

Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative

Hidden in Plain View

Kimberly Diamond-Berry

HighScope Educational Research Foundation
Ypsilanti, Michigan

Nkechy Ezeh

Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Abstract

Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative (ELNC) began as a year-long initiative to support early learning for very young children and families. The program has grown into a self-sustaining, nonprofit, place-based organization committed to improving the lives of children and families in the underresourced neighborhoods of Grand Rapids, MI. Together with local partners, ELNC is implementing an intentional birth to 5 service system that provides high-quality early care and education within a multigenerational framework. Now in its 10th year of operation, ELNC is made up of six community organizations and annually serves more than 400 families and their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

The years between 2010 and 2012 were economically bleak for many families in the United States. In fact, the nation's poverty rate rose to a whopping 15.1%, the highest in 17 years (United States Census Bureau, 2011). In Grand Rapids, Michigan, at that time, the poverty rate had grown faster than any other metropolitan area in the country (Kneebone & Berube, 2014) and young children were entering kindergarten reporting no previous preschool or early childhood experiences at an alarming rate of 71.1% (Michigan School Data, 2019). As if these facts were not enough to cause serious alarm, the high school graduation rate hovered below 50% from 2011–2013 (Public School Review, 2020). Census data from 2010 (United States Census Bureau, 2010) revealed that 21.2% of families in the city of Grand Rapids were living below the poverty line, and that figure increased to 24.9% for families with children under 5 years old. In fact, 55% of infants were born to mothers who did not have a high school diploma, and 20% of infants were

born to teen mothers. Grand Rapids families, like many families around the country, were in a state of crisis.

Physically, the neighborhoods in which these families resided were barren and desolate, with boarded-up houses and businesses. Parks and open area play-spaces were littered with debris, broken glass, and deteriorating playground equipment. Job prospects and educational advancement opportunities for parents were few and far between, and access to high-quality, full-day early learning centers and preschools in the neighborhood for young children were nonexistent.

A local Grand Rapids stakeholder and college professor took notice of this crisis and decided to take action. Dr. Nkechy Ezeh was commissioned by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to lead a year-long project which included planning and implementing an Intentional Preschool Service System to expand and sustain high-quality preschool slots in these same underserved and underresourced Grand Rapids neighborhoods. Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative (ELNC) was established in response to this crisis. ELNC began as a grassroots initiative involving neighborhood-based providers, local community-based organizations, and faith-based organizations interested in the early education of young children.

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Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative is a grass roots initiative involving neighborhood-based providers, local community based organizations, and faith-based organizations interested in the early education of young children.

Dr. Ezeh led the newly formed ELNC through a collaborative process that included Listening Community Forums with parents, partners, funders, and other key early childhood education (ECE) system leaders. ELNC partners participated in site visits to two model early learning programs with the goal of broadening their knowledge by observing and experiencing best practices successfully used in action. Simultaneously, Dr. Ezeh's research produced a document titled *The Current Reality Report* (Ezeh, 2010). Findings practically mirrored those found by the 2010 and 2011 U.S. Census reports related to families with young children in the local Grand Rapids neighborhoods. Although ELNC has become a self-sustaining, place-based organization focused on supporting optimal early development and learning for young children from birth to 5 years old, the collaborative's beginnings were made possible because a few local stakeholders began working together to make early learning and professional development resources available for neighborhood families.

The ELNC Community Partners

Guided by her knowledge of the importance of community relationships in creating a high-quality early learning environment, Dr. Ezeh began by enlisting the help of partners and stakeholders in the surrounding community. She quickly found the early childhood community to be nice, polite, and comfortable with the status quo. Many of the ECE services in the Grand Rapids region were used by families living in resource-abundant communities. Children and families in underresourced areas did not have access to ECE and were not being served. Dr. Ezeh was described by community partners as the "disruptive" force needed to change the status quo in ECE in 2010 Grand Rapids. Armed with the data collected as part of her reality report, she believed that data plus disruption

would eventually equal results. Making the case that the young children in Grand Rapids' underresourced neighborhoods deserved high-quality ECE as much as young children living in resource-rich communities, Dr. Ezeh found an early ally at Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC). The director of the Phyllis Fratzke Childhood Learning Laboratory at GRCC joined Dr. Ezeh and, together, they were able to convince the ECE community to acknowledge this glaring disparity.

