
Domain Leads



Nell Duke
Co-Director,
Infant – Grade 2;
Literacy Lead

Nell K. Duke, EdD, is executive director of the Center for Early Literacy Success at Stand for Children and a professor in Literacy, Language, and Culture and also in the Combined Program in Education and Psychology at the University of Michigan. Duke's work focuses on early literacy development, particularly among children living in poverty. She has served as Co-Principal Investigator of projects funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, the National Science Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the George Lucas Educational Foundation, among other organizations. Duke has been named one of the most influential education scholars in the U.S. in EdWeek. She has received many awards for her work including, in 2018, the International Literacy Association's William S. Gray Citation of Merit for outstanding contributions to research, theory, practice, and policy. Among other roles, she serves as an advisor for the Public Broadcasting Service/Corporation for Public Broadcasting Ready to Learn initiative. Her Twitter handle is @nellkduke.



Marisha Humphries
Co-Director, Pre-K;
Social & Emotional
Learning Lead

Marisha L. Humphries, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor and licensed clinical psychologist who engages in developmental and prevention science research that takes an integrated approach to studying African-American children's normative and prosocial development. Specifically, her work examines African-American children's emotional and social competence, and the ways in which schools can support this development by facilitating an equitable learning environment. Given Dr. Humphries' interest and experience in applied research, she engages in work that has contributed to the development of culturally relevant classroom observation tools along with training and support for pre-service teachers and principals. She has also engaged with university faculty to facilitate their learning regarding the connection between social and emotional competence, diversity, and learning in university rooms. Her research has been published in *Early Education & Development*, *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, *Children & Schools*, and the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.



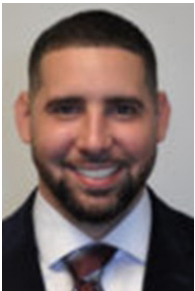
Claire Vallotton
Co-Director,
Infant through Age 3;
Social & Emotional
Learning Lead

Claire D. Vallotton, Ph.D., is Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Michigan State University. Her research, teaching, and service focus on the development and well-being of young children in the context of relationships with their families, educators, and communities. Claire uses her research to improve the quality of training for the early child care and education workforce, and to provide families with effective tools to support their children's development. Claire is passionate about high quality teaching, and leads the Collaborative for Understanding the Pedagogy of Infant/toddler Development (CUPID), a group of 60 scholars across universities that aims to better prepare the infant/toddler workforce and works toward social justice in infant/toddler education. She is the lead author of a book on comprehensive competencies for infant/toddler educators, published by RedLeaf Press. Her work has been honored the Ruth L. Kirschstein Clinical Research Service Award, the National Institutes of Health Clinical Research Fellowship, the New Investigator Award from the World Association of Infant Mental Health, and she was named an Exceptional Emerging Leader in child care research by Child Care Exchange. Her twitter handle is @CDVallotton



Andres Bustamante
Science &
Engineering Lead

Andres Bustamante is an Assistant Professor at the University of California Irvine's School of Education, and directs the Social, iTerative, Engaged, and Meaningful (STEM) Learning Lab. He designs and implements play-based early childhood STEM interventions in places and spaces that children and families spend time (e.g., parks, school yards, grocery stores etc.). He maintains an intentional focus on translating rigorous science from the lab, into meaningful research in the classroom, and the community. Andres is invested in research that has practical implications for school and life success for children and families from under-served communities. His work has been funded by the National Science Foundation, Advanced Education Research and Development Fund (AERDF), Heising Simons Foundation, and the American Educational Research Association (AERA). He was recognized by the Association for Psychological Science (APS) through their Rising Star Award for early career scholars. He is also committed to sharing and interpreting early childhood research with a broader audience through blog posts for the Brookings Institution, Psychology Today, BOLD Blog, and other media outlets.



