

DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLE

The Development of Program Identity in Blended Early Childhood Personnel Preparation

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Blended personnel preparation programs grant teacher candidates more than one teaching license, qualifying them to provide educational services to young children and their families in a variety of early childhood education (ECE), early childhood special education (ECSE), and early intervention (EI) settings. However, there is not yet a cohesive understanding of the qualities and characteristics blended programs share. In this paper, we describe one blended program from a four-year, undergraduate educator preparation program at a large, research institution in the Midwestern United States. We address multiple key components of our program, including a brief historical overview, its curriculum and content, and several unique program features. We also discuss how our program aligns to both the EI/ECSE Standards and the ECE Standards and Competencies. We include specific examples from our program to illustrate our blended approach to personnel preparation.

Keywords: blended programs, personnel preparation, early intervention, early childhood education, early childhood special education

The Development of Program Identity in Blended Early Childhood Personnel Preparation

Early childhood educator preparation programs have evolved over several decades with an increased interest in blended programs, which qualify teacher candidates to provide high-quality educational services to young children in early childhood education (ECE), early childhood special education (ECSE), and early intervention (EI) settings (Mickelson et al., 2023). Broadly defined, blended early childhood preparation programs grant emerging education professionals more than one teaching license and include content and philosophy from ECE, ECSE, and EI, delivered with an interdisciplinary lens (Miller & Stayton, 2006). This shift towards developing and implementing blended programs has been shaped by changes to state and national policy, ongoing research, and influence from professional organizations (e.g., the Division for Early Childhood [DEC] of the Council for Exceptional Children [CEC] and the National Association for the

Education of Young Children [NAEYC]), ultimately aiming to better prepare educators to support an increasingly diverse early childhood context (DEC, 2020). Advancing efforts towards inclusion in early care service delivery, an overall increase in the heterogeneity of children and families served, and policy-driven increases in interdisciplinary collaboration continue to contribute to the growing diversity in early childhood programs and the need for education professionals to have a broad range of skills to support all children and families in their care (DEC & NAEYC, 2009; Miller & Stayton, 1999; Power to the Profession Task Force, 2020). For instance, with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) reauthorization in 2004, the definition of *natural environments* in early intervention service delivery was expanded to require that children with disabilities are educated alongside typically developing peers.

To date, there is no established empirical evidence suggesting that blended, or any other program model, specifically contribute to the implementation of inclusive practices in early childhood environments (Pugach et al., 2014). However, blended programs are believed to provide emerging early childhood educators with the varied knowledge and skills needed to serve all young children and their families (Mickelson et al., 2022), thereby potentially supporting the promotion of positive child and family outcomes (DEC, 2014).

Working Towards a Shared Understanding

Despite overall enthusiasm for blended programs, there is not yet a cohesive understanding of the qualities and characteristics they share. The structure and content of blended teacher preparation programs vary across institutions, bringing with them varied curricula and implementation. While the field's professional organizations have made significant advances in establishing personnel preparation standards valuing blended ECE/ECSE/EI content (CEC & DEC, 2020; NAEYC, 2020), efforts to advance research centering blended programs' composition and impact have been limited. Without empirical evidence and continued attention to blended programs in the literature, the development of shared terminology, definitions, and guidance for these programs has been sluggish (Mickelson et al., 2023). Considering the ongoing evolution of blended programs in the absence of explicit direction and their potential for developing educators to support inclusive early childhood settings, the field needs to learn more about blended programs currently offered. Descriptions of existing blended programs, including information about their curriculum, alignment with professional standards, level of interdisciplinary implementation, and opportunities for growth, may help continue to develop the identity and effective components of blended programs.

Purpose

In this paper, we describe one innovative model of blended educator preparation for inclusive early childhood environments. We detail how our program aligns with the most recent professional standards in the fields of ECE and EI/ECSE (CEC & DEC, 2020; NAEYC, 2020), including how our coursework, fieldwork experiences, and embedded learning opportunities (e.g., reflection), leverage the current personnel preparation standards. We first consider factors that contributed to contemporary blended programs, briefly describing the initial steps in their shared history and

providing a description of the field's professional standards. We also present a sample of current blended program offerings in the field.

