



## Leadership learning design principles: Co-creating dialogic and critical pedagogy within cohort and community contexts

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**Wendy B. Allen**  
University of Colorado Denver, USA



**Lori G. Ryan**  
University of Colorado Denver, USA



**Rebecca Vlasin**  
University of Colorado Denver, USA

### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to share our pedagogical evolution as graduate faculty in relationship with increasingly diverse cohort communities of early childhood professionals learning across the landscape of leadership roles engaged with young children, families, and other adults. The early childhood leadership program described in this paper offers a graduate certificate where annually, a cohort of 18-22 early childhood professionals from across Colorado in the United States learn together for 13 months. As faculty, we share a strong commitment to both learning about our teaching and to inviting student voices, the early childhood professionals, through dialogic processes in participatory study as we co-learn and grow our practices of learning and teaching. This paper introduces and explores four leadership learning design principles: (1) identity and agency, (2) socially constructed pedagogy, (3) contextually relevant learning experience, and (4) appreciative stance. As we go, the story will unfold around how we engaged cohort members of the 2019-2020 program year through initial survey reflections and then deepening our shared understanding of these leadership learning design principles through iterations of dialogue after the program was concluded. We end the paper with reflections on how this process of study has ultimately brought us to an awareness and eagerness to engage in relational forms of inquiry, placing student voices at the center with even more intention and depth.*

*Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Dialogue, Early Childhood, Leadership, Cohort Learning, Appreciative Leadership, Socially Constructed Learning*

**Wendy B. Allen**, Ph.D., was the Co-Director of the Early Childhood Leadership Program at Clayton Early Learning in partnership with the University of Colorado Denver's School of Education and Human Development until 2022. Wendy continues to explore the tensions and possibilities of centering families through her current work with Rocky Mountain PBS KIDS. Through her public media content curation, teaching, and parenting experiences, she has deepened her commitment to embracing asset-based community-engaged practices. She continuously seeks opportunities to cultivate inquiry, collaborative partnerships, and shared study of the ecologies where children and families live, learn, and generate knowledge together. e-mail: wendyallen@rmpbs.org.

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**Lori G. Ryan**, Ph.D., is a Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Colorado's School of Education and Human Development. She formerly served as Co-Director of the Early Childhood Leadership Program until 2022. Lori centers her work within early childhood contexts and educational leadership environments, with a commitment to equitable and inclusive practices that promote, in partnership with early childhood communities, a strong image of children, families, and professionals as co-constructors of their own learning stories. Within each unique context, Lori's teaching, research, and coaching are focused on building the capacity of her students, early childhood professionals, and the children with whom they work. e-mail: Lori.Ryan@ucdenver.edu

**Rebecca Vlasin**, Ed.D., is the Director of the Division of Early Childhood Workforce for the Colorado Department of Early Childhood. She has over 25 years of experience across complex educational systems, including serving on the design and faculty teams for the Early Childhood Leadership Program. Through her work with leaders across the state in various organizations and schools, she has content expertise in issues of preschool funding and governance, pedagogical leadership, inclusive learning contexts, community engagement, and other core areas of systems change. e-mail: rebecca.vlasin@state.co.us

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At the heart of this story is an evolution of an early childhood faculty we belong to into a community-engaged collective. This paper is about the nexus of learning dialogues occurring in three communities of practice: early childhood professionals centering the experiences of children prenatally to age eight, leadership learning and development experiences aiming to enhance the capacity of adults to create lasting social change, and an emerging sense of what dialogic pedagogy means to us through the co-discovery of a set of leadership learning design principles. We (the authors) have experienced the development of our purpose and a deepening of our understanding of leadership alongside those who work in communities nurturing the growth and development of young children. As we continue to inquire and learn with each group of early childhood professionals with whom we work, we find ourselves more authentically concerned with the unsettling inequities within our communities at this critical moment in history. Yet, we also see the potential and future possibilities for development. In the opening to their book *Presence*, where they introduce Theory U as a theory of change, Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, and Flowers (2005) reflect,

If awareness never reaches beyond superficial events and current circumstances, actions will be reactions. If, on the other hand, we penetrate more deeply to see the larger wholes that generate 'what is' and our own connection to this wholeness, the source and effectiveness of our actions can change dramatically (Senge et al., p.12).

This paper marks an important step toward sharing with whom and how we are learning and what new understandings and questions we intend to continue to explore together. While this paper is far from sharing the full story of our experiences with early childhood leadership learning and development, our hope is that it provides a place for deeper dialogue and discoveries and contributes to a dynamic process rooted in the central aspects of bringing our work with early childhood professionals to life.

## **Co-Learning with Early Childhood Professionals**

The early childhood leadership program (ECLP) at the University of Colorado Denver described in this paper offers a graduate certificate where annually, a cohort of 18-22 early childhood professionals from across Colorado in the United States learn together for 13 months. The program is a partnership of a philanthropic foundation, a university school of education and human development, and a community-based early education, professional development, and advocacy non-profit. In this program, early childhood professionals are defined as people working in communities with young children and their families from the period before birth through a child's eight years of age. This includes professionals in three sectors: early childhood education/early learning, health/mental health, and family engagement. Positions in communities across these domains of practice range from direct service to children and families to organizational or administrative positions to community-wide or policy-related roles. Hybrid courses are, by design, accessible to early childhood professionals throughout the state with monthly learning both in-person and online.

Although the purpose of the ECLP, to cultivate leadership capacity to effect change within early childhood programs, policies, and practices and advance equity, excellence, and opportunity with all young children and their families, has remained strong and constant, we have continued to deepen our belief that all early childhood professionals with a stance of commitment and curiosity about children and families have the capacity to lead and innovate to co-create "open, engaging, and democratic cultures" (Lambert, Zimmerman & Gardner, 2016) in our communities. The program content and understanding of leadership in theory and practice have evolved to reflect the complex environments where leadership occurs across the field of early childhood and the growing scholarship of teaching and learning in leadership development in the 21st century. Significantly, our sense of leadership is amplified each year by the lived experiences and wisdom of increasingly diverse contributors who represent and identify with the racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of the communities with whom they work.

