

St. John's University

**St. John's Scholar**

---

Faculty Publications

Department of Education Specialties

---

2020

## **Tracing Diverse Pathways to Teaching: Tales of Nontraditional Immigrant Women of Color Becoming Teachers of Young Children**

Seung Eun McDevitt

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.stjohns.edu/education\\_specialties\\_facpubs](https://scholar.stjohns.edu/education_specialties_facpubs)



Part of the [Early Childhood Education Commons](#)

---



# Tracing Diverse Pathways to Teaching: Tales of Nontraditional Immigrant Women of Color Becoming Teachers of Young Children

Seung Eun McDevitt<sup>1</sup>

© Springer Nature B.V. 2020

## Abstract

Situated in New York City, this qualitative case study investigates nontraditional teachers, particularly immigrant women of color, and their diverse pathways into early childhood classrooms. Against the backdrop of the city's expansion of public preschool programs and its efforts to ensure high quality through narrowly defined measures of professionalization for the early childhood workforce, I traced the lived experiences of nontraditional immigrant women of color, their becoming teachers of young children, and the ways in which their funds of knowledge shape their teaching practice. Findings reveal that although nontraditional immigrant women of color enter teaching with unique and valuable life experiences, they face many challenges in the changing landscape of early childhood education. Implications point towards the importance of cultivating a more diverse teaching force and supporting teachers' development through culturally responsive and sustaining ways that honor the wealth of knowledge they bring to the benefit of young children and their families, especially those with diverse cultural backgrounds.

**Keywords** Teachers of color · Nontraditional · Immigration · Alternative pathways · Early childhood · Workforce · Funds of knowledge

Expansion of the early education sector through policy and reform is a growing global trend that has made childcare and preschool education universally available to many more children and families around the world (e.g., Harwood and Tukonic 2016; Hordern 2016; Fenech et al. 2009; Wingrave and McMahan 2016). In the United States, there is an emerging movement across many states to implement publicly funded prekindergarten (Delaney and Neuman 2018). In New York State, New York City (NYC) has taken a pioneering step with a prekindergarten program called Pre-K for All, now expanded to 3-K for All, a citywide, free, full-day, and public universal program for young children across all five boroughs (NYC Department of Education).

The movement towards providing free preschool education to all children in NYC has sparked increased discussion on raising the standards for teacher qualifications to ensure high quality early education (Barnett and Riley-Ayers 2016). Along with the rapid expansion of universal prekindergarten

programs, the field is facing the enormous challenge of preparing, recruiting, and retaining a highly qualified teaching force (Graham 2019), especially in response to the growing superdiversity among young children (Woods et al. 2016). In addressing this challenge, researchers and policy-makers have focused primarily on teacher certification and university-based teacher preparation programs (Fuligni et al. 2009; Hyson and Mitchell 2016), ignoring a great pool of individuals with diverse backgrounds who are less likely to travel traditional teacher education/certification routes to become early childhood professionals (Sugarman and Park 2017).

Against the backdrop of “raising the qualifications” of the early childhood workforce in New York City, I investigated a particular group of nontraditional teachers and their pathways to teaching in preschool classrooms. According to Garavuso (2016), nontraditional teachers share key characteristics, including years of varying working experiences and ethnic and linguistic diversities, and they are often the first in their families to pursue higher education. Some of these nontraditional teachers are African Americans, and some are first- or second- generation immigrants with various immigration histories (Morales and Shroyer 2016). In contrast to the K–12 school system, early childhood education,

✉ Seung Eun McDevitt  
mcdevits@stjohns.edu

<sup>1</sup> St. John's University, New York, USA

particularly prior to kindergarten, is comprised of distinctively diverse professionals who come from racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds (Sugarman and Park 2017). Many of these professionals are nontraditional teachers of color, often with immigrant backgrounds (Matthews et al. 2018; Whitebook et al. 2018), who took diverse pathways into the classroom, such as starting as a parent volunteer, then working as an assistant teacher, and then being promoted to become a teacher. Yet, under the rigorous efforts to “professionalize” the teaching force (Sachs 2001), these nontraditional teachers, particularly immigrant women of color, are (in)directly disenfranchised due to the heavy emphasis on standardized teaching credentials and increased requirements for teaching certifications linked to the expansion of Pre-K for All (Park et al. 2015; Souto-Manning et al. 2019).

### Preschool Teachers Within the Early Childhood Workforce

Early childhood (birth through age 8) is generally grouped into three categories of practice: infants and toddlers, preschool and kindergarten, and primary school (first through third grade; Couse and Recchia 2016). In the United States, preschool education is comprised of various programs depending on funding resources: federally funded Head Start programs, city- and state-funded prekindergarten programs, subsidized child care, and home-based family childcare programs located in both private nonprofit (as well as for-profit) organizations and public schools (Barnett and Riley-Ayers 2016; Delaney and Neuman 2018; Fuligni et al. 2009). The expansion of preschool education, particularly city- and state-funded programs such as Pre-K for All, has created many “blended” programs, blurring the distinction between public and private. As a result, many of the prekindergarten classrooms are housed in programs with Head Start, private preschools, or within public schools.

In this study, the terms *teachers* or *preschool teachers* are used to refer to those who work directly with young children in the aforementioned preschool education programs. As stated in the 2018 Early Childhood Workforce Index, preschool teachers are “predominantly female, ethnically and linguistically diverse, and often have children of their own” (Whitebook et al. 2018, p. 2). More specifically, 40% of preschool teachers are women of color and about 20% of them are immigrants (Sugarman and Park 2017), uniquely representing racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity in the profession.