Eduardo Bustamante
Kinesiology &
Nutrition Lead

Eduardo Esteban Bustamante, PhD, FACSM, holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Kinesiology from the University of Massachusetts Amherst (2006) and a Doctor of Philosophy in Kinesiology, Nutrition, and Rehabilitation from the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) (2013). Dr. Bustamante completed a postdoctoral research fellowship at the Medical College of Georgia, Georgia Prevention Institute (2015). Dr. Bustamante's expertise lies in Exercise Psychology with an emphasis on ADHD and community-engaged intervention research. His research focuses on generating evidence-based lifestyle interventions that promote physical and mental health among Chicago families. Dr. Bustamante is an Assistant Professor of Kinesiology and Nutrition at UIC, where he is Director of the UIC Healthy Kids Lab. His intervention research has been conducted in partnership with Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Park District, and Urban Initiatives. This work has been funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities, the UIC Center for Health Equity Research (CHER), the UIC Chancellor's Office, and the Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion.



Sandra Chapman
Social Identity Lead

Sandra (Chap) Chapman, Ed. D. is the Founder of Chap Equity, an organization rooted in the belief that, through teamwork, we can learn more about ourselves and others and create conversations that support individuals where they are as they confront barrier issues. Dr. Chap facilitates workshops on racial identity development, racial microaggressions, implicit bias, intergroup anxiety, and stereotype threat in education, healthcare, and with teams from various types of organizations. Dr. Chap is the lead on Social Identity Development for the Great First Eight curriculum development project. In addition to creating units for the Infant and Toddler curriculum, Dr. Chap created the professional learning modules on identity and positionality for all educators using the program. Dr. Chap currently serves on the Pre-School team and has maintained her role as Lead on Social Identity Development. Chap is the co-author of *Bias Starts Early. Let's Start Now: Developing an Anti-Racist, Anti-Bias Book Collection for Infants and Toddlers* (<https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2169>); *Black Girl on the Playground* (Teaching Beautiful Brilliant Black Girls, Corwin Press, 2021); and *The Power of Conversation* (Summer 2014) NAIS Magazine.



Shana Cinquemani
Art Lead

Dr. Shana Cinquemani is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Teaching + Learning in Art + Design (TLAD) at the Rhode Island School of Design, with a specialty in elementary and early childhood art education. Her research interests are grounded in ethical research practices with children, relationships between children and adults in the art classroom space, curriculum inquiry and theory in early childhood art, the conceptualization of children's art as a meaningful socio-cultural practice, and ideas about motherscholarship in art education. She has worked as a museum educator, a preschool teaching assistant, as well as an elementary and middle school art teacher. She is the founder and director of the Mini Makerz Art Studio, a community-based program that offers free high quality early childhood visual arts programs to young children and families in the greater Providence RI area. Shana has published her research in various peer reviewed publications and edited collections, and is currently co-editing a book on motherscholarship, young children, and the arts. She has presented her work at local, national, and international venues, and is also the past president of the Early Childhood Art Educators Interest Group for the National Art Education Association.



Nicole Gardner-Neblett
Language & Linguistic
Diversity Lead

Nicole Gardner-Neblett is currently Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. As of September 1, 2019, she will be Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan. She is a developmental psychologist whose research focuses on the individual and contextual factors that promote children's language and literacy development. She adopts a strengths-based approach to conducting research on socially and economically disadvantaged children and families to better understand children's development and identify effective practices that can transform the early learning experiences of young children. In particular, Dr. Gardner-Neblett's work examines the oral narrative, or storytelling, skills of African American children and the implications for literacy development and educational practice. Her work also examines the effectiveness of teacher professional development programs to promote children's early language and communication development. Dr. Gardner-Neblett has published her work in high quality, peer-reviewed outlets, including *Child Development*, *Developmental Psychology*, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, and *Child Development Perspectives*. Dr. Gardner-Neblett holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in Developmental Psychology from The University of Michigan and a bachelor's degree in Psychology from Brown University.