As lead learners, we are in a generative relationship with the participating early childhood professionals, those enrolled in the program, and alumni of the program, to collectively explore questions that are relevant not only to our pedagogical practices but, more importantly, to the leadership practices lived and sustained by the learners themselves in everyday work of communities. We share a strong belief that engaging student voices is crucial to honoring our reciprocal relationships with them as co-learners and collaborators in the ongoing discovery and understanding of leadership development and growth in context (Felten et al., 2013). Each cohort of early childhood professionals since 2007 has shaped our ECLP content, course design, learning experiences, and ongoing inquiry into leadership development. In the last two years, we have come to embrace this fact as the generative core of our own study of early childhood leadership learning and teaching and as the heart of this program immersed in and responsive to the context of the field.

In May 2018, as we enrolled a 12th cohort of early childhood professionals, the authors of this article became the core faculty to consistently engage throughout the entire program to align with an emerging contemporary conception of leadership development. Our process of study shared in this paper was guided by the overarching questions: How does the pedagogy of this ECLP bring to life leadership learning for individuals and for the collective? In what ways are the leadership learning design principles evident in the early childhood professionals learning processes and in their practice? In response to these questions and in the context of the 2019-2020 program year, we will describe our paradigm of learning and teaching and the pedagogical practices that inform the ECLP. Then we will describe our program study approach and findings around the program's emerging leadership learning design principles and enriching processes and conclude with a discussion of evolving understandings and hopes for the future.

## **Critical and Dialogic Pedagogical and Curricular Foundations**

With our own lived experiences, we entered this dialogic process with both a critical and action orientation as “True praxis can never be merely cerebral. It must involve action. Nor can it be limited to mere activism. It must include serious reflection” (Crotty, 1998, p. 151). As three white women, we were committed to creating an inclusive space and to sharing power with the early childhood professionals with an openness to what we could co-create together. Postmodernist and critical perspectives are tied together for us in a fundamental idea best articulated by Paulo Freire when he described how knowledge is generated when we engage reciprocally in “an act of creation” through dialogue (Freire, 2015, p. 89). Freire inspired generations of scholars, teachers, and learners to explore the liberatory potential of dialogue continually evolving through a robust global conversation of critical pedagogy research and practice (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). As educators ourselves, we are continually drawn back to how to “teach new worlds through new words” and embrace a “critical pedagogy that seeks to transform consciousness, to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully” (hooks, 1994, p.167) as we engage in forms of dialogue and a pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2006) that disrupt, expand, deepen, and transform our relationships with ourselves and the world.

Morris & Stommel (2018) provocatively state that “Critical Pedagogy is concerned less with knowing and more with a voracious not-knowing. It is an ongoing and recursive process of discovery” (Morris & Stommel, 2018). Our sense of a critically informed pedagogical process within our context invites active engagement to both learn and unlearn with cohort members through intentional dialogue and the introduction of multiple modalities for the representation of learning. Invitations for small group learning are frequently embedded inside most learning experiences, either in person or asynchronously, through online discussions. These inclusive pedagogies surface the incredible capacity the cohort has for teaching each other and offer intimate spaces that promote deep listening. This type of listening promotes self-awareness through recognition of each group member’s own body signals, choice of words, and subconscious paradigms about the world with the hope of suspending these. Through this act of letting go, group members generate a collective space for co-sensing and co-creating with one another, growing relationships as the cohort threads through experiences. The variety of perspectives included is what makes the cohort a generative source for learning.

Rooted in our shared paradigm of critical pedagogy, the ECLP curriculum aligns best with the sentiments of Dugan’s (2017) description of Strategic Social Change Leadership (Ospina et al., 2012) where we go beyond individual achievements and productivity by reframing discourse, promoting a “greater sense of interdependence” (Ospina, et al., 2012, p. 303), building bridges and unleashing human energies through transformational learning and community-based action. Across the many experiences during the program year, we embed opportunities for early childhood professionals to learn through their own experiences as individuals, in group dialogue, and within their own communities to transform and apply theory in ways that build leadership capacity to make a meaningful difference with young children and families. We design inclusive learning environments where the materials and teaching strategies deliberately reflect the diversity of contributions of the field and the range of identities of early childhood professionals. As learners co-construct shared meaning by bringing their background, knowledge, feelings, hopes, and perspectives to one another, we embrace the power of collaboration and dialogic practices to create engaging and meaningful learning experiences with the hope that early childhood professionals can bring the same to their own diverse communities of practice.

The current sequence of six courses (see Figure 1) evolves with a unique focus within each and across all three semesters through an iterative process for the individuals and the collective. The program journey begins by looking inward as a leader (Leading Within), then toward understanding leading

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inclusively within organizations and communities dynamically in relationship with children and families (Leading with Others), and culminating by coming into leadership action across communities and systems through co-researching, co-creating, and expanding relationships in new ways including across broader political and advocacy spaces (Leading Across).

Figure 1 The ECLP Curriculum Framework and Course Flow



This journey emerges gradually as early childhood professionals engage in multiple learning experiences where they examine their own and others' lived experiences and they realize their potential to co-create positive change. In the "Leading Within" semester, they examine their personal identities, values, leadership theories, and practices toward equitable and inclusive early childhood environments. In the "Leading with Others" semester, they apply appreciative and inclusive leadership practices with children, families, and colleagues to deepen awareness and understanding of the dynamic ecologies where children and adults live and learn. And finally, when "Leading Across," they engage across multiple pathways for deepening understandings around the contextually relevant and complex early childhood issues and opportunities to foster participatory collective action.

### *Leadership Learning Design Principles: A Literature Review*

As part of our ongoing and recent evolution as program faculty, four leadership learning design principles (LLDP) emerged, illuminating our own shared philosophical roots, theories of interest, and priorities in our practice with others. These design principles are not meant to be a framework but rather a way of making visible what we were learning to be most reflective on and to be touchpoints for our sense of dialogic pedagogy across the year. We are acutely aware of the multiple layers of dialogue that continue to shape and inform our practice, including the dialogue shared in this paper, as we learned alongside this group of early childhood professionals. The purpose of this focused literature review is to surface another layer of dialogue prompted by paradigms, concepts, and voices that have shaped our decisions over time as faculty regarding how we go about the work of designing learning experiences.

We represent these emerging LLDPs in a table and narrative form. Table 1 describes the LLDPs and lists the primary citations to literature and source material informing our understanding of them and their influence on our pedagogy. We recognize the potentially disparate quality of the table and encourage

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the reader to see beyond the boundaries portrayed by the table lines to see how the LLDPs integrate and dynamically interact across and beyond the program year in a holistic way. The review below Table 1 connects the LLDP descriptions to the philosophical and practitioner voices themselves included in our citations.