Developments in Blended Program Identity

A Brief History

Blended programs originated in the 1990s, when a limited number of programs (e.g., Handicapped Children's Early Education Program [HCEEP]) (Mickelson et al., 2023) first demonstrated the effectiveness of incorporating both EI and ECSE content. Blended programs described in the literature at this time include models in which two independent licensure programs were unified for the purpose of broadening content (e.g., The University of Florida; see Mickelson et al., 2023) and those in which programs were newly developed (e.g., Western Kentucky University; see Mickelson et al., 2023). Additional characteristics unique to these various programs (e.g., faculty collaboration) were identified as programs were established and continued to develop.

Subsequent changes to IDEA (2004), input from professional organizations, and emerging research catalyzed the shift in favor of blended licensure programs (Mickelson et al., 2023). For instance, in addition to reauthorizations of IDEA, both DEC and NAEYC published guiding documents that supported inclusion and emphasized needed components in teacher preparation, such as the position statement on inclusion (DEC, 1993) and the DEC position statement on personnel standards (DEC, 1995) respectively. Recognition for blending increased as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), then known as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), began accepting documentation for blended programs in 1997 (Mickelson et al., 2023). During this time, researchers presented evidence in support of blended programs and increasingly framed the fields of ECE and EI/ECSE as more similar than different (Miller & Stayton, 1999).

In the following decades, enthusiasm for blended programs continued to expand in certain domains more than others. Notably, blended programs became available at more institutions of higher education (IHE), maintaining availability where previously established. Additionally, DEC was tasked with the development of the initial and advanced Specialty Sets of knowledge and skills, used to inform the existing CEC Standards (CEC, 2012) (Stayton et al., 2023). In lieu of a distinct set of standards for EI/ECSE, the DEC Specialty Sets and CEC Standards were used as the curricular foundation for IHEs with EI/ECSE programs. While research and policy specifically advancing blended programs waned and funding opportunities diminished for select programs (e.g., undergraduate offerings) (Mickelson et al., 2023), the field's leading professional organizations began developing strong ties that would later lead to the development of personnel preparation standards (CEC & DEC, 2020; Stayton et al., 2024) in support of blended licensure programs.

Table 1*The Two Sets of Professional Standards*

ECE Standards (NAEYC, 2020)
Standard 1: Child Development and Learning in Context
Standard 2: Family-Teacher Partnerships and Community Connections
Standard 3: Child Observation, Documentation, and Assessment
Standard 4: Developmentally, Culturally, and Linguistically Appropriate Teaching Practices
Standard 5: Knowledge, Application, and the Integration of Academic Content in the Early Childhood Curriculum
Standard 6: Professionalism as an Early Childhood Educator
EI/ECSE Standards (CEC/DEC, 2020)
Standard 1: Child Development and Early Learning
Standard 2: Partnering with Families
Standard 3: Collaboration and Teaming
Standard 4: Assessment Practices
Standard 5: Application of Curriculum Frameworks in the Planning of Meaningful Learning Experience
Standard 6: Using Responsive and Reciprocal Interactions, Interventions, and Instruction
Standard 7: Professional and Ethical Practice
Standard 8: Field and Clinical Experience

The Professional Standards and Blended Programs

Since early in the development of blended programs, leaders of national and international professional organizations in the field have collaborated on unifying ECE and ECSE and preparing a cohesive early childhood workforce (Stayton & Miller, 1993). Initial efforts included the position joint statement on personnel standards from DEC (1995), NAEYC, and the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE). They continued with alignments between the DEC (1995) standards and the NAEYC (1996) guidelines for personnel preparation. In tandem with additional organizations in

the field (e.g., CEC and NCATE, now CAEP), these groups have continued to make significant strides towards creating a foundation for educator preparation that values blended models. Within the last two decades, a DEC workgroup aligned the NAEYC standards with the CEC professional standards and the DEC EI/ECSE Specialty Set to support curriculum for personnel preparation and training, bolstering blended program development (Mickelson et al., 2022). Continued alignments were implemented, including support from the Early Childhood Personnel Center (ECPC), as well as national advocacy efforts between DEC and NAEYC (Power to the Profession Task Force, 2020) strengthening their partnership and the links between ECE and EI/ECSE.