ELNC and GRCC collaborated to develop literacy kits for parents; train ELNC teachers; and provide classroom observations, informal coaching, and relationship building at no cost. In turn, when ELNC received a grant to operate an Early Head Start (EHS) program, one of the classrooms and a 3-year-old transition classroom for EHS children were housed at GRCC. This partnership allowed the adult students of ECE at the college the opportunity to gain experience and learn from the teachers and children in the EHS classroom. This mutually beneficial collaboration has supported the professional development of teachers and students, and it filled a gap in needed educational services for parents in the community. The continuous professional development and coaching of teachers also helped ensure that young children were receiving high-quality early learning experiences.

Other early allies whose partnership made a significant impact on available services and resources for families with young children were the executive directors at SECOM Resource Center and Steepletown Neighborhood Services. At that time, SECOM was a busy food pantry organization that served Southwest Kent County, including parts of Grand Rapids, East Grand Rapids, and Kentwood. Steepletown was a community-based nonprofit agency located on the northwest side of the city, providing a variety of services for vulnerable families. Neither organization was providing ECE programming.

The SECOM executive director supported Dr. Ezeh's idea of creating a space for children to be exposed to early learning opportunities while their parents were "shopping" at the Food Pantry and/or involved in a SECOM workshop. ELNC provided the resources to restore and furnish a classroom and, subsequently, provided technical assistance throughout the licensing process. Once licensed, SECOM began their Little Steps preschool program serving 32 children (16 in the morning and 16 in the afternoon). SECOM continued receiving financial support and technical assistance from ELNC, and their excellence was recognized by receiving the second five-star rating in Kent County (the first recognition had gone to the Phyllis Fratzke Childhood Learning Laboratory at GRCC). The following year, again with support from ELNC, SECOM opened a second classroom which allowed the program to operate a full-day program for 3- and 4-year-olds. The addition of the Little Steps preschool program began the transformation of the neighborhood as SECOM added a playground and a community garden. SECOM developed from a pantry providing food to a well-rounded organization known as a resource center. The organization's focus was giving help and hope to the neighborhood by empowering families with young children to

achieve their full potential through encouraging healthy living and providing educational and economic opportunities.

Steepletown programs were focused on supporting adults 18–24 years old around workforce development issues. In 2010, the staff encountered young adults who were eager to learn new skills and grow professionally, but who struggled to commit to any type of meaningful employment training program because they did not have a safe, high-quality early learning environment in which to leave their children while they received training. As a leader of one of the original partner organizations, Steepletown’s executive director was seeing first-hand how integrating an ECE program into their current services could be the answer for many of their workforce development participants. After meeting with Dr. Ezeh to learn more about the unique multigenerational ELNC model, he was convinced that bringing this opportunity to the families within their service neighborhood would narrow the gap in opportunity and help solve this dilemma. Again, ELNC provided the resources and technical assistance needed to restore and license five classrooms that would serve children birth through 4 years old.

The process of creating a community of institutions, stakeholders, and families committed to ongoing work together for a common cause—known as collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011)—is not an easy task. Stakeholders have to first take ownership of the community, agree that problems exist, and take action to address those problems that create the gaps in services and systems. As stakeholders became more aware of the issues and concerns faced by families of young children in ELNC’s target neighborhoods, they began to create opportunities within the community for these families.