**Table 1**

### *Leadership Learning Design Principles and Citations*

Leadership Learning Design Principles	Citations (see References for full citation)
<i>Identity and Agency</i> are grounded in a liberatory approach to leadership learning that operates from the premise that change begins with an exploration of the core of what people believe about themselves, their personal identities, and their experience of authenticity and agency within their lives.	Harro, B. (2018) Johnson, A. (2018) <a href="#">NAEYC Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education</a> (2019) Ospina, S. M. & Foldy, E. (2009) Wilson, P. (2019)
<i>Socially Constructed Pedagogy</i> centers its practice on community and collaboration; remains open to diverse voices, and thus requires reimagining the ways that communication and collaboration happen across boundaries and spaces; and generates platforms for reciprocally engaging people as full agents of their own learning.	Dugan, J. (2017) <a href="#">Digital Pedagogy Lab</a> at CU Denver Martins, P.P.S., & Arantes, M. (2019) <a href="#">Relational Research Network, The Taos Institute</a> Rogoff, B. (2003) Shah & Rashid (2017) Vygotsky, L. (1978) Wood, L. (2020)
<i>Contextually Relevant Learning Experience</i> is based on a constructivist theory of teaching and learning. Learning takes place when faculty design learning in such a way that learners can construct meaning based on their own experiences and apply their learning in context.	Bloch, M.N., Swadener, B.B., & Cannella, G.S. (2018) Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) Dewey, J. (1938) Harvard University's <a href="#">Project Zero</a> Lambert, L. et al. (2002) Long, S., Souto-Manning M., & Vasquez, V.M. (2016) National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (2018) <a href="#">How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts and Cultures</a> Moss, P. (2019) Vecchi, V. (2010)
<i>Appreciative Stance</i> is grounded in practices that engage individuals, teams and organizations through positive inquiry and dialogue that promotes leadership as a life-long commitment to values, vision and connection to others locally and globally. The potential in oneself and one's work in community is illuminated as problems are flipped to opportunities and human energy is unleashed.	González, N., Moll, L. & Amanti, C. (2009) Nxumalo, F. & Brown, C.P. (2020) Whitney, D. & Trosten-Bloom, A. (2010) Whitney, D., Trosten-Bloom, A, & Rader, K. (2010) Wheatley M. & Frieze, D. (2011)

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**Identity and Agency.** The early childhood professionals who participate in the ECLP are seeking ways to catalyze change in their communities, specifically around how to promote equitable learning opportunities enabling all young children to thrive as valued members of society. The National Association for the Education of Young Children released a position statement on *Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education* (2019), offering a comprehensive set of recommendations for practices and policies that begins first by acknowledging “that [while] both institutional and interpersonal systems must change, our recommendations begin with a focus on individual reflection” (NAEYC, 2019, p. 5). We come into our leadership potential through the intersections of our identities, including gender, race, sexual orientation, disability status, and social class, and through these identities, others are invited into the ways where our position and power can have significance (Johnson, 2018). As Harro describes in *The Cycle of Liberation*, learning that invites waking up through introspection to how we experience the world allows one to consciously dismantle forms of oppression from within to see liberatory perspectives and possibilities (Harro, 2018, p. 629). Likewise, Ospina and Foldy (2009), in their review of leadership studies, reveal a “gradual convergence of theories of leadership and theories of race–ethnicity as their relational dimensions are increasingly emphasized” (Ospina & Foldy, 2009, p. 877). Regardless of the layer of work on social change one is seeking to transform, from classroom communities to policy systems, staying attuned with an inner awareness of one’s own identity and agency in relationship with others is fundamental to all processes of learning and leading (Wilson, 2019).

**Socially Constructed Pedagogy.** As early childhood professionals ourselves, our sense of human development is grounded in the seminal work of Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist best known for his sociocultural theory. Vygotsky’s theory (1978) asserts that social interaction plays a critical role in child development and that children experience a continuous process of learning where language is the root of culture and where individuals learn and develop within their community. The Vygotskian theory extends for us embracing adult learning and development. It forms the theoretical base of what, for us, has become a strongly rooted socially constructed pedagogy of teaching and learning. We view learning as informed by participating in community and individual and collective meaning as made from the various cultural perspectives of the learners (Rogoff, 2003). Vygotsky’s influence on adult learning and higher education provides a way to explain how adult learners construct experience within a social-cultural framework as they make meaning through interactions and communications with others, including those who hold varying levels of lived experience and expertise. Shah and Rashid (2017) review Vygotsky’s core concepts and how they inform our understanding of adult learning and describe how the concepts of the “zone of proximal development” and “scaffolding” apply to adult learning contexts and processes.

Participatory forms of social change research reinforce our commitment to practices of socially constructed pedagogy by demonstrating how democratic processes are generated when we engage with collaborative processes of discovery (Wood, 2020). We find ourselves as teachers and researchers continually integrating the intentions, influences, and possibilities of socially constructed forms of pedagogy, for example, by listening to the stories of others through the [Relational Research Network of the Taos Institute](#) and at the [Digital Pedagogy Lab](#), inviting us to be in full collaboration with the early childhood professionals along the way. And in extension, our understanding and sense of teaching, learning (Martins & Arantes, 2019), and leadership are also continually being shaped as we critically think about and reflect on the diverse perspectives and stories of leading for social change in context (Dugan, 2017).

**Contextually Relevant Learning Experience.** Our experience of learning and teaching has been equally shaped by the foundational concept of experience and education famously explored by John Dewey (1938) and iterated upon in theory and practice by many others (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Given our shared commitment to young children, we find all learning to be nested



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within complex webs of relationships and dynamically interacting systems seminally characterized by Bronfenbrenner's *Ecology of Human Development* (1979). Together it is both our experiences and our relationships inside complex cultural environments that actively shape and construct our sense of knowing, thus situating our sense of leadership within meaningful contexts (Lambert et al., 2002).

