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LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

**You Can't Build Quality on a Broken Workplace:
Rethinking Leadership, Professional Development,
and Advocacy in Early Childhood Education**



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A Broken System Can't Build Quality

Billions of dollars are spent each year trying to improve the “quality” of childcare programs through new curriculums, assessments, and professional development checklists. Yet morale in many centers remains alarmingly low. Teachers call out frequently, skip quality measures, and hesitate to invest in their own growth.

Over the years, I've come to believe that what's missing isn't more systems or stricter accountability—it's leadership.

When I began researching leadership, culture, and climate in early childhood education (ECE) programs, I discovered a powerful truth: you can't build quality childcare on a broken workplace. Programs try to improve outcomes for children while ignoring the environments in which educators work. But when staff feel unsupported, undervalued, or unheard, even the best-designed improvement plan will fail.

I once visited a center where the director proudly displayed quality certificates along the hallway. But in the staff room, the teachers whispered about burnout. One told me, “I love these kids, but I'm running on fumes.” The walls said quality—but the culture said survival.

As Dr. T the Pre K Guru, I've walked into hundreds of programs and seen the same pattern: policies built on passion, but not people. You can't legislate belonging, and you can't checklist culture.

The Human Side of Quality

We often talk about “high-quality care” in terms of ratios, curriculum fidelity, and licensing standards, and while these are important—but they don't tell the full story. True quality is relational; it's built on trust, collaboration, and belonging among the adults who care for our children every day.

When those relationships break down and teachers feel micromanaged or dismissed, the entire program climate begins to suffer. Across diverse ECE settings, I've witnessed this same truth: leadership shapes everything.

Staff working under empathetic leaders describe empowerment and teamwork, while those under rigid, even punitive leadership, describe burnout, fear, and disengagement. The difference between a thriving and struggling programs isn't funding or QRIS ratings; it's leadership that listens.

Research by Akwaa (2025) reinforces this. Her study on social-emotional learning (SEL) and restorative practice found that educators' ability to model empathy and build relationships directly influenced student outcomes. Authentic school improvement depends on cultivating trust and belonging within the learning community; a reminder that quality cannot thrive where educators feel disconnected or undervalued.

“You can hear the difference in a strong early childhood program: the hum of teamwork, the laughter of children, and the calm confidence of educators who trust one another. That sound, the sound of connection, is what real quality feels like.”



Professional Development Without Purpose

As a field, we often treat professional development (PD) as the answer to every problem. Need higher quality? Send teachers to training. Need better compliance? Add a webinar.

Still, PD often misses the mark because it's disconnected from daily realities. Teachers juggle complex compliance demands, health, safety, and documentation while many PD sessions focus narrowly on theory, not practice.

I once attended a session where teachers were asked to memorize policy codes without ever discussing how they play out in a classroom of three-year-olds. At the conclusion of the training, the room was silent: no questions, no energy, no reflection. It wasn't that the teachers attending didn't care. It was that the training spoke at them, not to them.

[The Worthy Educator Framework](#) (2024) calls for purposeful and reflective practice as a professional standard, urging leaders to connect PD to educators' lived experiences. When this happens, training nurtures both competence and connection and shifts from being transactional to transformational.

Quality PD should do three things: build competence, build confidence, and build connection. When these align, PD becomes a bridge between accountability and authenticity, transforming compliance into collaboration.



The Leadership Gap

Many early childhood leaders are promoted for their teaching strength, not leadership preparation, and their training often centers on compliance: how to maintain ratios, complete forms, and prepare for inspections. This neglects critical components of leadership: how to build trust, resolve conflict, and create a culture where people feel safe to speak up.

The [Funds of Knowledge \(FoK\) framework](#) offers a way forward. Traditionally used to value the cultural assets children bring to school, the approach also applies to leadership. Every educator carries valuable wisdom from their family, community, and life experience, and when leaders recognize and leverage that expertise, they transform staff from “workers” into partners in improvement.

As Dr. T the Pre K Guru, I often remind directors: you don't build quality through control; you build it through connection.

Rethinking Professionalism

A common frustration I hear from directors is that staff “don't want to be professional.” Intrinsic motivation thrives only where people feel seen, supported, and respected. It's not that teachers don't care, it's that they often don't feel cared for.

