

Creating More Dynamic Learning Experiences in PreK-3rd Grade

Final Report for Year 1 of the Dynamic Innovation for Young Children (DIFYC) professional development program

August 2019





\

Authors

Jennifer Keys Adair, PhD
Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction
Director of the Agency and Young Children Research Collaborative
Director of Dynamic Innovation for Young Children
The University of Texas at Austin

Molly E. McManus, PhD & Katherina Payne, PhD
Faculty Affiliates, Agency and Young Children Research Collaborative
The University of Texas at Austin

Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove, PhD
Faculty Affiliate, Agency and Young Children Research Collaborative
Texas State University

Copyright August 2019, Agency and Young Children Research Collaborative, All Rights Reserved.

The Dynamic Innovation for Young Children or DIFYC is a partnership between San Antonio ISD and the Agency and Young Children Research Collective within the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin. The partnership follows a co-constructive, cohort model for teachers, instructional coaches, principals and district leaders to re-design early childhood (preK-3rd grade) programming towards more dynamic, active and meaningful learning experiences district-wide.

INTRODUCTION

Being a young child in public school classrooms in the U.S. has changed significantly over the past 10 years (e.g., Graue, Ryan, Nocera, Northey & Wilinski, 2017). Children currently experience more direct teaching and less child-centered instruction (Takanishi, 2016). Children have less opportunities and time to play and interact with each other. Children have little or no opportunity to influence or make decisions about their learning, so they are unable to expand or demonstrate a wide range of capabilities (Adair, 2014). Instead, children are assessed continuously with tools that often do not reflect their learning or experiences (Yoon, 2015). This is particularly troubling, since the children who experience the most extreme versions of this type of schooling are those from culturally, economically and linguistically diverse communities (Crosnoe, 2005, 2006).

During 2018-2019, under the leadership of Superintendent Pedro Martinez, San Antonio Independent School District co-created and launched The Dynamic Innovation for Young Children professional development program in partnership with The Agency and Young Children Research Collaborative at The University of Texas at Austin. The program was designed and led by Dr. Jennifer Keys Adair (College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin) and Dr. Pauline Dow (Deputy Superintendent, San Antonio ISD). The main goal of the program was to co-construct professional development that could help teachers, principals and district administrators offer young children more dynamic, sophisticated and community-rooted learning experiences in their everyday schooling lives.



Impact at a Glance

- **25** teachers and principals at **6** SAISD schools & **13** district administrators
- **150** hours observing children in PreK, Kindergarten, 1st Grade and 2nd Grade
- **42** hours of professional development plus individual coaching over one school year for each teacher and principal
- **1,050** professional development hours for Cohort One
- **100** principals and **100** instructional coaches participated in district-level workshops

THE DIFYC MODEL

DIFYC is a professional development model designed to build district-wide instructional and leadership capacity in early childhood education. Built as a cohort model, teacher and administrator participants engage in a co-constructive retreat, five workshops on high quality early childhood education principles, and a series of action plans and coaching. DIFYC staff follow an observation/interview protocol with each participant (both teachers and administrators) to document and reflect on how children in their classrooms / schools use agency in their learning. Workshops include small ongoing professional learning communities and interactive delivery of content (e.g., videos of early childhood classroom experiences, discussion with peers and community members, designing projects, and reviewing assessment protocols created for specific classrooms).

Participant progress is documented in pre- and post-classroom observations and one-on-one interviews, transcript analysis of workshops, learning samples collected throughout the year, observations-in-context, and benchmark assessment data from the year previous to DIFYC participation and the year of DIFYC participation.



Essential Components of DIFYC

Multi-year
investment

Voluntary at school
and teacher levels

Co-constructive
cohort Model

Administrators and
teachers together

Focus on children's
agency and
experiences

Valuing children's
languages, families
and communities

Racial equity
commitment

Grow-your-own
teacher-leadership

Mixed-method data
as evidence of
growth



What DIFYC IS

A professional development program to help educators...