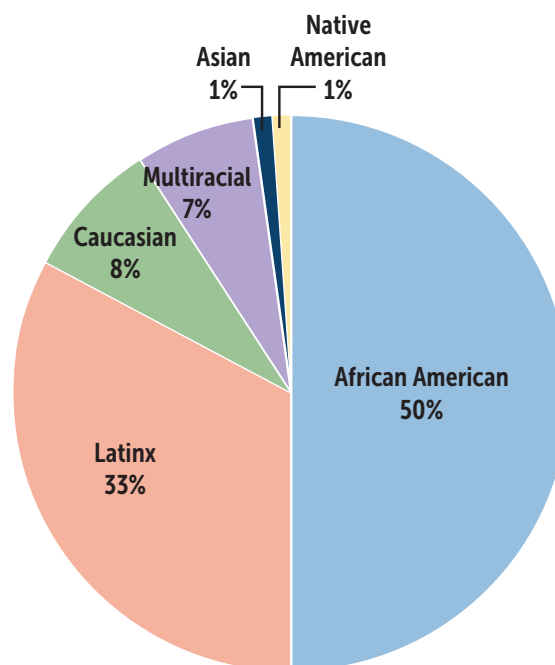
ELNC’s Demographics and Theoretical Premise

As ELNC’s community partners continued forming the network of support, the program was simultaneously growing into a self-sustaining, nonprofit, place-based ECE collaborative. Nestled in the shadows of a vibrant downtown community district, ELNC is now comprised of seven community partners in 12 sites; each with its own unique set of goals and priorities, but all in agreement that the young children living in ELNC’s target neighborhoods deserve a safe and secure, high-quality, culturally responsive ECE environment. Currently in its 10th year of operation, ELNC serves 408 young children in 11 infant and toddler classrooms, and 20 preschool classrooms, impacting approximately 400 families daily. In 2017, the Refugee Education Center joined the collaborative as a service partner and opened Hands Connected, an infant and toddler center in which 60% of the children are African refugees. ELNC families represent six diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and five different languages listed as primary languages: English, Kinyarwanda, Nepali, Spanish, and Swahili. (See Figure 1.)

Beginning at the Beginning

ELNC was a founding partner in the Baby Scholars program funded by the Doug and Maria DeVos Family Foundation. Baby

Figure 1. Racial/Ethnic Background of Families Served



Source: Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative, 2018–2019

Scholars was established in 2011, in partnership with Strong Beginnings and Arbor Circle, as a home visiting/coaching program for parents of young children 5 months to 5 years old. ELNC staff members of the Baby Scholars program drew from the work being done at the Harlem Children’s Zone Baby College in New York City (Barnes, 2002) and the Children’s Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Sciences Center in Houston (Cahill, 2018). Baby Scholars was designed to work with families of very young children by operating parent and home visiting groups focused on assisting them with access to basic resources, raising awareness of early brain and child development, and providing a space for parents to form peer networks to support each other. The program expanded from a home-visiting model to an 11-week cohort program for 3-year-olds and added a focus on sound and letter recognition. Four cohorts were held each year, and graduates were then invited to attend an ELNC-sponsored preschool.

An important lesson learned in the early stages of ELNC’s development was the necessity for creating a multigenerational birth to 5 ECE system for families and children in the target communities. As ELNC expanded its reach, the program grew to embrace the theoretical premise that empowered parents and families support young children and build better learners. However, in 2012 when ELNC staff began working to assist parents in becoming community leaders, it became evident that many struggling parents had limited capacity to support their children’s learning and development because they were focused on basic survival needs such as steady employment, housing, and food insecurity. In response to these challenges, and in partnership with PONA Consulting L3C, ELNC piloted

Empowering Parents Impacting Children (EPIC), at one of their partner locations. A dual-generational approach to ECE, the EPIC model includes six steps to supporting school readiness for young children:

1. collaborative coaching,
2. basic needs met,
3. increase social capital,
4. parents as change agents,
5. quality ECE, and
6. children ready to learn.