To date, the culmination of these efforts has resulted in two groundbreaking documents in early childhood personnel preparation. In their 2020 update, NAEYC revised what is now called the *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators*, or what is commonly referred to as the ECE Standards (NAEYC, 2020) to guide the preparation of ECE professionals. In the same year, a collaboration among DEC, CEC, and ECPC led to the creation of the *Initial Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Early Interventionists/Early Childhood Special Educators*, or more commonly referred to as the EI/ECSE Standards (CEC & DEC, 2020). These two sets (ECE and EI/ECSE) of personnel preparation standards set the foundation for the continued development and evolution of blended programs. The six ECE Standards and the eight EI/ECSE Standards share topics addressing child development, family and professional collaboration, assessment, curriculum, instruction, and professionalism (see Table 1 for a list of each set of standard titles). Following their development, ECPC conducted a cross walk of both sets of standards (ECPC, 2020a) to assist programs (IHE and professional development) with identifying how the standards intersect and with integrating them into their curriculum. In the same year, ECPC conducted a think tank (ECPC, 2020b) to gather input from leaders in ECE and EI/ECSE about how best to support blended personnel preparation programs. Specifically, participants addressed national accreditation and recognition for blended programs, needed supports for integrating the ECE and EI/ECSE standards in blended programs, and the role of organizations in influencing states. By accessing available guidance for ECE and EI/ECSE, it is easier now than at any point in history for programs to integrate philosophy and content from both fields and potentially prepare educators to effectively support children and families in a variety of early childhood contexts. Furthermore, by pairing these two sets of standards, guiding organizations (e.g., DEC) can more effectively support blended personnel preparation programs with planning and accreditation (Stayton et al., 2024).

Blended Program Characteristics

As previously stated, there is not yet a shared definition for blended programs in early childhood personnel preparation, nor is there direct evidence for their effectiveness in preparing educators to support their use of inclusive practices with young children. Also, blended programs remain in the minority of available EC preparation offerings. In 2015, Chen and Mickelson found that just 12% of ECE programs and 11% of ECSE could be considered to fit the description of a blended program. They reported that identifying blended programs within EC is complicated by the significant degree of variance within programs, including the age range of children to be served with the license/certification, (e.g., kindergarten through third grade), and state-specific degree, curriculum, and licensure and certification requirements.

With that in mind, programs offering licensure in both ECE and EI/ECSE settings, though limited in number, do exist and are described in the literature. These programs feature shared and unique components in structure, topic areas, and faculty representation. For instance, Mickelson et al. (2023) described several key characteristics of blended programs, including their social-cultural context, their origin (if they were newly established or developed by modifying existing programs), their level of administrative support, if they featured integrated fieldwork experiences, and if the content was coordinated and delivered by an interdisciplinary faculty. In their study, Miller and Stayton (2006) identified similar characteristics among blended programs, with an emphasis on an interdisciplinary faculty team coordinating and implementing the program. Indeed, they found this team to be a “core element of blended teacher preparation” (p. 61), responsible for planning, developing, and implementing content and curriculum, program planning management and evaluation, student advising and support, managing standards compliance, and coordinating students’ community involvement.

Developments in One Program’s Blended Identity

As described previously, blended EC programs vary significantly between institutions. In this section, we briefly describe the history of one blended program, provide an overview of its curriculum and content, and share its unique features. We also outline how this program incorporates both the ECE (NAEYC, 2020) and ECSE/EI (CEC & DEC, 2020) professional standards. We illustrate how the program demonstrates a blending of these two sets of standards and consequently prepares a generation of educators who can effectively serve children with and without disabilities and their families. We close with a brief discussion of challenges met when implementing a blended personnel preparation program.

