DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLE

Reimagining Preparation for Early Intervention Providers

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Preparing highly qualified Part C early intervention providers to serve eligible infants and toddlers and their families is crucial. Currently, there is no licensure for early childhood special education in the state of New Mexico, leaving many Part C providers without the necessary preparation. Project RISE, Reimagining Intervention to Support Early Childhood, a grant funded through the Office of Special Education Programs, will create a multicultural early intervention concentration within the existing early childhood education birth-four non-licensure program. The aim of this project is to reimagine the preparation of early intervention providers through the infusion of culturally sustaining practices, strengths-based practices, and Yosso's community cultural wealth model. Project RISE will fund two cohorts of scholars within the final two years of their bachelor's degrees to complete this concentration. This manuscript will describe Project RISE, including the relevant New Mexico context; the development of Project RISE competencies, courses, and practicum experiences; the development of and collaboration with our affiliated faculty team and advisory board; scholar recruitment; and lessons learned thus far.

Keywords: Part C, Early Intervention, Community Cultural Wealth, Funds of Knowledge, Personnel Preparation

INTRODUCTION

Project RISE, Reimagining Intervention to Support Early Childhood, aims to transform the early intervention (EI) workforce in New Mexico by preparing underrepresented scholars to serve the state's culturally and linguistically diverse population. This five-year grant funds two cohorts of scholars for the final two years of their bachelor's degree in applied studies (birth to four non-licensure program). The grant is currently in Year 1, which is a planning year. The first cohort began in August 2024, and the second cohort will begin in August 2026. Project RISE scholars will graduate with a concentration in multicultural early intervention within the existing early childhood birth to four non-licensure pathways at New Mexico State University, including courses on EI, Native American education, and multilingual/multicultural special education. This

will help generate EI providers who can enter the workforce prepared for their role. The emphasis on multicultural education, culturally sustaining practices, and evidence-based practices will ensure that scholars are highly qualified EI providers and responsive to the needs of the infants, toddlers, and families they serve. Project RISE aims to reimagine early intervention preparation to train inclusive, culturally responsive, and equitable EI providers to improve child and family outcomes in Part C.

BACKGROUND

Part C Early Intervention

Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) serves infants and toddlers with identified delays and/or disabilities and their families. According to the US Department of Education, Part C early intervention services promote child development by increasing the capacity of families/caregivers and help to increase positive outcomes for infants, toddlers, and their families (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Part C is markedly different from Part B (special education services for students ages 3-21), as it is centered around the priorities of the family and takes place in the child's natural environments. This means services are provided in settings such as the family's home, community settings such as a playground or community playgroup, and early care and learning settings. The goal is to increase the competence and confidence of families/caregivers so they can implement strategies within the everyday activities and routines of a child to promote their development (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Increasing the capacity of those interacting with the child daily within the natural environment is important in promoting inclusion.

Services in Part C are driven by the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). The IFSP is a document developed jointly by the EI providers and family focused on child outcomes based on the strengths, interests, and needs of the child and family. Many different providers can work with children and their families/caregivers within Part C. Providers include developmental specialists (known widely in the field as special instructors), speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, nurses, social workers, and others. Services will look different according to the child/family's needs and priorities as written in the IFSP. However, it is mandated through IDEA that every child and family have a service coordinator on their team to assist families with accessing services, understanding their parental rights, and navigating the Part C system (Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center [ECTA], 2024). Service coordination can be a blended model or a dedicated model. In the blended model, service coordinators have an additional role as one of the providers listed above. In the dedicated model, service coordination is the provider's only role (ECTA, 2024). EI providers must possess a specific set of knowledge and skills to promote positive outcomes for infants/toddlers and their families. Necessary skills include a knowledge of child development, evidence-based practices appropriate for Part C, family-centered practices, culturally sustaining practices, and collaborative practices (Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2020b). Project RISE Competencies are outlined in Table 1.

There is a documented shortage of EI personnel throughout the United States, as well as documented challenges with provider retention (ECTA, 2024a). Some of the factors fueling this

problem include low compensation; lack of specialized training/personnel preparation; and low public knowledge of Part C and of the EI profession (ECTA, 2024b). Currently, there is no early childhood special education license in the state of New Mexico. Given the significant need for (1) EI professionals in New Mexico and across the country; and (2) a program that prepares highly qualified EI providers; we prepared, submitted, and received an Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Personnel Preparation Grant. This grant, Project RISE, will fund two cohorts of undergraduate scholars in the final two years of their program and prepare them to be highly qualified Part C EI providers. This manuscript will describe the development of a reimagined preparation program for developmental specialists and dedicated service coordinators within an existing early childhood education program in New Mexico.

