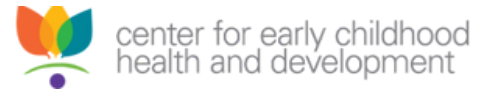


The Radical Refuge: Program Overview



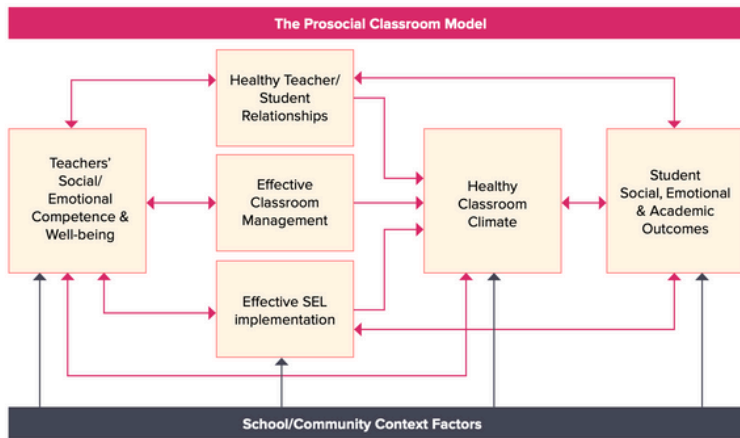
Dr. Vanessa Rodriguez

Assistant Professor



Teacher Mental Health & Well-being

Teacher mental health & well-being (MHW) plays a pivotal role in fostering healthy teacher-student relationships and a positive classroom climate, which in turn, promote positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students.¹ Since the landmark Prosocial Classroom Model was published, research has clearly shown that we must meaningfully invest in teacher MHW if we want to see positive student outcomes.

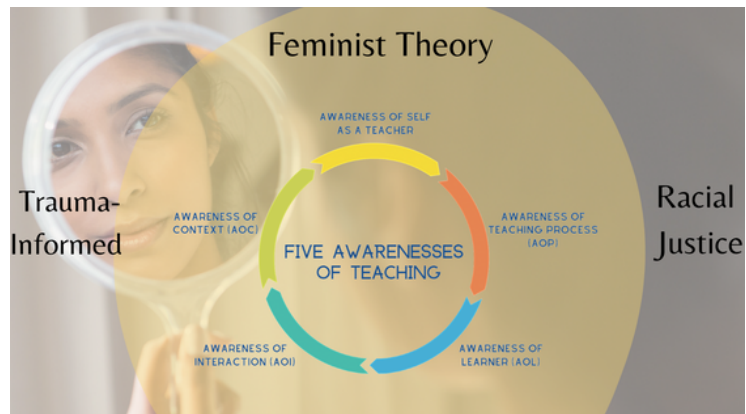


Source: Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). *The prosocial classroom*. Reprinted with permission from SAGE Publications, Inc.]

This investment is more critical than ever. Teachers in early childhood education (ECE) have long faced tremendous adversity and stress in providing children in disadvantaged communities with high-quality schooling. These challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with ECE teachers, especially women of color, functioning as essential workers to support disenfranchised communities. ECE teachers have continued to experience trauma without the time or the supports needed to process it.² Yet, as the social-emotional learning (SEL) content experts, ECE teachers are expected to support the social emotional development of young children. This is particularly difficult during times of crisis when both teacher and student are experiencing significant trauma.³ Research I conducted with ECE teachers about their experiences teaching during COVID-19 lockdown in NYC⁴ identified three themes: (1) societal and self-imposed expectations put upon women, (2) how the loss of classroom norms dismantled the teacher-student relationship and teacher's identity, and (3) the impact of past and present crises on the mental health and well-being of teachers. Left essentially alone, teacher effectiveness and morale has eroded. Systemic inequities have been exacerbated, highlighting a disproportionate impact on home and center-based child-care providers of color who teach predominantly children of color living in poverty. These trends mirror the literature seeking to explain soaring rates of ECE teacher attrition and challenges with recruitment and morale, especially amongst women of color.

Workforce Sustainability

ECE teacher workforce sustainability has traditionally been approached through removing financial and regulatory barriers to career entry (e.g., towards recruitment) or enhancing professional learning (e.g., towards retention).⁵ However, these external approaches have overlooked teachers' MHW. Critically, these approaches are based on research that does not reflect the composition of the ECE teacher workforce. While nearly 97% of ECE teachers identify as women,⁶ workforce sustainability research has utilized frameworks centering white male values that favors autonomy and separation, rather than fostering deep relationships, which is central to women's identity development.⁷ Additionally, while racial affinity positively impacts students of color,⁸ our systems are not effective in retaining Black and Brown teachers. Supporting ECE teacher MHW towards workforce sustainability requires a feminist model that is trauma-informed and with a lens towards racial justice.



Our Approach

Unlike professional support programs that promote individualistic male-centered models, our work is grounded in feminist theory,⁹ incorporating trauma-informed practice with a lens towards racial justice. Our evidence-based Five Awarenesses of Teaching framework was developed, piloted and tested with teachers.¹⁰ It guides our programming and continued research. This Framework categorizes teachers' MHW as depicted in their reflections on how they view themselves, their students, and students' families in relation to each other and their current context.¹¹ It considers the teacher a human being, whose past and present experiences play a crucial role in their MHW and teaching practices. By raising awareness of and honoring teachers as relational beings, our approach supports a healthy, sustainable workforce of teachers who are more effective in promoting positive outcomes for our most vulnerable children.