- approach **learning as an active endeavor** in which young children and teachers need agency to move, engage, observe and initiate.
- see young children as **smart, capable and caring** and create schooling environments that reflect this belief.
- Foster **teacher agency and leadership** in order to increase joy and professional depth.
- Fight against racist schooling practices by asking parents and families for their ideas and valuing the **languages, stories, lives and realities of the communities served by SAISD.**

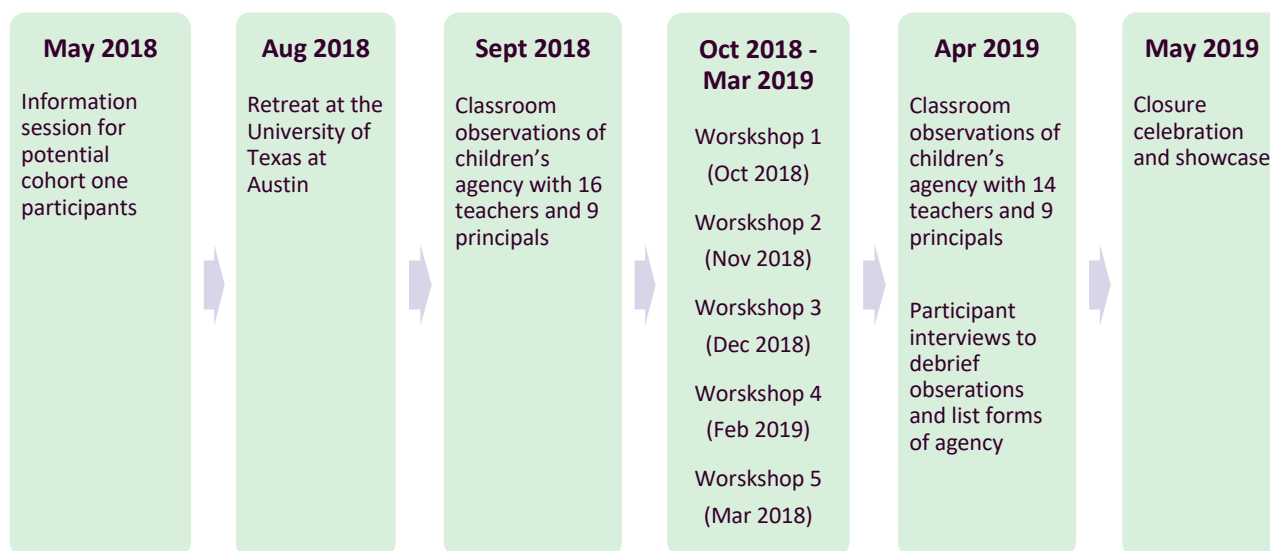
What DIFYC is NOT

A controlling curriculum, system or approach such as...

- a boxed curriculum
- a behavior management
- scripted teaching
- a one size fits all solution
- a deficit-oriented approach to families and children
- a color-blind approach to teaching and learning

SUMMARY OF WORK

DIFYC 2018 – 2019 Timeline



Retreat

DIFYC began at the end of the 2017-2018 school year with informational sessions for interested principals and teachers. These sessions included focus groups, video examples of cross-cultural early childhood education and an explanation of the DIFYC program. The DIFYC program began with a retreat hosted at The University of Texas at Austin. The retreat focused on children's learning experiences and how racial discrimination impacts what kinds of learning experiences young children receive at school. Participants shared their own schooling experiences, generated a strong list of the kinds of learning experiences they would like to offer young children in their classrooms and schools, and brainstormed the kinds of workshop topics that would support their pedagogical/learning goals for the children in SAISD.