Program Description

The program we will use for our example and discussion is a four-year, undergraduate educator preparation program at a large, research institution in the Midwestern United States. The socio-cultural context of this institution’s educator preparation program is influenced by national initiatives and state policy (Mickelson et al., 2023). The program is accredited through CAEP and completes both national recognition and state program review. While the state does not have a unified teaching license for blended ECE and EI/ECSE, graduates from this program are eligible for the state’s teaching licenses of Early Childhood Education (preschool through grade 3) and Special Education: Mild Intervention (preschool through grade 3). The state does not hold licensing requirements for educators serving in early intervention settings.

Information collected from graduates through program, college-level, and Teacher Education Program surveys over the past 11 years (at the time of the development of this manuscript) report an over 90% employment rate within three months following graduation or attendance in graduate school. Those attending graduate school after graduation have attended law school, Occupational Therapy Master’s and Doctoral, Applied Behavior Analysis, Curriculum and Instruction, and Special Education programs.

For those entering teaching positions, the high majority of program graduates work in preschool through 3rd grade in a public or private school, in an accredited early learning program, or in the university child development laboratory school. A small percentage (less than 20%) of those in public and private school settings for employment post-graduation are in preschool special education or kindergarten – 3rd grade special education classrooms. Those program graduates that are not in special education environments note the value of the blended approach they received as they find themselves more able to support all learners. Several local elementary schools regularly reach out to the program coordinator for suggestions for hiring graduates, noting they recognize the value in the early childhood approach for the younger grades such as kindergarten.

Faculty associated with this program are both tenure track (n=3) and non-tenure track (n=3); one of the non-tenure track faculty also holds an administrative position in the institution's child development laboratory school. Tenure track faculty (and the non-tenure track with an administrative line) only teach one course per year for the program while the other two non-tenure track faculty are responsible for up to six courses per year, including field supervision. Additionally, one of the non-tenure track faculty serves as program administrator and liaison to educator preparation administration at the institution. Finally, faculty also represent various professional foci such as child development and learning in literacy, math, and science, as well as EI/ECSE and elementary education.

Brief Program History

The deep relationship between educator preparation and the child development laboratory school on the campus where this program is housed began in 1926 with the beginning of the university “nursery school” as a practice location for those completing coursework in child care (Purdue University, n.d.; Schlesinger-Devlin & Purcell, 2019). Over the decades, the Human Development and Family Studies department built itself around the laboratory school, first being focused on home economics and ultimately moving to a broad focus on child and youth development. Then, through a series of discussions and activities in the early 2000s, multiple changes occurred at the institution. By 2010, the College of Health and Human Sciences (HHS) was formed, housing the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, now named Human Development and Family Science (HDFS). This was also a name change from Child Development and Family Studies, demonstrating the enhanced focus on the lifespan and not only child/youth development. Additionally, in 2011, the HDFS department gained a new building that expanded the child development laboratory school as well as research opportunities across the lifespan. Consequently, the faculty associated with the existing early childhood education program and separate early intervention program embraced the opportunity to update and reformulate the curriculum into one that prepared educators to work with young children with and without disabilities and developmental delays and their families. The new blended ECE and EI/ECSE curriculum launched in the fall semester of 2012.

Curriculum and Content

The faculty associated with the initial blended program carefully studied and aligned the 2012 curriculum to the existing professional preparation standards from NAEYC (2011) and CEC

(2012) as well as the EI/ECSE specialty set. This curriculum was designed to prepare educators in teaching content areas such as methods-based courses in math, science, social studies, literacy, and music/movement. Methods-based content courses all contain student learning outcomes that carry themes of care and education for children from infancy through grade 3, intervention and individualized instruction for children with or at-risk for disabilities and developmental delays, education for children who are multi-language learners, and family collaboration. Through additional courses, topics such as care and education for infants and toddlers, assessment and specialized instruction and intervention for children with or at-risk for disabilities and developmental delays, and using guidance with children are addressed. All courses are delivered in-person, with an emphasis on student participation in lecture-based application activities and field experiences.

