

DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLE

Preparing Teacher Candidates for Inclusive Practice: A Program

Overview

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This paper provides a programmatic overview of an early childhood education (ECE), dual-licensure personnel preparation program in the Midwest. The foundation of the ECE program includes blended faculty from general and special education, a cohort model, field placements every semester, and continual review and innovative practices. The ECE Program is offered in both campus-based and online delivery models to meet the needs of prospective students across the state and region. Faculty have recently expanded the program array to include two additional 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. The ECE program's unique components and multiple offerings position it well to prepare teacher candidates to educate all children within inclusive settings. Future directions include developing a master's degree in early childhood special education.

Key words: early childhood, personnel preparation, dual-licensure

INTRODUCTION

It is well established that high-quality early childhood programs support the healthy development of young children (Bustamante et al., 2022; Center on the Developing Child, 2010; Heckman, 2017). Competent and caring educators with specialized training and credentials are at the heart of high-quality early childhood programs (Manning et al., 2019; National Research Council, 2015). Early childhood educators are guided by Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP),

which is the core framework of principles and guidelines for implementing best practices in early childhood education (NAEYC, 2022). Early childhood educators who work with children with disabilities start with a developmentally appropriate foundation, and then layer additional supports and individualized intervention strategies to facilitate each child's growth and development within a blended practices approach (Grisham & Hemmeter, 2017). Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE) practitioners must have specialized knowledge and skills in many areas including collaborating with families and implementing evidence-based interventions (Bruder et al., 2021). The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices provide guidance to practitioners for promoting optimal learning outcomes for young children with disabilities and at risk for disabilities (DEC, 2014). In addition to these recommended practices, NAEYC and DEC have developed professional preparation standards to guide programs in higher education in preparing educators. NAEYC's professional standards and competencies outline the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions needed for early childhood educators to promote the development and learning of all young children (NAEYC, 2019). In 2020, DEC developed the first set of EI/ECSE Standards which emphasize the unique skills and knowledge needed for professionals who work with young children who have or are at-risk for disabilities and their families (DEC, 2020).

To effectively work with all young children including those with disabilities and their families, early childhood educators must have the knowledge, skills, and training to understand and use both DAP and DEC Recommended Practices as described in the NAEYC and DEC personnel preparation standards. Blended teacher preparation programs train teacher candidates (TCs) to teach all young children, including typically developing children and children with identified disabilities (Grisham & Hemmeter, 2017; Mickelson et al., 2023). University faculty developed the first blended early childhood teacher preparation programs several decades ago to prepare TCs to meet the needs of all children within inclusive settings (Grisham & Hemmeter, 2017; Mickelson et al., 2022). In blended or merged programs, TCs are prepared in a "single curriculum with a complete integration of courses and field experiences designed to address the needs of all students, including those who have disabilities" (Blanton & Pugach, 2011, p. 226). In blended programs, faculty from both early childhood and EI/ECSE disciplines collaborate to develop and implement the program which includes courses and practicum experiences needed to prepare TCs to teach in general and special education settings (Blanton & Pugach, 2011). Core assumptions of a blended program model are that general and special education teachers require the same body of knowledge, TCs can be adequately prepared within the program (e.g., a 4-year curriculum), and graduates will be willing to assume roles in either general or special education (Blanton & Pugach, 2011). Blanton and Pugach (2011) suggest the following markers of practice for blended programs: a) a preservice curriculum with intentionally related and sequenced components, b) faculty collaboration at the course and program level, c) depth of TC knowledge in both general and special education, d) shared review of TC assessment by faculty from both disciplines, and e) partnerships with school districts and other community agencies.

Despite efforts of teacher preparation programs, the early childhood field is grappling with an ongoing shortage of early childhood educators, early interventionists, and early childhood special educators (Bruder, 2021). Although teacher shortages are not new (Darling-Hammond, 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated and amplified existing shortages (NCES, 2022). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023), 86% of public schools in the U.S. reported challenges in hiring teachers for the 2023-24 school year, with the highest vacancies

reported for general elementary and special education teachers. The early care and education field was hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). The pandemic exacerbated long-standing challenges within the early care and education workforce including low compensation, inadequate benefits, limited opportunities for professional development, and high levels of stress and burnout (Maier & Roach, 2023; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). The EI/ECSE workforce has also experienced ongoing shortages which is concerning given the growing number of children with identified disabilities (Bruder et al., 2021). According to a survey of Part C coordinators across the United States, 100% of respondents indicated a shortage of qualified early intervention providers, with 71.7% reporting shortages of special educators or developmental specialists (IDEA Infant & Toddler Coordinators Association, 2022). Ongoing workforce issues in the early care and education field have had negative impacts on young children and their families. Following the pandemic, teacher shortages led elementary school leaders to implement stop gap measures like increasing class sizes, sharing teachers and staff with other schools, and having staff in roles outside of their normal duties (NCES, 2022). In early care and education programs, many classrooms or entire programs shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lin & McDoniel, 2023). These program closures led to a decrease in the number of high-quality early care and education programs available to families, with disproportionate impacts on low-income families and communities of color (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The shutdown of community early childhood programs also impacted the ability of ECSE programs to provide inclusive services for preschool children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

As our societal context continues to evolve, teacher preparation programs must change to meet the needs of the children and families served and the workforce (Mickelson et al., 2022). One strategy to address these needs is to prepare a more diverse workforce that reflects the children and families being served (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Higher education programs must develop innovative program models to attract and retain TCs. The Early Childhood Education (ECE) program described in this paper was developed nearly 25 years ago and is continuing to evolve to meet the needs of the field. In this paper, we provide an overview of our current ECE program models, describe unique components of our program, and highlight recent innovations designed to meet the needs of the field. We also describe the impact of the program, current challenges, and future directions.