Observations and Interviews

UT Austin Educators/Researchers spent two hours observing children in participants' classrooms or school and taking field notes on how children used their agency. This happened once at the beginning of the school year and again at the end of the school year to show progress in how participants could observe children's learning and agency AND to show improvement in how many ways children could use their agency in the classroom/school. After each observation, participants and UT Austin Educators/Researchers engaged in a "scripted conversation" interview to discuss the types of agency they noticed and documented as well as the capabilities children demonstrated by being able to move, engage, observe and use their initiative.

"I learned a lot just to let go, you know, letting them explore and build and do things on their own. I felt like kind of a weight off my shoulders," – Ms. Chapa, Charles Ball Elementary

Workshops

Workshops took place five times through the 2018-2019 school year. The topics were generated by the participants at the retreat.

Workshop 1: How do young children learn?

Instructor: Dr. Jennifer Keys Adair

This workshop focused on the concept of agency and the idea that children learn like scientists through embodied experiences, experimentation and social engagement. Empirical data from developmental psychology, early childhood education and neuroscience demonstrated young children learn in many ways including observation, making hypothesis, experimentation, helping out, collaboration, contributing to shared activities and using initiative. Data also showed that while historic and continuous racism has made it seem "normal" to deny many young children of color these kinds of learning experiences, all children need and deserve dynamic learning experiences.

Action/inquiry plans included teachers wanting to change their



practices/classrooms to provide more choices, encourage movement, foster more child-led discussions and expand the curiosity of children in their action plans.

Workshop 2: Six Steps of Inquiry Learning with Young Children – Part One

Lead speaker: Dr. Jennifer Keys Adair

This workshop focused on the first three of six steps of inquiry based learning - Curiosity, Experiment, Inquiry Question/Wondering, Research, Documentation, and Sharing/Teaching. Administrators and teachers brainstormed examples of children's curiosity, created inquiry webs, and generated strategies to listen to and develop units based on children's interests. Action/inquiry plans included incorporating children's interests into a lesson, support children choosing what to study, trying out ways to capture/document children's ideas, and asking questions and supporting children finding answers by themselves.

Workshop 3: Six Steps of Inquiry Learning with Young Children – Part Two

Lead speaker: Dr. Jennifer Keys Adair

This workshop focused on the final three steps of inquiry based learning. Using video examples, discussion and an actual inquiry into the human body using a range of materials and interests, teachers and administrators generated their own ideas for prompting and supporting inquiry in the classroom in ways that ultimately support agency and follow state TEKS. Action/inquiry plans focused on developing a project based on children's interests, things that are easily accessible in and outside of classrooms and that connect to children's real lives.

Workshop 4: Including Families and Communities in Early Childhood Curriculum

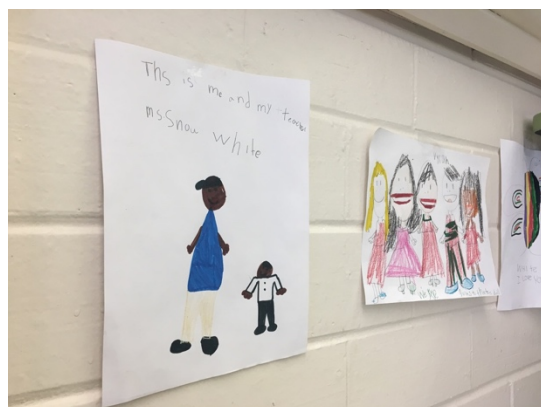
Lead speakers: PreK-3rd grade parents from SAISD, Dr. Adriana Alvarez

This workshop focused on including the languages and knowledges of families in classroom learning. Parents of PreK-3rd grade children within SAISD spoke to teachers and administrators about what kind of teacher they hope to have for their child, what their experiences with teachers have been like, what makes them feel welcome as a parent, and what kinds of learning experiences they hope their children have in the first years of school. Dr. Alvarez shared numerous examples of (and strategies to develop) TEKS-aligned inquiry projects that invite parents and families to share their expertise with students at school and value children's languages and family histories. Action/inquiry plans included creating an inquiry project that involved families' expertise and stories.

