

The Robeson Persona Project Introduction

Adult learners, including college students, are more successful in completing their programs when instructional content is connected to their lives¹. Yet there is a lack of instructional materials for preparing current and future early childhood educators (ECEs) that authentically reflect the values, traditions, context, assets, and challenges of America’s children and families, particularly those living in rural communities².

Personas are instructional tools with promising evidence³ for preparing and supporting adult learners to select and implement evidence-based practices that support young children and their families. Unlike more traditional vignettes or case studies, personas are asset-based and concise stories of a child and family that address aspects of development, family and community context, and individual characteristics.

In November 2024, a team from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at UNC-Chapel Hill began coordinating the co-creation of a set of personas that would reflect the identities, histories, and lived experiences of the children and families in and around Robeson County in rural North Carolina (NC). The project builds on the work that one of the team members, Camille Catlett, has successfully led in partnership with faculty, community partners, and families in Michigan, California, and other states. Partners in developing the Robeson personas were faculty members (Robeson Community College, UNC Pembroke), family members, educators, and community partners (e.g., Head Start, Robeson County Partnership for Children, the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina).

This collaborative project yielded a set of eleven personas that can be used by faculty, instructors, administrators, coaches, mentors, and others to prepare and support early childhood professionals to authentically work with children and families. While the personas were developed with the Robeson community, they can be used or adapted for other communities.

You can find the [Robeson personas](#) on the SCRIPT-NC website.

¹ Karp, M.M. (2011). *Toward a new understanding of non-academic student support: Four mechanisms encouraging positive student outcomes in the community college*. New York: Community College Research Center, Teacher’s College, Columbia University.

² Muniz, J. (2021). *Embracing culturally responsive and sustaining instructional materials: Promising strategies for state and district leaders*. Washington, DC: New America.

³ Shaffer, L., Seggerson, D. S., Catlett, C., & Holmberg, K. (2022). *Addressing personnel preparation needs through intentional statewide personas: The Michigan persona project*. Unpublished presentation handout. San Diego, CA: Conference on Research Innovations in Early Intervention.



The Robeson Personas Co-Creators

The FPG team is deeply humbled and privileged to have dedicated partners from the Robeson community who agreed to share their stories and expertise to make this project possible. The Robeson Personas Team included:

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The Robeson Personas

Click on the name of each child to review the persona.

Child	Age	Considerations	Family Configuration	North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development Domains ⁴				
				APL	ESD	HPD	LDC	CD
Lily	3	Down Syndrome, Lumbee heritage	Grandmother, parents, sister	x	x			
Kayden	4	Native American heritage, behaviors that challenge	Parents, brothers, grandparents	x	x			
Liam	4	Bilingual, giftedness	Parents, sister, grandmother	x				x
Luke	4	Native American heritage, behavior that challenge	Parents, sister, grandparents	x	x			
Mya	4	African-American/Black	Mother, father, brother	x	x		x	x
River	4	Bilateral microtia (hearing loss)	Parents, fraternal twin sister		x		x	
Rosalina	4	Language delay, experiencing homelessness	Mother, grandmother		x	x	x	
Ben	5	Spina bifida, Lumbee heritage	Parents, grandparents, aunt, uncle, cousins, siblings			x		
Annie Rose	5	Limited vocabulary, communication challenges, Native American heritage	Parents, brother, grandmother	x	x		x	x
Gage	7	Autism, Native American/Lumbee heritage	Mom, sister, brothers, grandmother	x	x		x	
Leighton	7	American Indian heritage	Mom, grandparents, extended family members	x	x			

⁴ APL = approaches to play and learning; ESD = emotional and social development; HPD = health and physical development; LDC= language development and communication; CD = cognitive development





Lily

Lily, a beautiful 3-year-old, red-headed Lumbee preschooler, is deeply connected to her cultural heritage, which plays a vital role in both her life and her family's. From an early age, she has been surrounded by strong family values rooted in connection, support, and shared experiences. These values are reflected in her family's everyday life—for instance, their grandmother joined them on a family vacation to Disney, emphasizing the importance of extended family involvement and togetherness.