Early Childhood Education Program Models

The ECE program is a 4.5 year long, interdisciplinary undergraduate professional education program at University of Wisconsin – Whitewater (UW-W), a public University in the United States. The dual-license program is robust and placement intensive to ensure TCs are prepared to teach ALL children from birth to 8 years old (i.e., typically developing children and children with disabilities). The mission of the ECE program is to:

- provide innovative interdisciplinary pathways to undergraduate and graduate degrees focused on meeting the unique needs of all children from birth through third grade.
- We prepare pre- and in-service teachers to use content knowledge and evidence-

based practices in inclusive settings, to use relationship based and equitable approaches to support children's learning, to engage and collaborate with families and other professionals, and to facilitate developmentally appropriate learning within the context of families, cultures, and communities.

Campus-Based ECE Program

The ECE program is offered in two program models: campus-based and online (i.e., ECE4U Program). The impetus for the development of the original campus-based program was to prepare early childhood educators to meet the needs of all children and to support their families. Faculty in the Curriculum and Instruction and Special Education departments discussed the separate early childhood programs offered in each department and the philosophical similarities between the faculty and programs. Because of these discussions, the group members decided that a new "blended" program was in the best interest of UW-W students and children and families. After a decade of planning, the dual-license blended ECE program was launched in 2001.

The face-to-face, campus-based program accepts up to 30 new TCs each year into a cohort. TCs apply to the program in their first semester of their sophomore year and complete 148 credits across six semesters. Upon graduation, TCs are eligible for licensure in early childhood and early childhood special education. The most important impact of the program is the development of high-quality teachers, many of whom stay in the state to teach in preschools, Head Start programs, birth to three programs, and in kindergarten through third grade classrooms in public and private schools. Teachers prepared through the ECE program are neither "regular" nor "special" education teachers, but instead are well-prepared to teach all young children.

Online ECE Program (ECE4U)

Beginning in 2010, the University began offering the ECE dual-license program in an online format. This new, innovative program was designed to attract and retain TCs working full time in the field and TCs living in rural areas of the state. The ECE4U program was created based on recommendations from advisory board members who knew that working educators needed a pathway to a bachelor's degree and licensure that allowed them to continue to work while earning their degree. TCs entering ECE4U have an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree in ECE and typically bring years of experience working with children and families in childcare, Head Start, or elementary settings. The state technical college system has a consistent AAS degree program which allowed UW-W to develop and maintain one articulation agreement with the entire system. The University also has articulation agreements with regional technical colleges and local community colleges.

TCs complete the online program in six semesters over a 2-year period including summers. Most courses are 8 weeks long (i.e., half semester), allowing TCs to carry a full course load while juggling fewer classes at a time. Classes are offered in an online, hybrid format with

TCs meeting synchronously online six times per semester on Saturdays. The program is predominantly staffed by a core group of adjunct faculty who are partnered with full-time tenure track faculty for mentorship and review.

ECE4U is unique because of the articulation agreements with AAS programs and the strong relationship with instructors and advisors at the transfer institutions. Furthermore, the program serves the entire state. Most TCs in ECE4U transfer from AAS programs within a one-hour radius of campus. However, TCs attend from all over the state, many from locations that are not within driving distance of an ECE degree and licensing program. In addition, few universities offer a transfer program that is online, allowing TCs to work while earning their degree and license.

Unique Components of the ECE Program

There are several unique aspects common to both the campus-based and Online ECE programs. These components are essential in providing high quality experiences to prepare TCs to work with all learners.

Blended/Dual-licensure Program Curriculum

The ECE program was the first blended program in the state University system. In the development of the ECE program, faculty and staff were cognizant of the need to develop course content that was reflective of all children and families, and that addressed both NAEYC and DEC personnel preparation standards. This blended program includes courses related to language arts, math, literacy, music, science, social emotional development, working with caregivers, and methods for working with children with disabilities. In all courses, the emphasis is on how to meet the needs of ALL children from birth to age 8 through high quality, high impact teaching. For example, across curriculum courses taught by Curriculum and Instruction faculty, TCs develop lesson plans that not only address learning outcomes for the whole group, but also include modifications and teaching strategies designed to meet the individualized needs of children with identified disabilities. The introductory course in early childhood education includes content in both general early childhood education and EI/ECSE. Assessment courses, which are taught by Special Education faculty, focus on EI/ECSE-specific assessment knowledge and skills including developmental screening and assessment for eligibility for special education. However, these courses also address best practices in assessment for typically developing children including authentic assessment, portfolio assessment, using assessment data to make instructional decisions, and monitoring children's progress. In the course focused on families, the instructor, who is a faculty member in the Curriculum and Instruction department, has updated the course to include a textbook focused on the experiences of families of children with disabilities. In these and other similar instances, faculty have designed the ECE program curriculum and courses to blend early childhood and EI/ECSE content.