Workshop 5: Teaching and Caring for Children Experiencing Trauma

Lead speaker: Dr. Travis Wright

This workshop focused on how young children respond to trauma in different ways. Teachers and administrators discussed what trauma is, how it impacts children, and how teachers and schools can



create a caring space for their students. There was a particular focus on young children experiencing homelessness and how schools can support children's learning by welcoming them instead of dismissing or ignoring their actual, real experiences. Action/inquiry plans included open discussions with children, finding books that offer a strengths-based view of resilient children in many difficult life situations and create more opportunities for children to help one another and show care.



Teachers and Principals Inquiries and Goals

Teachers and principals were ambitious in what they set out to do and change in their classrooms and schools. Below are the most common inquiries and goals they explored and worked towards:

- Develop lessons that spark student curiosity (n=10)
- Motivate students and build their excitement to learn (n=10)
- Ask more questions (n=8)
- Increase student choice in classroom or school-wide (n=6)
- Connect Pre-K guidelines and TEKS to the interests of students (n=2)
- Help children appreciate and rely on each other more to problem solve (n=5)
- Help students share more personal experiences (n=5)
- Step back and interfere less (n=5)
- Bring experiences from home and welcome parents (n=3)
- Offer more freedom to explore materials out of curiosity and interest (n=11)
- Allow students to move around classroom and expand learning spaces (n=11)

“I like the freedom of it all, being able to say. ‘Okay these kids are interested. Let’s pull that in!’ It just gains so much interest and builds the communication. – Ms. Olivares, Carroll Early Childhood Center

TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE FOR CHILDREN AND EDUCATORS

Based on school and classroom observations as well as teacher and principal documentation DIFYC led to observed children’s capabilities improved over the year most notably:

> Increased student initiative

“I saw they put the Leap Frog pad up on my chart [and] they transformed it into a musical center. Like a musical, dancing center . . . that showed me so much imagination, creativity. That is agency. That is autonomy, right there.” – Ms. Rabago, SH Gates Elementary

> More movement and conversation

Students get their individual book bags (with leveled readers in them) and find a spot. Some are on the rug, others in the library, in the teacher’s chair at the kidney table, sitting around a small round table etc. Lily and Alice and Mia are reading the book Lily wrote during center time and taped to the wall. Children are absorbed in many different reading experiences at the same time, most of

them in groups reading and discussing together. – A scene from Ms. Bonard’s classroom, Agnes Cotton Elementary

“Students move from one space to another and talk and yell. They negotiate toys and share creations with friends and teachers.” – Ms. Santiago, Tynan ECE Center



> Problem-solving and helping with peers

Students go to the table and grab the colored paper, crayons, scissors, and tissue paper that is set out on the tables. They discuss what they’re going to draw. “A bush!” Some students get up to get extra supplies from the shelf. “How do I draw a bush?” a student asks. “Hold on, I’ll help.” a student replies, “You need green.” She models for him how to draw a bush on her own paper. – A scene from Ms. Santiago’s classroom, Tynan ECE Center

At the yellow table, Socorro still didn’t understand how to do the center, so she asked, Jackson how do you do this?” Jackson said “Look.” and showed her his paper. Jaxon, who had just come to the table, started asking Zelda, “What do we do?” Zelda sighed loudly and shook her hands as she told him, “I just told you two times. You aren’t listening.” Jaxon put his hand on her shoulder and told her, “Zelda, I definitely wasn’t listening because I wasn’t even over here!” Zelda looked at him, then said, “Come here.” Socorro, seeing her respond to Jaxon, asked, “Zelda, do you put it under this letter here?” Emmy looks up from her spot and asks “Wait, how do you do it?” Zelda complained about having to explain again. Jackson and Jaxon start playing with the bear, ignoring their worksheet. Zelda explained to Emmy and Socorro how to do the station then they worked at the table. After a couple of minutes, Socorro asked, “Does anyone know what 7+3 is?” Emmy, who had already solved that one, told her, “count it.” Socorro counted to 7 on her fingers then counted three more. She went to Emmy. “See, Emmy? You put it here because the letter is the same.” Emmy nodded. They kept working, not saying much. Then Socorro saw a problem and laughed. She said, “Jaxon, this is so easy. Look at 1 plus 1. It is so easy!” Jaxon says “No kindergartener doesn’t know one plus one. What if a grown up didn’t know 1 plus 1?!?” They both laughed. – A scene from Ms. Paez’s classroom, Advanced Learning Academy