Beatriz Ilari
Music Lead

Beatriz Ilari, PhD, is an associate professor and chair of music teaching and learning at the University of Southern California. She has conducted extensive research with infants, children and adolescents to examine the intersections between musical participation, child development, cognition, and culture. A Brazilian native, Beatriz strongly identifies with the Latin American communities of Southern California. Her research focuses on the musical experiences of Latino children and their families, in the home, at schools and in community spaces. Beatriz is a research fellow at USC's Brain & Creativity Institute and collaborates regularly with scholars from various fields in Brazil, Portugal, Spain, UK, USA, and Hong Kong. Her research has appeared in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *Journal of Research in Music Education*, *Music & Science*, *Proceedings of the New York Academy of Sciences*, and *Psychology of Music*. She is also co-editor of the "Routledge Companion to Interdisciplinary Studies in Singing – Volume 1 (Development)," "Music in Early Childhood: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives and Inter-disciplinary Exchanges (Springer)," and "Children's Home Musical Experiences Across the World" (Indiana University Press). A violinist by training, Beatriz is a former early childhood and elementary music educator.



Diana Leyva
Family
Engagement Lead

Diana Leyva, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Psychology and a Research Scientist at the Learning and Development Research Center (LRDC) at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Leyva's research draws from principles and methods in Developmental, Educational and Cultural Psychology. Dr. Leyva studies authentic familial practices, such as family food routines (e.g., cooking, grocery shopping) and oral storytelling, that support preschool children's early language, literacy, math, and self-regulation development, and uses that information to design, implement, and evaluate intervention programs for families. Her signature intervention is Food For Thought, a school-based, family program that promotes Latino children's academic skills via family food routines. Dr. Leyva has expertise and a track record of successfully leading and managing large research teams, designing, and implementing strengths-based, family-focused interventions in schools, community centers and at home, and disseminating research results in top scientific journals including *Child Development* and *Developmental Psychology*. Her work has been funded by the Brady Education Foundation and the William Penn Foundation.



Katherina Payne
Social Studies Lead

Katherina A. Payne is an associate professor of Curriculum and Instruction, specializing in Social Studies Education at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research considers the intersections of civic education, elementary/early childhood schooling, and teacher education, and examines the role of relationships, community, and justice to transform classrooms into child-centered, democratic, and more equitable spaces. Prior to her academic research career, Dr. Payne taught in first and second grade general education and inclusion classrooms in New York City Public Schools; she credits her time learning alongside her colleagues and curious, brilliant children in developing her own practices as a democratic elementary school teacher and her commitment to urban education. Her research has been published in venues such as *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *Teachers College Record*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, and *Journal of Teacher Education*. She has also published practitioner-oriented pieces in *Social Studies and the Young Learner* and *Young Children*.



Geetha Ramani
Mathematics Lead

Geetha B. Ramani, PhD is an Associate Professor of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology and the director of the Early Childhood Interaction Laboratory at the University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Ramani's research is focused on the development of mathematics and problem-solving skills. In her research, she examines important correlates in mathematical learning, such as executive functioning and language skills, in diverse populations of children. She also examines how children learn early math and problem-solving skills through play and informal learning activities in both school and home environments. She also investigates how peer interactions, parent-child interactions, and parental beliefs can contribute to children's development in these areas. Her research has been published in *Child Development*, *Developmental Psychology*, *Developmental Science*, and the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Her work has been funded by the National Science Foundation, Spencer Foundation, Heising-Simons Foundation, and the NewSchools Venture Fund. Dr. Ramani is currently an Associate Editor for the *Journal of Numerical Cognition*.

Advisory Board



Celina Byrd
Principal, Early
Education Center
at Marygrove,
Starfish Services

An unrelenting advocate for equity and hope, Celina Byrd has focused her career on children, families, and education. Following years as a teacher with DPS and serving in higher education, Celina redirected her expertise to early childhood education over 20 years ago. Centered in social and racial justice, and the core belief that every child deserves a great start regardless of zip code or identity, Celina is passionate about the cradle-to-career model embodied on the campus of Marygrove. Having owned and operated multiple childcare centers, Celina has had a lasting community impact as a trainer, consultant, and mentor in early childhood education. Byrd joined Starfish Family Services in 2014 and has held numerous roles focused on innovation, strategic planning, and leadership. After serving as the Special Projects Director during the development and construction of the Marygrove Early Education Center, Celina became the inaugural principal of the center – a role that continues today. A visionary and practitioner, Celina is a force for optimism and change. She is grounded in partnership, motivated by the possibilities of every child, and is an inspiring example of turning a great love of children into a lifetime of impact.



