settings too often results in harm for nondominant children and families. As a result, they said, they are very judicious in how they apply conventional approaches, curricula and assessments, both to prevent harm and to ensure effective, meaningful, affirming learning experiences for children and adults. As Bruno and Iruka (2021)[148] explain, "how ECE environments can support children to reach their full potential may vary by the sociohistorical contexts of families and communities given both the variability in the challenges faced (historically and currently) by different communities and the different strengths promoted within them." Grantees consistently emphasized the importance of starting with — and being accountable to — families' and communities' needs and priorities:

> For me, high-quality learning is really like figuring out what the community needs and who your audience is, and being able to develop the program around their actual needs. It might not be the mainstream type of learning … it's really like taking and blending what they need to have in school to be successful and trying to teach it in a way that is more relevant to that child.

> I think it's really important that you know what the needs are of that specific culture. That's, to me, what "culturally relevant" means. Like, if they are in a rural area, it's specific to that rural area. It's not necessarily about an ethnic background. It's really like taking and blending what they need to have in school to be successful and trying to teach it in a way that is more relevant to that child. I think we've been able to do that fairly well.

"For me, high-quality learning is really like figuring out what the community needs and who your audience is, and being able to develop the program around their actual needs."

**ECEF Grantee**

In mainstream circles, it's not uncommon to hear the concern that taking a more flexible, responsive approach will open the doors to some kind of "anything goes" cultural relativism that will end up harming children. Far from representing a less rigorous practice, it was abundantly evident in these interviews that ECEF programs are bringing an unusually high level of thoughtfulness and reflection to customizing programming, along with a well-developed understanding of mainstream ECE pedagogy.

This finding aligns with recent literature on culturally sustaining pedagogy: "Culturally sustaining pedagogy … represents the goal of centering instruction on students' cultural and linguistic competence while also offering students access to culturally dominant

competencies."[149] In other words, this is not an either/or binary but rather a "best of both worlds" approach. It is past time to acknowledge and address the implicit bias embedded in the suspicion that certain culture groups might be motivated to "game the system" and provide low-quality care to *their own children* if given the opportunity.

***Sense of safety as a baseline condition and through line for everything***

ECEF grantees frequently called attention to safety as a baseline condition and through line for quality early learning environments. In this context, understandings of safety go well beyond basic licensing requirements (e.g., physical safety). Grantees spoke at length about creating psychologically and emotionally safe environments that meet minoritized children and families' need to be seen, understood, accepted, respected, cared about, listened to, and to have meaningful influence over what happens to them.

Intuitively, this is likely what every caregiver wishes for their own children and family. And yet, it is all too rare for minoritized children in mainstream settings where dominant culture (and standard American English) is reflexively centered and anyone "different" is expected to assimilate at best, and at worst, may be labeled as problematic/deficient, experience discrimination or be excluded. As Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol (2018)[150] point out, "first, do no harm" is a fundamental principle in the NAEYC's code of ethics, but when mainstream culture is centered, such harm is routinely perpetuated.

The grantees explained that we cannot expect children without this baseline experience of safety to develop the sense of self, social-emotional regulation and confidence that true engagement in learning requires. Indeed, an extensive body of research demonstrates that experiences of marginalization, discrimination and exclusion are associated with significant short- and long-term negative outcomes for children — educational and otherwise.[151] Emerging research on the prevalence and effects of specifically school-induced, race-based trauma should be deeply troubling to all of us.[152] Culturally specific ECE programs, on the other hand, strive to build a strong foundation for future engagement with the mainstream education system:

> The sense of belonging — the sense of empowerment that my culture, my food, my language, my traditions are valued — is what 's going to build the strength and the resilience in those kiddos and in those families to be able to transition into the not-so-supportive education system in kindergarten.

A number of grantees also talked about a growing understanding within culturally specific ECE that supporting a sense of safety requires recognizing and affirming multiple aspects of children's and families' identities:

> It's important for us to also view things in an intersectional way, as in, "Oh, I don't have to be biased only because of race or culture, but I can also be biased because a family is an LGBTQ family," [or based on] gender, and also abilities. ... If we're saying that we have a space for all families, then we have to be ready for all families. That doesn't mean that we might not get triggered, or a bias might not show up, because nobody's perfect. Sometimes things come up, and you're just like, "Oh. I didn't know I had that. I didn't know I had that bias." It's being conscious enough and having time to reflect in order for you to understand, "Oh. That set me to this headspace. Let me figure out why." Taking the time to do that — I think it's important.

It is past time to acknowledge and address the implicit bias embedded in the suspicion that certain culture groups might be motivated to "game the system" and provide low-quality care to *their own children* if given the opportunity.

"If we're saying that we have a space for all families, then we have to be ready for all families. That doesn't mean that we might not get triggered, or a bias might not show up, because nobody's perfect."

**ECEF Grantee**

Grantees were similarly thoughtful about and respectful of diversity within communities. Several Latine-serving grantees talked about all the different languages, dialects and cultures represented within the megacategory "Latine" and the importance of not marginalizing groups within their own communities:

> It's finding out that there's a lot of diversity within cultures and learning about that. Learning about not making assumptions and holding ourselves accountable too. Just because the majority of our staff providing services to those little kids and families are from the immigrant Latinx community that we're serving, we shouldn't make assumptions that we know everything.

The level of racial/ethnic self-awareness and commitment to intersectional equity on the part of culturally specific program staff and leadership was striking. Sadly, this key component is missing from mainstream ECE programs more often than not.

***Providing welcoming, affirming spaces that support positive identity***

This crucial sense of safety, grantees said, is made possible by a number of factors unique to culturally specific organizations. Typically, organizational leadership and program staff reflect the communities they serve, as do program settings, materials and activities. This is in marked contrast to mainstream educational settings, where most teachers and administrators are White, curricula usually reflect mainstream culture, and minoritized children and families are invisibilized or tokenized.

In contrast, culturally specific approaches are rooted in shared community histories and understandings; staff are much more likely to speak children's and families' language and to understand the cultural references and meanings embedded in the language itself. For these reasons, culturally specific organizations are understood to have a significant advantage in terms of creating welcoming, comfortable environments for nondominant families.[153] In addition, grantees noted, they avoid the miscommunications or misperceptions that often occur in dominant settings.

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Facilitating positive ethnic/racial identity, both for young children and their caregivers, was a key component of culturally specific ECE and family support programming shared by grantees. Research demonstrates compelling relationships between positive racial/ethnic identity, social-emotional competence and academic outcomes.[154] "Racial socialization" (i.e., teaching cultural histories), affirming racial/ethnic identities and sharing strategies for negotiating mainstream environments have all been shown to support "positive racial identity and mitigate the psychological harm from continuous negative messages about one's race."[155] As one grantee shared:

> I can't tell you how impactful it is for parents to come to our literacy nights or, through the pandemic, get a bag of books that mirrors back their worth, their value, their identity, their norms, their hair texture, their eyes, their Ebonics. ...You see their whole countenance lift up when they see a young mama with the afro puff — that looks like them — that's teaching and reading to their kids. [Their culture] is not reinforced in this state ... in the medical systems, or in the school systems ... so [they're] having this isolated experience oftentimes, as a mom. Even our children, oftentimes they are having these isolated experiences, so it's something very powerful when they get to have a place of home that reinforces who they are.

One grantee similarly characterized culturally specific early learning as a kind of "affinity space" for young children:

> I don't know if you've heard that language, but in the equity world they talk a lot about sitting in affinity. It's almost as if we're putting these kids in an affinity space with people that look like them, talk like them. They speak their same language, the language we're hearing at home. Then they get to be their true selves in that space versus when...sometimes, when people of color are put in spaces with all White people, we can't truly be ourselves and we have to assimilate to our peers.