### Nontraditional Pathways to Teaching

Situated within the diversity of the preschool education workforce, this study examines alternative teacher development pathways to teaching in preschool classrooms, both in and outside traditional college/university teacher education programs. Paradoxically, a majority of the literature on alternative pathways to teaching for nontraditional teachers of color focuses on K-12 levels (e.g., Beynon et al. 2004; Cruickshank 2015; Gist et al. 2019), though the preschool education workforce comprises a proportionally higher number of nontraditional teachers of color. Few studies address this important group of teachers, including their pathways to teaching and how their teaching practices are shaped by their experiences accumulated throughout their lived histories. This indicates an enormous knowledge gap in teacher development and the training of nontraditional teachers of color in the field of preschool education (Black 2018).

Recognizing the strength and potential that nontraditional teachers of color can bring to today’s classrooms, especially to educating increasingly diverse student populations (Ladson-Billings 2009), some teacher development programs have recruited and supported this promising group of potential teachers. In the context of preschool education in the United States, there are a few programs, such as the Child Development Associate, and T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) programs, designed to support nontraditional teachers to continue working as they advance their education and acquire credentials (Garavuso 2016). Despite such programs, in the current accountability-driven era, high-stakes qualification measures in preschool classrooms and higher education programs further marginalize nontraditional teachers, particularly immigrant women of color, and the complex, diverse, and subjective knowing they bring to educating young children (Delaney 2018; Souto-Manning 2019).

The current study focuses on these nontraditional immigrant teachers of color, shedding light on what is known about them and the support they require in alternative teacher development and education programs. Looking within and against the professionalization of the field and through the lens of nontraditional immigrant teachers of color, provides a platform to tell their stories, a window into their worlds, and a more inclusive way to examine what it takes and what it means to become a teacher. Simultaneously, I question the push to standardize teacher qualifications, the increasing measures of professionalism, and the value placed on teaching credentials, specifically for teaching children with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. To this end, I ask the following research questions:

1. How do nontraditional immigrant women of color describe their pathways to teaching in preschool classrooms?
2. How do their lived experiences inform their teaching, and what unique strengths do they bring as immigrant teachers of color when working with children and families of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?
3. What challenges do they face in the changing landscape of preschool education?

## Theoretical Framework

Anchored in the framework of funds of knowledge (González et al. 2005) and the construct of borderlands (Anzaldúa 1987), this study examines the lived experiences of nontraditional immigrant teachers of color to investigate their pathways to teaching, to highlight the strengths they bring, and to shed light on the challenges they face in the changing landscape of preschool education. Elbaz-Luwisch (2007) stated that teaching is “grounded in [teachers’] personal resources, values, and life experiences” (p. 364); accordingly, the concepts of funds of knowledge and the borderlands emphasize individuals’ engagement with multiple cultural worlds through their lived experiences (Anzaldúa 1987; González et al. 2005). Thus, the funds of knowledge framework and Anzaldúa’s borderlands concept serve as helpful tools to excavate the personal experiences of teachers, especially those with immigrant backgrounds deeply interwoven within the current political context.

## Funds of Knowledge

“The concept of funds of knowledge ... is based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (González et al. 2005, pp. ix).

Funds of knowledge is defined as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual function and well-being” (Moll et al. 1992, p. 133). Moll and his colleagues explained their conceptualization of knowledge as one that was dynamic and derived from individuals’ lived experiences. The concept was traditionally used to examine immigrant students’ knowledge based on their familial and lived experiences, but Moll et al. (1992) highlighted these funds of knowledge as tools for strengthening pedagogy in schools, rather than deviations from the norm. Similarly, Amanti (2005) emphasized that all individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds already possess rich knowledge from their lived experiences at

home and in their community, which can be tapped as pedagogical tools. In her study of the Funds of knowledge project, Amanti (2005) documented the ethnographic work of teachers who researched their students’ lives outside of school to bridge home and school. Similar to Amanti’s approach, in the current study, I used an ethnographic approach to document teachers’ funds of knowledge. I investigated how their cultural and lived experiences shaped who they were as teachers and learners of their students, following the trend toward expanding the perimeter of the funds of knowledge concept to study immigrant teachers whose lives are deeply connected to the lives of their immigrant students (Adair 2011; Gupta 2006; Jackson 2006; Recchia and McDevitt 2018).

Hedges (2012) argued that teachers’ funds of knowledge, informal knowledge established through their experiences and daily teaching practice, can be a tool to examine pedagogical matters of the classroom. Hedges stressed the nature of the preschool educational context as one in which teachers are key curriculum decision-makers who need an understanding of each child, family, and community in order to respond responsively and naturally during in-the-moment interactions with children. She also critiqued the notion that research-based practices are more valuable than teachers’ funds of knowledge and noted the need to acknowledge how teachers filter such practices through their own funds of knowledge. Hedges’s study also revealed that the teachers’ responsiveness and support increased when their funds of knowledge matched the children’s funds of knowledge. In addition, the teachers’ decision-making in the classroom was filtered through their funds of knowledge, supporting the notion that their practice was “evidence-informed” rather than “research- or evidence-based practice” (p. 20). Hedges’s findings are significant to the current study because they provide evidence that the use of teachers’ funds of knowledge benefits children’s learning.

Adair (2009) affirmed the notion that immigrant teachers have rich funds of knowledge that enable them to have “the largest repertoire of strategies for bringing diversity into the classroom” (p. 146) and thus benefit all children, including those with immigrant backgrounds. Furthermore, immigrant teachers’ funds of knowledge are resources for working with families and communities, due to their shared cultural knowledge and the teachers’ deep understanding of immigrant communities. The term “nontraditional” often implies the teachers did not follow the norm to enter the field of their current situation and they are lacking in something because of their paths. However, in the words of van Manen (2015), “Knowledge speaks through our lived experiences” (p. 46). Funds of knowledge, as a framework, undergirds the current study and orients the stories of nontraditional immigrant teachers through an asset-based lens as opposed to a deficit lens.