> More student questions and student-led discussions

> Inquiry projects that children direct

“I like the freedom of it and being able to let them create the lessons. On Monday, [the students] came in and when we were talking about space, Dominic asked, “Oh, we’re learning about space?” I said, “Well yes. Jamier was really interested in it.” And Jamier turned around and said, “Yeah, didn’t you remember the moon was in the sky during the day?” So he talked about it to the class. “It didn’t look like the moon. It was only part of the moon, because it was a half moon.” Jamier saw [the moon] in the sky and he was like, “Well, why is that?” So we had a discussion about it on the playground about why the moon was out in the sky [during the day]. It just peaked his interest and other people started following suit when they saw all the cool things that happen and they talked about asteroids and then how craters are created. They got to explore those different things in the classroom. I like the freedom of it all, being able to say, “Okay, these kids



are interested. Let's pull that in! It just gains so much interest and it builds the communication.” – Ms. Olivares, Carroll ECE Center

“Before I picked a TEK and taught and continued on, but now my teaching is being more guided by students and of course still have a TEK behind all that we do in class” – Ms. Santiago, Tynan Early Childhood Center

> In-class units that involve families and/or family knowledge

Children at Cotton worked on a book about a special story of their families, modeled after a project shown by Dr. Adriana Alvarez (Bilingual Professor of Education at Colorado State University and DIFYC presenter). *“The [children] also got to present a book. I had so many parents show up. I was like oh my god, I haven't seen this many parents show up. I had about 40 parents come for Pre-K as they presented their books. It was awesome. They had the entire room full. Most of the kids presented. Some of them got scared but... they practiced in the morning. And there was one in Pre-K dressed up like a judge because she wrote her book about how she was going to be a judge. And she had the gavel and everything.”* – Principal Hammoudeh, Agnes Cotton Elementary

“I'm doing a whole lot more and I'm getting really good feedback from the parents about asking for stuff. Either help or sometimes it's just ideas. I ask the parents, "Hey, I wanted to do this, but I don't have this. Does anybody have this or something that'll work like it?" So their feedback is helpful. [They ask me] "Oh, have you tried this?" And a couple of them have sent me links and said, "Hey, I found this. Would you like this? Just I thought I'd give you this." And I thought, "Okay, we're going to ask for bags, see if anybody can donate a bag of potting soil." And we were going to get into the plants and start to root plants. Well, all of a sudden before I knew it I had four bags of plants!” – Ms. Hughes, Agnes Cotton Elementary

One of the most important pieces I leave DIFYC with is the importance of listening to the students. By doing this, we have explored so many REAL topics way beyond TEKS” – Ms. Paez, Advanced Learning Academy

> Improved listening to children's curiosities

While a group of children and Ms. Ramon were at the writing table, one child exclaimed, “I need more hands!” She was trying to draw multiple things on her paper. “I sometimes wish I had more hands. How many hands does an octopus have?” another child said. The children offered different

answers: 6, 10, 15. Ms. Ramon, instead of answering the children's question, responded with excitement, "We're going to have to research that. After we finish the zoo, we're going to have to do marine animals!" – a scene from Ms. Ramon's classroom, Carroll ECE Center