Furthermore, context and culture have changed tremendously since the early twentieth century when the elements of the U.S. education and social systems were first rooted. As educators, we find ourselves called to responsively and courageously create new educational and social structures that align with the experiences of young children and families today. There are many voices currently involved in reconceptualizing early childhood nurturing the exciting work of constructing contemporary and life-giving stories of who we are as early childhood teachers, learners, and leaders (Bloch, Swadener, & Cannella, 2018; Long, Souto-Manning, & Vasquez, 2016; Moss, 2019). With similar responsiveness and enthusiasm, we seek to design contextually relevant experiences that invite learners to construct meaning through a variety of modalities or forms of expression, such as those experienced through the visual and graphic languages known as the "100 languages" in the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy (Vecchi, 2010) and [Harvard's Project Zero](#).

**Appreciative Stance.** As faculty, we are bonded by a deep respect for the capacity of all people to create and positively contribute to a changing world. Significantly influenced early on by the funds of knowledge held by young children and families (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2009), we believe "people are competent" (González et al., 2009, p. ix) and are the assets from which community change blossoms. By extension, together with early childhood professionals, we find the pervasive language in the early childhood field around the gaps, deficits, and risks pertaining to children to be misaligned with the abundantly rewarding and highly relational experience of working with young children and families (Nxumalo & Brown, 2020). As such, we are drawn to forms of learning with communities that intentionally choose to see the positive potential of all people exemplified in the last few decades through appreciative inquiry and leadership practices (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010; Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, & Rader, 2010). Inclusive and equitable leadership "relies on the fact that people want to be engaged, that they want to learn and contribute to their community" (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011, p. 225).

In summary, we strive to recognize whole people connecting across boundaries within themselves and in communities. We invite agency through the intersectional and diverse identities of the early childhood professionals in our field. We design and facilitate inclusive spaces through dialogue and socially constructed, multi-modal pedagogy. We open and invite learning experiences to adapt and evolve in response to contexts, culture, and diverse forms of expression, and we remain committed to processes that surface potential and reinforce the life-giving nature of people and places and disrupt deficit views of young children and families.

## Methods

### *Participants*

In the 2019-2020 academic year, 18 early childhood professionals enrolled in the ECLP. All identified as women and collectively represented a culturally and linguistically diverse cohort, with 33% identifying ethnically as Latina, Native, or of Indian origins. In total, this cohort was composed of committed early childhood professionals who engaged in an individual and collective leadership journey while being employed in a variety of professional roles in relationship with their communities of practice. This cohort began their year in May 2019 and finished in June 2020. As with learners worldwide, this group was deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, we adapted the curriculum and shared learning to respond to



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local, national, and global dynamics as the pandemic required shutdowns of their school districts and organizations. The early childhood professionals began to work with children, families, and colleagues exclusively through remote platforms. It was a time for faculty and students to significantly reimagine our collaborative practices. Honoring the early childhood professionals and their communities and recognizing that lives were being disrupted and lost, we were deeply grateful to the early childhood professionals for their unwavering commitment to their learning journeys as all 18 remained fully engaged.

### *Study Design and Data Generation*

As faculty, we worked with our partners to intentionally shift away from the decade-long approach of external evaluation focused on program impact to a more participatory action research approach grounded in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Through more frequent moments of reflection, we sought to understand what is at the heart of learning during the program year, how learning was applied in context, and, most importantly, being in dialogue with the early childhood professionals to hear their powerful stories of change. As we listened in our faculty roles, we engaged in ongoing reflection on our teaching practices, adjusting and adapting along the way to co-construct responsive learning environments and experiences for individual students while promoting optimum growth for the group as a collective. We examined the early childhood professional's reflective writing and had many conversations with individual students about their learning experiences. These conversations inspired us to dig deeper into the LLDPs that were coming to life for us as provocations for co-inquiry.

Inspired by the ethical approach of *Participatory Action Learning and Action Research* (Wood, 2020), we sought open communication, critical reflection on self and process throughout the study, and a balance of both engaged relationships and research activities centered around shared research commitments and goals. Additionally, we actively documented our steps, engaged in frequent dialogue with each other throughout the process, and transparently communicated with the early childhood professionals our intent of learning from our teaching through a series of surveys and participatory approaches of making meaning of the expressions together.

**LLDP Surveys.** At the end of each semester, the 18 early childhood professionals were sent a set of open-ended survey questions designed to gather insights and perspectives from each person regarding their learning experiences and the variety of ways the LLDPs were present for them on their learning journeys. For example, individuals were asked to reflect on the following at the conclusion of each semester, "An example of how the program supported me in exploring and trying new leadership practices is..." Although names were not requested in the survey, responses were not always anonymous since the nature of the questions invited identifiable roles and context-specific details.

Like the data analysis spiral depicted by Creswell (2007), the how of the data examination process was iterative through cycles of data generation, interpretation through theming or clustering, and shared meaning-making through faculty dialogue, reflection, representation, and visualization. We engaged individually with separate sets of survey question responses to identify initial themes for each LLDP across the three sets of surveys and then collaboratively explored the themes that emerged across and within each semester.

**Initial LLDP Enriching Process.** Finally, we facilitated a relational and participatory meaning-making process among small groups of early childhood professionals. Across two phases of dialogue, the groups generated additional interpretation and insight and enriched our impressions of their leadership learning experiences expressed through the LLDPs. It is in this evolving dialogic approach of first organizing

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the survey data into the LLDP tables followed by two meaning-making sessions with the program participants that our understanding deepened.

The first meaning-making session involved a semi-structured approach to the dialogue in which a small group of program participants reviewed each LLDP separately. We invited the group to comment on how we interpreted their own survey response data into summarizing definitions of each LLDP across each phase of the learning journey. After sending the emerging LLDP definitions and organized quotes from the surveys ahead of time, we gathered virtually. We asked the group to examine each LLDP through a series of questions “How do these short descriptions sound to you? How do the words resonate? What other words might you use? And what meaning is emerging for you from the data that is not already visible in these summaries?” To surface their observations and experiences around these questions, we structured the dialogue with 5 minutes to read and individually comment on a single LLDP, 15 minutes of dialogue, followed by 10 minutes to critically enhance the definitions we were using for that LLDP by making edits and comments on a shared document.

As we will describe in a different section, we engaged in a second phase of dialogue with a different small group of program participants. To create an authentic feeling for the reader of how this process unfolded for us in surprising ways, our process for the second phase of dialogue and the quotes and themes that emerged will be described later in the paper. In the final section of this paper, we will share how this collaborative-dialogic process is nurturing in us a deeper sense of learning and leading within and across the early childhood landscape.