## Nepantla in the Borderlands/La Frontera

Anzaldúa (1987) used the term *la frontera/the borderlands* to describe a space in “a constant state of transition” (p. 3), where many individuals live in multiple cultural realities that are ambiguous, confusing, and contradicting. While the funds of knowledge framework brings the everyday lived experiences of nontraditional immigrant teachers of color to the center of the conversation and highlights their assets, Anzaldúa’s borderlands framework enables a deeper look at the complexity of their lives. It situates teachers’ lives in the intersectional identities and multiple social locations through race, ethnicity, citizenship, culture, language, class, ability, religion, and gender (Mancilla et al. 2014). González (2001) noted that the complexity and contradictions of lived experiences intersected by multiple identity markers were at the “very core of the borderland experience” (p. 14).

Anzaldúa adapted the term *Nepantla*, which means “in-between space,” to describe a site of transformation and the confusion, pain, and complexity of lived realities in the borderlands (Keating 2006). In this study, I draw on *Nepantla*, “a zone of transformation and possibilities” (p. 113), to describe the space where nontraditional immigrant teachers of color “revisit, rediscover, and reinvent” (p. 113) themselves (Reza-López et al. 2014). I call those nontraditional immigrant teachers of color *nepantlera*—the term Anzaldúa used to represent “a unique type of visionary cultural worker” (Keating 2006, p. 6). As *nepantleras*, or “in-betweeners,” nontraditional immigrants of color have alternative ways of thinking and knowing gained through straddling multiple worlds (Cho 2010; Yosso 2005). Keating (2006) quoted an interview with Anzaldúa in which she said that nepantla occurs when “living in between overlapping and layered spaces of different cultures, and social and geographic locations, of events and realities—psychological, sociological, political, spiritual, historical, creative, imagined” (p. 8). Thus, nepantla is a space of the marginalized and a tool to bring those in the margins to the center.

I highlight the possibilities and positive influences the teachers in the current study brought with them, along with their funds of knowledge. Looking through the data in the nepantla paradigm reveals the challenges and the

messiness of being minority teachers who are nontraditional, immigrants, and women of color, and of their intersectional identities at work as teachers of young children in a foreign land. My aim in using nepantla in the borderlands paradigm is to amplify the lived realities, the good and the bad, of these teachers, whose voices have been traditionally marginalized in the field of preschool education, despite the fact that a large number of them are nontraditional teachers working tirelessly with young children. Their funds of knowledge and position in nepantla often go unnoticed and yet have significant influences on the children and families with whom they work. By centering the marginalized and tracing the pathways of nontraditional immigrant teachers of color, I aim to offer insight and suggestions to support this particular group of teachers in culturally responsive and sustaining ways (Ladson-Billings 2014; Paris 2012).

## Methods

### Participants

To explore the work of immigrant teachers of color and their pathways into the profession, this qualitative case study (Yin 2014), part of a larger study, was situated in public center-based preschool programs (i.e., Universal Pre-K for All and Head Start) serving low-income preschool-aged children, including those with immigrant backgrounds, in New York City. I used purposive sampling (Merriam and Tisdell 2016) and chose two teachers, Vanessa and Gianna (see Table 1), because of their unique pathways to teaching and the valuable funds of knowledge they brought to their work with children and families.

### Bright Future Preschool

Vanessa worked at the Bright Future Preschool, a community-based nonprofit preschool, as a head teacher in the Pre-K for All classroom governed by the NYC Department of Education prekindergarten program. The preschool is located in the southern part of the Bronx, the borough in New York City with the fastest growth, driven by an increasing number of immigrants, who comprise nearly 40% of the total population (Office of the New York State

**Table 1** Participant and preschool information

Participant	Country of origin	School	School type	Type of program	Location
Vanessa	Guyana	Bright Future Preschool	Community-based preschool	Pre-K for All	Bronx, New York
Gianna	Dominican Republic	Livingston Family Center	Community-based preschool	Head Start	Manhattan, New York

All names of persons and places are pseudonyms



Comptroller 2018). Despite the upward trend in its economic growth being largely due to immigrants and their entrepreneurship, many residents live in poverty at a significantly higher rate than in other boroughs of New York City. Reflecting the neighborhoods in the South Bronx, the children in Vanessa's classroom came from low-income families including Spanish-speaking immigrants, African immigrants, and African Americans (Vanessa, Observation).

### Livingston Family Center

Gianna worked as a head teacher in a year-round Head Start classroom at the Livingston Family Center located in Upper Manhattan, an area with highly segregated neighborhoods and startling socioeconomic inequities. The Livingston Family Center boasts a long 80-year history of serving preschool children from low-income families in the area and is recognized nationally and internationally as "a model of early childhood and parent education" (Livingston Family Center website). The center focuses on partnering with parents in the education and development of their children, and it extends their outreach to siblings, extended family, and the community by joining with many community organizations to support access to various services and resources. In addition to Gianna's federally funded Head Start class, there are Pre-K for All classes at the center funded by the NYC Department of Education. The classrooms at the center are bilingual in Spanish and English, as there are a significant number of Spanish-speaking newcomer immigrant students and families. The students in Gianna's classroom reflected the center's mission and the community in the surrounding neighborhoods, comprising children of low-income immigrant families representing greater ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversities and countries such as Senegal, Ethiopia, Morocco, India, Peru, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico (Gianna, Observation).