Born with Down syndrome, Lily thrives in the nurturing environment her family has cultivated with love and intention. Her parents are deeply committed to her well-being, offering gentle guidance and redirection as she navigates daily routines and interactions. They are especially attentive during medical procedures, ensuring she always feels safe and supported.

Lily has a confident, expressive personality and is never shy about sharing her honest opinions, something her family both appreciate and encourage. She loves spending quality time with her older sister, Sarah, often engaging in shared activities that strengthen their close bond. One of Lily's favorite pastimes is taste-testing different foods, especially sweet treats like Oreos and milkshakes. These playful moments not only bring her joy but also offer opportunities for sensory exploration and connection.

Lily primarily communicates in English, and her voice—bold, curious, and full of heart—is celebrated every step of the way.

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(Image created using AI)

Kayden

Kayden is an energetic, loving 4-year-old preschooler who lives with his parents and three brothers. His father is African-American and his mother is Native American. Kayden's brothers are 2, 6 and 8 years old. Life in his family is a whirlwind, with all the children involved in sports, church activities, and family gatherings with their large group of cousins. Kayden's parents work outside the home. His mother, a dedicated high school teacher, is deeply involved in her children's education and serves as a leader in the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO). She describes Kayden as loving, smart, and eager for attention.

Kayden loves being outdoors and spending time on his four-wheeler. He also loves visiting his grandparents (who live nearby), playing soccer and baseball, spending time on his tablet, and playing with his cousins. While Kayden seeks praise and thrives on positive reinforcement, his competitive streak sometimes surfaces at home. He can grow aggressive when correcting his siblings, particularly during conflicts with his older brothers. His parents are aware he is the middle child, so they worry about Kayden's need to be both a pleaser and someone who may demonstrate aggressive behavior when denied attention.

In preschool, Kayden is polite, cheerful, and an eager helper. His teacher notes that Kayden is a natural pleaser—always looking to help his classmates succeed and find happiness. However, he occasionally feels upset when his peers don't follow his instructions or cooperate with him. During these moments, his teacher redirects him to independent tasks where he can focus and thrive. He can be very talkative and seeks attention. Kayden's favorite part of the school day is carpet time, where he enjoys reading and being read to. He also loves arts and crafts, along with outdoor recreation, where he runs and plays energetically with his classmates. Known for his kindness, Kayden is well-liked by his peers.

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Liam

Four-year-old Liam is the youngest in his family, with an older sister five years his senior. He lives with both parents, who are employed. From infancy, Liam was immersed in a rich environment of books and language, and his family places strong emphasis on quality time together through shared meals, board games, vacations, and visits with extended family.

An especially influential figure in Liam's life is his paternal grandmother, who holds a degree in child development. She has supported his growth by providing age-appropriate books and educational toys while also sharing Puerto Rican cultural traditions such as cuisine.

Liam loves learning. From an early age, he enjoyed memorizing and reciting favorite stories with impressive detail. Reading remains a favorite pastime, but he also enjoys video games—especially Super Mario Brothers—and delights in ordering meals for himself when dining out. He is generally obedient and eager to follow rules, though he resists when asked to stop playing games.

At home, English is the primary language. While his grandmother encourages his learning of Spanish, Liam often prefers English. He shares a close relationship with his sister, valuing time in her company. At school, he looks forward to learning and shows particular interest in reading and math. He has even begun solving addition problems on his own, impressing his parents. His parents and his grandmother worry that his advanced skills are not being fully nurtured at school despite alerts to his teacher.

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Luke

Luke is a very active four-year-old who lives in a small town with his parents and his one-year-old sister. Luke's family includes both American Indian and Caucasian heritage. His busy life includes swimming lessons, soccer, riding his bike, and fishing. Luke loves animals and has pet dogs and a pet goldfish. One of his favorite things to do is spend time with his grandparents on their farm where he gets to release a lot of his energy.

Luke's parents describe him as a happy and loving child who interacts well with people, even calling him a "social butterfly." He is curious, enjoys building and creating with blocks, and likes to be engaged in hands-on activities whenever possible. Luke doesn't like quiet activities, like reading books.