### Professionals’ Expressions and Enriched Impressions of the Leadership Learning Design Principles

The 18 early childhood professionals’ expressions around the LLDPs, described in the section above, are organized in a series of tables. Each table, corresponding to one LLDP, represents written responses from each semester/phase of the program in the left-hand column. On the right are our enriched impressions through dialogue with the first group of five early childhood professionals a few months after the program's conclusion. The words and phrases found on the right of the table are representative of a collective synthesis combining both the words and comments program participants verbalized or directly wrote on a shared document during our dialogue with our own summarized understandings. Our intent in sharing the tables in this way is to preserve the integrity of the words shared across the year by the early childhood professionals and also to capture the evolving quality of our understanding of the LLDPs as enriched by the members of the cohort.

#### *Initial Thoughts Expressed: First Set of Dialogic Impressions*

**Identity & Agency.** Early childhood professionals were asked to reflect on how their learning during the program helped them understand themselves as people and professionals. They were asked to share an example(s) of how their identity was reflected (or not reflected) in their learning experiences and how they had agency (or not) as a learner throughout the program. In this sense, we defined agency as feeling effective and having ownership of one’s learning experience.

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**Table 2**

*Identity and Agency through Leading Within, Leading with Others, and Leading Across*

EC professionals' thoughts expressed on surveys	Enriched impressions through dialogue
<p><i>Leading Within Summer Courses</i></p> <p>I started to understand the weighty responsibility of leadership to pursue equity, accessibility, and opportunity for all, and reflected on my role in those situations.</p> <p>I am more aware how my privileges and bias affect me and how it has shaped me.</p> <p>I will continue to grow, evolve, change, be challenged and therefore always keep my mind active as a constructivist learner who can engage authentically in these conversations for the rest [of the program] and afterwards in my work.</p> <p>It's OK to be unsure and shaky in concepts new to me and if I am open to the learning process, I will gain confidence and strength as a leader.</p>	<p>It's OK to be unsure and shaky in concepts new to me and if I am open to the learning process, I will gain confidence and strength as a leader.</p> <p>EC professionals expressed an early self-awareness around their privilege, strengths, and areas for growth, what there is to potentially let go of and possible shifts to make as they were moving toward leading as equity-minded professionals. A deeper understanding of leadership as an ongoing learning process emerged, as well as an awareness that uncertainty fuels learning, and that inquiry and reflection are helpful processes for their leading and learning journeys.</p>
<p><i>Leading with Others Fall Courses</i></p> <p>Conversations that I may not have previously engaged in, I now have the confidence to facilitate meaningful conversations to move forward...and create new ideas and learn new perspectives.</p> <p>One of the biggest learnings for me is that we must not shut down if others have differing perspectives or opinions. This semester taught me 'third spaces' are truly possible. Collaboration can be fostered even when there are differences. It's holding all people in positive regard. This is much more challenging.</p> <p>Curiosity-listening, asking questions, inquiring, and really focusing on the things that I don't already know the answers to instead of depending on that which I already know has allowed me to get to know myself, my colleagues, and children and families in ways I didn't before.</p>	<p>EC professionals enhanced their work as inclusive and appreciative leaders who invite dialogue and shared learning. They articulated new-found confidence and experienced changes in themselves, with many examples of appreciative leadership practices. Most notable is how they invited and led inclusive conversation through inquiry (asking questions instead of giving answers) and engaged others in the learning process. There was a knowing and welcoming that, "I can't do this alone".</p>

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*Leading Across Spring Courses*

This program has confirmed for me the importance of self-reflection. We need to know how we operate as a human, and identify our biases and privileges if we truly want to advocate for social justice within early education and all systems.

That my impact can be a positive experience or negative depending on how I choose to show up, how I choose to ask questions, how I choose to engage in appreciative leadership, [and] how I choose to pause...

I now see myself and how I lead with others in a new light. One who inspires others to hear the voices of our children, one that offers support to families in an equitable way, one that encourages other early childhood professionals to look within to see their own leadership potential.

I am a leader who is willing to lead intentionally to ensure that I am including all.

A deepening of understanding of oneself (who I want to be as I lead) emerged as well as a sense of one's capacity to lead--that is from the position one holds and to influence change from that unique place in the field. Ensuring diversity of voices and engaging in equitable practices were seen as essential elements of identity and agency.

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**Socially constructed pedagogy.** Early childhood professionals were asked to reflect on the various ways they learned with others and the learning processes and pedagogies that were most meaningful to them. Reflections on the different tools/technologies, types of assignments, small group dialogue, and other course experiences were invited, and how these experiences of learning prepared them to contribute to a larger conversation in socially constructed ways.

**Table 3**

*Socially Constructed Pedagogy through Leading Within, Leading with Others, and Leading Across*

EC professionals' thoughts expressed on surveys

Enriched impressions through dialogue

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*Leading Within Summer Courses*

The active presence of the other cohort members during the learning experiences was an incredible opportunity to grow from one another and learn from others' experiences and perspectives.

...It was incredibly meaningful, yet challenging, to break out by people of color and white. It was an interesting opportunity and one I won't forget.

I enjoyed the [world cafe] technique to further breakdown and discuss the chapters we read in *Leadership Theories*. I feel like we sometimes have to talk further about ideas and theories in order to process and internalize what we are learning.

Active engagement to learn about and with other cohort members and participating in the experience of intentionally facilitated meaning-making dialogue was highlighted. Although not represented in the survey comments, when enriching, the group emphasized the power of multiple modalities (i.e., writing a 6- word memoir, manipulating loose parts, selecting representative music) and approaches to expressing and representing learning as central to dialogic pedagogy and to the surfacing of meaning. While enriching, the early childhood professionals described their desire to engage in a deeper process of sensing and listening to self and others that this moment offered them.

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The women in my cohort have shown me the strengths we each bring to the table from different perspectives and different roles in ECE, but also the commonality we all share: the desire to make this field stronger and to be agents of change. I've heard different perspectives, had my opinions supported and challenged, and learned from stories different from my own.

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### *Leading with Others Fall Courses*

I love when we are able to engage in small groups and I can listen to my cohort share all their beautiful work. I also enjoy the pattern of small group to large group...helps me to build more connections and understanding.

The small group work has been particularly supportive this semester...there is much capacity.

I am an introvert at heart and being around people drains me; however, I notice that as I meet with my peers more, I actually enjoy our time together. The small group discussions that we post [online] are also so rich. I notice that we engage more when we are in small group activities.