> We've seen it ... where students will make fun of the student who brings the rice and beans or who brings the Thai food or Vietnamese food because it's something that's out of their norm. But when we put a group of Vietnamese children together or a group of Black kids or a group of Latino kids together, they're able to be in affinity with each other and be their true selves ... without shame, without judgment, without blame of who they are.

New research into racial microaffirmations — as opposed to microaggressions — suggests that such "moments of shared cultural intimacy allow People of Color to feel acknowledged, respected, and valued" while also mitigating the cumulative harm caused by everyday experiences of racism.[156]

New research into racial microaffirmations suggests that such "moments of shared cultural intimacy allow People of Color to feel acknowledged, respected, and valued" while also mitigating the cumulative harm caused by everyday experiences of racism.

Without using this language, ECEF grantees repeatedly described using strategies that would be characterized as microaffirmations. Several grantees shared the importance of creating environments in which minoritized children and families can actually relax and engage with *multiple* aspects of their experience, rather than being overdefined by (and hyperaware of) mainstream culture's perceptions of their racial/ethnic identity.

### *Centering relationship at every level: Co-investment in each other*

Recent scholarship uses the term "culturally and linguistically sustaining climates of care" to describe the kinds of environments ECEF grantees create. A climate of care is one in which children and families do not have to "defend their worth and make their worthiness as recipients of care contingent on their acceptance of [White, Eurocentric] norms."[157] Central to creating a climate of care, grantees said, is the centering of relationship at every level: child, family, staff, community. Grantees repeatedly referenced the relational nature of many minoritized cultures and how that is reflected in the way programs understand and interact with children, families and community.

> We lean on our traditions, our beauty, our customs that come from the diaspora, the things that we've been able to miraculously pass down and the biggest asset that we have is relationship. That's the value and the reverence that we have for relationship.

"We lean on our traditions, our beauty, our customs that come from the diaspora, the things that we've been able to miraculously pass down and the biggest asset that we have is relationship. That's the value and the reverence that we have for relationship."

**ECEF Grantee**

> It's not just something transactional: 'I'm here to provide a service, you're here to attend. See you later.' It's more like, 'I want to really get to know you, from a staff perspective, and I really want to create this relationship with you.' Not in a fake way, but in the fundamental way: We're both people.

This "reverence for relationship" is reflected in the level of authentic commitment to children and families, for example, working diligently to support children who may be experiencing behavior challenges in the classroom:

> We definitely don't believe in expulsion, suspension, kicking a student out, or a family out in that way. … Just seeing the results at the end of the year of us not giving up and us trying our best, and then sometimes even acknowledging, "Well, this is hard." We keep going and we keep supporting the family, because it's a whole family like, "Let's all work together." I have to figure this out because we want to make it work.

Programs described attending carefully to staff needs and prioritizing relationships within their organizations. Many grantees talked about the need to take care of one another in doing this often challenging work, and to recognize that staff may share or see reflected trauma. They also identified modeling self-care for families as important.

> Our work is steeped in being the healing for ourselves and for each other. We have half-day retreats where we come and we tell stories, we dance, we read poetry. We listen to inspired authors, writers. We have one-on-one check-ins every week with them as well.

> We are also excited about getting a significant mental health contract to help us be able to provide counseling for our home visitors, especially those that are walking through some serious traumas with our parents.

> That is very important to us, and we're always looking for other ways to take care of our staff. We have the trust level, again, with staff and being able to say, "You're looking really stressed, and you've been a little grumpy lately. I think you might need a day off. I don't want to see you tomorrow because you got a whole bunch on you."

Finally, many grantees talked about feeling a sense of *collective* responsibility, shared with families and community: a kind of co-investment in children and each other, and an understanding of relationship writ large. Of course, this is the sentiment that mainstream advocates invoke when they use phrases like "it takes a village to raise a child." But in mainstream educational settings, minoritized children and families are all too often excluded (literally and metaphorically) from the "village." Nor do we see many signs of mainstream culture leaving behind the emphasis and high value it places on individuality and competition in dominant educational settings, including ECE.

Many grantees talked about feeling a sense of collective responsibility, shared with families and community: a kind of co-investment in children and each other, and an understanding of relationship writ large.

***Supporting self-determination with asset-based, collaborative approaches***

The use of demonstrably asset-based, collaborative approaches was another key aspect of quality articulated by ECEF grantees. While many well-intentioned mainstream system helpers likewise endorse asset-based approaches, the evidence suggests that deficit-based practice remains the norm for minoritized children and families in most mainstream settings, and that the reasons for this likely include persistent conscious and unconscious bias.[158]

As grantees explained, they don't struggle to understand minoritized families' experiences for the simple fact that they share many of the same experiences. Naturally,

they also have a grounded, personal appreciation of the strengths and resilience needed to negotiate life in frequently inhospitable environments — experiences and understandings that may well be unfamiliar to most mainstream early childhood educators and family support programs.

Moll and González (1994)[159] characterize these experiences and understandings as invaluable "funds of knowledge" largely untapped by mainstream systems.

> Something that is unique about our program and about culturally specific programs is that you see the family as an asset, not as a burden. We see every family that comes into our program with a strengths-based approach.

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**ECEF Grantee**

Many grantees spoke about helping families gain confidence to question and push back on inequities they and their children might experience. In particular, programs talked about preparing families to negotiate mainstream school settings and to advocate for their child's needs during the transition to kindergarten.

> We see a lot of our caregivers become advocates and become more confident speaking up if there's things they're noticing that maybe are not going well. We try to empower our caregivers so they do feel like 'oh actually, I do have a say. This is a partnership with the teachers.'

Indeed, some grantees said that program caregivers went on to become community advocates and leaders, determined to work with and for families like their own.

***Respect for families as first teachers and true classroom partners***

The fundamental respect for and belief in families' strengths was reflected in many programs' authentic commitment to and partnership with "parents as first teachers." Grantees underlined the importance of believing in caregivers and their right to set their own goals and make their own choices.

> We give them tools so they can do that at home. [We say that] we know they care; we say, 'You already have the experience. Now we're just going to give you some tools so you can modify some of the stuff you're already doing.' I think that's not recognized. Parents are not [actually] recognized as the child's first teacher in a lot of settings even though they say it. Every preschool will say parents have to work with them. Every kindergarten teacher will tell you that.

> Sometimes programs come in with a solution before they know what [the community wants]...I don't feel we come in saying there's a problem. That's what's different about ours. We're not coming in to solve a problem for you. We're coming in to support you to be able to be the best parent you already are. We're going to find out how you feel, what the need is, but we're going to come alongside of you.

Grantees highlighted the value of life experience and described mechanisms in place to invite substantive caregiver participation in the classroom and curriculum development, in some cases scaffolding a transition to paid classroom positions, effectively creating a culturally specific ECE workforce pipeline. A number of ECEF grantees reported incorporating the principles of Popular Education[160] into their programming.

Because of that, we have created an informal pathway for workforce development in EC and in education in general. Some of these parents started in our program, wanting to just take a workshop, for example, to learn how to advocate for their children, to learn more about challenging behaviors and how to take care of themselves and their mental health, in order to be better parents. They ended up wanting to be professionals in the early childhood education field. We helped them accomplish that by supporting the classes, their GED, and after their GED, looking for entry-level positions, either with us or any other early childhood education programs where they can grow as professionals and provide them with the pathway in the mentoring and the coaching on how to acquire all of the other certifications such as CPR, first aid, and all the other trainings that are related to child development. If they start working with us, we also provide them with the support of paying their child development associates.