### Data Collection

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and receiving participants' consent, I followed ethnographic tradition to collect data including interviews, participant observations, and informal conversations. The main source of data was a series of three in-depth interviews, each lasting one to two hours, supplemented by two classroom observations per teacher. I kept detailed field notes and researcher memos reflecting on my observations and the interviews to engage in on-going data analysis. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and shared with the teachers for member checks.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis began using open coding (Merriam and Tisdell 2016) during the initial inductive analysis. For conceptual congruency, I then used the funds of knowledge framework to thematically and deductively code in order to answer my research questions. One of the participating teachers, Gianna, mentioned, "You don't have to look for examples far away from you. Look at you. Look at your family. Look how you felt when you went to a place where you were not welcomed" (Gianna, Interview). Concurring with her statement, I chose to look closely at their lives, instead of looking far away, to examine what it means to become teachers as immigrant women of color. I reflected on their stories within a larger context, the changing landscape of preschool education, to investigate questions around becoming highly qualified teachers, such as "In what context?" and "To whom is quality ensured" (Sugarman and Park 2017). This process of focusing a deep gaze into the histories and lived experiences of the teachers and then enlarging the lens to the current context of preschool education and teacher development helped to organize the patterns and themes (Merriam and Tisdell 2016) in their stories. In pulling and collapsing analytic codes in their narrative data (see Table 2), four themes were identified: (a) Falling into teaching, (b) Becoming teachers through nontraditional pathways, (c) Lived experiences as resources for teaching, and (d) Where is the future? These themes help trace the teachers' pathways into teaching and to illuminate the strengths and tensions in the values, beliefs, and potentials they bring to their work with young children and families.

### Findings

Both teachers, Vanessa and Gianna, described their pathways starting from their country of origin. Vanessa emigrated from Guyana to the United States after receiving her high school diploma. Gianna emigrated from the Dominican Republic after graduating from college with a psychology degree and with a growing family composed of her husband and two young children.

### Falling into Teaching

Coming from immigrant backgrounds, Vanessa and Gianna vividly remembered their transitions to the first of many jobs they had to survive in the new land before entering their teaching professions. For Vanessa, there was a year-long physical and metaphorical "dark time" before she was able to do any work due the structural barrier of her high school diploma from Guyana not being transferable to the school system in the United States. According to Vanessa, it took her a while to navigate the education requirements

**Table 2** Themes and examples

Themes	Codes	Data examples
Falling into teaching	Immigration histories Parent volunteer Assistant teachers	“You know what the teacher said to me one day? ‘Gianna,’ because she saw me how I was with the children and said, ‘Do you wanna stay here and help us a little bit in the classroom?’” (Gianna, Interview 1)
Becoming teachers through non-traditional pathways	Teacher development English language learning Teacher identity	“Don’t write the word [you] speak. Write English, standard English” (Vanessa, Interview 1) “Like sometimes you feel like you couldn’t say the way you wanted to say because of the way you felt.... I had professors like, ‘Look at you,’ and you feel like they are telling you, ‘What are you doing here?’ ...I almost quit [the program] many times. I’m like sweating and sweating ...Why am I here?” (Gianna, Interview 3)
Lived experiences as resources for teaching	Funds of knowledge Immigrant realities Building relationships with immigrant families	“It takes a village to raise a child. Where we grew up, my neighbor is my Tee Tee, my aunty, ... And all children at church are <i>our</i> children. And so, when you go into the workplace, I have the same kind of system I grew up with and it’s hard to separate myself.” (Vanessa, Interview 3) “The ones who work and can’t come to the meetings might be in a fish market and they need to go there early and when they drop off their kids they need to run. They are still good parents and they are part of their children’s education at another level. And the children know.” (Gianna, Interview 1)
Where is the future?	Passion for teaching Teaching certificate Challenges with state exams Preschool teacher salary	“I’m trying so hard to get my certification because I love working with these little kids. So, I have to keep going. I can’t stop. It’s that Guyanese thing where things are not easily handed to you. You have to work for it.” (Vanessa, Interview 3)

in the State of New York because “[she] wasn’t sure how to do here” (Vanessa, Interview). Vanessa ended up repeating a couple semesters of high school even though she had already graduated from high school in Guyana. Then she went for her General Education Diploma (GED), and once she received her GED, she was able to start working. The first job she had was as a nursing assistant, escorting patients to their destinations in the hospital. She then worked as a maid during the day and at night she attended a city college to earn her bachelor’s degree in Black studies.

Vanessa stated that she had come a long way to become a teacher. She mentioned a scholarship program for immigrants that enabled her to stay in college to complete her master’s degree in early childhood education while working as an assistant teacher at a special education school. Although the scholarship program ended in the middle of her studies for reasons she was not aware of, she had quickly fallen in love with teaching and set a goal of having her own classroom. She continued her education to become a teacher, eventually earning her master’s degree in early childhood education. Yet, even with this degree in hand, she had a difficult time passing the required state tests to be a certified teacher. At the time of my interview with her, she was working as a head teacher at a community-based preschool as part of the Pre-K for All program under the condition that she would be certified within three years, the grace period permitted by the New York City Department of Education.