Small group learning continued to be key and meaningful to the learning experience during the fall courses. EC professionals named the importance of dialogue that occurred during intimate conversations and how it facilitated their understanding and growth. Incredible capacity was emerging for the cohort for teaching each other and learning from one another in small group processes and was seen as incredibly supportive. There was a sense at this point that the richness of the dialogue grew from the prior semester; "it was so rich because we had the opportunity to build this in the summer...in a bare your heart kind of way".

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### *Leading Across Spring Courses*

In-person meetings are absolutely irreplaceable. Any time we were able to come together to synthesize our learnings, we all left feeling smarter, richer in ideas, and more focused on our goals.

...Those moments are the glue [that] formed a different cohort with more stable and long-lasting connections.

Seeing the field from the perspective of an SLP who works with low-income families, home visiting providers who provide services in both English and Spanish, a child welfare advocate for the Indian Family Resource Center, and all the other unique roles filled by my peers helped me totally shift my paradigm of what early childhood IS as a field, and emboldened my commitments to equity, inclusion, and justice within the system.

Connecting with the women in my cohort was endlessly educational and valuable.

A critical aspect of what made the cohort a generative source for learning was the extended and evolving time together and the variety of perspectives included across identities, roles, and regions in the state. Being in and deepening relationships with each other as a cohort was a key aspect threading through many of the learning experiences cited as most meaningful including in-person learning, something that this group experienced and abruptly lost in March 2020 when the program moved to remote learning.

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**Contextually relevant experiences** Early childhood professionals were asked to reflect on their application of new leadership practices across the year and to describe how the program experiences

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supported exploration of leadership in context. They were also asked to share examples of how others in their context have recognized or noticed their leadership learning and growth.

**Table 4**

*Contextually Relevant Experiences through Leading Within, Leading with Others and Leading Across*

EC professionals' thoughts expressed through surveys	Enriched impressions through dialogue
<p><i>Leading Within Summer Courses</i></p> <p>I have practiced with my family. This has allowed conversations to deepen and more understanding to come from inquiry.</p> <p>Not only the actual course content itself, but also the modalities in which we practiced the content helped me to explore leadership practices.</p>	<p>Opportunities to practice intentionally and specifically with one another in many ways (i.e., role playing) produced new ways of thinking. Learning and leading were explored within close relationships including family members and cohort members within safe spaces. The fear of thinking that "I am the only one not grasping it" was dismantled when realizing that all members of the cohort are trying to understand what this means.</p>
<p><i>Leading with Others Fall Courses</i></p> <p>I have appreciated the assignments in these courses to not only read about the tools and skills for leading with others, but that the assignments pushed us into action.</p> <p>Because of what I've learned this Fall, I first had the confidence to request a spot on the search committee, and I've been able to be vocal in changing the interview questions to be more inquisitive and appreciative, challenging the status quo of how we've facilitated interviews, and being sure to weave in other voices into the process thanks to the skills I gained this semester.</p> <p>Having 'hard' conversations doesn't seem as daunting. My team is utilizing strategies and tools learned this semester to help us be stronger.</p> <p>The Fall experiences and literature have been very actionable. These classes have invited me to read and learn about tools to then explore in practice.</p>	<p>Fall courses offered multiple pathways of practice within individual and organizational contexts. The early childhood professionals described the experience of being "catapulted" into action and noticed a vulnerability in themselves as they brought the learning into their workplaces.</p>
<p><i>Leading Across Spring Courses</i></p> <p>I was able to eschew the 'path of least resistance' (and the things we were doing because 'that's how it's always been done') to create something that was responsive, unique, and brand new.</p> <p>I was noticing some inequities in my school. I went through the regular hierarchical ladder and got nowhere. I reached out to someone high in the district, which is completely unheard of in my school, and using appreciative</p>	<p>Many examples of leadership application were noted: descriptions of nuanced leadership learning practices in context, examples of changing and impacting larger systems and examples of specific recognition and positive feedback from colleagues, supervisors and organizations related to the leadership practices and growth of the early childhood professionals.</p>



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leadership, was able to illuminate the program without placing blame or even demanding a result. And I got a result within hours. It was remarkable.

From my supervisor's performance evaluation: 'She has increased input in staff and project meetings throughout the year and has voiced new perspectives, critiqued approach or viewpoints, and suggested solutions. She delivers information calmly, but increasingly shows the strength of her convictions and continues to approach challenges with a positive lens, even while vocalizing real concerns. This balance of exhibiting these values is such an asset to her as a professional, but also to the organization and the work.'

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**Appreciative Stance** Early childhood professionals were asked what potential they saw in themselves as they transitioned from the Summer to the Fall semester and again from the Fall to the Spring. At the conclusion of the program, they were asked about the potential they saw in their community and/or the work they have done with them or will do that they did not see before the program.

**Table 5**

*Appreciative Stance through Leading Within, Leading with Others and Leading Across*

EC professionals' thoughts expressed through surveys	Enriched impressions through dialogue
<i>Leading Within Summer Courses</i>	
I have been challenged, pushed to think deeper and further outside all of the boxes I previously operated from within and am ready to continue facing challenges head on.	Appreciating one's potential surfaced as early childhood professionals described their emerging clarity around what leadership is and what type of leader they would like to continue to learn to be, as well as a growing understanding and confidence in themselves. The semester surfaced an understanding of their identities and developed an equity-mindedness. Knowing oneself better invited shifts in how they might show up for themselves and for others.
I have the potential to slow down and be a more intentional listener.	
My ability to listen, observe, self-reflect and then share.	
I see myself as more confident in talking to others about my values and beliefs.	
I've heard different perspectives, had my opinions supported and challenged, and learned from stories different from my own. Also of note was a developing awareness that equity systems begin with self-reflection and reflection and getting comfortable with being uncomfortable.	

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### *Leading with Others Fall Courses*

Being able to have conversations with others with different perspectives without coming from a place of judgement and truly exploring alternative narratives. Now that I have no reason to feed my ego, I have realized there is much to be learned from others.

Co-creating is an outstanding process that leads to great outcomes. That I don't need to have an idea of the process [in advance] because it works best when we create the process as we go.

Appreciate all those who are a part of my work, apply meaning to my work, share responsibilities, let go, presence, apply my personal pedagogy to my current work and invite others to be a part of the journey, build relationships, involve families, listen, learn, reflect and co-create.

