Early Childhood Framework for Quality (EFQ) Research Paragraphs

The EFQ Elements are high-level, research-based principles of early childhood quality. These are aligned to the Elements of the NYCDOE Framework for Great Schools (FFGS), which is grounded on empirical evidence from many of the leading educational researchers in the education field. As the Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) has transitioned into a unified birth-to-five system, we have had the opportunity to develop a Framework that is not only aligned with the FFGS, but also reflective of the the latest ECE research, as well as the values, priorities, expertise, and experiences of the DECE central and borough staff. The following paragraphs ground our work by synthesizing the latest research and connecting our early childhood-specific Elements to various initiatives and commitments of the larger NYCDOE.

The Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) believes that high-quality 0-5 programs…

1. **respect and value differences.** {trust}

2. **create safe and positive environments**. {supportive environment}

3. **advance play-based learning and responsive instruction.** {rigorous instruction}

4. **promote families' roles as primary caregivers, teachers, and advocates.** {strong family-community ties}

5. **work collaboratively towards continuous quality improvement.** {collaborative teachers}

6. **demonstrate strategic leadership.**{effective school leadership}

Element 1. Respect and value differences

The NYCDOE is committed to supporting learning environments that reflect the diversity of New York City, where all students, families and school staff are supported and welcomed. Whereas all Elements of the EFQ are rooted in promoting equitable opportunities for all children, families, and staff, *Element 1: Respect and value differences* is explicitly aligned with our system-wide *Equity and Excellence for All* initiative, and the New York State guidelines for culturally responsive-sustaining education. We believe all students benefit from diverse and inclusive schools and classrooms. We know that socioeconomic and racial/ethnic diversity within preschool classrooms not only supports children's cognitive skills but has the potential to foster social equity (Reid & Kagan, 2015, Potter, H., 2016). We further understand that diversity comes in many forms- included but not limited to: ethnicity, racial background, socioeconomic status, home language, country of origin, immigration status, ability, special needs, religion, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, housing status and cultural background and experience (NYC DOE Equity and Excellence for All). In order to create a culturally responsive learning environment, teaching teams need to integrate children's experiences, knowledge and perspectives in an effort to be responsive to all children's identity lines (Cardwell, 2016). This requires teaching teams to explore their biases and beliefs, and identify how they may be reflected in their instructional practices, as well as materials and curriculum selection. Leadership teams also play a pivotal role. They can support teachers in becoming culturally responsive instructors, by facilitating relevant training sessions and resources, and modeling and creating opportunities for teaching teams and other staff to explore and reflect on the impacts of structural racism and implicit bias in their classrooms, programs, and communities (NPBEA, 2015). Moreover, as the DECE moves to become a unified birth-to-five system, leaders have a heightened responsibility of diversifying programs by recruiting children, families, and staff who reflect the identities and experiences of the communities they serve.

Element 2. Create safe and positive environments

The NYCDOE understands the importance of a healthy, nurturing, and predictable environment for all children, families, and staff. Such an environment aligns with NYCDOE's School Safety and Respect for All policy as well as the recent expansion of access to social-emotional learning. In all NYCDOE early childhood programs, children and families should feel secure, supported, and recognized as important members of a program's community. From a research standpoint, decades of evidence have continually emphasized that early brain development is directly influenced by day-to-day interactions with caregivers (Ronald & Peter, 2017). A child engaged in active learning who feels secure, supported, and valued is more likely to demonstrate respectful and constructive behaviors and engage in positive interactions. Children's behavior should be guided in a positive way as part of the developmentally appropriate instruction taking place throughout the program. Children learn how to self-regulate by anticipating their parents' and teachers' responses to them when they express various emotions (Statmen-Weil 2005). Specifically, when children experience distress, parents or other caregivers support them by reestablishing a sense of safety and control. When early relationships are positive, children develop emotionally secure attachments with their caregivers that can buffer stress at various levels of intensity. Indeed, the research on trauma and resilience indicates that the ability to manage emotions and self-regulation is one of the most "fundamental protective factors" for healthy development (Alvord & Grados, 2005, Benard, 2004). Such social and emotional development lays the foundation for children's growth across all developmental domains.

The notion of safety in a classroom is multi-faceted: in addition to emphasizing the importance of adult-child interactions, the research also highlights key structural elements, including class sizes and features of the classroom environment such as cleanliness, daily schedule, and availability of stimulating learning materials (Pianta, Downer, & Hamre, 2016). Leadership teams should work closely with teaching teams by equipping program spaces with the appropriate quantity of high quality materials based on children's different developmental stages. Furthermore, teaching teams can then arrange the classroom environment for children to not only engage with developmentally appropriate materials, but also have opportunities to interact with peers and/or engage in independent activities that foster exploration and self-regulation (Persell & Kerr, 2017; Worman, S., Ulrich, R. 2017).