Sonia Cabell
Associate Professor,
Florida State University

Sonia Cabell, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the School of Teacher Education and the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University. Before receiving her Ph.D. at the University of Virginia, she worked as a second grade teacher and literacy coach in Oklahoma and Virginia. Dr. Cabell's research focuses on early language and literacy instruction, with a particular interest in preventing reading difficulties in young children. She has authored over 70 publications, including peer-reviewed articles, books, book chapters, and early childhood language and literacy curricula. She is the lead editor of the *Handbook on the Science of Early Literacy* from Guilford Press, and co-author of *Literacy Learning for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers: Key Practices for Educators* from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. In 2021, Dr. Cabell, along with her colleague Dr. Tricia Zucker, was awarded the Diane Lapp & James Flood Professional Collaborator Award from the International Literacy Association. Dr. Cabell has served as Principal Investigator or co-Principal Investigator on federally funded research projects totaling approximately \$10 million dollars. She has been an advisor or consultant for a variety of national organizations and state departments of education. Twitter handle: @soniacabell.



Ximena Dominguez
Director of
Early STEM Research,
Digital Promise

Ximena Domínguez, PhD, is the Director of Early STEM Research at Digital Promise. Her research investigates young children's STEM learning across home and school and involves partnering with public preschool educators, curriculum developers, media designers and families from historically excluded communities to co-design meaningful STEM learning experiences for young children. In addition to studying how science, mathematics, engineering and computational thinking can be promoted in authentic, playful and developmentally appropriate ways, her work investigates how STEM domains can be integrated feasibly to strengthen teaching and support children's learning broadly. Many of the collaborative projects she leads involve developing resources for multilingual learners and explore the affordances of technology and media for supporting teaching and learning early in childhood. Her work has been supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), and philanthropic foundations. Dr. Dominguez earned an M.S.Ed. in education from the University of Pennsylvania and a Ph.D. in applied developmental psychology from the University of Miami.



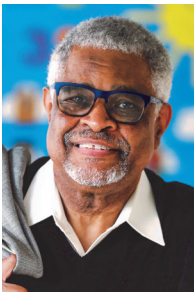
Tonia Durden
Clinical Professor,
Georgia
State University

Tonia Durden, Ph.D. is a Clinical Professor and Birth through 5 Program Coordinator within the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at Georgia State University. Dr. Durden's primary scholarship and research trajectory focuses on exploring how to create racially equitable learning experiences for young children. Dr. Durden's professional work and scholarship can be categorized into three core areas of focus: Early Childhood Education (curriculum and program development); racial educational equity (research to professional practice); and Early Childhood Systems Engagement (strategic partnerships and equitable systems building). Dr. Durden is committed to using teacher education, research and scholarship to support educators and leaders who are culturally responsive change agents and advocates in their classrooms and communities.



Ron Ferguson
Adjunct Lecturer
in Public Policy,
Harvard University,
Boston Basics

Ron Ferguson is an MIT-trained economist whose teaching, research, and social entrepreneurship over 40+ years span topics ranging from state and local economic development, to school reform, to early childhood development and parenting. A full-time faculty member at Harvard Kennedy School from 1983-2014, he transitioned to an adjunct role in 2015. Ron's current priority is an initiative that he launched while Faculty Director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard, to mobilize communities for infant, toddler, and preschool learning and brain development. It operates through The Basics Inc., a nonprofit organization that he leads, and The Basics Learning Network, a community of practice with affiliated coalitions in dozens of communities in the US and abroad. Ron's most recent book, coauthored with Tatsha Robertson and published in 2019, is *The Formula: Unlocking the Secrets to Raising Highly Successful Children*. He grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, before earning an undergraduate degree from Cornell University and a PhD from MIT, both in economics.