***Being holistically trauma-informed, without pity or pathologizing***

Many grantees directly linked the notion of "safety" to their commitment to being a trauma-informed organization and using a trauma-informed lens in all their work. Almost every grantee talked at length about the prevalence and impacts of trauma on their communities. It is well documented that minoritized communities are disproportionately exposed to trauma, including widely prevalent race-based traumatic experiences at the individual, institutional and systemic levels.[161]

Typically, however, mainstream models of trauma-informed care (TIC) have been "colorblind." As Fairchild and Mehrotra (2021)[162] observe, "All of these principles, and how they may come to life in practice, are shaped by world view, lived experience, cultural ways of knowing and identity… not universal, neutral or outside of sociopolitical reality."

As a result, the TIC principles defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration may be applied in counterproductive or even harmful ways by dominant systems working with minoritized children and families. These principles make no mention of racial stress or trauma, fail to acknowledge structural factors that contribute to risk, and sidestep the option of actually addressing or interrupting conditions that cause harm. The sixth TIC principle, *Cultural, historical and gender issues*, has been widely viewed as a performative afterthought. Indeed, recent research suggests that TIC in mainstream educational settings often reverts to a deficit-based, pathologizing approach that focuses on race rather racism as a risk factor for trauma and pays very little attention to the need for system change or collective action.[163]

Trauma-informed care in mainstream educational settings often reverts to a deficit-based, pathologizing approach that focuses on race rather racism as a risk factor for trauma and pays very little attention to the need for system change or collective action.

Culturally specific ECEF organizations conversely described incorporating a profound sensitivity and responsiveness to trauma, while also rejecting "damage-centered narratives"[164] that overdefine or pathologize minoritized children and families only as victims of trauma. They also consistently implicated systemic factors driving trauma and highlighted the need for *system changes* to address these root causes, rather than focusing on "fixing" individuals. These organizations are well positioned to authentically embody the principles of TIC with nondominant children and families for all of the reasons discussed here: deeply relational approaches; shared understanding and lived experience of historical and ongoing trauma; accurate interpretation and contextualization of communications and behaviors; authentic commitment to a

strengths-based approach; ability to leverage the healing value of cultural histories, traditions and stories; direct accountability to the community; and a shared stake in child and family well-being.

Many ECEF organizations also engage in community mobilization and system-change efforts to minimize the risk of future trauma. Indeed, scholars and advocates increasingly argue that true TIC is not possible without centering racial/ethnic/linguistic justice.[165, 166]

Scholars and advocates increasingly argue that true trauma-informed care is not possible without centering racial/ethnic/linguistic justice.

> One of the ways that we're able to create safe space is our understanding of racism as trauma and not just a one-time event, but the impact of generational epigenetics. How literally racism as trauma has passed on cellularly through mothers to children. Starting at that understanding of our collective harm, our collective striving, we base everything at the center of healing and empowerment and places where our parents can just be seen, valued and heard.

> This is how we break the indoctrination and the stigmas and the negative cultural nuances that we still hold as a result of 400-plus years of trauma. ... I'm not here to tell another mom how to raise her kid ... we are all imperfect. I just want mom to know she's OK. There's no shame in her experience. ... If you empower someone and reinforce the positive, you get more positive. If someone is always being told what they aren't, what they can't, what they don't have, or how they should, then they're honestly going to begin to work against themselves and become what they aren't. It's a weird psychological situation that the mind does, but it's real.

Dr. Shawn Ginwright, professor of practice at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has developed a framework called Healing Centered Engagement" as a kind of corrective to mainstream trauma-informed care.[167] This holistic, culturally grounded, asset-based approach encourages critical consciousness and civic action in the service of collective healing; in many ways, it echoes what ECEF grantees shared in the interviews about their approach to TIC. Multiple grantees also spoke about creating spaces for hope, joy and aspiration in this work. As Ginwright (2018) notes, "The greatest casualty of trauma is not only depression and emotional scars, but also the loss of the ability to dream and imagine another way of living."[168]

> To see the creativity and the innovation and the genius that we come from, opposed to wearing the cloak of victims and dominant culture...if you look in the news, we look like we're gang members. We are strung out or stupid. That's what dominant culture says we are.

> I don't want to level the playing field among the poor. I want this Black child to recognize that their worth is just as high as this child of the one-percent. My programming is designed to say, 'Cultivate experiences and gain accessibility.'

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**ECEF Grantee**

It's important to note that we heard from rural ECEF grantees that their communities have also been significantly impacted by trauma, including the loss of former industries (and families' livelihoods), wildfires, flooding and so-called "deaths of despair" (addiction and mental health challenges disproportionately experienced by low-income White communities). These grantees similarly shared bringing a trauma-informed approach to their work in a way that is uniquely responsive to these particular communities:

> I think in this community, we don't talk about those things as much... the trauma aspect and how that impacts behavior and healing from that, how to make space for that. We're isolated and we like living in our shell ... Sometimes it takes a person to bring it up and then people begin to feel more open about talking about things they've experienced or how that impacts their parenting.

System-level factors and inequities are similarly implicated in communitywide traumatic experiences in rural Oregon. And rural communities consistently express a perceived lack of respect or understanding of rural cultures and needs on the part of urban decision-makers. As McGhee (2021)[169] has pointed out, a number of parallels exist between the experiences of minoritized urban communities and White rural communities that, if better recognized, could be leveraged in support of policies and programs (such as ECEF) that would benefit both.

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***Being deeply responsive to the inseparable nature of culture and language***

Language accessibility is a basic prerequisite for educational equity, but it is frequently overlooked or minimized in dominant settings and is rarely treated as a baseline condition for quality. In fact, whether implicitly or explicitly, "the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students and communities of color [are seen] as deficiencies to be overcome" through a focus on "how to get working-class students of color to speak and write more like middle-class White(s)."[170] In turn, language injustice in dominant, monolingual educational settings is associated with mistrust, lack of engagement, loss of language, disconnection from culture, loss of self-esteem, active exclusion, discrimination and systematic disadvantage.[171]

Numerous grantees spoke eloquently about the essential role played by ECEF staff who speak children's and families' home languages. In particular, they highlighted the key role of *native speakers*. Within sociolinguistics, it is well understood that language and culture are deeply intertwined; shared cultural understandings shape communication beyond the spoken word (e.g., via tone of voice, body language and eye contact).[172] Shared cultural understandings are also embedded in language itself (as with slang, difficult-to-translate idioms and words that literally have no translation in other languages). This nuanced, instinctive understanding is very difficult to teach and poses significant communication challenges for nonnative speakers, which frequently causes intercultural misunderstandings.[173]

> It's not good enough just to speak Spanish. ... For this community, you need to hire from within. You need to hire someone who is trusted, who can introduce the concept, the idea [of early learning]. We have that in a way that I've never seen anywhere else before. That's the difference. There's a basic trust level that exists here.

For all of these reasons, ECEF grantees prioritize hiring staff who both reflect the communities they serve and are native speakers of the languages. Whenever possible, they developed curricula and program in languages spoken rather than translating from English). Grantees believe this approach supports much more effective communication, facilitates more trusting relationships, supports native language development/retention and cultural identity for children, sustains intergenerational relationships, facilitates a sense of belonging and pride, builds and empowers community, and ultimately supports better educational outcomes and well-being for children and families. It should be noted that "language" in this case may also include nondominant

English dialects such as African American Vernacular English or Ebonics.