Element 3. Advance Play-based Learning and Responsive Instruction

Dr. Charles E. Schaefer, American psychologist and author of "Ages and Stages," writes, "We are never more fully alive, more completely ourselves, or more deeply engrossed in anything than when we are playing." In alignment with the NYCDOE Instructional Leadership Framework, *EFQ Element 3: Advance Play-based Learning and Responsive Instruction* encourages early childhood program leadership teams and teaching teams to engage children in a variety of play-based and developmentally appropriate learning experiences, and ensure instruction is based on children's individual strengths, interests, and needs. In early childhood education, play and learning are inseparable. Masterson and Bohart (2019) cite the decades of research that has shown how free play and guided play support children's learning. They identify play as a key way through which children discover, build, and reinforce knowledge about their world. While play might come naturally for children, it is imperative for teachers and leaders to be intentional about how play opportunities throughout the day are informed by multiple sources of data on individual children's development. All NYCDOE early childhood programs use a research-based curriculum that supports children's developmental milestones, as outlined by state and national standards. The National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning states that the importance of using a research-based curriculum lies in its promotion of domain-specific teaching practices that are effective in supporting positive child outcomes (2017).

Beyond structural elements, such as utilizing a research-based curriculum, quality early childhood instruction is grounded in child-teacher interactions. Pianta et al. explains, "Experimentally controlled studies suggest that targeting specific aspects of quality—such as interactions and curriculum—is a more promising way to increase children's knowledge and skills" (2016). Dombrow et al. further explain that what teaching teams learn through children's data and engaging with families informs opportunities for teachers to interact intentionally with children. They refer to these opportunities as "powerful interactions" (2011). Through these powerful interactions, children are more likely to be engaged in their learning experiences, exploring, thinking critically, and communicating with their teachers and peers. A responsive approach to early childhood teaching views the role of data as extending far beyond compliance, instead embedding it into everyday classroom practice. It is through developmental screening and authentic assessment that teaching teams have opportunities to deepen their shared understanding of children's development and learning across domains. By collecting evidence of children's learning on an ongoing basis, teaching teams reflect and determine next steps to inform instruction and support individual growth.

Element 4. Promote families' roles as primary caregivers, teachers, and advocates

The NYCDOE recognizes the critical role of families and communities as the bedrock of children's holistic learning and development. Further, our programs emphasize the development of strong relationships and the provision of resources to support both the well-being of the child and the whole family in line with a two-generational approach to family engagement. In alignment with NYC's Parents' Bill of Rights, *Element 4: Promoting families' roles as primary caregivers, teachers, and advocates,* recognizes that all parents, caregivers, and families have the right to feel welcomed, respected, and supported in their school communities (NYC DOE Equity and Excellence for All). It has been well established that family engagement plays a significant role in children's school readiness, and effects social-emotional and academic milestones (Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010; Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010). Such engagement is fostered when programs establish two-way ongoing communication with families, which further promotes collaboration, mutual relational trust and progress toward addressing systemic challenges (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Specifically, we know that children's outcomes are entrenched in their family context. Parents' education and income can cause changes in parent stress, home environment, and overall stability, which can mediate children's outcomes (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Magnuson, 2007). Accordingly, a two-generational approach, emphasizing the strengths, needs, interests, and goals of both families and their children, has been identified as a means to help address the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

In order to develop mutually trusting relationships with families, leadership teams should model reciprocal, professional, caring and collaborative relationships within the organization (Douglass, 2011). Partnering across the organization involves the creation of an environment that affirms and empowers families as partners, leaders and advocates in the classroom, program, and community and as their child's first teacher. Such relationships also provide reciprocal benefits to programs. Specifically, when programs have positive experiences with family engagement it contributes to their professional development and job satisfaction. At the level of the teaching teams, building strong partnerships with families helps to build trust in one another, which in turn helps teaching teams feel more confident and open with families, especially when collaborating about a child's development or behavior (Reedy & McGrath, 2010). Teaching teams can also share information about children's learning and development, which impacts families' self-efficacy, confidence, and skills. Such access to information also influences families' motivation to trust, collaborate, and remain positively involved with leadership and teaching teams. Lastly, families' perceptions of teacher responsiveness are an important aspect of parent-school relationships, such that their perceptions are linked to the frequency of involvement in their children's schools (Powell et al., 2010).