Ed Greene
Producer,
Advisor, Coach,
Ed Greene Strategies

Ed's passion is focused on building culturally relevant partnerships, policies and program practices that benefit children and families in the digital age. He formerly served as VP, Children, Youth and Digital Media Literacy Initiatives at the Hispanic Information and Telecommunications Network (HITN), and is currently a senior consultant with HITN Learning. His diverse experience includes roles as a senior adviser and consultant to Cito, the Netherlands, and its Piramide Approach to Early Learning; and director of global outreach for Sesame Workshop. Ed is a former elected board member of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the HighScope Educational Research Foundation, the American Camp Association, and currently serves as a trustee of the Coalition for Quality Children's Media. Ed received his B.A. Music Education, DePauw University; M.A. Child and Human Development, Pacific Oaks College; PhD, Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Indiana State University.



**Wendy
Lewis Jackson**
Managing Director,
Detroit Program, Kresge
Foundation

Wendy Lewis Jackson is managing director for the Detroit Program. She leads The Kresge Foundation's efforts to revitalize Detroit and to strengthen its social and economic fabric. Her work supports organizations providing economic opportunity for low-income people and addresses the needs of vulnerable children and families. Prior to joining Kresge in 2008, Wendy was a program director for Children and Family Initiatives and executive director for education initiatives at the Grand Rapids Community Foundation in Grand Rapids, Mich. She taught at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich., and has co-authored and assisted in the publication of several reports and publications that address community needs and problem solving. Wendy is an American Marshall Memorial Fellow of the German Marshall Fund of the United States; the Association of Black Foundation Executives named her an Emerging Leader in 2008. Wendy earned a bachelor's degree in political science and communications from the University of Michigan. She also holds a master's degree in social work from U-M, with a concentration in community organization and social policy and planning.



Lieny Jeon
Associate Professor,
University of Virginia

Lieny Jeon, Ph.D., is the Jane Batten Bicentennial Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education in Educational Psychology - Applied Developmental Sciences at the University of Virginia. She also serves as the Director of Early Childhood Initiatives at the Baltimore Education Research Consortium leading the Early Childhood Data Collaborative, a research-practice partnership with Baltimore City's publicly funded early childhood programs. Dr. Jeon's research focuses on early care and education, family and neighborhood characteristics that impact children's development. In particular, she studies early childhood educators' well-being and workforce development. She is interested in improving the working conditions for early childhood educators and the early childhood workforce system. She also examines how early care and education buffers challenging home and neighborhood environments and maximizes children's development. She is leading development and implementation of the Well-being First program, which is designed to support Head Start teachers' resilience and organizational well-being. She has published more than 30 manuscripts on this topic in peer-reviewed journals, including *Child Development*, *Journal of School Psychology*, and *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. She is also an Associate Editor for the *Early Education & Development*.



Gigliana Melzi
Professor,
New York University

Gigliana Melzi is Professor of Applied Psychology and affiliated faculty of Latinx Studies and at the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University. Dr. Melzi's scholarship focuses on the intersection of cultural and linguistic practices and their relation to children's early development and learning, focusing predominantly on Spanish-speaking and bilingual children from Latine immigrant communities in the United States. Using mixed-methods and emic approaches, she investigates how Latine immigrant parents nurture their children, the role of language in that process, and how classroom instruction can leverage these culturally and linguistically grounded practices to support young children's school-based learning. Her latest work focuses on Latine family math and science practices. As part of a cross-university effort to enhance the Development and Research in Early Math Education (DREME) network, she investigates everyday math-related activities and math talk in Latine homes. In her recent project, she explores the role of stories in supporting Latine children's early science learning. Dr. Melzi's work has been funded by the Spencer Foundation, National Institute of Health, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and lately by the Brady Education Foundation, the Brooke Astor Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, and the National Science Foundation.