> There's a lot of fear of loss across our organizations. Loss of cultural heritage, specifically language and traditions. Language is a big one that impacts families, especially when the children and parents are not able to communicate.

> We see that their language and their culture is enriching the culture of the classroom, the culture of the programming that we're providing. We provide them with opportunities to value and to feel empowered because of their culture and try to see the strength that they have as a family.

For children in particular, grantees believe that a connection to linguistic and cultural heritage is essential to the healthy social-emotional development that serves as a foundation for school success. When children feel safe, seen, understood and accepted, the grantees explained, they are ready to learn.

Research likewise demonstrates compelling relationships between positive racial/ethnic identity, social-emotional competence and academic outcomes.[174] This is in contrast to the dysregulated, anxious state young, nondominant children may experience in mainstream, English-only early childhood programs.[175]

Research demonstrates compelling relationships between positive racial/ethnic identity, social-emotional competence and academic outcomes.

> Knowing who you are helps with self-esteem, which then helps kids learn. If you know who your community is, and you know where your family comes from, you have a sense of belonging. That really helps when things get hard. It's one of the resilience factors; when we fail, we know we're still going to be cared for and loved because I have my family. I have my community.

Several grantees further noted the well-established research base[176] supporting the many cognitive benefits to children of multilingualism; they wondered why multilingualism is often seen as an asset for affluent White children but as a deficit for students of color. Grantees referenced research demonstrating that a strong foundation in one's native language allows for a transfer of skills and greater ease of learning when engaging with a second language.[177]

A strong foundation in one's native language allows for a transfer of skills and greater ease of learning when engaging with a second language.

Research on translanguaging and the complex linguistic repertoires of multilingual children also suggests a *high* level of skill rather than a language deficit.[178] Precisely because of the inseparability of language and culture, being multilingual requires nimbleness and sophisticated mechanisms for context-dependent meaning-making and communication.

> As a first-gen student, a first-gen person, growing up in the United States, being able to create that confidence of "Yeah, I can speak another language!" that is so cool and using it as an asset versus seeing it as a deficit.

For Tribal ECEF programs, language loss is a particularly egregious trauma; language preservation and revitalization are seen as central to communities' very survival:

> We know that without language and culture, we will lose our Indian-ness. For us, it's a fight.

Tribal grantees shared the traumatic legacy of the Indian residential schools, which forcibly separated Native children from their families and communities with the

explicit goal of extinguishing Native languages and cultures and assimilating Native children into the dominant culture. About a quarter of Native languages have already been lost, with another quarter nearing extinction.[179]

By association, Tribal grantees explained, school itself came to be viewed by many as a place of trauma. The ECEF-funded early learning language preservation and revitalization programs represent a profoundly meaningful effort to rebuild this core aspect of Native identity from the youngest ages up, and across generations:

> It all comes down to the healing of that intergenerational trauma and that loss. Really trying to heal through the kids, and that works out to their families; we want the kids to learn the language in order for them to become speakers and we also want their families involved with that.

> Sometimes it can be really intimidating if you didn't grow up with language or you didn't learn about weaving, you didn't learn about plants or foods. Then, when you're an adult and you're expected to know those things because you're Tribal ... but you didn't have the opportunity to learn it. Through our kids and their families, we're giving them that opportunity to ease into it without judgment.

Given the central importance of language, Meek et al. (2022)[180] argue, "A program that does not embrace linguistic diversity, actively promote exposure to the home language, and provide tailored supports for emerging bilinguals and speakers of different varieties of English *should not be considered a quality program*" (emphasis added).

About a quarter of Native languages have already been lost, with another quarter nearing extinction.

"A program that does not embrace linguistic diversity, actively promote exposure to the home language, and provide tailored supports for emerging bilinguals and speakers of different varieties of English should not be considered a quality program."

**Meek et al. (2022)**

HORIZON 3

# System Transformation & Adaptation

## Time for a More Inclusive, Responsive Vision

In the face of questionable science, clear inequities, disappointing system-level outcomes, and widespread dissatisfaction with the mechanisms in place to support quality, it's high time to reconsider the values, underlying assumptions and strategies driving the mainstream quality narrative. The state has repeatedly articulated its commitment to supporting effective, equitable learning experiences for young minoritized children in Oregon.

We believe that the ECE quality principles generously shared by the ECEF grantees are essential to realizing that vision — a vision by no means limited to minoritized children and families. The idea here is not to silo minoritized communities, but to bring the ECEF lessons to bear *on the rest of the system*, especially considering Oregon's high proportion of young minoritized children who will realistically continue to be served in predominantly mainstream educational settings.

We are confident that the deeply relational, respectful and responsive approaches practiced by ECEF grantees would be welcomed by — and benefit — all children, families and communities in Oregon. The parallel process taken by DELC to administration of the Fund, anchored in trust and relationship, would likewise be appreciated (and would quite possibly prove more effective).

The idea here is not to silo minoritized communities, but to bring the ECEF lessons to bear on the rest of the system, especially considering Oregon's high proportion of young minoritized children who will realistically continue to be served in predominantly mainstream educational settings.

Mainstream culture itself is not a monolith; White families in Oregon, especially those living in rural and frontier areas, have similarly pushed back against excessive standardization and assessments that label a large proportion of families as deficient and children as "behind." To many, the expert-driven, one-size-fits-all strategy seems decidedly anti-democratic — unfriendly to the pluralism and sense of liberty that Americans of all walks of life endorse, and exclusionary to anyone with limited access to privilege.[181] As one rural grantee shared:

> I've seen so many programs come into the community and fail because they came in thinking they were going to solve everybody's problem, which [the community] didn't see as a problem. I would say in general, parents here tend to be very independent. They don't necessarily look for input. ... We really value that we are trying to support our communities where they're at. If that's where they're at, let's just give them the supports that they need, instead of making them feel like no, they're not good enough.

Even White families with ample access to resources (often technocrats themselves!) might appreciate a pivot away from high-stakes "helicopter parenting" approaches intended to optimize child development and life outcomes (e.g., entry into a prestigious college and increased earning potential). Indeed, evidence suggests that uptake of the "cultivated child" narrative has been greatest among more privileged families.[182]

At the same time, Luthar (2003)[183] has documented disproportionately high rates of depression, anxiety and suicide in affluent youth, while only 18% of White parents said on the most recent Pew Survey on Parenting that they found parenting enjoyable or rewarding "all of the time," as compared to 39% of both Black and Latine parents. Only 14% of higher-income parents said the same, as compared to 38% of lower-income parents.[184] This should be another red flag that we as a nation have gone astray in our pursuit of so-called quality.

## The Deep and Enduring Value of Education

Despite the issues identified with the mainstream ECE narrative, nothing in this analysis detracts from the great value of early childhood education. We know that very young children are primed from birth to learn; there is incredible opportunity in these early years to provide a robust foundation for social, emotional and cognitive development and lifelong engagement in learning.

We also know that **education is strongly associated with a whole spectrum of individual benefits**, including better job prospects, increased earnings, better health status and even longer life expectancy. Education is in fact one of the most powerful policy tools we have at our disposal; it just won't magically address structural inequities.

On the societal level, esteemed educational philosophers have long argued that education is critical to the sustenance of an informed, reflective, moral and engaged populace that is responsible to one another and capable of resisting authoritarianism and injustice. Indeed, the so-called founding fathers viewed **education as the backbone of democracy**. At a time when trust in government seems to be at a historic low and great swaths of America feel disaffected and disengaged from the political process, education may be more important than ever to our democracy.

In advocating for public education, Thomas Jefferson himself argued that education (for White boys) was essential to civic engagement and meaningful participation in democracy (by propertied White men): "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves. … And if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power."