(Image created using AI)

Luke's parents also report that he has difficulty communicating about his emotions. For example, he often exhibits his displeasure about the amount of attention his little sister receives through both words and actions. They also say he becomes stubborn and defiant when he does not get his way. His parents have used words like "impulsive" and "hyperactive" to describe him, also mentioning that his talking is sometimes excessive.

Luke does not have much experience interacting with children his age but has recently joined a play group to provide experience socializing. The play group leader's comments about Luke's excessive talking have his parents concerned about how he will do in kindergarten next year. They do not want his challenges to overshadow his positive qualities.

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Mya

Mya is a four-year-old African American/Black Head Start student who lives in Robeson County with her mother, father, and 3-year-old brother. Although both parents work, Mya's family works hard to make ends meet each month. Her mother works part-time so she can be available to support her children, both of whom have learning disabilities. Education is a priority for this family and both are active participants in the educational process of both children.

Mya loves to play with baby dolls and stuffed animals. Despite the closeness of her age to her brother's, Mya prefers to play alone both at home and at school

Mya attends a full-day preschool in an inclusive setting and has been diagnosed as Developmentally Delayed and Autistic. To support her educational growth, she receives services from a medical speech therapist, an education speech therapist, and an Applied Behavior Mental Health Therapist, who is assigned to Mya's classroom environment daily.



(Image created using AI)

Math is an area in which Mya excels, especially with the identification of shapes and colors. She can touch count from 1 to 10. She can follow two-step directions easily. After a long period of being nonverbal, Mya has recently started to use words and to form short sentences. Socialization with others with whom she is not familiar is a struggle for her, as are loud noises and soft food textures. Presently, she relies on a teddy bear for comfort and security when placed in an environment that has loud noises or requires her to socialize with unfamiliar people.

Mya's parents are concerned about her socialization and her language development. They are eager to learn more about ways in which they can support Mya's learning and development at home.

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River



Four-year-old River lives with her parents and her fraternal twin sister. She was born with bilateral microtia, a rare congenital condition of the ear. Bilateral microtia of the ear can be defined as small, malformed ears and the absence of ear canals that would lead to hearing loss. River has undergone several surgeries to address her condition and unfortunately, she is expected to require additional surgeries as she gets older. To support her hearing, River wears a Bone Anchored Hearing Aid (BAHA) along with a cochlear implant. Due to her diagnosis, River was not expected to be able to speak. However, with the support of her BAHA and cochlear implant, she is able to engage in conversations with her family, peers, and anyone she chooses.

River enjoys dancing; dressing up with makeup and doing her nails; she enjoys watching YouTube videos and participating in online gaming. She prefers smaller, familiar social settings and feels uncomfortable around strangers and in large crowds. She enjoys spending quality time with her sister and her parents.

In River's inclusive preschool classroom, her teacher wears a microphone connected to the BAHA which enhances River's access to spoken language and supports her classroom participation and language development. To further support her communication development, her teacher is helping River learn American Sign Language. River receives weekly speech therapy services. Recently, River has become more aware of teasing and bullying related to her disability which has affected her self-esteem.

While River performs well in school, her mother consistently raises questions about River's overall progress and is exploring whether additional or alternative supports could further enhance her development. Given the rarity of bilateral microtia in their area, her mother wonders if access to providers with more specialized experience, such as those in larger metropolitan regions, might offer different perspectives or strategies. River's mother also wants River to experience relationships with her peers in a setting that meets her physical needs as well as her emotional and social needs.

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(Image created using AI)

Rosalina

Rosalina is a four-year-old girl who recently started the state PreK program at her local school. She lives with her mother and grandmother. Rosalina's mother works two jobs, and the family struggles financially. They are currently considered homeless, after losing their home and all belongings during hurricane flooding. They now live in a camper in the backyard of relatives. While her mother is working, Rosalina's grandmother takes care of her when she is not at school. However, her grandmother has recently had significant health issues. Rosalina has become very sensitive to her grandmother's needs and will at times refuse to leave her side. She tries to help do things around the house to help.

