



Examining Contemporary Approaches to the Preparation of Early Childhood Education Professionals for Inclusion

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Changes in federal law (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2019; Hebbeler, et al., 1991) and societal needs (Burton, et al., 1992), in the 1980s led to an increase in the number of young children, with and without identified disabilities, participating in early childhood programs across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In response, the field experienced a paradigm shift regarding the way in which services for children were designed and delivered (Buisse & Wesley, 1993). This in turn spurred increased attention as to the preparation of the early childhood workforce. The anticipated shift toward inclusive practice created the impetus for the movement toward blended and other collaborative models of educator preparation (Mickelson et al., 2023; Pugach et al., 2011).

Blended and other collaborative models of preparation have long been lauded as promising approaches to effectively preparing candidates for inclusive practice. The historical literature from the beginning of the blended movement includes several program descriptions and other research as faculty responded to the needs of the field. (See Mickelson et al., 2022, 2023 for more in depth accounts of the history of this movement). While blended and other collaborative approaches to preparation for inclusion have remained highly valued across the field, very limited literature has been published in recent decades resulting in the practice going forward without empirical support or contemporary practical guidance (Brownell et al., 2011; Mickelson et al., 2022). Further, the dated literature base is increasingly difficult to apply to the increased diversity of educational contexts (Mickelson et al., 2022). Contemporary contexts necessitate a broader view of inclusion that considers the diverse and intersectional identities of the children and families served. Further, these contexts call for recruitment of similarly diverse professionals into the field. Indeed, recent definitions of inclusion come from a broad, shared equity agenda designed to ensure educational success for every group of learners experiencing marginalization (Pugach et al., 2020; U.S. Department of HHS and U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

The aim of this special issue is to showcase the contemporary landscape of early childhood preparation for inclusion and highlight how higher education and community partners currently respond to the varied programmatic, licensure, clinical, and other contexts observed across the field. In essence, the purpose is to help update our aging literature base on blended and other approaches to the preparation of early childhood educators for inclusion. We received a strong response to the call for papers and the result is a robust collection of articles spanning multiple contexts and including descriptions of programs and program development processes, empirical studies, and a call to action. Readers will undoubtedly benefit from the experiences and wisdom included. It is with great pleasure that we bring you this issue. We hope it will lead to further collaboration in pursuit of providing clear guidance for contemporary programs, and that it will

spur more research to develop a strong empirical foundation for our efforts as inclusive early childhood teacher educators and preparation programs.

DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLES

The special issue includes six descriptions of early childhood educator preparation programs and/or program development processes. The preparation programs depicted here include both newly developed and long-standing programs that have evolved over time. Across these articles, authors explore what it means to be a “blended” program and to effectively prepare early childhood professionals for inclusive contexts. The programs described range in structure (e.g., single programs, distinct collaborating programs, dual certification programs), focus (e.g., standards, identity, definitions, specific elements of preparation such as diverse populations served, age ranges, and field components) and delivery format (e.g., campus-based, online).

First, **Meyer and Northey** provide an overview of their experience at their university where early childhood education (ECE) and early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) faculty were confronted with the task of reconceptualizing their blended undergraduate teacher preparation programs. Their article attends to how faculty critically examined how “blended” was defined for their specific context and what it means for a program to be “blended” in general. In their contribution to this special issue, they explore influences that shaped faculty conceptions of blended in regard to sustaining inclusive values yet maintaining two distinct teacher education majors and programs. The authors conclude with recommendations for other ECE and EI/ECSE faculty who may also need to reimagine their conceptualization of blended teacher preparation due to current realities within IHEs.

Next, **Harbin and Purcell** provide a description of a blended preparation program with particular attention to the influence of professional standards. They describe their innovative model of blended preparation for inclusive early childhood environments by detailing how the program aligns with the most recent professional standards in the fields of ECE and EI/ECSE (CEC & DEC, 2020; NAEYC, 2020). Their account shares how coursework, fieldwork, and embedded learning opportunities (e.g., reflection), leverage the current personnel preparation standards to “blend” ECE and EI/ECSE preparation within one program. Their article also shares their perspectives on factors that contributed to contemporary blended programs, briefly describing the history and providing a description of the field's professional standards. Finally, the authors present a sample of current blended program offerings in the field.