Needless to say, Jefferson's perspective was severely compromised by racist and sexist beliefs and practices, but the idea itself remains provocative — so much so that it was once illegal in many states for an enslaved person or free person of color to learn to read or write, or for anyone to teach an enslaved person or free person of color to read or write (a crime punishable by whipping, fines or even death).[185] Enslavers were well aware that literacy would fundamentally threaten the institution of slavery. In turn, esteemed Black intellectuals have long maintained that education is key to liberation and social justice:

> Education means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free. — Frederick Douglass

> The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions … The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change and fight it — at no matter what risk. This is the only hope that society has. — James Baldwin

Gholdy Muhammad's study[186] of Black literary societies in the 1800s documents the powerful commitment of Black people to "us[ing] their minds and pens as a weapon to battle injustice." Historically, many social movements across the globe have embraced the idea of "education as the practice of freedom" and included literacy campaigns as a core element.[187, 188]

Today, scholars of color such as Muhammad, Ladson-Billings,[189] Souto-Manning,[190] Love,[191] and Paris and Alim[192] similarly encourage us to embrace educational approaches in support of a thriving, multiracial democracy — those that foster empathy and mutual understanding, engagement in learning, critical thinking, creativity, and a sense of shared responsibility and commitment for our collective future.

We need this vision now more than ever before. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development,[193] this is far more than an academic or philosophical debate. Children born today face an uncertain, challenging and increasingly divisive future requiring a high degree of creativity and flexibility, critical thinking and social-emotional skills — the same competencies prioritized by culturally responsive and affirming pedagogies. The need for such skills has profound implications for both the process and goals of education, bringing into sharp relief the demonstrable inadequacy of the technocratic approach:

> Children entering school [today] will need to abandon the notion that resources are limitless and are there to be exploited; they will need to value common prosperity, sustainability and well-being. They will need to be responsible and empowered, placing collaboration above division, and sustainability above

Children born today face an uncertain, challenging and increasingly divisive future requiring a high degree of creativity and flexibility, critical thinking and social-emotional skills — the same competencies prioritized by culturally responsive and affirming pedagogies.

> short-term gain. … Education has a vital role to play in developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enable people to contribute to and benefit from an inclusive and sustainable future. … Education needs to aim to do more than prepare young people for the world of work; it needs to equip students with the skills they need to become active, responsible and engaged citizens.

Last but certainly not least, **families with young children desperately need child care.** The most pragmatic argument in support of ECE is the economic reality facing families today: Simply getting by requires that most parents (including about two-thirds of mothers with children under age 5) work outside the home. And yet early childhood educators are paid so inadequately, they can barely cover their costs, while families struggle to pay for care for even just one child. We routinely hear bona fide despair on the part of educators and families. As centrist Isabel Sawhill recently observed, "The main reason we need more preschool is because … it provides high-quality child care for low-income working parents. That care enables the parents of 3- and 4-year olds to work, knowing that their children are in a safe and stimulating environment. … If it also improves children's later life prospects, that's great. And it may."[194]

If we *do* want to make an economic argument in favor of ECE, we need look no further than economic modeling that suggests investing in child care creates jobs, supports stable employment and facilitates spending, while not investing in child care comes at a significant cost. According to some estimates, it costs us $122 billion in "lost earnings, productivity and revenue every year."[195]

For all of these reasons, we can and should pivot away from problematic narratives based in incomplete science, deficit-based thinking and neoliberal values. As we can see, there are equally (or even more!) compelling and less problematic arguments and strategies for supporting our very youngest children and families. Emerging frameworks such as HOPE (Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences) encourage us to move beyond these damage-centered and fearmongering policy rationales.

Of course, families' challenges and suffering are real; systemic injustice is real. That doesn't mean minoritized communities are or should be *defined* or overdetermined by such experiences. Not only is such a strategy fundamentally disrespectful and inaccurate, but it also likely activates and reinforces underlying biases just as often as it generates empathy and action (e.g., we have many years of research demonstrating that fear-based public health messaging is actually ineffective or even counterproductive).[196] The Burke Foundation's 2023 report *Early Relational Health: A Review of Research, Principles, and Perspectives* includes an appendix reflecting on lessons learned from several decades of early childhood communications, examining which messages have been more and less effective, possible explanations for their relative effectiveness, and suggestions for how to pivot moving forward (e.g., scaling back the overemphasis on brain science, the ROI argument and ACEs).[197]

We have the opportunity right now to tell a new story, one centered around positive notions of "family freedom and flourishing,"[198] shared values (they do exist!) and coalition-building across a broad cross section of Americans. For inspiration, we might look to Australia's 2022 Early Learning Framework that centers on the values of "belonging, being and becoming" and the vision that "all children engage in learning that promotes confident and creative individuals and successful lifelong learners. All children are active and informed members of their communities."[199]

This affirming, hopeful vision stands in marked contrast to the alarmist and dispiriting narrative that treats early childhood as an emergency and minoritized children in particular as damaged, economic burdens. There is no reason we can't aim equally high, here in the United States, the richest and most powerful nation in the world.

## Recentering and Relearning Relationship

Of course, the assumptions and values referenced in the OECD passage above — those we will need to "abandon" — are dominant culture assumptions and values that have often been forcefully imposed upon minoritized communities via colonization and imperialism. Notions of deep interconnectedness and relational accountability have been central to nondominant worldviews for millennia.[200] Indigenous onto-epistemologies (theories of being and knowing) are grounded in relational ethics that encompass not only our relations with other human beings, but also with the "more than human" world (e.g., plants, other animals and the land).[201]

Notions of deep interconnectedness and relational accountability have been central to nondominant worldviews for millennia.

What may seem like a new insight for the dominant culture represents enduring cultural wisdom for many minoritized communities — wisdom that could serve as a timely and important reminder for all of us: "When relationships and connections are so fundamental to who and what we are, it would seem reasonable to consider relationships and connections as central to humanity's survival."[202]

Indeed, the loss of our "reverence for relationship" (as one ECEF grantee put it) has been identified as one of the primary casualties of the ECE technocracy. Cliffe and Solvanson (2022)[203] remind us that most educators *do* highly value relationships. In large part, it's why many are drawn to the work: They genuinely care.

As noted earlier, families in turn underscore the central importance of authentic, caring relationships with educators. In sharing what educators and families in California said about ECE quality, Keisha Nzewi entreats us to honor what she calls "The Love Connection":[204]

> The one attribute of high-quality child care that everyone agreed on: LOVE. Expressed repeatedly, parents and providers felt the most important trait of a high-quality provider is the love they generously share with children in their care. Food is love. Hugs and kisses are love. Nurturing and providing individualized care is love. Trust is love.

Extensive research suggests that authentic relationships may be the most powerful catalyst we have for human growth. For example, a recent series of 16 meta-analyses reaffirmed that the strongest predictor of positive outcomes for psychotherapy is *the strength of the therapeutic relationship*, regardless of the specific treatment modality.[205] And yet, the mainstream ECE technocracy creates a tension between meaningful relationships — which are highly nuanced and responsive by definition — and the standardization of "evidence-based" approaches, measurement strategies and outcomes in the service of instrumental neoliberal priorities. Even when relational measures are included as a quality metric, they are often implicitly or explicitly framed as being in service of something else, such as school readiness. In other words, relationships are approached as a means to an end rather than as something indispensable to our shared humanity and quality of life. Paradoxically, this moves relationships uncomfortably close to the realm of transaction and achievement instead of representing

The mainstream ECE technocracy creates a tension between meaningful relationships—which are highly nuanced and responsive by definition—and the standardization of "evidence-based" approaches, measurement strategies and outcomes in the service of instrumental neoliberal priorities.

meaningful connection. Long before the pandemic, many were sounding the alarm regarding declining social-emotional skills and rising narcissism among youth. The two issues may not be unrelated.