For Gianna and her family, the most challenging aspect of their transition to New York City was financial difficulty. She had two young children when she first moved and gave birth to their third child soon after. Despite her circumstances

of being a mother with three young children, she had to hold multiple jobs, such as a gym locker room attendant, a cleaning maid, and a security guard, to help pay the bills. During this time, her children were enrolled at the Livingston Family Center, and by the time her fourth child arrived, Gianna was invited to stay in the classroom as a volunteer. She shared more details about how she became involved in the center:

You know what the teacher said to me one day? “Gianna,” because she saw me how I was with the children and said, “Do you wanna stay here and help us a little bit in the classroom?” And I stayed with the baby and the second one who wasn’t in school yet and the one who was four. And I helped the children with breakfast, we were playing, and I felt like I was in heaven. (Gianna, Interview)

According to Gianna, the teacher *saw* Gianna and understood her struggle and opened her classroom to her and her children. After a few months of working as a parent volunteer, the center offered her a job as a classroom aid working 20 h a week. Shortly after, she was promoted to an assistant teacher and eventually became a head teacher in one of the Head Start classrooms.

Although Vanessa and Gianna entered teaching at different points in their lives and took varying pathways, they are grateful to be where they are now. Vanessa stated, “It’s a blessing [to be able to teach]. There is a lot of people who helped on the way. Because of that I help kids” (Vanessa, Interview). Gianna described her first experience working in the classroom as “heaven” (Gianna, Interview) because

she was grateful for the opportunity to spend time in the classroom, not only with her own children but also in helping the teachers and volunteering to care for other children.

### Becoming Teachers Through Nontraditional Pathways

Vanessa shared at length about her experiences in higher education and her journey to receive her master's degree in early childhood education at a city college. She mentioned the struggles she had with English. Although she spoke British English, she had struggled with her writing because "there wasn't much emphasis on the grammar in Guyana" (Vanessa, Interview). She clearly remembered one of her professors instructing her, "Don't write the word [you] speak. Write English, standard English" (Vanessa, interview). Vanessa said she had to "relearn grammar" and the standard American English that was accepted by her professors. She said the English she had learned to speak and write in Guyana was not the language "that can take [her] to places [in America]" (Vanessa, Interview).

Vanessa found herself with a very low GPA due to her writing skills and realized that she had to work to relearn the language in order to raise her GPA. Fortunately, she had a professor, an immigrant from Somalia, who paid attention to her needs and invited her to office hours. Vanessa shared,

I would work [on] my paper and go [to her office] and we'd go through [the paper]. She's the one that got me a thesaurus...dictionary thesaurus. So, when I write, and she changes the word, I go to the thesaurus to see how I can use this word in different places. And that was her help and that's how I became close to her. So now she makes me emotional cause she really helped me in that ...She was the one who helped me with the syntax and phonics and all of that. (Vanessa, Interview)

Differing from Vanessa, Gianna had gone back to school to get her master's degree in teaching after she had been promoted to a head teacher position, when she was recommended for a scholarship in inclusive early childhood education at a university partnered with the U.S. Department of Education. She described her experience at this university as both "empowering" and "intimidating" (Gianna, interview). Gianna shared that many times before entering the university building, she had to take a deep breath and tell herself, "Everything is gonna be okay" (Gianna, interview). It was intimidating for her to enter the elite space of higher education, and she felt nervous to the point of feeling that her "self-esteem put [her] down and [she was] sweating" (Gianna, interview). According to Gianna, every day was a challenge because although she had many professors who

supported her, she also encountered professors who questioned her presence in the university. She said,

Like sometimes you feel like you couldn't say the way you wanted to say because of the way you felt...I had professors like, "Look at you" and you feel like they are telling you, "What are you doing here?" ...I almost quit [the program] many times. I'm like sweating and sweating ...Why am I here? (Gianna, Interview)

In addition, Gianna was aware of her differences including her age, accent, and the way she looked. She noted,

It was hard to be constantly aware of that the way I express myself was not at the level of university's expectations. This was a challenge. Being aware of that when you talk you don't talk at the level of how other people talk, you know, this is a big challenge and being aware of that." (Gianna, interview)

Despite the challenges she faced in her journey to receive her degree, she found strength in the professors who came to see her in the Head Start classroom during her practicum affirming her teaching abilities. Gianna noted, "I had to keep telling myself that I know what really works in the classroom" (Gianna, interview) to stay confident and finish the master's program.

### Lived Experiences as Resources for Teaching

In the classroom, both Vanessa and Gianna were competent teachers and their funds of knowledge played important roles in their work with children and their families, who also came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Vanessa mentioned that her conceptualization of early childhood education and partnering with families came from living in a small village in Guyana where everyone took care of each other's children. She noted:

When I go into my classroom, those are *my* children ...And I want the *best* for my children. I take care of them. If you don't extend the love, the children are not going to enjoy the learning. So, that's what I do. (Vanessa, Interview)

Vanessa added that the love she has towards her students also came from her Christian background, which extended from her community in Guyana. She added,

It takes a village to raise a child. Where we grew up, my neighbor is my Tee Tee, my aunty, ...And all children at church are *our* children. And so, when you go into the workplace, I have the same kind of system I grew up with and it's hard to separate myself (Vanessa, Interview).



Paying extra attention to the children who are marginalized in the classroom, she makes sure to create a classroom environment where the children can be happy and thrive. Vanessa said because of her experience in Guyana, teaching is her way of “help[ing] and give[ing] love” (Vanessa, Interview).