"From the wonder wall to identifying a group of students interested in spiders to creating time for small group spider study, this year has been a chance to not only notice student interests, but to provide kiddos opportunities to learn about a topic they independently identified" – Ms. Pikla, Advanced Learning Academy

"I learned a lot just to let go of, you know, letting them explore and build and do things on their own. And it was, I felt like kind of a weight off my shoulders," – Ms. Chapa, Charles Ball Elementary

> Joyful engagement and spontaneity

"In our word work center, I saw my students really exploring literacy using the LeapFrog pads. They were tapping words from the word cards onto the pads. After all, they seemed to turn the word work center into a musical dancing center. Jamar put one of the LeapPads on top of the bookstand, and he and Rain started to dance to the buttons they were pressing. They were having such a great time. It seemed like they were connecting literacy to music in a very fun way." – Ms. Robago, Gates Elementary

Shifts in Principals' Capabilities

Pre/Post Observation and interview data shows the following ways that principals and teachers developed.

> Stronger capacity for observing young children

"Now when I evaluate them, I'm watching what the teacher did to prepare for the students to learn. I've got to watch both. But I tend to watch students more, because it tells me more. It tells me what the teacher is prepared or not prepared for." – Principal Rivers, Charles Ball Elementary

> Deeper understanding of young children's learning

"My participation in this has given me an understanding that the teacher needs to back off more than maybe I had previously understood or appreciated, in terms of letting students negotiate things. . . so often when we intervene, we may actually be reinforcing the wrong things sometimes." – Principal Bieser, Advanced Learning Academy





> Increased support for teacher agency, collaboration and leadership

"There's no teacher space in there now. [The DIFYC teachers] came to me and they said, 'Hey, I want to remove my desk. Can you get the custodian to come take them out? Because I want to have more space for the kids.' And so during a faculty meeting I said, 'Hey can you share what you're doing in your classroom really quick?' One of them said, 'Well for my center, they were all cramped up and now that I don't have my desk in there and the shelves in there and the cabinets in there, they have more space for their center.' And then ... I could see some people pondering then thinking about it and now it's all going in that direction." – Principal Velasquez, Tynan ECE Center

"Some of the choices that I saw kids make was what they were learning about, what centers they go into, who they interact with, how they interact with them and how they handle different situations. They are capable of working collaboratively, problem solving, taking ownership, leading learning . . . and they're just curious about everything." – Principal Hammoudeh, Agnes Cotton Elementary

> More mechanisms to welcome families into school

"[Children] now see parents in the classroom acting as experts. For instance, we have a lot of our parents are coming in to present. Jacob R.'s dad came in and he actually owns a plumbing company and so he brought little goggles for everybody and tape measures. And that day everybody came out and they were like, 'I'm a plumber.' They were all wearing goggles as they were going home. . . And then there was a parent that worked at Taco Cabana and she came and she shared what she did." – Principal Hammoudeh, Agnes Cotton Elementary

> Improved support for children's agency

"Being a DIFYC participant has really opened my eyes. I'm learning to 'let go' and have students explore on their own. I learned that children need to explore on their own and communicate with each other to learn." – Ms. Chapa, Charles Ball Elementary

"It has also made me think about the "whole child" much more than I ever have. It has reminded me that students are much more than just reading levels, test scores, data, etc. They have so many more dimensions that I feel are being ignored" – Ms. Rabago, SH Gates Elementary

> More freedom for children to talk in hallways, cafeteria and other school areas + less behavioral controls such as lines on the floor, assigned cafeteria seating, noise monitors or body control in shared spaces

"They leave the classroom in pairs as they walk to the gym. They all walk together, not in a line, not really following a particular order. They are walking together, like in the street or the mall. The

teacher starts singing and then all the students follow. The teacher and a parent take the children to the gym. Children walk holding hands, jumping and walking. Some children are excited about all the visitors so they wave hello as they walk.” – Principal Velasquez, Tynan ECE Center

SPOTLIGHT: TYNAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CENTER

Tynan ECE Center made a number of significant changes during year one of DIFYC. Under the leadership of both Gregorio Velazquez and Dr. Ale Barraza, Tynan shifted their focus from behavior controls and order to children’s agency and social development. This led to major changes in the school environment, teacher engagement and children’s social and academic development.