Blended Faculty

Our program consists of a small core of six full-time employees: two faculty in Curriculum and Instruction, two faculty in Special Education, one Instructional Academic Staff in Curriculum and Instruction, and one Academic Staff housed in Special Education. Faculty in both departments are equally invested in the ECE programs and have contributed their time and expertise to the development of the blended programs. There are additional staff who teach courses in the ECE program from departments such as Math, Reading, Music Education, Communication Sciences and Disorders, and Educational Foundations. All faculty and staff hold a related Ph.D., Ed.D., or Master's degree and have a minimum of 3 years of relevant teaching experience with young children.

Our core faculty and staff meet weekly for two hours as part of our commitment to continuous review and high quality. During weekly meetings we (a) provide updates on the program array, (b) address challenges and barriers within each program (i.e., ECE, ECE4U, Early Child Care and Education [ECCE], and Master of Science in Education-Early Childhood Education Policy) (c) work collaboratively on current initiatives, and (d) address any concerns with TCs to promote retention and success. Our ongoing communication assists with cohesiveness of the interdisciplinary team, allows for continuous monitoring of the program, and provides opportunities to address barriers as they arise. Moreover, the meetings provide built-in space for innovation. During these meetings, we generate new ideas, collaborate on current projects, and build upon existing initiatives.

Our core faculty and staff are leaders in their Departments, the College, the University and the community. All core members who have been at UW-W for at least a year have been nominated for College advising and teaching awards. In addition to teaching and advising, the roles and responsibilities of staff and faculty are manifold. Academic staff maintain program structures, pursue grant work, and participate in visioning and planning for meeting new program goals. As educator scholars, faculty pursue research that is community-based to benefit professionals and learners in the field of ECE regionally, nationally, and internationally. We see ourselves as teachers, scholars, past practitioners, learning facilitators, curriculum planners, and theory-to-practice negotiators. We share a common belief that early childhood is a critical time for children and their families, and it is our position that there are a variety of ways we can have an impact.

Cohort Model

Cohort-based teaching and learning is an important focus of the ECE Program. TCs complete the program together, moving through required courses and field experiences while deepening their knowledge and skills. We strongly believe in the power of the cohort model. While TCs have individual lives outside of school, they have common ground they can all relate to as they have made the commitment to earning their degree while balancing work, family, and other personal responsibilities. During the first semester, TCs may feel apprehensive about having the same people in classes throughout their training. However, throughout the program, they build formal and informal supports that contribute to a positive cohort climate and acquire effective communication and team building skills, which they will continue to apply in professional settings

where team-based decisions affect the lives of young children and their families. During a study on cohorts, we found that many TCs believe that cohort-based learning is a positive aspect of the program and that it allows them to develop supportive relationships that they hope will continue throughout their professional ECE careers (DeVore et al., 2008). Faculty get to know TCs individually and support them in creative problem solving. Additionally, the cohort model provides a sense of community and equity (e.g., responding to diverse perspectives, learning approaches, individual needs) for TCs and instructors.

It is likely the TCs will have the same faculty/staff member more than once during their university career which can lead to deeper understanding of concepts. Each course does not necessarily need to start with the TCs and the instructor getting to know each other. It also means the TCs know each other so the second semester and beyond looks different from some other models of instruction where there are new TCs in every course. This familiarity can lend itself to jumping into content sooner and going deeper into the pedagogical underpinnings of truly meeting the needs of all children. The cohort model also alleviates some anxiety about being able to enroll in all of the courses needed for graduation in a timely manner. TCs are guaranteed to have a "spot" in all classes from the time they enter the program until they graduate. Reducing this stress means TCs can focus more of their energy on the content of the courses, planning experiences for children in their field placements, or participating in faculty-led professional development opportunities. For example, TCs have presented with faculty on the ECE program models and undergraduate research at state and national conferences. We support TCs who seek out these opportunities as a way of beginning to network in professional circles, gaining valuable experience in presenting, and developing interests professionally that go beyond the classroom.

Placements and Applied Projects

The ECE program was designed around a core belief that TCs need meaningful opportunities to apply theory to practice. TCs are in a placement every semester, in placements ranging from 50 hours to full-time student teaching with children across the licensure age range in general and special education settings (See Table 1). While most placements last 15 weeks, the placements in the sixth semester last 18 weeks as the TCs follow the district calendar for the first semester and continue their placement post-graduation for approximately two weeks.