Uniquely, in this curriculum restructure, field experiences were paired with courses/sets of courses so that teacher candidates learned content in their class and immediately applied their newly acquired knowledge in the field. Finally, the capstone student teaching experience was updated to be an entire semester in an inclusive environment for young children.

Over the next 12 years, while the structure remained much the same, the content of courses and the overall alignment to the fields of ECE and EI/ECSE have been updated. Most importantly, these updates reflect changes in the field (such as trauma-informed care; Purcell & Ruprecht, 2022) as well as what the field expects early career educators to know and be able to do through alignment with the ECE Standards (NAEYC, 2020) and EI/ECSE Standards (CEC & DEC, 2020). Table 2 provides the curriculum map along with field experiences effective fall semester of 2024.

Table 2

Curriculum Overview

Semester	Course Content	Field Experiences (FE)
1	· General Education	None
	· Human Development / Education Foundations	Not ECE or EI/ECSE specific
2	· General Education	None
	· Human Development / Education Foundations	Not ECE or EI/ECSE specific
3	· General Education	None
	· Human Development / Education Foundations	Not ECE or EI/ECSE specific
4	· Human Development / Education Foundations	None
	· The Inclusive Classroom	20 hours in elementary special education
	· Language Development	Not a specific number of hours but engagement with children is expected
	· Guidance in Early Childhood · Professionalism and Music and Movement in Early Childhood	45 hours of shared FE in campus child development laboratory school
5	· Developmental Foundations of Infant and Toddler Curriculum	45 hours of FE in campus child development laboratory school
	· Developmental Assessment · Literacy Development in Preschool and Primary Grades · EI/ECSE: Issues and Professional Practices	45+ hours of shared FE in public school ECSE programs
	· Approaches to Early Childhood Education	None
6	· Positive Behavior Supports	16 hours in elementary or preschool special education or inclusive early childhood classroom
	· Mathematics in Preschool and Primary Grades · Science in Preschool and Primary Grades · Social Studies in Preschool and Primary Grades	45 hours of shared FE in inclusive Kindergarten – 3 rd grade
	· General Education	None
7	· General Education	None
8	· Supervised Teaching in Inclusive Programs for Young Children	16 full-time weeks in inclusive classrooms for children ages 6 weeks through 3 rd grade

Note. Adapted from Purcell and Schmitt (2023).

Unique Features

Features of this program that promote a blended approach to preparing educators to work with children with and without disabilities and their families include being housed in the content area of human development, faculty collaboration, paired courses and fieldwork, and the integral relationship with the institution's child development laboratory school. Each of these will be discussed, and examples will be provided for the unique aspect of a blended approach to ECE and EI/ECSE educator preparation.

Content Area

One unique feature of this preparation program is that it is housed in the Department of HDFS, College of Health and Human Sciences (HHS). Hence, it is retained in the content area of human development rather than the College of Education. The institution uses a partnership model for educator preparation so many of the educator preparation programs are spread throughout the institution. With this location of the program, there is a stronger connection to the content of child development and working with families. Teacher candidates enroll in courses with experts in these areas and have opportunities to participate in research and community engagement to expand their knowledge and application of theories and practices. Additionally, being housed in the College of HHS, we are able to more seamlessly collaborate with other departments such as Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences where, beginning in the 2024-2025 academic year, teacher candidates will take courses from experts in the study of language development.

While the partnership model of educator preparation provides our program a unique situation of being housed with our content of child / human development and family studies, this can also present some challenges. Being one of two educator preparation programs in HHS means that many other faculty and administrators within this college are naive to the nuances of educator preparation, such as the level of mentoring needed for field experiences, data collection and events associated with accreditation, and the alignment to professional preparation standards. As well, the program coordinator role is extraordinarily valuable to ensure collaboration and communication is maintained between HHS and the College of Education. Thus, the coordinator has administrative and collaboration responsibilities, which reduces their time for effectively teaching and mentoring the candidates.