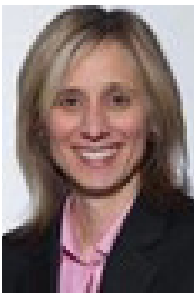
Carla Thompson Payton
Vice President
for Program Strategy,
W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Carla Thompson Payton is vice president for program strategy for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan. In this role, she supports the foundation's efforts to promote thriving children, working families and equitable communities. Thompson Payton provides leadership and management for the creative and strategic direction of programming from design through implementation, evaluation and dissemination. As a member of the executive team, she is also responsible for the overall direction and leadership of the foundation. Prior to joining the foundation in 2012, Thompson Payton was deputy director of the Office of Child Care at the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C. There, she was responsible for developing national early childhood education policy, managing the \$5 billion annual budget of the Child Care Development Fund and providing oversight to 10 regional offices serving states, tribes and territories. Previously, she was assistant superintendent for early childhood education for the District of Columbia, where she initiated the first publicly funded pre-kindergarten program. In other professional experience, she has held positions with the Department of Education and Department of Public Welfare for the state of Pennsylvania; United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; and the U.S. Department of Education. Thompson Payton has been honored for her leadership in early childhood education by the Administration for Children and Families, the Children's Defense Fund and the Temple University Institute on Disabilities. She also has served on boards and committees for nonprofit associations and professional organizations. In addition, she is the author of three publications related to school readiness and advocacy. She also is featured in the Huffington Post as a regular blogger and has been cited in numerous news media for her expertise. Thompson Payton received her bachelor's degree from Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York. She holds a master's degree in social work and a doctorate in educational leadership from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.



Manica Ramos
Senior Research
Scientist, Early Child
Development,
Child Trends

Manica F. Ramos, PhD, is a Senior Research Scientist in the Early Childhood research area at Child Trends (CT). She is a board member of CT's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and of a member of CT's Hispanic Institute research committee. Dr. Ramos' substantive research focuses on the intersection of family engagement and early childhood development. Cultural sensitivity is an integral element in all of Dr. Ramos' work; she has published several reports on the importance of and how to enhance cultural sensitivity when working with children and families. Dr. Ramos co-authored a book on developing indicators of positive child development and has developed many surveys (in English and Spanish) that are used at the state and local levels. Currently, Dr. Ramos is the project director of CT's team that supports the National Center for Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. She is the principal investigator of an evaluation of PBS KIDS Parent Engagement programs as well as a seven-year evaluation of an American Heart Association wellness promotion program being implemented in over 400 preschools across the nation. She is also the project director of a strategic research-community partnership to redesign a two-generational program serving Latino families with preschool age children across multiple states.



Julie Sarama
Chair in Innovative
Learning Technologies
and Professor,
University of Denver

Julie Sarama, PhD, is the Kennedy Endowed Chair in Innovative Learning Technologies and Distinguished University Professor at the University of Denver. She conducts research on young children's development of mathematical concepts, implementation and scale-up of educational reform, professional development, and implementation and effects of software environments (including those she has created) in mathematics classrooms. These studies have been published in more than 80 refereed articles, 7 books, 60 chapters, and over 100 additional publications. She is Principal Investigator on her latest IES award, "Evaluating the Efficacy of an Interdisciplinary Preschool Curriculum (EPIC)," which evaluates a curriculum produced from a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) on which she was also PI, titled "Early Childhood Education in the Context of Mathematics, Science, and Literacy." In total, she has directed 36 externally funded projects from IES, NSF, and the National Institute of Health (NIH). Another project, funded by the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Gates Foundation, "Scalable Professional Development in Early Mathematics: The Learning and Teaching with Learning Trajectories Tool," updates and disseminates a professional development software application (LearningTrajectories.org) empirically supported in previous projects. She has taught secondary mathematics, computer science, gifted math, and methods and content courses for elementary to secondary teachers.



Christina Weiland
Associate Professor,
University of Michigan

Christina Weiland is an associate professor at the School of Education at the University of Michigan and co-directs the Education Policy Initiative at the Ford School of Public Policy. Her research focuses on the effects of early childhood interventions and public policies on children's development, especially on children from families with low incomes. She is particularly interested in the active ingredients that drive children's gains in successful, at-scale public preschool programs. Her work is characterized by strong, long-standing research collaborations with practitioners, particularly the Boston Public Schools Department of Early Childhood. Her work has been generously funded by the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, the U.S. Department of HHS, the Smith-Richardson Foundation, Chile's Ministry of Education and the University of Michigan. She has presented her work on preschool to the Seattle City Council, to senior U.S. Department of Education officials, and at a Congressional briefing, at U.S. House Education and the Workforce Committee and U.S. Senate HELP Committee briefing, among others. She holds an MA in Education and an EdD in Quantitative Policy Analysis in Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.