There are nine field experiences so that TCs experience the theory and pedagogy they are learning about in their courses in various settings. We strive to provide placements in which services are provided to young children with disabilities in inclusive environments. Head Start placements are inclusive given the federal requirement that Head Start programs ensure that 10% of their enrollment are young children eligible for special education services (Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, 2007). General education placements (e.g., Infants/Toddlers, Kindergarten, Student Teaching: Preschool placements) are chosen based on the quality of the programs and vary in the number of children with disabilities enrolled at any given time. We consistently place CTs in our campus-based program which provides inclusive programming for children from 3 months to 5 years of age. General education placements in public schools (i.e., Pre-Student Teaching: Elementary and Student Teaching: Elementary) often include children with identified disabilities or children currently being evaluated for special education. Special education placements (i.e., Pre-Student Teaching: Special Education and

Student Teaching: Special Education) include a variety of service delivery models and settings for children with disabilities. These include services provided by the special education team in inclusive classrooms as well as services delivered in small group and one-on-one formats in resource rooms and self-contained settings. TCs work directly with special education cooperating teachers and often see services delivered in a variety of ways based on child needs. TCs in Early intervention placements are placed in Part C programs serving infants and toddlers with or at-risk for disabilities and their families whenever possible, however these placements are challenging to secure and some TCs are placed in programs serving typically developing infants and toddlers and their families (e.g., school district playgroups for young children and families).

Table 1

ECE Program Placements

Semester	Placement	Hours
1	Head Start	75
2	Infants/Toddlers	50
	Kindergarten	50
3	Student Teaching: Early Intervention	300
4	Student Teaching: Preschool	150
5	Pre-Student Teaching: Early Elementary	50
	Pre-Student Teaching: Special Education	50
6	Student Teaching: Early Elementary	Full-time 9 weeks
	Student Teaching: Special Education	Full-time 9 weeks

We believe it to be our responsibility to teach and learn about diverse perspectives and viewpoints. Every attempt is made to ensure that TCs have a variety of placements (e.g. rural, urban, with learners who speak English as a second language, programs designed for families with low incomes) so that TCs have opportunities to work with children and staff who are different from themselves. TCs from both program models can participate in international placement opportunities, two coordinated through the ECE program. Our campus has a long-standing relationship with the Centers for Interamerican Studies Foundation (CEDEI) in Cuenca, Ecuador, where TCs can spend half of their final semester of student teaching, living with a local family and teaching in a private school while also taking classes on the language and culture of the country. Future opportunities in Ecuador may include a three-credit summer preschool placement which would be shorter and less expensive making it more accessible to a larger group of TCs. In the past, placements were also made in a sovereign nation in the northern part of the state. TCs spent three weeks living and learning within the community where they engaged in fieldwork in Pre-K

through 3rd grade classrooms at the community school and took a course introducing the culture of the sovereign nation at the Tribal College. In addition, TCs worked with a community liaison to attend traditional and community events and visit historic sites.

While in field placements, TCs take concurrent courses and implement what they have learned through various applied projects. Each placement provides opportunities for TCs to plan and implement instruction, adapt and modify instruction for children with disabilities, conduct assessments, evaluate student learning outcomes, and collaborate with families and professionals (Linzmeier et al., 2022). Placements allow TCs to explore, practice, and apply new skills and strategies in real time. Just as we believe young children learn by doing, we believe our courses should be an extension of this philosophical belief. Faculty and staff provide opportunities for TCs to learn new content in coursework, and then TCs have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of concepts in field placements.

The cooperating teacher, University supervisor, and TC complete evaluations of the TC's core knowledge and skills based on NAEYC, DEC, and Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards. They also complete a dispositions assessment based on values, commitments, and professional ethics as defined by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). These evaluations are completed at midterm and the end of the semester during pre-student teaching and student teaching placements. Midterm feedback is discussed during a meeting with the TC, cooperating teacher, and University supervisor. University supervisors also conduct observations during student teaching placements to provide feedback to TCs on their teaching. Additionally, throughout the program, TCs attend two reflective seminars in which they discuss their work in the field and develop three electronic portfolios for assessment of their knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Key Assessments

As a blended program that prepares TCs for license endorsement through the state department of education, TCs must demonstrate proficiency across three different sets of professional standards: InTASC, NAEYC, and DEC standards. In this spirit, the ECE team developed seven key assessments to measure TC learning. Initially, we wrote our own integrated standards and measured candidate learning on those standards using key assessments and associated rubrics. In 2019, our team embarked on the journey to earn NAEYC Higher Education Accreditation. As part of the NAEYC self-study process, the ECE team revised all key assessments to align with NAEYC standards and key elements, adding relevant DEC standards not explicitly outlined by NAEYC.

All seven key assessments are embedded into courses and field placements completed by *all* TCs regardless of program delivery model. The key assessments are completed during the second half of the program; four are completed during TCs' final semester student teaching. This was an intentional decision because many of the courses taken by TCs in the campus-based program model during the first year of the program are transferred in for candidates in the Online ECE program delivery model through the articulation agreement. For example, during final student teaching TCs conduct a functional behavior assessment and develop and implement a behavior

intervention plan. Other key assessments include an integrated curriculum project and the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

To meet the reporting needs of the state department of education, our institution's Audit and Review (A&R) committee, and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the core team members are responsible for ensuring we have and use an assessment plan that allows us to make data driven decisions. While the program has gone through three A&R cycles to date with no stipulations, the NAEYC self-study process has forced us to reevaluate and revise our assessment plan, beginning with the development of our own mission statement and conceptual framework as well as identifying student learning outcomes outside of the teacher preparation standards. While we always informally reviewed the data from key assessments and made changes as a result, this process was formalized as we prepared for NAEYC accreditation.