On a more promising note, the field seems to be rediscovering the centrality of relationships, as evidenced by the rapid ascendency of frameworks such as Early Relational Health and Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation. Still, we need to be leery of the technocracy simply reproducing itself by recentering "experts" and approaching relationships as a medical or professional specialty — with all the attendant technologies and assessments that may inadvertently perpetuate a sense of separation or alienation.

Doubtless, the sincere intention of such relationship-based approaches is to help. And maybe after the relentless promotion of unfettered individualism, competition and exceptionalism — beginning now in early childhood — dominant culture has reached a point of such alienation from the fundamentals of relationship that we need a more significant course correction. The question is whether we want to continue pursuing an arguably failed strategy (technocracy), or if dominant systems are willing to consider potentially transformative approaches grounded in community wisdom, authentic relationship and democratic values. This is the work of articulating a new Horizon 3.

The question is whether we want to continue pursuing an ostensibly failed strategy (technocracy), or if dominant systems are willing to consider potentially transformative approaches grounded in community wisdom, relationship and democratic values.

## Recommendations

In its centering of relationships, the Early Childhood Equity Fund has blazed a path for us to follow in living the values of true belonging and tied futures. We invite conventional ECE experts to take a step back with us and create space—literally and in our hearts and minds—for community-generated priorities and solutions that counteract the toxic effects of othering and broaden the circle of human concern. Below, we have outlined a suggested course of action based on the 3H framework. These recommendations are aspirational, no doubt, but arguably more farsighted than the technocratic ECE approach given the economic, political and climate **polycrisis** facing us today.

Learn about polycrisis and its implications for children at www.unicef.org/blog/outlook-2023-tackling-polycrisis

True system-change work is complex and challenging. It requires partnership and alignment across multiple entities and roles. Many aspects of the quality support system are not, in fact, under the direct control of DELC. DELC (formerly known as the Early Learning Division) neither single-handedly created these challenges nor can be expected to single-handedly address them. As noted earlier, the current quality support system was built incrementally and often opportunistically, based on funding available at the time and various requirements tied to that funding. Federal and state mandates both played and continue to play a major role, as do the perpetually shifting priorities and investments on the part of state elected officials. As a state agency, DELC is beholden to parties and policies not of its own choosing or making, and it's also significantly constrained by budget allocation decisions made by the Legislature as well as direction from the Department of Justice. To be clear: The recommendations that follow are neither intended nor should be used to hold DELC solely accountable for what are shared responsibilities to young children and families in Oregon.

"Often, public and philanthropy dollars are used to create programs that have layers of bureaucracy, high indirect and administrative costs, and are run by people from outside the target community. Although these programs may create some benefit for the community, they are not addressing racism as a root cause because the decision-making and budgetary power remains concentrated within White-led institutions, and the money and career opportunities are primarily circulated among racially privileged individuals."

**Zea Malawa, M.D., MPH**

With that reality in mind, we've tried to provide a comprehensive set of recommendations that are intended for a *broader audience* well beyond DELC. In some instances,

there may be places where DELC can independently move forward; indeed, we already see examples of DELC taking significant steps in that direction, for example, with the Spark redesign and the trust- and relationship-based approach to ECEF administration. In other places, however, sustained efforts to build understanding, grow partnerships, and align policies and funding will likely be required to enable DELC and other related entities to truly reconceptualize and support ECE quality in Oregon. In some cases, there may also be a need for longer-term societal shifts in values and priorities, in order to build public and policymaker will. The recommendations are centered around three basic strategies:

1. Dismantling redundant, ineffective and problematic aspects of the current quality support system.
2. Partnering with families and communities to envision and co-create structures and processes that support true ECE quality.
3. When and where possible, redirecting resources away from the bureaucracy and toward the community in order to facilitate and support a transformed system.

Note that redirecting resources from the bureaucracy should not be done at the expense of compromising adequate service levels and manageable workloads for DELC staff.

For those who might benefit from a more visual representation of the suggested change process, we have created *Figure 3: The Three Horizons of Reconceptualizing ECE Quality in Oregon*. Only the most "high-level" recommendations are included in this diagram. Remember that all three horizons are in play *at the same time*; by definition, the process is nonlinear and iterative. Thus, the framework is both realistic about how complex system change actually happens, and deeply aspirational, grounding us in big-picture visioning and "future thinking."

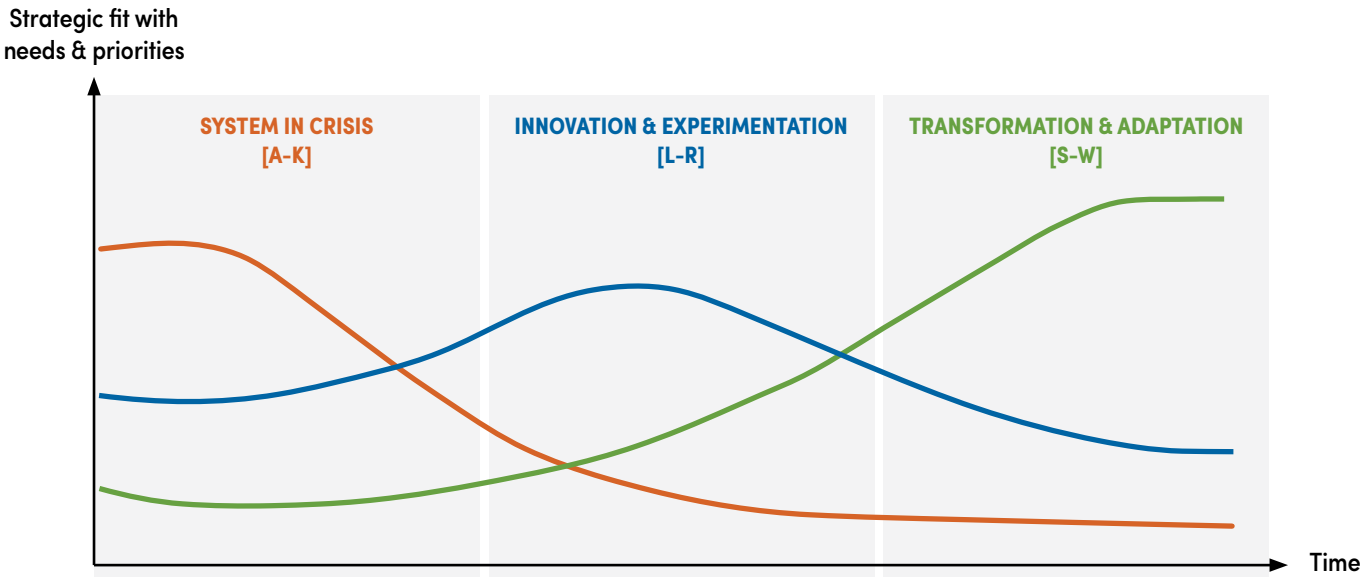
We know you're busy, but we urge you not to bypass the more fully developed recommendations that follow the diagram; they will likely make a lot more sense to you when considered in context. Our hope is to *facilitate the real engagement, reflection and learning required for meaningful change*. Because the mainstream ECE narrative is not, in fact, the one "truth," we have ample opportunity to imagine and bring into being a better, shared future for our children, families and communities:

We know you're busy, but we urge you not to bypass the more fully developed recommendations that follow the diagram; the recommendations will likely make a lot more sense to you when considered in context.