Findings revealed that adopting EPIC program-wide would lead to increased parent engagement and more efficient teaching staff time. As a result, the EPIC framework is now embedded within all ELNC classrooms. Figure 2 depicts the EPIC model in action:

Through the Eyes of ELNC’s Staff and Parents

To share the story of ELNC from the perspective of parents, staff, and community partners, the authors conducted individual and focus group interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) in 2018 and 2019. This method of interviewing is an effective way of capturing individual’s feelings, beliefs, and experiences regarding important life events, and the meanings and definitions attached to those events (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015; Miles et al., 2014; Strauss, 1987). We developed focus group questions for ELNC parents, administrators, teachers/ staff, and community partners. We audiotaped interviews and analyzed them using Grounded Theory (Strauss, 1987), and

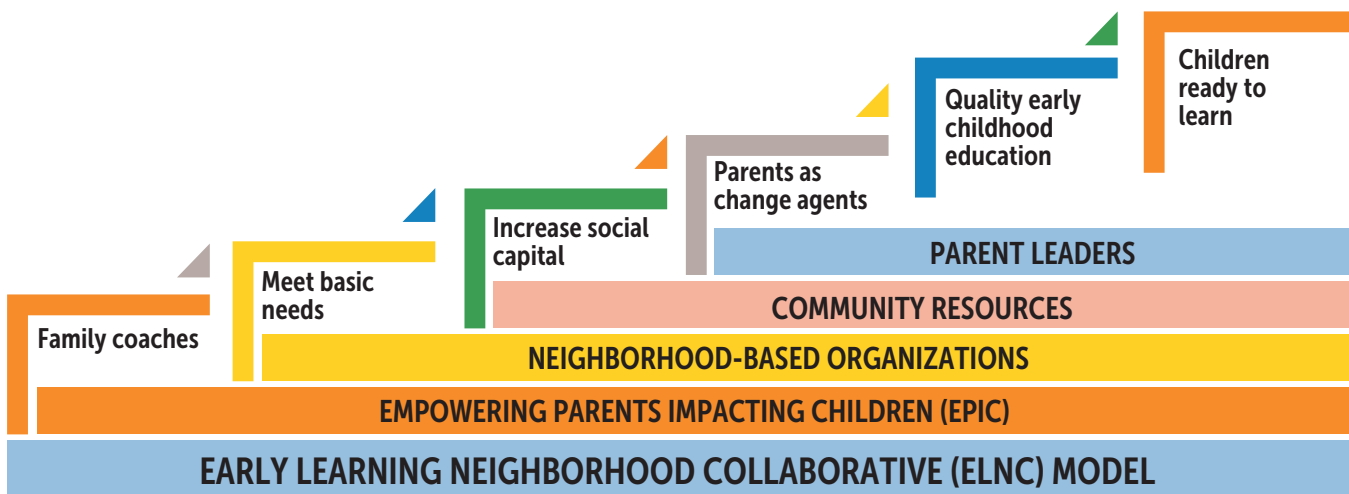
we developed coded themes (Miles et al., 2014) from the data. General themes that emerged from discussions indicated that embedding the EPIC model program-wide has provided parents with the needed stability to support their children in the context of a high-quality ECE program. Other themes that emerged pointed to the following essential elements of successful high-quality ECE programs:

- they stabilize families and transform communities;
- they provide access to needed resources within communities;
- they encourage, support, and sustain parent and family engagement;
- they promote goal setting with families and staff; and
- they promote equity and professional development.

Stabilizing Families and Transforming Communities

Many parents described ELNC as a place that helped create stability for them and their families. One parent elaborated even more by stating that the fact that ELNC provided a high-quality, safe, and culturally responsive ECE environment for her children allowed her to feel comfortable leaving them there. As a result, she was able to secure gainful, full-time employment, and her husband was able to go back to school and pursue graduate studies. All of the parents stated that having a safe ECE multigenerational program in which to leave their children helped to stabilize the entire community. Parents witnessed the change in their communities and described how the target ELNC neighborhoods were transformed from deserted, forgotten enclaves with little hope, to vibrant, family-friendly communities filled with great potential. In some of

Figure 2. Empowering Parents Impacting Children



The EPIC component of the ELNC model was intentionally designed through a partnership with PONA Consulting L3C as a “Parent Driven” two-generational approach using existing community collaborative resources. All families receive the services of a family coach who walks along side of them, providing support to develop a family-driven plan to meet basic needs and increase social capital.