Each semester, course instructors and supervisors complete a scoring rubric, providing TCs with feedback on their key assessments against NAEYC and DEC standards. These are separate from grading rubrics as they may not include all considerations that go into grading, such as grammar. TCs receive a rating of advanced, proficient, basic or no evidence on each standard; the goal is for TCs to meet the standard with a rating of proficient. Data from these rubrics are collected through a Qualtrics survey each semester which provides evidence of TC proficiency on the standards every semester. Each TC has seven data points across their time in the program. The data are used to inform program scope and sequence, key assessment directions and rubrics, course experiences and learning opportunities, and TC successful completion of final student teaching. These data have also been used to inform decisions about program scope and sequence during redesign efforts.

Continual Review and Innovation

The ECE program has evolved since 2001 and undergone many changes. The commitment of the ECE team to continual review and intentional improvement has allowed the ECE program to maintain high quality programming while being responsive to the field. The continual review process has led to innovation in curricular redesign and adding to the program array.

Response and Impact from COVID-19 Pandemic

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 created a need for major shifts in higher education (Marinoni, Land, & Jenson, 2020), including changes in how teacher education programs prepare future educators (Barnes et al., 2020; Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Quezada et al., 2020). Both our courses and field placements shifted during the pandemic. Initially, our team offered ECE courses in remote format with both synchronous and asynchronous components, with courses gradually shifting back to primarily in-person instruction later in the pandemic.

The pandemic presented unique challenges for providing TCs with meaningful field experiences that were safe, and followed policies of universities, school districts, and early childhood agencies and centers. Our College made the decision that all field placements would be virtual with the exception of final semester student teaching. Throughout the pandemic, we coordinated

approximately 149 placements per semester in seven different practicum and student teaching experiences and pivoted to online placements. TCs who started the ECE program during 2020 or in semesters to follow, had little, if any direct contact with children or experience in schools, community centers, or agencies. Some TCs graduated from our program having all virtual placements leaving them with less hands-on experience prior to graduation.

From these challenges, we learned two important lessons. First, strong relationships with community partners are critical to creating meaningful field placements, both for TCs *and* the partnering school or agency (Linzmeier et al., 2022). Second, the significant shifts in field placements and student teaching experiences during the pandemic reinforced the importance of placements in preparing early childhood teachers (Linzmeier et al., 2022). Ultimately, we discovered that it is not only the number of placements or hours in a placement that mattered, but also the quality and depth of the placements (Linzmeier et al., 2022).

Curricular Redesign

Great care was taken in the development of the program, and that level of care has continued as the faculty and staff are in a cycle of continuous curriculum development and redesign to ensure this rigorous program meets the needs of young children and their families today. The last redesign was implemented in 2019. The focus of those curricular changes included: (a) updating course titles and descriptions to more current terminology, (b) changing credit hours for five courses in the program to better represent shifts in course content and requirements, and (c) creating and eliminating courses. We created a second course on social emotional learning and two new courses on math content including one on STEAM strategies. Three courses were eliminated; the content from two were combined with the new math courses and one reflective seminar was eliminated. One significant shift was that we changed the prerequisite for three introductory courses so that TCs could take the courses prior to admission to the ECE program. This allowed prospective TCs to take courses within the ECE major earlier to ensure the major was a match for their career goals.

The ECE team is currently in the process of an additional curricular redesign. The impetus of the latest redesign is to address recommendations made by the College's administration team to reduce credits to degree and increase enrollment capacity. Other considerations include the feasibility of maintaining the ECE program's rigor given current resources (i.e., staffing) and revising our licensure plans in accordance with our state department of education's licensure criteria. The primary objective is to reduce the ECE program from a 4.5-year program to a 4-year program which aligns with the University system goal to offer programs that allow all students to graduate in 4 years. In order to reduce credits to degree, the redesign efforts include: (1) reducing the number of placements, (2) reducing credit hours for some placements, and (3) eliminating or combining some courses. While reconceptualizing the ECE programs, the components valued most were prioritized. While placement credits were reduced, the wide variety of experiences was not. The placements allow the faculty to continue utilizing an applied project approach to much of the coursework. The inclusive nature of the programs is paramount and was a key consideration throughout the curricular redesign process. Specific examples include making the special education content more visible to TCs by changing some course prefixes from EDUINDP (education interdepartmental) to SPECED (special education). Another example includes taking

the two 3-credit assessment classes and merging the content into one 4-credit course to address redundancy across the two courses. Additionally, TCs were having difficulty understanding the differences among the purposes of assessment. By having all aspects of assessment in one course, confusion over the purposes of assessment should be minimized. We are also responding to needs of TCs and the field by adding a special education field placement and an additional course on differentiation and planning for individual needs. We are also adding a course on bilingual education. The proposed changes streamline course content while maintaining rigor. Moreover, the ECE program will remain placement intensive to provide various and diverse experiences with children and families. Reducing the program by one semester will allow TCs to graduate within 4 years which should be favorable for recruitment.