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Early childhood professionals articulated their appreciation for their learning and a strong desire to continue to build their capacity that was becoming even more evident to them; a confidence was emerging. Their capacity for generative dialogue and shared learning with others around issues and opportunities for the field expanded. This appreciation for the learning of the fall offered a sense of anticipation to move into more expansive dialogue within and across systems in the spring.

### *Leading Across Spring Courses*

I know that my community is uniquely positioned to be active forces of change. I see the potential to change, to challenge, and grow in a way I never did before.

I now see my program and community I work within as innovative and forward-thinking. Before the program, I did not see the potential for growth in impacting my diverse community. Now after collaborating with community partners, I have found numerous resources to support all families with young children. Looking past my small circle and working together supported me in my vision of making my community a more equitable place to live.

We have a great opportunity to elevate all voices: children, families, educators and other members of the community. When this is accomplished and all perspectives are valued and accounted for, we can make positive change happen for the good of the whole community.

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The final semester revealed to the early childhood professionals the enormous potential of their communities as co-leaders and learners with them as they now realized and embraced previously unknown appreciation for and confidence in members of the community. As community potential was revealed to them, they also recognized they have the opportunity to actively value, invite and elevate the voices of children, families and colleagues in shared efforts to grow their communities. They noticed a tone and feeling in these comments that was calming after the vulnerability of the summer and the confidence/push in the fall.

### *Threads Across the Program Year: A Second Set of Enriched Impressions*

As we engaged in dialogue as faculty following the first enriching session, we sensed that although enhancing our understanding, perhaps by our focusing on the LLDPs in a delineated fashion, we were missing an opportunity to see layers of the unfolding story across the year. And importantly, we realized that although all members of the cohort were invited, the first dialogues happened to occur only with a small group of white women. We wanted to ensure our impressions were enriched by the perspectives of those who experienced the program from racial and ethnic identities other than white. Thus, we invited a second group of early childhood professionals of color from the cohort to share their stories from the year as inspired by the LLDPs.

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As a result of inviting holistic responses and storytelling around each phase of the program, this second dialogue resulted in fewer edits and comments directly on a shared document and instead was an opportunity for us to listen deeply to statements like “I feel like the Leading Across semester really opened my eyes to the possibilities of how one single voice can make such a ripple effect outward.” Another participant built on that idea by saying, “I’m echoing a little bit of what she said is something for me is to be open to possibilities, like you said, when talking to the community...it’s so exciting to talk to them about how your voice is important.” Through an emergent approach to dialogue and then by studying a transcript of the dialogue recording, this group of seven further gifted us with powerful insights, collectively enhancing our understanding of additional layers of meaning that surfaced through the intentional practice of the LLDPs.

Specifically, the group surfaced four ways our pedagogy and leadership learning design principles were experienced across this unique program year, namely by (1) creating learning spaces that allowed for vulnerability and openness, (2) beginning by breaking down barriers within themselves to be able to challenge the status quo, (3) exploring together how to co-create processes with others and share power, and (4) simply how to listen.

First, it was expressed right away that they were welcomed into a space of shared *vulnerability and openness* to take risks with each other in a non-judgmental and supportive environment. As one early childhood professional articulated,

During the circle experience in the summer with the artifact, I was really impressed by the vulnerability. I was the last one to go, and I had so many experiences of feeling connected...we started clean and raw with one another so that we were able to try new things as leaders and trust the process.

This feeling of safety and trust within the group allowed each person to engage through their authentic self, through their intersecting identities, and to keep trying new things throughout the program year. If they failed, it was okay, they had the “[cohort] cushion that I knew I could fall back on.” And ultimately, the unique and consistently safe space of the cohort “helped bring everyone’s strengths in...which I thought was also really beautiful.” During a moment in the dialogue, one early childhood professional expressed how the experiences they had together encouraged them to first *break down barriers* within themselves so that they could then see ways to challenge systems and change the status quo together. “...it was almost like we gave each other permission to not have to do things in the way that we were taught to be...Instead, we could really forge our own paths and include everybody.”

As the conversation deepened, there was a sense of synergy in how the experiences emerging from LLDPs were shaping the conditions for the cohort’s learning and invited the application of practices into their own context. In other words, as they engaged with each other in unhurried dialogue and asked more appreciative questions of each other within the cohort, they began seeing opportunities in the community to include voices in similar ways. The group began to share their insights about how to *co-create processes with others and share power*. “...you’re not coming in as the expert, that you’re really honoring that community and collective wisdom that exists and being able to uplift that. I think that was a really, really big learning and just moving away from the transactional way of doing things...” Ultimately, for one person, this meant understanding that fundamentally leading is all about relational processes of sharing power.

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This changed my perspective because I always think of leading across, leading with those who were above me, but really leading across as leading with everyone. So, it's leading with bringing in children and families and the community to really illuminate everyone's voice, is leading across for me.

This inclusive stance opened pathways for the early childhood professionals to be responsive to each other and their communities when the COVID-19 pandemic began, and both their personal and professional lives shifted significantly as a result. While this group shared a sense of grief of not being able to experience a more typical end to their year of learning together, they also expressed a sense of privilege of having this community with which they could experience the changes and continue the leadership learning they started together in even more important ways. As one person commented, "I don't need to have an idea of the process because it works best when we can create the process as we go."

A key practice that, surprisingly to the group, was not as visible in the original survey reflections was *listening*. Across the program and through the many ways the cohort was invited to engage with each other and their community, the importance of listening was continuously reinforced and experienced. One early childhood professional described how her stance has shifted from walking in with "an agenda" to walking in open to listening to what is possible at the moment.

And I walk in now thinking...I'm going to be, I'm not going to have an idea of what's going to happen. I did my practice during the whole year in [the program]. And it was very helpful because it taught me the importance of listening, something that I felt I was doing, and then I realized I really needed a lot of work on that. So, I really do think that throughout the whole process, I did practice my ability to stop, to slow down, and to listen to others.

This experience of listening to the stories of learning through this small group dialogue with women of color opened our hearts and minds and offered us something we would have missed if we had not taken this approach. The value we place on the enriching experience is mirrored in the words of one of the early childhood professionals who shared,

Thank you for thinking of us and including us, because I think you're basically living out your actions through the values you're stating and modeling that for us too. You could have just said, yeah, we have that process, and we did get feedback, and that could have been the end of that. And you could have just pushed forward, but you didn't, and you opted for spending more time and ensuring those voices that weren't there missing were included and showing that and modeling it for us. So, a big thank you for that.