ELNC's target neighborhoods, new children's playgrounds have been installed or refurbished, a community pantry has taken up residence, and more community policing presence is evident. Even community partners have begun to take ownership of neighborhood families with young children. At Steepletown, one of the centers in which ELNC operates, the multigenerational EPIC framework is readily apparent as an adult resource center has been added to the already existing preschool. What the parents have described is a multilayered path to family and community stabilization that began with creating ELNC and is sustained by community partners who took ownership of the community by providing support for families and children in ELNC's target neighborhoods. These examples demonstrate the power of simultaneously creating and sustaining relationships that are bidirectional and interdependent with families and community partners working together to transform their individual and community spaces.

Providing Access to Needed Resources Within Communities

Parents described ELNC as a place that felt "like family," and a welcoming, equitable, and nonjudgmental atmosphere where receiving family assistance and resources for young children was the norm and an expected outcome of participation in the program. The welcoming and supportive atmosphere was particularly important because many parents who struggled to provide for their families, and lived in underresourced communities, felt inadequate. They further articulated feelings of "embarrassment" at having to ask for help. However, the family-like, welcoming atmosphere at ELNC, accompanied by readily available community partners and accessible resources, was a critical aspect of the program that helped take away the stigma of asking for help. For example, a family with a newborn in need of a stable high-quality food source and diapers is connected with these resources during a home visit. The ELNC family coach then encourages this mom and dad, who intuitively detect their fussy baby's need to be held and comforted, each taking turns cradling him in their arms during the visit. In a peer group meeting, a parent with multiple young children expresses the desire to continue her own education and is referred to a local college with open slots. The other parents are encouraged by the idea of learning at the college alongside their ELNC toddlers and preschoolers and follow suit by enrolling at the college. All resources are located within the target neighborhoods in which ELNC families live. It is intentional. Families who have coordinated resources located within their communities, and under one roof when possible, are more likely to consistently access and benefit from these services (Alliance for Early Success, 2018). Locating and investing in services and resources within targeted neighborhoods also signals to families that they are important, worth investing in, and have a right to expect basic resources and services for their families and communities.

Family coaches and teachers also described ELNC as an organization of staff interested and invested in the families, children, and target neighborhoods served. Similar to the



Photo courtesy of ELNC

Young adults were eager to learn new skills and grow professionally, but did not have a safe, high-quality early learning environment in which to leave their children while they received training.

parents, the family coaches and teachers agreed that the "safe and secure" environment created by ELNC felt "like family." Using the EPIC multigenerational model, ELNC staff created an atmosphere in which family support and access to resources was an expected norm and right of every family and child who came through their doors. This environment helped families feel more empowered to ask for and expect help, resources, and services.

Encouraging, Supporting, and Sustaining Parent and Family Engagement

While access to resources and sustaining family and community stability were described as crucial components of ELNC's program, of equal importance were the connections between and among home visitors, family coaches, teachers, and parents. These connections, or relationships, formed a very much needed network of support and opportunity that helped to strengthen families and the community. Family coaches described the development of a parallel process in the relationships among and between staff and families. The Center of Excellence for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation defined parallel process as the concept of all relationships influencing the others at all levels (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.). As home visitors, family coaches, and teachers modeled strong, supportive relationships with each other and with families, parents began to develop supportive and resourceful relationships with each other, co-creating this experience for themselves and their children. This network of support and stability allowed parents to focus not only on their own individual needs and goals, but also the ways in which they could support the development and learning of their children. Family coaches and home visitors described helping parents understand early brain development, reading baby's cues, and providing safe and predictable spaces for attachment and bonding to occur. The home-visiting peer groups provided



Photo courtesy of ELNC

As Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative expanded its reach, the program grew to embrace the theoretical premise that empowered parents and families support young children and build better learners.

an opportunity for parents to observe and interact with their babies and also provided them a separate group in which to share with other parents what they observed and learned in the process. Preschool teachers routinely welcomed parents—and expected those who were able—to volunteer in classrooms and to share family experiences and observations involving their child. In fact, infant–toddler and preschool teachers both described expressing interest with parents around family cultural practices and language and working with them to create lesson plans reflecting families’ experiences. This is the parallel process in action and the EPIC model in full force.