Gianna echoed Vanessa’s view on her students. Gianna stated, “I see me, I see my kids, I see me as a parent, and that’s why I take them as my own children. All of them, I try” (Gianna, Interview). To Gianna, partnering with parents was of utmost importance when teaching and caring for young children. She shared:

Something that I really know and am very clear in is that school is like a family ...When children see their parents are treated well in school they develop trust ...It’s like children see, “Oh, my mommy loves my teachers.” Then they feel comfortable. And it’s a good feeling when parents leave their children here to go to work. They [may] feel stressed with their job or life but at least their children are okay. You generate that kind of atmosphere. And it’s like home. (Gianna, Interview)

Echoing Vanessa’s words, “Parents must be happy enough to be able to leave their children with me” (Vanessa, Interview), Gianna further explained it was not complicated to create a welcoming environment even though many of the parents spoke different languages and came from many different backgrounds:

Children need love. People need love. That’s all. Doesn’t matter what language you speak. Caring is universal. Caring doesn’t require [a] complicated language. You know sometimes I see parents coming in the morning stressed and worried. So, I say to them, “You looked worried. Are you okay?” You know what that does? That’s all you need. That changes things. And that happened to me when I first came here. You know what I mean? I received this [at the Livingston Family Center] and I felt like, oh my God, a heavy book was taken away from me. The problem is still the same but it’s how I see the problem now after receiving that caring. (Gianna, Interview)

Having a deep understanding of the realities that many newcomer immigrant parents live, Gianna drew on her lived experiences to partner with the parents, caring for them by developing their trust in her care for their children. She added,

They want the best for their children. When the parents can’t participate in meetings, it’s not because they don’t want to be there. The reality is some parents who can come they may have a good job. Maybe they are their own boss. Or they have a secretary or whatever

...and they can come and participate in school meetings so they are good parents? No! The ones who work and can’t come to the meetings might be in a fish market and they need to go there early and when they drop off their kids they need to run. They are still good parents and they are part of their children’s education at another level. And the children know. (Gianna, Interview)

Gianna proudly claimed that working with parents was her “specialty.” According to her, many of the parents in her classroom were newcomer immigrants and they expressed the same sentiment: “When we come to your classroom, we forget that we are here and we feel that we are in our [home] country” (Gianna, interview). Gianna noted that, although they may have been in different situations, “many times these parents repeat [her] story” and she feels “so honored when they say, ‘Gianna, you are part of our journey’” (Gianna, Interview).

Fundamental to young children’s learning and development, both Vanessa and Gianna were fully aware of the importance of caring relationships and took actions to build partnerships with the children and their families. Their funds of knowledge, accumulated through living in multiple cultures and languages and through their experiences as newcomer immigrants who were marginalized in a new environment, were transformed into treasure in their teaching.

### Where is the Future?

Teaching is becoming, and becoming a teacher is a complex life endeavor. It is an ongoing process as illustrated by the teachers in this study, who described their continual growth through pursuing higher education and welcoming the challenges of a new set of children and families every year. Though surviving in the new land and becoming teachers were not easy processes, they were glad to be where they were. Vanessa said, “I mean, in the beginning when I came, it was a struggle. But, when I reflect, it’s a struggle that now I really love” (Vanessa, Interview). She continued, “[I] don’t want to revisit [the processes she had gone through] but it was that experience that brought [me] this way” (Vanessa, Interview). Gianna mentioned, “[One] cannot give to people what [one does not] have” (Gianna, Interview) explaining that all her lived experiences, good and bad, were treasures in her life and contributed to her becoming a better teacher for her students and their families.

At the time of this study, both Vanessa and Gianna were hoping to become certified teachers. For Vanessa, gaining her certification was the only way to keep her current position as a pre-K teacher. She explained her motivation:

I’m trying so hard to get my certification because I love working with these little kids. So, I have to keep

going. I can't stop. It's that Guyanese thing where things are not easily handed to you. You have to work for it. (Vanessa, Interview)

It was her genuine love for teaching, rooted in her cultural funds of knowledge, that kept her going toward becoming a certified teacher. However, with her multiple failures on the state certification tests, she had begun to look for other career options. Vanessa likened her experience of trying to gain certification to "a door ...you know you are outside and you need to come in now. You got everything out at the door right? And you just have to do a few more work and then you are in" (Vanessa, Interview). As she described her situation, she wiped her tears and said, "[This] really makes me emotional" (Vanessa, Interview).

For Gianna, gaining certification was something she felt obligated to do to increase her salary. She was aware of her extremely low wages as a preschool teacher (Interlandi 2018), and with her recently earned master's degree, she looked forward to the increase in salary that would come only if she had the courage to take and pass the certification exams.

## Discussion and Implications

Preschool education movements to "raise the bar" in the teaching force through standardized testing has created many roadblocks especially for teachers of color including nontraditional and immigrant teachers (Barnum 2017). Such movements do not allow flexibility in the field and limit who can become "legitimate" teachers, as demonstrated by the cases of Vanessa and Gianna. By presenting the diverse pathways they took to become teachers of young children, I stress that nontraditional immigrant teachers of color enter teaching with unique and valuable life experiences and with the hope, motivation, and passion to make positive impacts in the lives of young children and their families. Their funds of knowledge are inseparable from both who they are and who they are becoming, as well as the influence they have on students and families.

As shared, Vanessa's and Gianna's journeys were not easy, particularly in their teacher education programs. Higher education settings can be an intimidating space for nontraditional immigrant teachers of color who do not speak the languages of academia and who bring diverse experiences that differ from those of traditional college students. Garavuso (2016) argued that when nontraditional teachers are enrolled in university teacher education programs, teacher educators need to employ culturally responsive pedagogy that draws on their lived experiences, such as narrative pedagogies. Creating a third space (Gupta 2006; Recchia and McDevitt 2018) where they can feel a sense of belonging is

an important responsibility of teacher educators who aim to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in teacher education and development programs.