Element 5. Work collaboratively towards continuous quality improvement

This Element is grounded in the latest research on continuous quality improvement in early childhood care and education. The BUILD Initiative describes continuous quality improvement (CQI) as a process that is "reflective, cyclical and data-driven… in which participants control the process themselves, through continuous learning and dedication to 'getting better at getting better'" (2017). In NYCDOE early childhood programs, we define participants as the entire program community, including leadership and teaching teams, as well as families and community partners. The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance states that, "collaboration of program leaders and staff is expected to build their capacity to identify areas of quality improvement and develop solutions that work for their unique settings and program cultures" (2018). In *EFQ Element 5: Work Collaboratively Towards Continuous Quality Improvement*, partnerships between program staff, families, and community members/agencies are rooted in the collection, analysis, and use of data to improve outcomes for all children, families, and staff.

You will notice that this Element has a program-level data cycle for leadership teams in alignment to the classroom-level data cycle for teaching teams we describe in Element 3. This data cycle goes beyond complying with licensing requirements, and should be an intentional process of analyzing data from and with staff, families, and communities, and establishing and tracking goals that support continuous quality improvement (Zeribi, 2017). In her extensive literature review of data's role in CQI in early childhood, Derrick-Mills notes that, "effective leaders serve as role models for data use" (2015). Program leaders model a culture of continuous quality improvement by establishing and tracking their own professional goals and using data to inform quality improvement plans for their programs, classrooms, and teaching teams. They also support teaching teams in engaging in a similar process to improve the use of effective teaching practices that lead to positive outcomes for children.

All program staff should have ownership over their professional learning experiences, and ensure they are aligned to their goals and the goals of the program, which requires time to not only attend related workshops and professional learning opportunities, but also to reflect on strengths and areas of growth. Program leadership teams -- which may include specialized instructional coaches -- support teaching teams to navigate the process of continuous quality improvement. There are several coaching models that program leaders and coaches can utilize to support teaching teams. The most predominant models in our early childhood system include Practice Based Coaching, and relationship-based coaching. Workman and Ullrich note that all of these program-based supports, "do not operate in a vacuum and rely on the wider early childhood system" (2017). In addition to program leadership team members who serve as critical in-house supports for their staff, the NYCDOE provides programs with an array of quality improvement supports through the Division's Instructional Coordinators, Social Workers, Operation Analysts, and Policy Support Specialists, as well as ongoing professional learning opportunities.

Element 6. Demonstrate strategic leadership

"For a vision to become more than a statement on a piece of paper, you must engage the interest and involvement of the program's key stakeholders in generating a shared vision," (Derman-Sparks et al., 2015). In alignment with the NYCDOE Framework for Great Schools' Effective Schools Leadership, the NYCDOE Instructional Leadership Framework, and the McCormick Center's Whole Leadership Framework, *Element 6: Demonstrate Strategic Leadershi*p, considers program leadership teams and teaching teams' capacity to build and use organizational culture, structure, and resources to promote and execute a shared vision for quality. Leekennan and Chin Ponte refer to early childhood program directors as both leaders and managers. They further explain, "A manager focuses on people, problems, and tasks. A leader must tend to these managerial functions while bringing them into focus with the program's shared vision, mission, and goals" (2018). Leadership teams must establish and communicate clear roles and responsibilities for different members of the program community, and adopt fair and consistent processes to ensure that these responsibilities are carried out. Worman and Ulrich (2017) expand on this idea and state that administrative operational support takes many complex forms. They explain that beyond serving as operational and instructional leaders, early childhood directors oversee the programs' structural supports,"including access to professional development, quality improvement resources, stable and sufficient funding streams, and a pipeline of well-trained teachers " (p.5, 2017). Effective program leaders use responsible budgeting and financial management practices to strategically align these structural supports and resources to the program vision.

Beyond these structures and systems to ensure sustainable program operations, program staff need to work together to build and maintain a strong organizational culture. In her book, Leading for Change, Ann Douglas (2017) cites research on organizational science and relational coordination theory to state that, "relational quality of the workplace influences virtually every aspect of organizational performance" (p.20). She further explains that positive relationships among people working in different roles across the organizations are the most important element for achieving desired goals. This cannot happen without the support of program teaching teams, families, and the community. Douglas (2017) explains that sustainable change in organizations is a relational team process, "in which groups of people involved at different levels of the work process must together co-create solutions that work in that local context" (p.20). Such a co-creation process motivates staff, families, and communities to work toward a shared program vision that truly advances positive outcomes for all children and families.

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