Brittney Williams
Assistant Director
for Research-
Practice Partnerships,
Collaborative for
Academic, Social, and
Emotional Learning

Brittney Williams, PhD, is the assistant director of research-practice partnerships at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), where she assists in supporting the design of CASEL’s research and learning agenda through our external action-research partnerships. In her role, she supports efforts to define and communicate transformative SEL as a critical concept to address issues of inequities in schools. She provides districts with continuous improvement technical assistance to drive high-quality implementation aligned to strategic goals and support our partners’ informed decision-making toward equitable learning and development for all youth. This includes collecting, reflecting on, and sharing actionable data regularly to identify needs, create goals, and action plans. Dr. Williams has contributed to the CASEL Program Guide as an evaluation reviewer. She more recently co-led research-practice partnership along with CASEL district partners around engaging in essential actions that assist in building equitable learning environments. Prior to joining CASEL, Brittney earned a doctoral degree in educational psychology, with a focus on social and emotional development in young African-American children at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC).

Writers



Luci Davila
Writer

Luci Davila, MS, is a doctoral student at Michigan State University in the Human Development and Family Studies department. She builds on her previous experience as a coach, lead teacher, and staff support in schools both across the United States and abroad, in Thailand and the Dominican Republic. She has extensive experience with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, as well as elementary and high school classes. She also brings knowledge from multiple years in the non-profit sector, where she has served in a Senior-level position as a coach and mentor. Luci holds a Master’s in Human Development and Family Studies from the University of Alabama, and a Bachelor’s with a concentration in Human Development and Family Studies from Texas Tech University. She has experience implementing and adjusting various curricula for infant, toddler, and pre-k classrooms. Currently, her research focuses on increasing preschool quality in underserved areas and populations. She is primarily focused on early educator’s professional development through coaching, especially as it pertains to children’s language, literacy, and social-emotional outcomes.



Angel Dungee
Writer

Angel is a curriculum writer, mindfulness educator, and early childhood education consultant. With over 20 years of experience as an educator within the DC, Maryland, and Virginia area, Angel has taught Pre-K, Kindergarten, and Second grade, served as an Instructional Specialist to teachers of young learners (Pre-K and Kindergarten), and lead several mindfulness-based trainings to support staff wellness initiatives. She is passionate about creating culturally responsive curriculum content and trainings that spark joy, connection to self and others, and opportunities for students or participants to share their story. She supports the Great First Eight project as a writer for the preschool curriculum. Angel holds a BA of Psychology and MEd in Curriculum and Instruction, Pre-K-3rd, from George Mason University.



Ann Gadzikowski
Writer

Ann Gadzikowski is an early childhood educator and author with a passion for challenging children to think creatively, critically, and inclusively. A graduate of the Erikson Institute, Ann taught preschool and served as a program director for many years. As early childhood coordinator for Northwestern University’s Center for Talent Development, Ann created the *Tech Beginnings* curriculum for teaching coding and robotics to students in PreK to Grade 3 through project based learning. She is an award winning author of books including *Problem Solving with Young Children and Young Architects at Play* (Redleaf Press). Ann serves as a developmental editor for the National Association for the Education of Young Children and she creates curriculum content for organizations including Encyclopedia Britannica, Prufrock Press, and the Latino STEM Alliance.



Tamesha Harewood
Writer

Tamesha Harewood, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Michigan State University. Her scholarly interests focus on professional development of the pre-service early childhood workforce, as well as parental influences on children's early development. She is particularly interested in the competencies needed by the early care workforce to support children's learning and development in all areas. Tamesha has been involved in conducting research in academic, community-based, and applied settings for over 10 years. Her contributions include authored and co-authored research papers, book chapters, and federal reports related to children's development, specifically in the language, cognitive and social-emotional domains. Tamesha holds a Master's in Child Development and PhD in Human Development from Michigan State University, a Masters in Human Resources Administration from Central Michigan University, and a Bachelor's of Science in Public Sector Management from University of West Indies.