The Radical Refuge: Program Overview



Radical Rest¹²



Focus Groups¹³



Learning Journey Mapping¹⁴



Healing Circle¹⁵



Professional Programming

Our evidence-based service model considers effective implementation within an integrated, stage-based framework.¹⁶ We begin with a series of small professional support groups. Then, we convene as a whole group for a free day-long healing retreat. Both programs are Black¹⁷ and Latina¹⁸ Feminist Pedagogical Interventions, developed, piloted, and evaluated as part of a research-practice partnership. Throughout, we utilize methodological tools to collect data to inform a continuous improvement cycle. Preliminary findings suggest that participation enhances teacher mental health, well-being and commitment to the profession. These factors are linked to teacher effectiveness and healthy relationships with children.¹

Virtual Group

The evidence-based Five Awarenesses Framework¹⁰ was used to guide this series of virtual teacher support sessions. Each virtual session is 60 minutes and tailored to develop teachers' awarenesses across each of the five domains: 1) awareness of self, 2) awareness of learner, 3) awareness of context, 4) awareness of teaching practice, and 5) awareness of interaction. These sessions are book-ended by an introductory and a closing session for pre/post data collection. Groups are facilitated by clinical social workers, each with a decade's of experience supporting ECE teacher MHW. While popular self-care models place the onus of healing on the individual, our novel approach engages experts who facilitate and teach the practice of communal healing as a means to developing teachers' MHW skills to process ongoing systemic (i.e. racism, sexism) and situational (i.e. COVID-19) trauma.

In-Person: Healing Retreat

After participating in all seven support group sessions, teachers convene as a whole group for a free day-long healing retreat. Unlike traditional professional development trainings, this retreat was designed with and for Black and Latina women to further develop their MHW skills. It offers immediate support for the most important, often overlooked educators, through a series of four small group sessions and four whole group sessions. Small group sessions for qualitative data collection include radical rest,¹² focus groups,¹³ learning journey mapping,¹⁴ and a healing circle.¹⁵ Whole group sessions include the history of Black and Latina women in education, their future with ECE, and celebration(see Image 2). Sessions are in affinity, implemented by veteran educators, mental health professionals, and researchers committed to educator MHW and methodological expertise.

[View participant feedback here.](#)

Community-Based Participatory Research Approach

Supporting teacher MHW and workforce sustainability requires an ongoing commitment to identity development. Unlike one-off professional trainings, our program builds from year to year with cycles of support groups and retreats informed by the voices of women who have long been excluded from policy and practice reform. Our community-based iterative approach challenges the societal circumstances and structures that cause stress and trauma by engaging with the community to incorporate justice and equity in their professional supports. We are likely the first to embed feminist humanizing research into the design, delivery, and experience of teachers' direct support. As we scale, this enables us to be nimble and critically responsive to the MHW and identity development of all educators. As researchers, we do not aim to "fix teachers"; rather, our unique approach supports teacher MHW while generating insights that can inform policy reform and positively impact the workforce.

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Image 1. Virtual: Beyond the Classroom

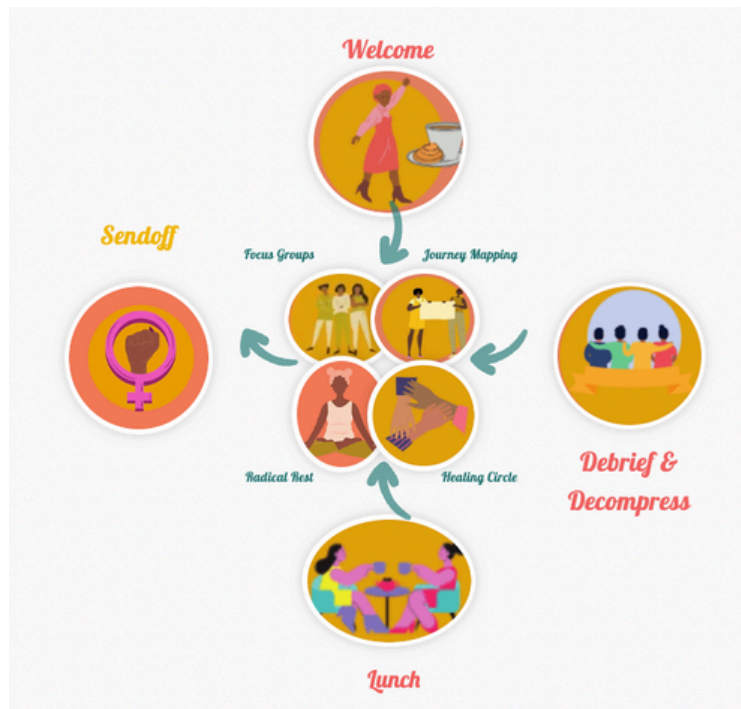


Image 2. In-Person: Healing Retreat

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