Winchell, Rahn, Linzmeier, Tillet, Becker, and Heimer describe the blended, dual-certification program at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, a longtime and highly respected example of blended preparation. They provide a detailed programmatic overview of the ECE dual-licensure personnel preparation program at this Midwest institution. They also describe how factors including the collaboration of a blended faculty (i.e., one including general and special educators), a cohort model, a commitment to field placements throughout the program, and continual review and innovative practices form the foundation of the program. Current program offerings including both campus-based and online delivery models to meet the needs of prospective students across the state and region are emphasized. The recent additions of two novel online programs to meet the changing needs of the workforce: a non-license

credential-based bachelor's degree and a master's degree in public policy, are also detailed. Finally, the authors explain how the unique components and multiple offerings position this program to prepare teacher candidates to educate all children within inclusive settings. Winchell and colleagues conclude by sharing future directions for their program which include developing a master's degree in ECSE.

Evans, Joseph, Bartlett, and Jozwik provide an account of the development of an inclusive preparation program that united ECE, EI/ECSE, and bilingual/English as a second language (ESL) programming. The authors highlight the importance of long-term collaborative efforts in pursuit of inclusive preparation by detailing a 10-year process that led to the development of their Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education Program (IECTE). Importantly, this article illuminates the transformation that occurred within individual areas of teacher education that led to an evolving shared paradigm of critical inclusivity in ECE. The authors detail this paradigm and its three tenets: (1) a dialogic approach, (2) curriculum revision, and (3) pre-service teacher guidance. The article offers implications for continuous growth through descriptions of transformative collaboration and advocacy in inclusive early childhood settings, such as intervention agencies, Head Start programs, childcare centers, community programs, and public schools.

Wiegand, Matute-Chavarria, and Hernández share their process of reimagining a preparation program to better address preparation for IDEA Part C EI. In so doing, they highlight the critical need for preparation in EI from the perspective of a state that does not currently require licensure to practice as an educator in Part C. Despite the critical importance of effective preparation for EI educators and other professionals, many states, like New Mexico where this article is situated, do not require licensure for Part C leaving many providers without adequate preparation. Wiegand and colleagues share details about the development of Project RISE, **Reimagining Intervention to Support Early Childhood**, a grant funded through the Office of Special Education Programs. This innovative program created a multicultural EI concentration within an existing ECE birth-four non-licensure program. The authors describe their aim of reimagining the preparation of EI providers through the lens of culturally sustaining practices, strengths-based practices, and Yosso's community cultural wealth model. In describing the development and resulting program, Wiegand and colleagues stress the importance of relevant local and state contexts, the specific Project RISE competencies, courses, and practicum experiences, and importantly the centrality of a collaborative team of faculty and partners in the development and execution of the program.

Bequette, Murnan, Kohart, Francois, and Wilson provide an important spotlight on field components in early childhood preparation for inclusion, a critical element of practice-based preparation and central to comprehensive training and support for future early childhood educators. This article highlights intercollegiate collaboration in one state by detailing a collaborative initiative among four state universities that sought to enhance practicum and field-based experiences for ECE candidates and address challenges in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce by fostering inclusive decision-making and engagement with (ECCE) partners. The authors describe how efforts helped emphasize collaborative relationships between novice teachers, mentor teachers, and university supervisors. Baguette and colleagues describe the evolution of practicum experiences and key components including the creation of universal training modules and an open-source platform to house training materials. The manuscript stresses the importance of ongoing collaboration and partnership in pursuit of high-quality ECE and concludes with recommendations for enhancing practicum experiences and addressing workforce challenges.