Professionalism isn't compliance, it's community. When leaders create spaces for educators to share ideas, ask questions, and make decisions together, growth happens naturally.

Motivation isn't mandated, it's modeled. Professionalism grows where belonging is nurtured, and quality improves when people feel safe to take risks.

Bridging Policy and Practice

Policymakers often talk about “quality” as something measurable by stars or ratings. But the true measure of quality is felt: in the tone of a classroom, the warmth of a greeting, and the trust among colleagues.

As Lipsky (1980) explained in his theory of street-level bureaucracy, frontline workers, teachers, directors, caregivers, are the implementers of public policy. They interpret and negotiate conflicting demands of regulation, resources, and human needs. Educators are not just carrying out policy; they’re translating it daily under real-world constraints.

If we want to elevate childcare quality, we must invest in leadership development at all levels, not just administration. Funding for quality improvement must include emotional intelligence, cultural responsiveness, and organizational well-being.

Integrating regulation-focused PD strengthens the workforce by enhancing educator confidence, aligning daily operations with frameworks like [QRIS](#) and [COMAR](#), and promoting accountability tied to growth rather than punishment.

When educators understand the why behind regulations and feel trusted to use professional judgment, compliance becomes more than a checklist, it becomes part of their identity.



Educators as Advocates: The Dr. T Perspective

I once met a preschool teacher who spent her lunch breaks replaying her licensing audit in her mind—wondering if she’d done everything “right,” if the inspector noticed the chipped paint on the cubby shelf, or if her classroom notes were detailed enough. The audit was over, but it lingered in her thoughts, coloring how she spoke to her team, how she greeted parents, even how she saw herself as a professional. In her quiet reflection, you could see the weight—and the power—of the street-level policymaker at work.

Her story is not uncommon. Across classrooms and centers, educators carry the invisible labor of compliance, often without the tools or trust to influence the systems that judge them. But they do influence those systems—every day.

Your educator voice is your advocacy power. And as Dr. T the Pre K Guru, I say this often: when teachers and leaders link practice, regulation, and workplace well-being: we rebuild early education from the ground up.

The same skills that brought you into education can make you an effective advocate. Advocacy begins with reflection, on why you teach, what you value, and how you can use your voice to shape better systems.

Lipsky’s (1980) concept reminds us that frontline workers are also policymakers in practice. Through our daily decisions, how we interpret rules, adapt procedures, and respond to families, we shape systems in our everyday work. As educators, our advocacy isn’t resistance; it’s reform in motion.

Advocacy Priorities

- ✓ Require PD providers to show measurable educator outcomes tied to instructional and regulatory quality.
- ✓ Mandate leadership development focused on emotional intelligence and organizational culture.
- ✓ Integrate regulation-focused PD into training hours to boost confidence and reduce compliance stress.
- ✓ Evaluate PD impact through classroom observations and staff morale—not just attendance.
- ✓ Foster partnerships between higher education, programs, and agencies to connect research with practice.

These steps align professional growth with accountability, reframing quality as something we build together rather than something that is done *to* us.



A Call to Action

If there's one truth my research and my work has reinforced, it's this: quality begins with the people who make it possible.

Both *The Worthy Educator Framework* and my findings converge on this truth: we can't build strong childcare systems on foundations of burnout, fear, or silence. Real improvement starts when leaders invest in belonging, reflection, and shared power empowering educators as they feel seen, supported, and trusted to lead.

We must center the humanity of educators, their voices, knowledge, and relationships, as the heart of any quality system. Imagine a program where every teacher feels heard, every family feels welcome, and every leader feels trusted to show the way forward with empathy. That is the vision of a *worthy workplace*, a place where quality isn't a checklist but a culture.

When professional development is reflective and leadership is rooted in belonging, we move beyond compliance to connection. We build truly worthy educational spaces where educators, children, and families thrive together.



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Dr. Neffitina Thompson, widely known as Dr. T the Pre K Guru, is an educator, advocate, and organizational leader whose career bridges the worlds of early childhood education, leadership development, and workforce transformation. She makes it her mission to improve the systems that shape the educators who shape young lives. Her journey is one of persistence and purpose: from teaching young children to mentoring adult learners, she embodies the belief that it's never too late to lead, learn, or reimagine what's possible in education.  

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