Promoting Goal Setting With Families and Staff

Most families who join ELNC rarely leave until their children transition to kindergarten, and many staff noted the importance of supporting the same families and children, from 5 months through 5 years old, as crucial to the success of the program. The ability to create and maintain consistent and stable caregiving relationships with young children and families—called *continuity of care* (Theilheimer, 2006)—for 3 years or more has bolstered staff’s ability to create meaningful relationships and set goals with families. ELNC staff also stated that for young toddlers, promoting preschool readiness was a chief primary goal. Staff emphasized the importance of starting as early as possible with young children and partnering with families to provide and co-create developmentally appropriate experiences to stimulate optimal early brain growth and development. One family coach said, “Starting early sets them up for life,” and a teacher stated that starting early assists in “catching cognitive delays faster” for young children requiring more support and early intervention.

While many parents said that their main goals were ensuring that their children received a good education, furthering their

own education, and maintaining family stability, they also all stated that they wanted to raise good, well-rounded children. “I want to raise good humans,” said one of the parents. She then went on to describe how she and her husband had been more intentional about spending more time together as a family hiking, camping, and visiting with extended family whenever possible. She shared that she grew up without parental support, her grades suffered, and her future life and career prospects looked dismal. Then one teacher believed in and advocated for her, she turned her life around, and graduated high school with a higher than average GPA and a determination and confidence to follow her aspirations and continue her education. Because of her life experiences, this parent is aiming to be certain that her children receive all the support they need as early as possible in their lives so that they can be successful both socially and academically. Having experienced family stability and access to community resources through joining the ELNC community, she wants to ensure that their children have and maintain this foundation as adults and parents of their own families someday.

All the parents believed the ELNC experience to be the link to help with the transition to kindergarten. One parent described the continuity of care that happens as the result of placing young children in the ELNC program, “Children move from EHS to preschool to kindergarten; and if kept through the entire program they are watched, monitored, and staff makes sure they are ready for kindergarten.”

In addition to supporting parents’ goals and the goals of the program, teachers and family coaches also stated that they needed to always remain continual learners, stay relevant, and modify teaching strategies when necessary to meet young children’s needs. They are able to do these things by accessing professional development training on a monthly basis through webinars, director’s meetings, and other relevant training. They were also in agreement that supporting and empowering parents was essential. “If you better the parents, you better the child,” remarked one of the family coaches. Another family coach stated that, “Supporting parents and families supports children and creates family stability.” She stated that when parents are supported they feel more empowered and able to support their children’s needs. Teachers and family coaches also shared examples of parents furthering their education by obtaining more vocational training, GED, or both.

Promoting Equity and Professional Development

Equity and equality are not the same when it comes to ECE (National Association for the Education of Young Children Governing Board, 2019). *Equality* denotes that every child receives the same resources and therefore assumes children have the same opportunities to thrive from the start. *Equity* means that all children receive the resources that they need to thrive. ELNC was established on the premise that “all children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that enable them to achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society” (National Association for the

Education of Young Children Governing Board, 2019, p. 5). Providing access to sustainable resources and services along with a safe, high-quality, ECE space created more equitable conditions for young children to thrive. This commitment to equity both as a program and within the collaborative of programs has been an important marker of ELNC's sustained growth and success.