Faculty Collaboration

Interdisciplinary faculty teaming, with shared responsibilities around program planning, implementation, and evaluation, as well as student support and standards compliance, is considered an essential component of blended programs (Miller & Stayton, 2006). Historically, our program has engaged in monthly program area meetings. During these meetings, topics such as successes, as well as concerns of the program, including individual course experiences, field work, teacher candidate needs, are discussed. Additionally, our logic model (Figure 1) along with program evaluation and continuous improvement assessment (e.g., key and common assessments [see Table 3]) data are shared and analyzed. Through this collaboration, faculty note areas for individual

course adjustments or overall program modifications along with continued alignment with the ECE and EI/ECSE Standards and expectations of the field.

Figure 1

Logic Model for Program Evaluation

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-term outcome	Intermediate outcome	Long-term outcome
Program curriculum	Content / methods-based coursework	Key Assessments	Improved reflection during clinical and field experiences	Improved candidate professional practices	Highly effective ECEs and EI/ECSEs
ECE Standards	Early field experiences	Common Assessments		Improved candidate reflection	Continuous program improvement in blended ECE-EI/ECSE preparation
EI/ECSE Standards	Semester-long student teaching		Improved mentoring focused on the skills and behaviors as noted in the standards	Identification of gaps in curriculum	
	Continuous reflection on others' and own professional practices		Data directly related to candidate skills and behaviors based on the standards		

Note. Adapted from Purcell and Schmitt (2023).

Table 3*Assessments for Continuous Improvement and Program Evaluation*

Semester	Course	Key Assessment	Common Assessment
1	N/A	N/A	N/A
2	N/A	N/A	N/A
3	N/A	N/A	N/A
4	Professionalism and Music and Movement in Early Childhood	N/A	Foundations Portfolio
5	Developmental Foundations of Infant and Toddler Curriculum	Collaboration / Intervention Plan with Families	N/A
	EI/ECSE: Issues and Professional Practices	Child Intervention Project	N/A
6	Science in Preschool and Primary Grades	Common Lesson Plan	Common Lesson Plan
	Social Studies in Preschool and Primary Grades	Collaborative Integrated Unit Plan	N/A
7	No specific course	Licensure Exams	Licensure Exams
8	Supervised Teaching in Inclusive Programs for Young Children	Licensure Exams Standards Based Reflection CPAST* edTPA ⁺	Licensure Exams CPAST* edTPA ⁺

Note. *CPAST is the institution's student teaching evaluation instrument for teacher candidates in birth-3rd grade settings; ⁺edTPA is the institution's chosen performance evaluation during student teaching across settings.

As previously noted, program faculty have both tenure track and non-tenure track lines as well as administrative responsibilities. As well, the program faculty have a range of backgrounds and research and engagement foci. Due to the team of faculty approaching educator preparation from a more interdisciplinary approach, current research and broad needs of the field are embedded into the curriculum through content/methods-based coursework, field experiences, and in additional opportunities for teacher candidates (i.e., research and community engagement).

Finally, the program is designed in a cohort model with teacher candidates traveling through the curriculum together. With this model, the non-tenure track faculty experience multiple opportunities for instruction as well as field supervision and mentoring with each teacher candidate. This provides a natural system of support for each teacher candidate as they have peers and professors with whom they develop strong relationships for academic, professional, and personal supports.

Pairing Courses and Field Work

A unique aspect of the reformation that occurred with the 2012 curriculum that has been maintained is the pairing of courses/sets of courses with field work. With this, the teacher candidates learn about theory and practice in their methods-based courses and immediately apply in the paired field experience (see Table 2). As well, they have multiple and varied experiences with different age ranges, abilities, and teaching practices as they are partnered with various early learning programs, public or private school settings, and practicing educators. Teacher candidates report (Purcell & Schmitt, 2023):

- Experiences with various age groups and developmental abilities lead to a broader understanding of teaching and learning with all young children;
- They more fully understand the expanse of their credentials / licensure and recognize the variety of possible career opportunities;
- Experiences with multiple cooperating educators and professional practices lead to more profound learning of their own craft;
- Direct connections to content through class assignments and reflection increases confidence in abilities; and,
- Observing and reflecting on the application of content – cooperating educator and own practices – improves professionalism.