Teachers note that Rosalina is a hard worker and wants to please adults. She is very artistic and prefers quiet art activities. She is very independent and tries to help the adults around the room but often avoids the other children. She prefers to sit in the grass and draw pictures of the things around her. Rosalina has highly developed fine motor skills and is able to draw very detailed pictures of people and animals. She avoids gross motor activities (i.e., running, jumping, playground equipment).

According to her teachers and mother, Rosalina is very sensitive and cries easily. She will withdraw when she thinks something bad is going to happen (i.e., when things get loud at school or when something falls). She has great difficulty during fire drills and at times needs to be carried out of the building because she becomes afraid.

Her teachers have noted that Rosalina comes to school with poor hygiene and is frequently hungry. They make sure she has something to eat when she first comes in and she receives backpack meals on Friday to take home.

Both Rosalina's mother and her teachers are concerned about language delays. Rosalina has difficulty using and understanding common vocabulary, which impacts her listening comprehension during class. She can label only a few objects and people in her environment (i.e., mom, grandma, teacher, potty, eat, drink, and crayon). She will sit and listen to a book being read but has difficulty answering simple questions about what she heard, even in familiar books. She loves to look at the pictures and will show the teacher the pictures she likes.

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Ben



Five-year old Ben has grown up surrounded by family: his parents and older siblings in the same house, his grandparents in a house on the same lot, and his aunt, uncle, and cousins across the street. Ben and his family are members of the Lumbee Tribe and have grown up listening to the stories of his grandparents and other tribal elders and participating in tribal celebrations.

Ben was born with spina bifida, which has impacted his mobility. Ben and his family have always viewed his disability as part of who he is, but not the definition of who he is. As a young child he got around in a stroller, and he got his first wheelchair when he started school. The chair had small wheels in the front that lit up when he moved, a feature that made Ben very popular.

Science is Ben's favorite subject, and he especially loves hands on learning. He enjoys participating in Indian Education programs offered by the Lumbee tribe that offer opportunities to learning about traditional housing, dances, and other tribal traditions. Reading is not a priority because it doesn't connect to topics he's interested in.

Ben's aunt Kim describes him as a very sociable child. Since he was an infant, he has participated in family gatherings and in a faith community that has provided weekly opportunities to interact with lots of different people. Many members of Ben's family are educators, and the priority for learning and pursuing advanced degrees is strong. They have high expectations for Ben and push back when teachers alter expectations because of his disability.

At school, Ben wants to participate exactly as his classmates do. On the playground, he wants to go outside and play. During story time, he wants to sit on a carpet square just like his friends do. And on a field trip, he wants to sit on a regular bus seat with his friends instead of being forced to go to the back of the bus where he can be bolted down. Lately Ben's been frustrated that his chair won't allow him to go into the housekeeping area.

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Annie Rose

Annie Rose is a 5-year-old Native American who lives at home with both of her grandparents and her older brother. Neither grandparent completed high school, and her brother also did not complete high school. Both grandparents work outside the home, and Rose is picked up from school every day by her grandmother, who works as a janitor at the local high school. While waiting for her grandmother to finish work, Annie Rose enjoys exploring the science room, where her curiosity is often sparked by the materials she sees.

Her family shares strong religious values, a solid work ethic, and places high importance on education, though they are unsure how to support Annie Rose academically because of their own limited educational experiences. The family is tightly knit, and Annie Rose is also closely connected to her aunt and cousins who live nearby.

(Image created using AI)

Annie Rose is a friendly, outgoing child who enjoys making friends and helping others. She is eager to please, especially her teachers. She responds well to praise and thrives when her efforts are recognized. Annie Rose loves to be active and prefers hands-on activities. Annie Rose is very interested in science, art, and music as these subjects allow her to explore, create, and express herself in ways that align with her strengths.