Maria Enid Santiago-Rodriguez
Writer

Maria Enid Santiago-Rodriguez was born and raised in Puerto Rico with a very warm, big, and festive family. Since she was a child, she wanted to work with children because she strongly believes that they are the future of the country. Thus, she has found very rewarding creating and supporting initiatives that positively influence children and adolescents' wellbeing. Maria is a former elementary school teacher (English as a second language teacher) as well as a movement behavior (collectively known as physical activity, sedentary behavior, and sleep) scientist trained to design and implement movement behavior programs in youth. She is particularly interested in designing and implementing interventions to improve physical activity and sleep levels while reducing sedentary time among female adolescents to help reduce sex disparities in health outcomes such as body composition, anxiety levels, and mood.

Other Contributors



Children

Children have rich information and insights related to curriculum. Children from partner classrooms provide input and feedback regarding the curriculum through conversations with them, observations of them, and examination of artifacts they generate.



DraeTown

DraeTown was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. In 2011, he burst on the scene with a hit song called "City of Gold." The song discussed everything that was great about Detroit and debuted on YouTube as a music video receiving thousands of views. The song's popularity gained local attention by Stephen Clark of WXYZ 7, where DraeTown was featured on their Detroit 2020 series. DraeTown received a Spirit of Detroit Award in recognition of exceptional achievement, outstanding leadership, and dedication to improving the quality of life in Detroit. In the Summer of 2011, DraeTown was selected as Detroit's Most Wanted artist by Hot 107.5 to perform at the city's Summer Jamz concert at Chene Park (now known as Aretha Franklin Amphitheater). In the Fall of 2011, the Planet Green channel selected DraeTown to participate in a 3-part docu-series titled "Detroit in Overdrive." This documentary highlighted the revitalization of Detroit and casted DraeTown in Episode 3: It Takes a Village, where "The City of Gold" song was introduced to the world. In 2015, DraeTown graduated with a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from Howard University. He continued to record music and released his debut album titled Cap and Gown in the summer of 2018. DraeTown continues to write and record music designed to inspire, motivate, and entertain.



Families & Community Members

Families and community members have rich information and insights related to curriculum. Families and community members from the Detroit Metropolitan area provide input through formal focus groups and informal interactions.



Taylor Hughes-Barrow
Assistant Editor

Taylor Hughes-Barrow is a student at Michigan State University studying Human Development and Family Studies, while minoring in Law, Justice, & Public Policy, and Digital Humanities. She is passionate about advancing educational equity. She is also interested in developing spaces that incorporate technology to promote social and emotional learning that cultivate positive holistic personal growth and development.



Illustrators and Graphic Designers

Great First Eight has been privileged to work with a number of talented illustrators.



Leadership and Staff



Leadership and Staff



Grace Meinke
Assistant Editor

Grace Meinke is an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan pursuing a B.A. in Social Theory and Practice in the School of Literature, Science, and the Arts with a minor in education for empowerment in the Marsal Family School of Education. Her concentration of study regards social class and inequality in education systems. After graduating in the spring of 2023, Grace plans to pursue a Master’s in Educational Policy and Analysis. Grace currently works in infant and toddler classrooms at the Towsley Children’s House and has worked with children as an academic tutor, student advisor, and choreographer. Grace also works with Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti-based non-profit, Telling It to implement arts- and play-based intervention programming in local school districts to create empowering spaces with youth-aged students coping with various degrees of trauma. Under the leadership of lead professors from the University of Michigan and outside consultants, Grace also has developed a model for mastery-based assessment and transcripts with the Learning, Equity, and Problem-Solving for the Public Good (LEAPS) program. Grace’s passion is focused on the potential for education to disrupt systemic inequalities and establish equitable learning opportunities for students of all backgrounds from a young age.