Revising our licensure plans in accordance with our state department of education's licensure criteria has been a significant challenge. As part of the redesign process, we opted to create alternate pathways for students to complete the Foundations of Reading Test. In order to do that, we were required to submit two separate licensure plans (i.e., regular education and special education). Each licensure plan had to meet separate requirements from our state department of education. On paper, it looks like we have two separate licensure programs, when in actuality, we have one blended program resulting in two licenses (i.e., regular and special education).

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation

NAEYC has served as the sole accreditor of early childhood programs since 2006 (NAEYC, 2024). Our ECE program is the first baccalaureate program in the state to achieve this recognition. Benefits of earning accreditation and participating in this reflective process included improving our knowledge of aligning student learning outcomes with course assessments, providing TCs more opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of national professional standards, and an increased awareness of the program and its value to the college community (NAEYC, 2024). Furthermore, the process forced our program to become structured and consistent with our data collection system, described earlier. We have been able to draw from this data for other reporting requirements. In addition, knowing how proficient our TCs are on NAEYC standards also helped inform program redesign decisions.

Course Syllabi Alignment with Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Standards

As part of continual program improvement efforts, ECE program faculty updated the EI/ECSE standards used in course syllabi in 2020 when DEC published personnel preparation standards for training EI/ECSE professionals (DEC, 2020). ECE program faculty participated in national efforts to advance blended preparation and the use of the newly developed EI/ECSE standards. In 2019, two members of the ECE program team, one Curriculum and Instruction faculty member and one Special Education faculty member, participated in a think tank focused on blended preparation (Early Childhood Personnel Center [ECPC], 2020). The Special Education faculty member also participated in a workgroup to develop a crosswalk for the new EI/ECSE and NAEYC standards (ECPC, 2020).

New Program Offerings

Since the development of the ECE campus-based and online programs, the ECE team has developed two additional programs to meet the needs of the field. These innovative programs were designed to attract new TCs and increase the diversity of the workforce by appealing to a broader audience through different degree pathways than those offered in our undergraduate programs with licensure.

Non-license Online Bachelor's Degree Program (ECCE)

Our state has long had a system of education and credentials within the field of ECE that are supported and organized by an independent not for profit organization. Credentials are sets of courses designed around a topic relevant to the field of ECE. These courses are offered and transcribed through the technical college system schools and state University system. A Preschool Credential is currently incorporated into the AAS degree program that can be earned through technical colleges. However, there was no pathway to use earned credits toward a bachelor's degree. In response to this situation and need in the field, UW-W created the non-license online major, Early Child Care and Education (ECCE).

The ECCE program is designed for working professionals who have earned at least one credential and want to stack credential-based credits toward a degree. This degree is best suited for those who want to work in child care, preschool, Head Start or Early Head Start, or for organizations supporting young children and families. There are two emphasis areas: Teaching and Leadership. The program is transformative by allowing for a high level of credit transfer (up to 90 of 120 credits) and completion of a final capstone placement in the TC's place of employment while conducting action research in the field with the support of a community-based mentor.

The focus of the major is to articulate credential courses already taken to build the major. This is a degree completion program, allowing TCs the opportunity to round out their bachelor's degree building off those transfer credits as the foundation. The University offers five credentials: Supporting Dual-Language Learners, Diversity, Leadership, Program Development and Nature Based Learning. There are eleven credentials that can be accepted into the major. TCs must take at least one credential at another institution. This ensures that it is truly a collaborative degree completion degree.

Several credentials and the AAS degree program are offered in Spanish through multiple technical colleges. One institution approached the University regarding establishing a pathway for these TCs to earn their bachelor's degree as well. ECCE received a grant from the state early childhood association to support the development of several bilingual courses and provide bilingual support services such as tutoring, text resources and advising. UW-W briefly offered general education courses bilingually on a rotation, however these courses had low enrollment and were discontinued.

The ECE online degree programs (i.e., ECE4U and ECCE) have had an impact on the ECE workforce in the state, particularly through preparing TCs in rural areas and addressing the needs of non-traditional students. In the northern portion of the state, there are large areas with low

population density and no state university within driving distance. However, the entire state has been divided into service regions within the technical college system with the goal of providing access to an AAS program in all areas of the state. Online programming, such as that offered by UW-W, is able to fill the gap left for students who want to continue with their education by earning a bachelor's degree.

In addition to meeting the needs of students in rural areas, both ECE4U and ECCE were designed to meet the needs of nontraditional students. This has been done through several key program features. The online courses provide students who are juggling work and home responsibilities with the opportunity to continue their education. Other programs offered through UW-W that support nontraditional students include online and evening tutoring, mailing textbooks from our bookstore and rental office, mailing library resources, and credit for prior learning. The programs also utilize intensive and consistent advising. Potential students meet the program advisor at information or recruiting events. Advising often begins before the student transfers to the University, helping with transfer credit questions. Then, the student works with the same advisor from admission through graduation. Students meet with the advisor individually every semester to check in, plan courses, track program progress, and answer questions.

Because of geography, the necessity to work, and life obligations, it is challenging to earn a bachelor's degree and/or teaching licenses. The course and program structures provide the opportunity to meet the needs of students from around the state. Supporting the education of our future (and current) educators ensures the best outcomes for our children.