Her kindergarten classroom can be challenging for Annie Rose, especially when she is required to sit still for long periods. Reading and math are particularly difficult for her, and she often feels confused or unsure about what's happening in class. She sometimes daydreams and is reminded by her teacher to stay focused. Annie Rose has a limited vocabulary which impacts her comprehension and verbal expression. She also lacks confidence in class and becomes anxious about making mistakes, particularly when asked to participate in front of the class. Sometimes when Annie Rose cannot express herself verbally, she uses nonverbal behaviors like biting.

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Gage



Gage is seven years old and was diagnosed with autism when he entered Kindergarten. He lives with his mom, dad, 15-year-old sister, 9-year-old brother, and 10-year-old brother who is also diagnosed with autism. The family has Native American/Lumbee heritage. Embracing and celebrating their cultural identity is important in Gage's life. Participating in traditions, storytelling, and connecting with their roots gives him a sense of belonging and pride. The family incorporates cultural practices into Gage's routines, which has been a beautiful way to strengthen their bond and honor their ancestors. Gage also has a special relationship with his grandmother and frequently asks to visit her. Gage's mother and family celebrate the unique opportunities raising and living with an autistic child can bring, such as moments of pure joy and gratitude for small victories.

Gage loves dinosaurs and playing with his toys. He can be a picky eater but loves chicken nuggets, fries, fried chicken, and corn on the cob. He dislikes sharing. Gage loves to do homework and schoolwork. As soon as he is in the car, he asks when he can do it. With support Gage can independently write his first name, trace letters, and count to 10. He continues to show improvement in his skills.

Gage is currently in a self-contained classroom. He didn't talk until age six but now mainly uses complete sentences to communicate. He has difficulty identifying and expressing his emotions. Gage will script lines from movies and fixates on specific words or lines. He has difficulty transitioning, especially between activities and in new environments. He is a mellow, happy child and is friendly and well-liked.

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Leighton

Leighton is a spirited 7-year-old American Indian boy with striking hazel eyes. Known affectionately as "Popi" by family and friends, he's a bundle of energy who's rarely seen sitting still for long. His infectious laugh and mischievous smile make him popular among his peers and adored by his extended family.

Leighton lives with his mother, who works as a travel nurse, and his 12-year-old sister, who is involved in competitive cheerleading. His father passed away in a car accident when Leighton was 6, a loss that has shaped his young life significantly. Though still processing this grief in his own way, Leighton finds stability through his strong connections with extended family. He spends considerable time with both sets of grandparents and enjoys special relationships with his maternal aunts, who help care for him when his mother is on assignment. This extended family network provides Leighton with consistent love and cultural grounding in his American Indian heritage. Leighton loves to attend fall and spring Pow-Wows with his maternal grandmother.

Beyond his immediate family, Leighton has formed several meaningful connections: his fifth-grade male cousin serves as both playmate and role model; a diverse group of friends at school appreciate his adventurous spirit; and the school crossing guard greets him daily with a special handshake. These relationships provide Leighton with much-needed male mentorship following his father's passing, offering emotional support that complement his female-dominated home environment.

Leighton embodies the concept of a "boy's boy" - constantly in motion and drawn to outdoor activities. Since receiving a BB gun for his 7th birthday, he's developed remarkable focus while target practicing with cans, showing patience that contrasts with his typically energetic behavior. Leighton loves to travel and he eagerly anticipates trips to both the beach and mountains during the summer. These adventures fuel his curiosity about the natural world. He's equally excited to travel to his sister's cheerleading competitions, where he enjoys being her biggest supporter and exploring new places.

Leighton is an enthusiastic reader who can become completely absorbed in books about animals, sports heroes, and travel destinations. His reading skills are above grade level, though his restlessness sometimes makes classroom participation challenging. His teachers note that Leighton learns best through movement and hands-on activities. When lessons incorporate physical components or competitive elements, his engagement skyrockets. He struggles with activities requiring extended periods of sitting still but loves to express himself through active learning. He especially loves to help his grandmother with any tasks she may be doing, such as cooking. Leighton's energy is his greatest strength but can also be a challenge in the classroom.

In conversations with Leighton's teachers, his family has expressed interest in ways to transform his intermittent disruptions into positive contributions. They are eager to explore ways in which movement breaks or other effective practices might support a more productive day for Leighton.

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