Lash and Castner (2018) discussed how addressing nontraditional teachers' lived experiences is "a way to contest the dominant, standards-based, managerial approaches" (p. 93) in the current preschool education system and move toward respecting the wealth of diversity they bring to their teaching and care for young children. Similarly, Exposito and Bernheimer (2012) emphasized the importance of promoting an asset-based curriculum in teacher education to hone in on (preservice) teachers' lived experiences and urged educators to work from a strength-based framework rather than a deficit one. Garavuso (2016) echoed this notion regarding the key aspect in reimagining support for nontraditional teachers of color, that by "using and trusting in their experiences as a valid starting place for reflection and theory making, adult students of early childhood education can be encouraged to view themselves as creators of pedagogy and theory" (p. 191). In this way, the "intimidating" experiences that Gianna had are not perpetuated in the experiences of other nontraditional immigrant teachers of color; rather, their rich experiences can be used as pedagogical tools in teacher education programs.

Ultimately, cultivating more diverse, nontraditional teachers is crucial, not only in terms of representation but also for the wealth of knowledge they bring that benefits children and families. In the field, where a majority of the population now consists of children of color, the urgent need is not for a standardized workforce; rather, the focus needs to be on recruiting a culturally and linguistically diverse teaching force (Souto-Manning and Dice 2007). Preschool programs need to tap into the rich pool of individuals within their communities and provide them with the necessary training and ongoing supervision to meet the needs of superdiverse children (Kirova et al. 2016).

Retention of the current workforce is also imperative. A large portion of the current preschool teaching force, including assistant teachers and caregivers, are for many reasons unable to reach higher education to advance their credentials. In addition, preschool teachers working in settings such as family childcare have the least access to formal training in early childhood development and education and rely on support from mentorship (Fuligni et al. 2009). There must be a system in place that supports the current preschool teaching force without sacrificing the richness of diversity they bring to teaching and caring for our youngest children (Workman et al. 2018).

One way to reimagine teacher education/recruitment/retention beyond the rigid, standardized pathways is through partnerships between universities and local schools and programs to develop and support nontraditional teachers of color (Massing 2015). In such partnerships,

competency-based models (Workman et al. 2018) can be used that draw on teachers' lived and classroom experiences and provide culturally relevant trainings and coaching to build credential-related skills and competencies (Black 2018; Sugarman and Park 2017). Future research, policy, and practice must amplify the lives of nontraditional teachers of color and/or immigrants who have diverse pathways to becoming and being teachers, and bring reforms that truly honor their funds of knowledge.

## References

- Adair, J. K. (2009). Teaching children of immigrants: A multi-sited ethnographic study of preschool teachers in five U.S. cities. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Arizona State University.
- Adair, J. K. (2011). Confirming Chanclas: What early childhood teacher educators can learn from immigrant preschool teachers. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 32(1), 55–71.
- Amanti, C. (2005). Beyond a beads and feathers approach. In N. González, L. C. Moll, & C. Amanti (Eds.), *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms* (pp. 131–141). Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Barnett, W. S., & Riley-Ayers, S. (2016). Public policy and workforce in early childhood education. In L. J. Couse & S. L. Recchia (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood teacher education* (pp. 38–53). New York: Routledge.
- Barnum, M. (2017). Certification rules and tests are keeping would-be teachers of color out of America's classrooms. Here's how. Chalkbeat. Retrieved from <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2017/09/12/certification-rules-and-tests-are-keeping-would-be-teachers-of-color-out-of-americas-classrooms-heres-how/>
- Beynon, J., Ilieva, R., & Dichupa, M. (2004). Re-credentialing experiences of immigrant teachers: Negotiating institutional structures, professional identities and pedagogy. *Teachers and Teaching*, 10(4), 429–444.
- Black, F. V. (2018). Providing quality early childhood professional development at the intersections of power, race, gender, and disability. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 19(2), 206–211.
- Cho, C. L. (2010). "Qualifying" as teacher: Immigrant teacher candidates' counter-stories. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 100, 19–22.
- Couse, L. J., & Recchia, S. L. (2016). Introduction. In L. J. Couse & S. L. Recchia (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood teacher education* (pp. 15–20). New York: Routledge.
- Cruikshank, K. (2015). A framework for inclusion: Plurilingual teachers in day and community schools. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 38(3), 155–171.
- Delaney, K. K. (2018). Looking away: An analysis of early childhood teaching and learning experiences framed through a quality metric. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 19(2), 167–186.
- Delaney, K. K., & Neuman, S. B. (2018). Selling Pre-K: Media, politics, and policy in the case of Universal Pre-Kindergarten in New York City. *Teachers College Record*, 120(4), 1–31.
- Elbaz-Luwisch, F. (2007). Studying teachers' lives and experience: Narrative inquiry into K-12 teaching. In J. D. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 357–382). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Exposito, S., & Bernheimer, S. (2012). Nontraditional students and institutions of higher education: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 33(2), 178–189.
- Fenech, M., Waniganayake, M., & Fleet, A. (2009). More than a shortage of early childhood teachers: Looking beyond the recruitment of university qualified teachers to promote quality early childhood education and care. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(2), 199–213.
- Fulgini, A. S., Howes, C., Lara-Cinisomo, S., & Karoly, L. (2009). Diverse pathways in early childhood professional development: An exploration of early educators in public preschools, private Preschools, and family child care homes. *Early Education & Development*, 20(3), 507–526.
- Garavuso, V. (2016). Reimagining teacher education to attract and retain the early childhood workforce: Addressing the needs of the "nontraditional" student. In L. J. Couse & S. L. Recchia (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood teacher education* (pp. 181–194). New York: Routledge.
- Gist, C. D., Bianco, M., & Lynn, M. (2019). Examining Grow Your Own programs across the teacher development continuum: Mining research on teachers of color and nontraditional educator pipelines. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(1), 13–25.
- González, N. (2001). *I am my language: Discourses of women and children in the borderlands*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.
- González, N., Moll, C. L., & Amanti, C. (2005). Introduction: Theorizing practice. In N. González, L. C. Moll, & C. Amanti (Eds.), *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms* (pp. 1–24). Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Graham, J. (2019, March). Four steps to fix early childhood's workforce crisis. Apolitical. Retrieved from [https://apolitical.co/solution\\_article/four-steps-to-fix-early-childhoods-workforce-crisis/](https://apolitical.co/solution_article/four-steps-to-fix-early-childhoods-workforce-crisis/)
- Gupta, A. (2006). Early experiences and personal funds of knowledge and beliefs of immigrant and minority teacher candidates dialog with theories of child development in a teacher education classroom. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 27(1), 3–18.
- Harwood, D., & Tukonic, S. (2016). Babysitter or professional? Perceptions of professionalism narrated by Ontario early childhood sectors. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 8(4), 589–600.
- Hedges, H. (2012). Teachers' funds of knowledge: A challenge to evidence-based practice. *Teachers and Teaching*, 18(1), 7–24.
- Hordern, J. (2016). Knowledge, practice, and the shaping of early childhood professionalism. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 24(4), 508–520.
- Hyson, M., & Mitchell, M. C. (2016). Accreditation and patterns of licensure: Achieving the potential. In L. J. Couse & S. L. Recchia (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood teacher education* (pp. 69–85). New York: Routledge.
- Jackson, L. G. (2006). Shaping a borderland professional identity: Funds of knowledge of a bilingual education teacher. *Teacher Education and Practice*, 19(2), 131–148.
- Keating, A. (2006). From borderlands and new mestizas to nepantlas and nepantleras: Anzaldúan theories for social change. *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, 4(3), 5–16.
- Kirova, A., Massing, C., Prochner, L., & Cleghorn, A. (2016). Educating early childhood educators in Canada: A bridging program for immigrant and refugee childcare practitioners. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies*, 67(2), 64–82.
- Ladson-Billing, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: A.k.a. the remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 81(1), 74–85.
- Lash, M. J., & Castner, D. J. (2018). Stories of practice: The lived and sometimes clandestine professional experiences of early childhood educators. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 19(2), 93–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949118784437>.