> Before the DIFYC Development program, the hallways at Tynan had yellow lines that students were required to walk on as they transitioned throughout the school (before photograph). After the district-wide DIFYC principals workshop that focused on the school to prison pipeline, Principal Velasquez decided to remove the lines on the hallways so



children could walk freely and move between places to make school as different from prison as possible.

> Before the DIFYC Development program, teachers had carpets with colored boxes on which students had to sit in individually assigned boxes whenever they were gathered on the carpet. After workshop 3 that focused project-based learning and supporting students’ inquiry, two DIFYC teachers at Tynan asked Principal Velasquez if they could buy new carpets that did not regulate children’s bodies. The DIFYC teachers presented the idea at a school-wide meeting and teachers across the school wanted to change their carpets also.

> Before the DIFYC Development program, most teachers at Tynan had plastic and premade materials in the classrooms. A group of DIFYC teachers at Tynan worked throughout the year to replace plastic and premade materials in their classroom with objects made of natural materials such as wood, rocks, plants, sticks and leaves. Over the course of the year, the classroom environment changed tremendously and increased children’s curiosity and exploration of these materials. Teachers removed their teacher desk areas so that children could take ownership of the classroom without distinguishing between adult spaces and materials and child spaces and materials.



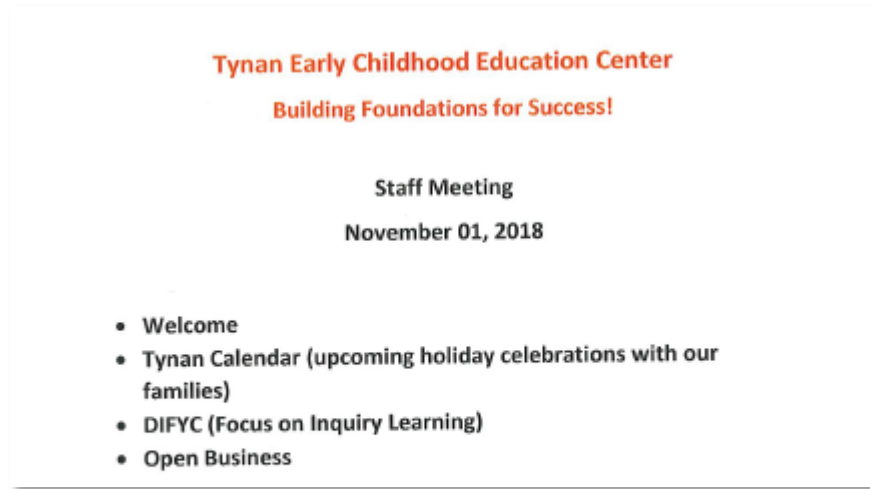
> Before the DIFYC Development program, the teachers did not run professional development efforts at the school. After the initial retreat, the DIFYC teachers at Tynan began sharing their learning from workshops with the rest of the teachers at their schools during staff meetings. Principal Velasquez formally scheduled time for them to share on each staff meeting agenda so they could present content



from the workshops and projects they were working on in their own classrooms. Over time, this practice developed school-wide interest in DIFYC as well as a school-wide learning community around the principles of the professional development. The DIFYC teachers who took this initiative are now serving as mentors to the second cohort of DIFYC teachers. This is an example of how DIFYC builds capacity in the district by developing early childhood education leaders.



Teacher-Led PD with DIFYC Content



Staff Meeting Agenda 11/1/18

REFERENCES

Yoon, H. (2015). Assessing children in kindergarten: The narrowing of identity, literacy, and culture in the testing era. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 15(3), 364-393.