CONCEPTUAL ARTICLE

The sustained and troubling national educator shortage is at a critical level. Preparation programs are central to ameliorating this crisis and the authors provide a model to assist and promote effective educator recruitment, preparation, and retention strategies. In this conceptual article, **Lohman and Macy** describe a five-point model (STARS): (a) Supplemental funding during field placements, (b) Teacher preparation that leads to ECE and ECSE dual licensure, (c) Advocacy at the local, state, and national levels, (d) Relationships between teacher preparation programs and local public and private early learning centers, and (e) Supportive and ongoing mentoring for in-service early childhood special educators. The authors also provide recommendations and discuss how the STARS model can help faculty combine research-supported strategies to develop a comprehensive and effective response to the teacher shortage.

EMPIRICAL MANUSCRIPTS

Our special issue also provides two empirical contributions. First, **Panse, VanLone, Ziegler, and George-Puskar** report a systematic review which examines the early childhood preparation literature specific to preparation for working with families. Their focus recognizes the importance of family-professional collaboration on outcomes for children with disabilities and their families. In their mixed-methods systematic review, the authors identify and synthesize the current state of knowledge behind higher education programs and curricula geared towards improving preservice educators' knowledge and practices regarding family-professional collaboration in inclusive settings. Findings indicate that various instructional strategies and outcome measures have been employed to measure preservice educators' knowledge and practices. Implications for future research are described.

In response to the current dearth of empirical literature reporting on contemporary practice, **Mickelson and Hoppey** present an instrumental qualitative case study that provides a much-needed empirical examination of one contemporary blended preparation program. This contribution recognizes the need and value for research examining programs as holistic systems. Therefore, the authors employ a conceptual framework derived from cultural-historical activity systems theory (CHAT) and a research framework for studying collaborative teacher education. The resulting framework allowed for in depth holistic examination of the program as a system through investigation of six interacting parameters of practice (i.e., subject, object/outcome, tools, rules, community, and division of labor) and as an instance of collaborative preservice preparation through examination of five program dimensions (i.e., curricular coherence, faculty collaboration, depth of knowledge, performance/ portfolio assessments, and PK-12 partnerships). Results provide an empirical description of the program and lead to implications for both research and practice. Perhaps most importantly, the novel conceptual framework provides a model for future empirical examinations of contemporary practice.

CALL TO ACTION

Our special issue concludes with a call to action from **McGuire, Sands, Skoning, Schafer, Berschback, Taylor, and Stein**. The authors highlight how the medical model of disability permeates educator preparation leading to a curriculum and approaches that encourage candidates to “fix” or “cure” young children with disabilities. The authors problematize the prevalence of the

medical model in preparation programs from the perspective of disabled preservice candidates who are ostracized as they see themselves in the very children spoken of as in need of “fixing.” McGuire and colleagues offer an alternative perspective and practical, useful strategies that can be implemented to build on the unique strengths and assets preservice candidates with disabilities bring to the early childhood field. This call to action was co-authored by teachers and candidates with disabilities to promote practices preservice faculty can use in their programs with the goal of recruiting and retaining candidates with disabilities. The recommendations shared stress that preservice preparation for equitable, meaningful inclusion must promote belonging and a positive perception of disability.

CONCLUSION

While the development of the 2020 EI/ECSE practice-based professional standards has spurred more research into early childhood preparation, there is still a dearth of literature to guide practice, and in particular, there are very few descriptive accounts of contemporary programs. This special issue presents the first such collection of articles focused on collaborative, blended and other approaches and perspectives of early childhood preparation for inclusion since the early 2000s. As these and other authors know too well, the contemporary academic publishing landscape has few spaces for descriptive work. However, it is imperative that this content be shared to ameliorate the outstanding lack of guidance and support for preparation programs seeking to design or implement collaborative (blended) and other approaches to preparation for inclusion. We hope this special issue can serve as a catalyst for further empirical research and the development of clear guidance for the field ultimately leading to effectively prepared collaborative, interdisciplinary professionals who promote positive outcomes for children and families. Please join us as we strive toward a new, reconceptualization of preparation for early childhood inclusion.

In closing, I would like to thank the HS Dialog for the opportunity to provide this special issue and the fact that by being open access, its content will be available to all.



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