Child Development Laboratory School

Finding high quality field placements is an identified need in our state (Knight et al., 2023). However, our program has the benefit of a strong relationship with the institution's child development laboratory school. As noted previously, the HDFS department evolved around this child development laboratory school. Consequently, since our program is housed in HDFS, the laboratory school is an integral part of the preparation experience of our teacher candidates. The laboratory school director is faculty in the program serving as a course instructor as well as overseeing field experiences that occur in the laboratory school. Teacher candidates engage in two

field experiences at the laboratory school and have the option to complete their capstone student teaching there as well (Table 2). The philosophy of the laboratory school is one of inclusion:

...a variety of activities designed to engage and challenge the diverse developmental levels and interests reflected in each group of children. We strive to maintain an atmosphere of acceptance, allowing children to develop a strong sense of self-worth (Purdue University, n.d.).

In their field experiences, candidates experience innovative practices as well as intensive mentoring from the laboratory school professional staff whose job description includes professional preparation in addition to their classroom responsibilities.

Connection to Standards

As noted, our program is aligned to both the EI/ECSE Standards (CEC & DEC, 2020) and the ECE Standards and Competencies (NAEYC, 2020). As well, since the institution's educator preparation program is accredited through CAEP and goes through routine state reviews, there is a dedicated focus on continuous improvement measures and data analysis to demonstrate teacher candidate competencies related to the EI/ECSE and ECE Standards. Standard alignment and data collection methods (e.g., key and common assessments) are integrated throughout the program.

The program faculty use a logic model (Figure 1) ensuring standard alignment and teacher candidate outcomes in relation to the standards are routinely measured. As well, a curriculum map is maintained noting the linkages of coursework and field experiences to standards. Along with the curriculum map, major area course syllabi display the EI/ECSE Standards and Indicators and the ECE Standards and Competencies that are addressed in the course content, experiences, and assessments. Since courses are paired with field experiences, standard alignment with field work is also reflected in course syllabi.

To enhance the alignment with standards, to assess teacher candidate competencies in relation to the standards, and to be in compliance with CAEP and state expectations, the program incorporates a series of both key (direct demonstration of teacher candidate competencies aligned with ECE and EI/ECSE Standards) and common (across the institution's educator preparation program) assessments (Table 3). One particularly innovative approach for linking teacher candidate outcomes with the ECE and EI/ECSE Standards is through reflective practice and an assignment that is incorporated throughout the program (McLeod et al., 2024). Through this assignment, we facilitate reflection for teacher candidates connecting growth in their content knowledge and professional practices and behaviors as indicated by the professional preparation standards (Purcell & Schmitt, 2023). The reflection prompts (Table 4) were created based on the ECE and EI/ECSE Standards. Purcell and Schmitt (2023) discuss that teacher candidates reflect on these same prompts throughout the program so they and the faculty may note growth and change in teacher candidate professional perspective and practice across the semesters that this assignment is completed.