Master of Science in Education

Early childhood educators have emerged as an essential workforce resource, and there is a dire need for ECE advocacy in the larger legislative and education policy arena. In response to this need and building on the existing successful ECE programs, the Master of Science in Education (MSE) in Early Childhood Education Policy (ECEP) at the University was developed in 2022 to give professionals and recent graduates the tools needed to address systems-level solutions.

This 30-credit program is one of few ECE Master's programs in the country to focus on policy. It is specifically designed to reach historically underrepresented practitioners across diverse economic, racial, cultural, and linguistic contexts. Studying together, students integrate self-awareness within systems of privilege and oppression, analyze ECE policies, and advocate for policy change to secure the profession. Through their interdisciplinary studies, including the history of ECE, research methodologies, and the legislative process, students become policy leaders ready to work with schools, non-profit organizations, governmental agencies, advocacy groups, and institutes of higher education. The instructional staff includes UW-W faculty as well as adjunct instructors who mirror the demographics of the students and are leaders in the ECE field bringing expertise in public policy and cross-sector communication.

The program includes an internship, offered both in-person or virtually, at the state, national or international levels working with agencies directly impacting policy for children and families. The MSE program is asynchronous online and offers supplemental synchronous sessions, small group project work, and culminates in a policy focused capstone course. The service-based tuition offers

a special rate that creates equal access for in- and out-of-state enrollment. Supports for students include flexibility in scheduling courses, individual advising, and peer support through cohorts as a scheduling choice. In December 2023, the program's first graduates earned their diplomas. The MSE program is in service of inclusive environments through advancing equity for the early childhood workforce, the children they work with, their families, and broader communities through policy and ECE systems change. Capstone and internship projects have included family care providers advocating for community support through civic engagement, and projects on trauma informed care toward a more inclusive curriculum, among others.

Areas of Needed Improvement

Placement Challenges

Given the multiple placements within the ECE program, we face challenges as we work to ensure TCs engage in a variety of experiences throughout the ECE program. The University is nestled in a rural community with three public elementary schools in the immediate community. Building partnerships with schools and agencies in the city and surrounding communities lays the foundation for providing TCs with quality placements. Our outreach extends to a 50-mile radius of the UW-W for TCs in the campus-based ECE program, and to schools and agencies throughout the state for TCs in the ECE4U program. This equates to fostering ongoing relationships with hundreds of contacts through personalized, ongoing communication.

Challenges in making placements include staff turnover, securing elementary special education placements with appropriately licensed cooperating teachers, and securing early intervention placements. One of the challenges we face with building relationships in the community is turnover with leadership and staff in schools and agencies. When the primary contact changes we often have to start relationship building over again and may experience a "waiting period" before we can place a TC while the position is being filled and the new teacher is adjusting to the position. An additional challenge is securing inclusive special education placements in elementary schools. TCs must have pre-student teaching and student teaching experiences with cooperating teachers in the same area of licensure as the focus of the placement. Due to the teacher shortage in special education, some cooperating teachers have emergency licenses or do not hold the specific license that matches the placement focus. This often means we are limited with the schools and agencies we can partner with for special education placements. Securing inclusive elementary placements can also be challenging because special education teachers are working with K through 5th grade even though we are licensing TCs only up to the 3rd grade level. This can limit the contact time a TC has with the intended age group.

Early intervention placements are often challenging to locate due to the reluctance of early intervention agencies to accept practicum students and student teachers. Feedback from early intervention programs suggests that they are hesitant to host TCs given that relationships with families are critical as is the consistency of staff who interact with children and families. This leads to some TCs having limited experience in early intervention placements serving infants and toddlers through Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). We often place TCs in alternative programs that serve infants and toddlers and their families.

Other challenges include financial barriers for TCs and placement health requirements. TCs may be asked to travel as far as one hour to attend placements, requiring that they have reliable transportation. Public transportation is generally not available and options for carpooling may be limited. The added expenses of campus parking, gas, insurance, and car maintenance present barriers for TCs. Another challenge is ensuring TCs are in compliance with the placement's health requirements. Each school and agency have a prescribed set of requirements. Given the vulnerable population that early intervention programs serve, the health requirements can be complex. The University Health Center provides support for TCs to meet health requirements but that comes with an extra cost. In addition, we also need to be respectful of TCs' personal beliefs about health requirements, including COVID-19 vaccination status.

When looking for quality placements there are many factors to consider. We must make sure schools and agencies we partner with offer quality programming, meet licensure requirements, and allow TCs to complete requirements. Gathering and maintaining placement data across semesters is essential so we can (a) identify placement qualities that align with our program's mission, (b) determine gaps in the type of placements being used, (c) make sure TCs have engaged in a variety of diverse placements throughout their degree program, and (d) efficiently access placement data as needed for reports and program monitoring.

