

Bethica Quinn

Personal Mission Statement

My professional mission has two components. First, I value children's questions and investigations and view play as the driving engine of the educational process. Second, I believe that bilingual development is not only possible and advantageous for all, but also an essential human right for those who come to our school communities with languages other than English. My work at Centro Las Olas is a project of continual research into how to bring these two beliefs to life on a daily basis. My work with other teachers and schools throughout San Francisco is an invitation to other teachers to do their own research as they join me in imagining a world where every childhood is rich with opportunities for both wondering and communicating.

I believe that play should and must be at the center of early childhood education. All too often, it is the very children who come to our educational system with the greatest challenges – the ones who are most in need of quality learning environments characterized by highly developed play – who are offered instead an education based only on basic skills and memorization. I believe we must change that. Childhood is not a preparation for life; it is a part of life. Children have the right to days filled with interest, friendship, joy and discovery. What is more, play is an essential part of the young child's learning process. Through play, children develop their capacities for relationships, practice using language, master the process of symbolic representation, and exercise their powers of reason on subjects ranging from the life cycle of frogs to the difference between good guys and bad. Our job, as adults engaged with young children and their families, is to create the environment that invites and supports rich, sustained, complex and serious play... and then to be deep listeners as children communicate their discoveries. This includes inviting and documenting constructive and dramatic play; scaffolding extended projects and investigations arising from play themes; and connecting children with nature so that they can play in wild spaces as well as tame.

In addition to creating an educational space that explores the incredible power of play as the engine of learning, I am passionate about creating a space that demonstrates the potential of bilingual development. When we characterize children who come to the educational system speaking a language other than English only as "English learners," we are discounting both the value of their home languages and their capacity for becoming bilingual – that is to say, cognitively, culturally, and linguistically advantaged – members of society. I believe that, instead of ignoring or giving second place to home languages, we must acknowledge an obligation to support children in developing them to the fullest extent possible. We must enrich children's vocabulary in home languages, use those languages to reason and to represent ideas in complex play and investigations, share stories and sing songs. Experience shows that children with their bilingual base thus strengthened acquire English more easily as they continue to develop their other languages, come to academic learning prepared to succeed, and are ready for participation in an increasingly global economy. As a bonus, the children from English-only households who are fortunate enough to attend schools where this happens also have the opportunity to become bilingual and share these strengths.

At Centro Las Olas for the past eight years, I have had the privilege of working to create an educational space that puts my beliefs into practice. There, a diverse group of children spends their time playing in Spanish and I get to join them every day. I also have the privilege of welcoming practicum students to join me in this space through my role as a mentor teacher. I have begun to share what I have learned at Las Olas with other educators as well. I have been fortunate to be able to create and facilitate professional learning communities exploring the themes of child-centered curriculum and bilingual development through First Five San Francisco. I hope to continue working in both of these worlds – the world of children and families and the world of teacher development – in the years to come.