Table 4*Standards-Based Reflection Assignment Writing Prompts*

<p>Learners and Learning</p> <p>(Aligns to ECE Standards 1, 4 and EI/ECSE Standard 1)</p> <p>1. Learner Development and Individual Learning Differences: How did you provide meaningful and challenging learning experiences for all children based on theories and philosophies of early learning and development?</p> <p>2. Learning Environments: How did you provide a safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environment so that all children were active and engaged learners? How were emotional well-being, positive social interactions, and self-determination developed and supported?</p>
<p>Content Knowledge and Professional Foundations</p> <p>(Aligns to ECE Standard 5 and EI/ECSE Standards 5, 6)</p> <p>1. Curricular Content Knowledge: How did you integrate knowledge of the content being taught as you planned for universally designed learning experiences that address the strengths and areas for growth for all children?</p>
<p>Instructional Pedagogy</p> <p>(Aligns to ECE Standards 3, 4 and EI/ECSE Standards 4, 6)</p> <p>1. Assessment: How did you use multiple methods of assessment and data-sources in making decisions about instruction and intervention?</p> <p>2. Instructional Planning and Strategies: How did you select, adapt, and use a repertoire of evidence-based instructional and developmentally appropriate strategies to advance learning of all children?</p>
<p>Professionalism and Collaboration</p> <p>(Aligns to ECE Standards 2, 6 and EI/ECSE Standards 2, 3, 7)</p> <p>1. Professional Learning and Ethical Practice: How did you use knowledge of the field and professional ethical principles to inform your practice in instruction, intervention, and collaboration with families and other professionals?</p> <p>2. Collaboration: How did you collaborate with families, other educators, related service providers, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways to address the needs of children across a range of learning experiences?</p>

Note. Adapted from Purcell and Schmitt (2023).

Challenges and Limitations

Much of this program operates very smoothly due to supportive administration at the department level. Department administration funds resource needs and often advocates for faculty positions to continue to build the capacity for ensuring the early childhood courses are taught by full-time, both tenure and non-tenure track, faculty. However, there is a sense of constant scrutiny about the number of enrolled students from the college and university. Enrollment numbers dropped considerably during the COVID-19 global pandemic from 22 graduating in the 2020-2021 academic year down to 8 graduating in the 2022-2023 academic year. As of the creation of this manuscript, enrollment has increased but not back to pre-pandemic numbers. Currently, cohorts are maintaining around 15 students each. This is a constant challenge with college and university administration who have a lack of understanding of the environmental impact of the pandemic on the early childhood and education fields writ large. Additional internal issues identified are associated with university offices, such as admissions, referring potential early childhood students to the College of Education (CoE) rather than to HDFS. Additionally, recruiting efforts can get confusing. Often, recruiters in HHS incorrectly assume the recruiters in CoE have events managed. Hence, the early childhood program may not be represented at vital recruiting events. The program coordinator, with the assistance of the HDFS undergraduate curriculum committee, is in regular contact with recruitment staff to ensure accurate advertising and representation of the program.

Finally, challenges identified at the state level that impact this blended program center around two main issues: (1) early childhood educator compensation and (2) lack of a philosophy of inclusion in early childhood (Purcell et al., 2024). Unless an early childhood classroom in a public school is a designated early childhood special education program and supported with IDEA funding, a lead educator in an early childhood classroom, both public/private schools and community-based programs, is likely not being compensated (salary and benefits) equivalent to degreed and licensed educators. This lack of compensation causes many of the program's graduates to not accept early childhood positions. Second, there is a state-wide lack of a philosophy of inclusion in early childhood education. Hence, early childhood programs are often not appealing to these graduates who have been explicitly prepared to serve an inclusive setting.

Even with the challenges and struggles, this program continues to lead the state in the number of dually licensed early childhood educators as noted by the state department of education. As well, as noted above, program graduates are sought after as employees and are successful in their chosen employment and/or post baccalaureate work.

Conclusion

Blended early childhood preparation programs hold promise for preparing teacher candidates to effectively serve a diverse population of young children and their families in a variety of settings. By integrating curriculum from the broad field of ECE with specialized information from EI/ECSE, blended programs support the unification of both content areas, reflecting the knowledge presented in the ECE (NAEYC, 2020) and EI/ECSE (CEC & DEC, 2020) personnel preparation standards. Despite the lack of a common definition or shared terminology, blended programs continue to evolve with the support of professional organizations and research. We present

information about one IHE personnel preparation program to support our collective understanding of how contemporary blended programs function in their unique sociocultural context. We hope that by sharing this program's history, content, unique features, and alignment with the professional standards, we can contribute to the literature addressing blended programs while catalyzing the ongoing development of high-quality early childhood personnel preparation.

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