> Central to alternative narratives is the understanding that the current dominant narratives are 'just stories.' In this sense, stories of child development, human capital and cost-benefit are really just stories that have been repeated over and over again, and become truisms in research, policy and practice (Iorio and Yellend, 2021).[206]

***We can and must tell a different story.***

**FIGURE 3** The Three Horizons of Reconceptualizing ECE Quality in Oregon




**A.** Stop overusing the word "quality"; it's become an empty buzzword.

**B.** Ground quality discussions in the realities of the child care crisis.

**C.** Stop trying to quantify quality with product rating scales.

**D.** Reevaluate the "evidence base" for quality.

**E.** Legitimate family and community expertise in defining quality ECE.

**F.** Stop repeatedly commissioning the same studies.

**G.** Begin with existing data on family and community priorities for quality ECE.

**H.** Acknowledge and respect the ECE priorities that families identify.

**I.** End blatant inequalities repeatedly identified in existing reports.

**J.** Engage in organizational self-assessment and problem-solving.

**K.** Adopt the quality principles shared by culturally specific ECE programs.

**L.** Begin operationalizing the quality principles shared by culturally specific ECE programs.

**M.** Invite and scaffold authentic partnerships with families and communities to identify, operationalize and evaluate innovations.

**N.** Prioritize innovations identified by these partnerships.

**O.** Simultaneously, start divesting from costly, top-down "quality" initiatives based on faulty assumptions, and....

**P.** Begin redirecting resources divested from the mainstream system toward families and communities at the local level.

**Q.** Co-create mechanisms for research, evaluation and system accountability with families and communities.

**R.** Recruit and support diverse ECE system leadership at every level of the quality support system.

**S.** Make a sustained commitment to a long-term process.

**T.** Embrace an affirming, humanistic rationale for ECE.

**U.** Fundamentally reimagine the current system, moving toward co-creation of a quality system that is based on respect, trust and relationships; prioritizes self-determination for families and communities; is responsive to the needs of all communities; and ensures diverse representation in leadership.

**V.** Complete the transition to a more flexible, equitable funding model.

**W.** Expect the unexpected: Emergent factors will require pivots and additional iterations as the goalposts shift.

## Moving from H1 to H2

Changing mindsets, ending harmful and ineffective practices, and setting the stage for innovation

**A** **Stop overusing the word "quality"; it's become an empty buzzword.**

- **a** This might also galvanize the system to articulate (rather than gesture toward) what "quality" actually means. In RUO 2.0, the term "quality" appears 54 times with only one parenthetical definition: "(culturally responsive, inclusive, developmentally appropriate)." Significantly, the system routinely uses these terms in performative ways.

**B** **Ground discussions of quality in the realities of the child care crisis.**

- **a** ECE educator well-being must be incorporated immediately and supported tangibly as a key dimension of quality, both as a matter of conscience and if we have any hope of retaining educators.
- **b** True respect for early childhood educators would at a minimum include adequate compensation.
- **c** Rather than primarily approaching early childhood educators as empty vessels in need of formal education and training, acknowledge and demonstrate more respect for the existing skills, understanding and experience they bring to their role.

**C** **Discontinue attempts to quantify quality using product rating scales.**

- **a** Ample evidence indicates that QRIS are based in questionable science, have largely been ineffective and consume an inordinate amount of resources.
- **b** The community-driven Spark redesign process is an encouraging reflection of Oregon's intention and efforts to move toward a more meaningful and equitable system of quality supports. We hope to see systemic support for recommendations from community partners.

**D** **Reevaluate the evidence base for quality.**

- **a** Unpack and interrupt the harmful narratives centered on mainstream developmental psychology and questionable neuroscience that pathologize minoritized children and families.
- **b** Move away from the alarmist ROI argument for ECE that frames minoritized children and families as economic liabilities for society.
- **c** Stop using mainstream understandings and approaches as the default standard.
- **d** Elevate the research and scholarship of academics who reflect minoritized communities and whose work centers the experiences, perspectives and understandings of those communities.
- **e** Fundamentally question the usefulness and desirability of technocratic approaches to ECE.

## Moving from H1 to H2—continued

**E** **Legitimate family and community expertise in defining quality ECE.**

- **a** Recognize that families are true experts on their own children and families and that communities know best what quality means for them.
- **b** Start moving from top-down, "expert"-driven policymaking, program design and implementation toward a bottom-up approach to quality.
- **c** Challenge the widespread, often unconscious stereotypes—across systems and branches of government—that minoritized families and communities are ignorant, dysfunctional, don't value education or need "saving" and thus can't be trusted to know what's best for them or to use funds responsibly.
- **d** Recognize that minoritized families and communities are taxpayers and full actors with the same rights to participation and representation as anybody else.

**F** **Stop repeatedly commissioning the same studies that ask families and communities about their ECE needs and preferences.**

- **a** This is fatiguing for communities, reinforcing their sense that their input is not taken seriously as a basis for real change. It's also a questionable use of public dollars, which could arguably be put to better use by serving families directly.
- **b** This underscores the need to build understanding across branches and levels of government. DELC is often mandated by the state or federal government to commission a study regardless of whether relevant data already exists or DELC itself sees a need.

**G** **Instead, begin with *existing* data on family and community priorities for quality ECE.**

- **a** Gather, review and synthesize findings from reports commissioned by DELC and other entities to better understand the documented needs and preferences of diverse families and communities for quality ECE. (DELC's current strategic planning process is a perfect opportunity to engage in just this kind of review and synthesis.)

**H** **Acknowledge and respect the priorities for ECE that families have identified in such reports, e.g.:**

- **a** Families rarely approach ECE as a consumer decision driven by "expert" ratings.
- **b** For the majority of families, neither teacher education, use of specific curricula nor academic outcomes are the highest ECE priorities.
- **c** Instead, families prioritize physical safety; accessibility; trust in the provider; feeling authentically welcomed, respected and cared about; and genuine partnership between the family and provider.

d | Especially for minoritized children and families, being truly welcomed and respected, and feeling like your child is not only physically but also psychologically and emotionally safe, is paramount. Currently, this most often occurs in **culturally specific and responsive** programs.

## I

**End blatant inequities repeatedly identified in existing reports. Use this review to identify glaring inequities that could be addressed immediately or in the near term. They are too numerous to list, but here are a few basic examples.**

a | Provide adequate public funding for culturally specific ECE and family support programs to provide the high-quality programming that families need and want right now. In 2021-2023, the Early Childhood Equity Fund received approximately 5% of funds allocated to the Early Learning Account created by the Student Success Act, while 44% of children aged 0-5 in Oregon are children of color.

b | Stop rating programs that do not meaningfully affirm diverse cultural and linguistic identities as "high quality," which continues to minimize key needs of minoritized children and families.

c | End "quality" incentives that disproportionately benefit mainstream programs or force culturally specific programs to assimilate.

d | Redirect those funds to help underresourced programs work toward their self-identified quality improvement priorities.

e | Recognize and pay for the homologation of foreign degrees.

f | Provide adequate funding for translation and interpretation in multiple languages, across all relevant quality support systems and mechanisms. This is a basic issue of accessibility, not an "extra."