- Mancilla, L., Boals, T., & Castro, M. (2014). DE AQUÍ Y DE ALLÁ: Latino borderland identities. In C. A. Grant & E. Zwier (Eds.), *Intersectionality and urban education: Identities, policies, spaces & power* (pp. 147–168). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Massing, C. (2015). Professional identities: Immigrant and refugee women's experiences in an early childhood teacher education program. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Young Children*, 40(1), 73–99.
- Matthews, H., Ullrich, R., & Cervantes, W. (2018). Immigration policy's harmful impacts on early care and education. Retrieved from <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/immigration-policy-s-harmful-impacts-early-care-and-education>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Somerset, NJ: Jossey-Bass.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141.
- Morales, A. R., & Shroyer, M. G. (2016). Personal agency inspired by hardship: Bilingual Latinas as liberatory educators. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 18(3), 1–21.
- NYC Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/enrollment/enroll-grade-by-grade/pre-k>
- Office of the New York State Comptroller. (2018). An economic snapshot of the Bronx. <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/sites/default/files/reports/documents/pdf/2018-11/report-4-2019.pdf>
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93–97.
- Park, M., McHugh, M., Zong, J., & Batalova, J. (2015). *Immigrant and refugee workers in the early childhood field: Taking a closer look*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- Recchia, S. L., & McDevitt, S. (2018). Unraveling universalist perspectives on teaching and caring for infants and toddlers: Finding authenticity in diverse funds of knowledge. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 31(1), 14–31.
- Reza-López, E., Huerta Charles, L., & Reyes, L. V. (2014). Nepantlera pedagogy: An axiological posture for preparing critically conscious teachers in the borderlands. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 13(2), 107–119.
- Sachs, J. (2001). Teacher professional identity: Completing discourses, competing outcomes. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(2), 149–161.
- Souto-Manning, M. (2019). “Good teaching” and “good teachers” for whom? Critically troubling standardized and corporatized notions of quality in teacher education. *Teachers College Record*, 121(10). Retrieved from <https://www.tcrecord.org>
- Souto-Manning, M., Buffalo, G., & Rabadi-Raol, A. (2019). Early childhood teacher certification as a site for the re-production of racial and cultural injustice. In S. Kessler & B. B. Swadener (Eds.), *Education for social justice in early childhood* (pp. 46–57). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Souto-Manning, M., & Dice, J. L. (2007). Reflective teaching in the early years: A case for mentoring diverse educators. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 34(6), 425–430.
- Sugarman, J., & Park, M. (2017). *Quality for whom? Supporting diverse children and workers in early childhood quality rating and improvement systems*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- van Manen, M. (2015). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. New York, NY: Left Coast Press.
- Whitebook, M., McLean, C., Austin, L. J. E., & Edwards, B. (2018). *Early childhood workforce index*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
- Wingrave, M., & McMahan, M. (2016). Professionalisation through academicization: Valuing and developing the early years sectors in Scotland. *Professional Development in Education*, 31(5), 710–731.
- Woods, T., Hanson, D., Saxton, S., & Simms, M. (2016). *Children of immigrants: 2013 state trends update*. Washington DC: Urban Institute.
- Workman, E., Guernesey, L., & Mead, S. (2018). Pre-K teachers and bachelor's degrees: Envisioning equitable access to high-quality preparation programs. New America. Retrieved from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/pre-k-teachers-and-bachelors-degrees/>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8, 69–91.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.