While generating this second set of enriched impressions concluded our data-gathering and meaning-making process, it certainly started more dialogue among the three of us as a faculty team. We have been inspired by this study to continue to deepen our understanding of our own pedagogy and the potential the LLDPs has for our future practice as lead learners and early childhood professionals.

### Evolving Understandings of Our Pedagogy

In a holistic review of the shared expressions and impressions across all four LLDPs, one sees a process of learning as it unfolds for the early childhood professionals. It begins with a foundational awareness of their unique identities and agency as learners. Then they experience practices of deeper listening culminating in a new understanding of how their leadership contributes to and operates from the dynamic system of the early childhood landscape. The early childhood professionals were engaged in a process that started with seeing potential in themselves as leaders. They gradually began inviting others.

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Ultimately, a desire was sparked to continue engaging with their communities to do the hard and important work of inclusive and equitable early childhood leadership. As we, the faculty, continued through the cycles of dialogue together with the members of the cohort, we were reminded of how transformational learning experiences are not easily sliced into phases of learning or into discrete design principles. Rather, through our conversations together, we were reminded of the unique storylines that emerged from this group of women, the twists, and turns of being in a relationship with each other as we together navigated and influenced a changing world. Concurrently, we also found great value in being able to articulate our pedagogy and deepen our understanding of the LLDPs. Looking at our practices of teaching and learning through this dialogic lens allowed us to explain our “why” in addition to our “how.”

To us, this study has uncovered the iterative flow of the courses, as well as an alignment across courses within each phase of the program, offering many opportunities for learning and practice that deepens across the year within the cohort and within each member’s context. The cohort structure continues to be essential for socially constructed learning. The increasing diversity of cohort members provides a space to learn across cultural, linguistic, and racial identities and across roles in the early childhood landscape. The values early childhood professionals hold and what they learn through the experiences, challenges, opportunities, and voices that each member of the cohort brings teach one another about leading within and across our state’s diverse contexts where children and families live and learn.

Self-awareness and awareness of the positive potential of co-creating with others is a consistent theme through all three phases of the program. Additionally, the application becomes more apparent and contextually relevant as early childhood professionals move through the program. There appears to be reciprocity between the ongoing deep work of self-awareness and the application of learning as the early childhood professionals try things out, reflect, share with others, and build confidence in their capacity to lead and return to the field to practice again. These cycles of learning, integrated practice, reflection, and dialogue hold great potential for early childhood professionals as they enter the deeper work of inclusive social change leadership and stay grounded in their own authentic selves.

### **Reflections on our Relational Inquiry Process and Hopes for the Future**

Contemporary research and inquiry within leadership calls for new understandings of how liberating and equity-seeking processes operate within individuals and groups to promote generative learning and transformation across systems. The process of this study, extending well beyond the conclusion of the program year for this group, in some ways, has been our attempt to keep the community that was built alive in our minds and hearts. As one early childhood professional shared at the end of our last dialogue, “the community is important and it’s not that [the program] started and ended. I think when it ended something different started, it was just the beginning of something new and I think that’s a reminder for us, too, in our jobs or whatever we do that is not just one thing. You continue building that community and that’s what you’re doing right now. You continue building that.”

Learning becomes a relational inquiry process with an openness to multiple possible realities and futures. With an appreciation of diverse perspectives and knowledge generation around leadership and the early childhood issues uniquely experienced during this time, we’ve deepened our commitment to how interrelated our own leadership story is with the stories of our students (McNamee & Hosking, 2012). Participatory action learning action research offered us, as co-learners on a shared learning journey, many moments of joy and, as articulated by Lenette et al. (2019), many complexities. This way of engaging in scholarly work, particularly the study of our own teaching, became a process of self-reflection, open dialogue, and gradual release of our role in shaping the path of the story. The early childhood professionals

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with whom we have the honor of engaging are the story holders and storytellers. Our role, still evolving, has shifted and will continue to shift as we are learning the flow and the rhythm of walking alongside, how and when to slow down and drop back and when to re-join and re-engage.

Deeply inspired by dialogic social inquiry (DeFehr, Infante & Valladares, 2021), we now see our research process as participant-driven. We whole-heartedly embrace this discussion of research outcomes,

Taking a social constructivist stance, we could also suggest that research outcomes can include more than the production of propositional knowledge. An outcome could be a change in attitude, a relational shift, a new possibility, a course of action, a distinct way of understanding something, an emerging set of new questions, and even the clouding of something that was unjustifiably clear and certain (DeFehr et al., 2021, p. 69).

The language expressed by the early childhood professionals and the meaning they made of their learning experiences shaped our understanding of their unique journey. Perhaps an even greater gift to us is the light illuminating our path of co-learning with new individuals and groups each year. Our teaching, our research, our leading, and our learning are forever changed by this dialogic and socially constructed moment in our shared journey.

The ensuing contribution of this research effort calls forward new questions about the nature and potential of co-inquiry within communities. In 2013, Felten et al. articulated a call for expanding inclusive student engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), a vision not yet fully realized in higher education's pedagogy or curriculum design. "Intentionally broadening the range of student voices in SoTL will enable us to ask additional and different questions and to pursue new lines of inquiry and dissemination" (Felten et al., 2013, p. 69). And now we ask, what is next for us in our inclusive practices? How will we be in dialogue with each new group of early childhood professionals? What will we learn from them?

### Final Words

It is important for us to say that the value of dialogic social processes is demonstrated through the actions that are taken to benefit the community of people directly engaged in the focus of the inquiry, in this case, early childhood professionals leading in context. Therefore, our hope is that the knowledge generated in this co-inquiry process will ripple out to shape new stories of leadership learning in our own pedagogical practices and in the practices of the early childhood professionals within their communities. As Arthur Frank noted, "Stories have the capacity to arouse people's imaginations; they make the unseen not only visible but compelling" (Frank, 2010, p. 41). We believe there are many compelling stories of what leadership looks like in development and in practice that may be currently unseen. By making those stories visible from our own practice, we hope to contribute to the evolving narrative of a complex and nuanced set of processes that is leadership within the contexts of working with young children and their families today and in the future.

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