## J

**Engage in organizational self-assessment and problem-solving in response to existing feedback from families and communities.**

a | Use this review to spark reflection and organizational assessment: What's getting in the way of implementing these recommendations? Identify possible barriers to organizational change such as existing policies, funding levels, organizational structure, bureaucratic processes, leadership capacity, technical knowledge, organizational culture, staff qualifications, organizational communication, etc.

b | Recognize and interrupt places where the mainstream quality narrative and explicit/implicit biases may be constraining perceived solutions.

c | Engage in creative problem-solving around the identified organizational obstacles.

d | Ensure that adequate time and budget are allocated to facilitate this crucial part of the process; without this piece, demonstrating accountability will be extremely challenging. (We also note that without buy-in and support from the Legislature, this recommendation will be difficult to implement as funding and timelines are often established outside of the agency's control.)

## Horizon 2 recommendations

**K** **Adopt the guiding principles for quality shared by culturally specific ECE programs as a guiding star for reenvisioning quality improvement and support systems.**

- **a** Have staff and leadership who reflect and speak the languages of the communities they serve.
- **b** Demonstrate accountability, starting with families' and communities' needs and priorities.
- **c** Understanding emotional/psychological safety as a baseline condition and through line.
- **d** Providing welcoming, affirming spaces that support positive identity.
- **e** Centering authentic relationship at every level as co-investment in each other.
- **f** Using authentically asset-based, collaborative approaches to support self-determination.
- **g** Respect for families as experts on their own lives, first teachers and true classroom partners.
- **h** Being holistically trauma-informed, without pathologizing children, families or communities.
- **i** Recognizing and responding to the inseparable nature of culture and language.
- **j** Incorporating helpful components of mainstream approaches.
- **k** Modifying less helpful components to be responsive to local cultures and conditions.

## Horizon 2 recommendations

Embracing and facilitating innovation

**L** **Operationalize guiding principles for quality shared by culturally specific ECE programs.**

- **a** Because mainstream notions of quality show up explicitly and implicitly throughout ECE policy and practice, reorienting the system toward alternative understandings requires comprehensive, sustained efforts across multiple areas.
- **b** Fundamental conditions for this transition include:
  - Adequate political will and system champions.
  - Acknowledgment and commitment to the undoing of historic and ongoing inequities embedded in the current system (including personal, interpersonal, agency and systems-levels work).
  - True embrace of the learning process, including tolerance of risk and uncertainty.

## **Horizon 2 recommendations**—continued

- Creative reimagination of rigid and siloed bureaucratic systems.
- Rejection of "one right way" mindsets. The idea is not to replace one set of prescriptions with another, but to support meaningful ownership and customization by community.
- Experimentation with more flexible, responsive and trust-based approaches.
- Ongoing vigilance regarding the "old wine in new bottles" tendency.

**M** **Invite, scaffold and resource authentic partnerships with families and communities in identifying, putting into practice and evaluating innovative approaches to quality.**

a Families and communities are essential partners in the reconceptualization of quality.

b Clarify the meaning of language used to signal family and community involvement, such as "voice," "input," "listening," "advisory," etc. Be very clear and transparent about where shared decision-making is and isn't being invited.

c Create conditions and supports for **true power-sharing** with families and communities, including:

- Working toward joint identification of system priorities and co-creation of policies and practices.
- Committing to the substantive, meaningful incorporation of needs and priorities identified by families and communities.
- Elevating the value of **lived experience**.
- Investing time and life energy in sustained relationship-building.
- Compensating family and community partners for their time and expertise.
- Accommodating partners' real-world schedules.
- Facilitating partner participation with food, child care and transportation.
- Planning for and devoting adequate time to deep engagement in complex work.
- Honoring commitments and showing accountability for outcomes.
- Ensuring that advocacy isn't penalized with funding reductions.

**N** **Prioritize innovations identified by these partnerships for implementation and evaluation.**

a Reconceptualizing quality is a systemic undertaking, so interrelated opportunities for innovation exist across all areas that touch on ECE. These include approaches to instruction and assessment; workforce issues such as education, credentialing, compensation, professional development; monitoring and compliance; and public financing.

See https://greenlining.org/publications/racial-equity-research-report/ for a useful guide to approaching authentic community research partnerships.

Here is one definition of lived experience: "People with **lived experience** are those directly affected by social, health, public health, or other issues and by the strategies that aim to address those issues. This gives them insights that can inform and improve systems, research, policies, practices, and programs. When we say lived experience, we mean knowledge based on someone's perspective, personal identities, and history, beyond their professional or educational experience."

https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/what-lived-experience

b Avoid "worshiping the problem" by asking partners to rehash existing barriers. Instead, focus on creative, collective problem-solving and identifying innovations to implement.

c Avoid fatiguing partners further by reinventing the wheel; share and build on solutions already identified in the review of existing reports.

d Immediate low-hanging fruit might include expanding ECEF, already shown to be a very promising approach. We would also recommend broader application of ECEF lessons to other DELC programming.

**O** **Simultaneously begin divesting from costly, top-down quality initiatives based on faulty assumptions.**

a As illustrated by the sprawling diagram (*Figure 2*) depicting the many Oregon entities involved in ECE quality, a tremendous amount of time, energy and public resources is currently dedicated to pursuing the mainstream concept of quality.

b When reconceptualizing quality, it's likely that some of the existing structures or mechanisms would be deemed less relevant or useful.

c Identifying redundancies is also strongly recommended. The uncoordinated layering of quality-related initiatives over time has resulted in a costly and inefficient system.

**P** **Begin *redirecting* resources divested from the mainstream system toward families and communities, providing flexible funding to support capacity-building and autonomy at the local level.**

a Of course, the hope is always for more funding. But opportunities also abound for putting existing resources to better use.

b Especially given the child care crisis, direct community investments are likely to have more immediate and meaningful impact than increased investment in bureaucratic oversight.

c Resources freed up by identifying redundancies and inefficiencies in the existing system could be redirected to implement community-identified innovations.

d None of this is likely to be simple or immediate. Funding structures and mechanisms are complex and subject to multiple constraints outside of DELC's immediate purview. This is another place where it will be especially important to build understanding and buy-in across branches and levels of government.

**Q** **Co-create mechanisms for research, evaluation and system accountability with families and communities.**

a Center families and communities as the experts and leaders of the evaluation process; engage university-based and/or community-based researchers as consultants and facilitators of community-led research and evaluation. The Early Childhood Equity Fund Evaluation is a promising example of how this could be done more routinely.

## Horizon 3 recommendations

b | Bring more qualitative approaches to understanding and supporting quality in nuanced, meaningful ways that support growth and reflect family and community values and strengths.

c | Put a stop to extractive and harmful data collection methods and uses.

d | Adjust timelines for expected outcomes so they more realistically reflect growth processes, not simply legislative cycles.

e | Ground research and evaluation in ongoing system reflection, growth and program accountability to families and communities.

f | Dedicate adequate time and resources to this work: There's little use in funding research and evaluation if it doesn't inform changes to policy and practice.

R **Recruit and support diverse ECE leadership at every level of the quality support system**

a | Increasing representation of minoritized communities at the supervisory, leadership and administrative levels of the ECE system is critical to creating welcoming, responsive, effective quality support systems.

## Horizon 3 recommendations

System transformation and adaptation

S **Make a sustained commitment to a long-term process.**

T **Fully embrace an affirming, values-based ECE rationale: We are all deserving and interconnected, working together toward a shared, just future.**

U **Fundamentally reimagine the current system, moving toward co-creating a quality system that is based on respect, trust and relationship; prioritizes self-determination for families and communities; is responsive to the needs of all communities; and ensures diverse representation in leadership.**

V **Complete the transition to a more flexible, equitable funding model where communities are empowered to do what they know is right (acknowledging the inherent constraints currently facing public agencies).**

W **Expect the unexpected: Emergent factors will no doubt necessitate pivots and additional iterations as the goalposts for ECE quality continue to evolve and new H1 challenges arise.**

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