One area of improvement that ELNC staff and parents identified is the need to increase the numbers of ECE teachers of color in the classrooms and increase the number of leaders of color in the early childhood system in the next 3 to 5 years. In the current ECE landscape, most staff of color are concentrated at the teacher and teacher's aide levels, and due to low salary and benefits compensation rates, staff turnover is high in these positions (Cassidy et al., 2011). There are even fewer staff of color who hold leadership positions in the ECE field (New Venture Fund, 2018) as there is currently no professional development pathway that leads to ECE teachers and leaders of color becoming directors or administrators. One way to close this gap would be to establish an Early Childhood Administrative Institute within existing ECE communities that would be responsible for supporting and sustaining emerging leaders of color by providing ongoing mentoring and professional development.

Infant Mental Health Principles

Two infant mental health principles undergirding the development, theoretical premise, and ultimate success of ELNC are (a) the centrality of relationships and (b) the parallel process which occurs as a result of strengthening and sustaining these relationships (Edelman, 2004; Weatherston, 2000). Weatherston wrote that infant mental health consultation is guided by the belief that "optimal growth and development occur within nurturing relationships" (p. 5). In the case of ELNC, relationship-building and the parallel process are both being applied and understood from a systems perspective. The partnerships or relationships that developed between ELNC staff and community stakeholders created the necessary resources and supports for neighborhood families. ELNC staff also created a bond with families through goal-setting, supporting young children's development and learning, and supporting the parent-child bond. Ultimately, family stability resulted in an improved ability for parents to support their children's development and learning. In this case, all relationships influenced one another at all levels—the parallel process in action (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.).

Conclusion

In many cases "investment in the community" often means agencies and organizations providing resources and supports from other areas outside of the designated neighborhood. However, the ELNC model is one of targeted investment within a community committing to ongoing work together, as opposed to working in silos. By focusing on a common



Photo courtesy of ELNC

Equality denotes that every child receives the same resources and therefore has the same opportunities to thrive from the start. Equity means that all children receive the resources that they need to thrive.

purpose, ELNC and its community partners identified gaps in services and supports for families with young children and created a web of resources resulting in co-creating high-quality ECE in safer, and more family-friendly community spaces. In her book, *Reclaiming Community: Race and the Uncertain Future of Youth Work* (2019), Dr. Bianca Baldrige argued that stakeholders representing historical community institutions with established roots are the best partners with which to engage and coalesce around a common cause. They are known to local neighbors and committed to strengthening the community by virtue of their continued presence and willingness to collaborate with community partners. These are the agencies and institutions "hidden in plain view," and when resources are pooled they have the potential to transform communities for families and young children.

Future directions include expansion of the ELNC model to other vulnerable communities within the region surrounding Grand Rapids and ultimately in the state of Michigan where the work is not currently being implemented. There are many other vulnerable children and families who need the resources and services offered by ELNC and, as Dr. Ezeh frequently reminds her staff, "Time is of the utmost importance for our youngest children, and they cannot wait for us to get it together!"

Kimberly Diamond-Berry, PhD, IECMH-E®, is director of early childhood applied practice at the HighScope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, MI. Dr. Diamond-Berry develops and implements processes that ensure the translation of the science of early childhood into current early childhood practices and policies. She also disseminates new findings and evidence about approaches, curricula, and interventions that work best for young children and those who care for, support, and teach them in educational settings. A licensed clinical psychologist, Dr. Diamond-Berry is also endorsed as an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Mentor in policy.

Nkechy Ezeh, EdD, is founder, pedagogical leader, and CEO of Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative (ELNC), a place-based early childhood education (ECE) collaborative that provides funding, innovative shared support services, and advocacy to partner organizations rooted in underresourced communities. Through the Empowering Parents Impacting Children program, its successful dual-generational model, ELNC and partners provide family support and high-quality,

culturally relevant, ECE services to underserved families. Under her leadership, ELNC has received more than \$22 million in grants that have supported more than 2,200 children in the Grand Rapids community since 2010. In addition to her work with ELNC, Dr. Ezeh is a tenured associate professor of education and director of the Early Childhood Education Program at Aquinas College.

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