Recruitment and Retention

As noted in the introduction, two strategies that higher education programs can use to meet the needs of the field include increasing the diversity of the workforce and developing innovative programs to recruit and retain TCs. The campus-based ECE program has experienced recent challenges in both recruitment and retention of TCs. For many years, more TCs applied to the campus-based program than could be accepted given the 30 available slots within each cohort. In recent years, however, we have observed declining enrollment with cohorts of 19-26 TCs between 2019 and 2023. Although the causes of the decline in enrollment are not clear, possible causes include program length (i.e., 4½ years to degree), changes in state licensure requirements resulting in other teacher preparation programs (both at our University and others within the state) that offer licensure in the K-3rd grade age band, and the COVID-19 pandemic. ECE4U and ECCE are designed to meet the needs of those currently working in the field and so recruitment is targeted. The enrollment for the online programs has been increasing over the years. The program coordinator conducts presentations to future TCs around the state and attends conferences that are geared toward practicing professionals. Meeting educators in these settings allows ECE program staff to share educational opportunities and potential pathways to degree. One challenge that continues to persist is that educators, especially those with teaching licenses, do not match the racial, ethnic, or linguistic diversity of the state's children. UW-W strives to alleviate this discrepancy through recruitment efforts and through creative and responsive programming. However, much more needs to be done in this area.

Retention of TCs enrolled in the campus-based ECE program has declined in recent years. We hypothesize that the same issues impacting enrollment (i.e., time to degree, availability of other programs, and the COVID-19 pandemic) are also impacting retention. Anecdotally, we have seen

an increase in mental health challenges and other stressors (e.g., financial concerns) that appear to be more pronounced following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Retention of TCs is a priority. Once TCs enter any of the early childhood program majors, the faculty and staff use a variety of tools to support success and retention. The cohort model used by the ECE major provides TCs with the ability to develop supportive relationships with peers. These connections can help during challenging times. Program whole group meetings, such as orientation, and activities, such as annual team building, allow TCs to connect with each other within their cohort and across cohorts as well. Supportive advising provides TCs with the opportunity to connect with their advisor and faculty members individually.

Adequate Faculty and Staff to Support Program Array

An additional challenge for the ECE program is ensuring adequate faculty and staff to support the growing program array. Although we have added programs (i.e., Online ECE program, MSE in early childhood policy), we have not added new full-time faculty or staff to support these programs. The work of developing, coordinating, teaching, and advising is being carried out by the same number of individuals who originally staffed the campus-based and online ECE programs. As we implement these new programs, administrative support will be critical to ensure adequate staffing. Another challenge is staffing for the Online ECE program. The courses in the Online ECE program are currently taught by adjunct instructors rather than full-time faculty. Adjunct instructors have excellent knowledge of current practices in the field but may not have a well-developed understanding of the ECE program as a whole. While we make every effort to involve adjunct instructors in course and program development, we also want to be respectful of their time as they often have other full-time employment. One possible solution may be to hire additional faculty dedicated to the Online ECE program in the future, or to have current faculty teach both the campus-based and online versions of the courses. This would likely require hiring additional faculty and gaining administrative support. Administrative support is critical in carrying out successful blended programs which are time- and resource-intensive (Mickelson et al., 2023).

Future Directions

In this programmatic description, we provide an overview of the ECE programs at UW-W which can be used by faculty at other institutions to guide the development or improvement of an inclusive blended program. The unique components of the ECE program array ensure high quality training for TCs. These components include multiple placements, blended faculty, and innovative programming. A variety of comprehensive quality placements are a cornerstone of our programming and while they may be challenging to secure and navigate, the experiences gained by TCs are invaluable. Blended faculty who are able to prioritize active collaboration provide the opportunity to participate in ongoing innovation and program improvement. Innovative programming is responsive to the field's need to recruit and support diverse TCs. Those interested in creating a blended program can utilize this program description to identify components that align with their philosophy. Those interested in revising aspects of their current program can utilize

the program description to review strong aspects of their program as well as areas in which changes can be made.

Whether an inclusive program is being created or modified through curricular redesign, there are several key supports to aid in this work. One suggestion is to seek out financial support from administration for time and effort to allow faculty and staff to deeply engage in this work. Another suggestion is to utilize the financial support to involve all faculty in day-long planning sessions to identify key priorities and areas for change, have difficult conversations about the vision for the program, and consider changes in the field that should be incorporated in redesign. Day-long planning sessions provide the needed time to fully develop new ideas, revisit former ideas, and gather input from all faculty and staff. Another suggestion is to use the personnel preparation standards from DEC and NAEYC to guide efforts when modifying a program. Using the personnel preparation standards ensures the modified program is up to date, responsive to the field, and following recommended practices.

The ECE program at UW-W has had an impact on the field by offering a variety of programming options that meet the needs of the field and of adult learners. Both the campus-based and ECE4U program models have consistently prepared cohorts of TCs who have the knowledge and skills needed to work with all young children ages birth to 8 years and their families. The program includes carefully sequenced courses and practicum experiences that address both NAEYC and DEC personnel preparation standards. TCs complete field placements each semester of the program, gaining experience in a wide variety of settings, helping prepare them to assume a variety of roles after graduation. Upon completion of the program, TCs are eligible to apply for teaching licenses in both general and special education for children ages birth to 8 years. The program has also developed new and innovative models for preparing diverse educators and policy leaders. Future directions include developing a Master's Program in ECSE to meet the needs of post-baccalaureate students seeking licensure in ECSE. The ECE programs will continue to evolve to meet the needs of the field and prepare TCs who are well positioned to meet the changing needs of children and families.

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