New Mexico Context

As we discuss personnel preparation at New Mexico State University, it is important to note the unique demographics of New Mexico and recent legislation as it relates to both preparing educators and serving children and families in EI programs. According to the 2023 US Census, New Mexico has the third highest poverty rate in the United States at 17.6%. Just over half of individuals in New Mexico identify as Hispanic or Latino (50.2%), 35.7% of individuals identify as White or non-Hispanic, 11.2% of individuals identify as Native American or Alaskan Native, 2.7 % identify as Black, 2.0% identify as Asian, and 0.2% identify as Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, making New Mexico a very diverse state with rich cultural heritages. Additionally, 32.6% of households in New Mexico speak a language other than English at home. The other languages spoken in New Mexico households include Spanish, Diné, Keres, Tiwa, and Tewa.

In 2018, an impactful lawsuit occurred in New Mexico. In the lawsuit *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico,* a judge ruled the state failed to provide multilingual learners and indigenous students a sufficient education (New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, 2018). Since this ruling, the state has passed legislation to provide the state with universal preschool, improved teacher pay, and include culturally responsive instruction and materials, among others. New Mexico has also engaged in increased tribal consultation and professional development efforts to ensure instruction is culturally responsive (Legislative Finance Committee, 2022). This ruling has significantly impacted New Mexico teacher preparation programs and state standards, increasing the attention to culturally responsive assessment and instructional practices.

Part C in New Mexico

New Mexico's Part C program is called the Family Infant Toddler (FIT) program. The lead agency for Part C in New Mexico is the Early Childhood Education and Care Department. In 2022, the FIT program was ranked first in the nation for identifying and providing services for the most infants under the age of one. However, this amount of service for children and families also presents great staffing needs. Additionally, in a 2022 cost study, New Mexico's FIT program reported a high turnover rate for both developmental specialists (18%) and service coordinators (29%). A 2022 Tribal Needs Assessment conducted by New Mexico's Early Childhood Education

and Care Department (ECECD) indicated tribes, pueblos, and nations in New Mexico experience challenges recruiting and retaining EI providers who are highly qualified to meet their needs.

As stated previously, there is no early childhood special education license in the state of New Mexico. Subsequently, to be a developmental specialist or service coordinator, one must hold a degree in one of 19 related fields, such as psychology, nutrition, social work, or early childhood education. Even given these broad requirements, 9.7% of New Mexico's FIT program developmental specialists were hired on a one-year waiver in 2022, as they did not have a degree in a qualifying related field. Overall, there is a significant need to recruit and retain highly qualified and diverse developmental specialists and service coordinators in New Mexico to meet the diverse needs of children and families in New Mexico.

New Mexico State University

New Mexico State University (NMSU) is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and is both a land-grant and space-grant university. Over half of our university students (57.6%) identify as Hispanic. As of 2022, a third of students identified as first-generation college students. This institution prides itself on being both student-centered and promoting social mobility. Many students work full-time, have families, and juggle many priorities as they attend university.

The early childhood program at NMSU includes two different pathways: (1) the birth to four non-licensure pathway, resulting in a bachelor's degree in Applied Studies, and (2) the Pre-K to 3rd Grade licensure pathway, resulting in a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Students in the non-licensure pathway take many of the same courses as the students in the licensure pathway, but they do not have to student teach or meet New Mexico requirements for licensure. Graduates from this non-licensure pathway are eligible for jobs in Head Start and Early Head Start settings, childcare settings, pre-K classrooms, home visiting programs, and EI agencies. In the last five years (Fall 2017-Spring 2023), the non-licensure pathway successfully graduated 177 students, and the licensure pathway successfully graduated 103 students, a total of 220 graduates. The early childhood education program at NMSU continues to grow and produce large numbers of early childhood educators.

AUTHORS' POSITIONALITIES

The first two authors are assistant professors at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and a Minority Serving Institution (MSI) in the Southwest on the borderlands. The third author is a professor at the same HSI and MSI as the first two authors. The first author identifies as a White, monolingual, cis-gendered woman. She is a mother and a former EI provider (developmental specialist, service coordinator). The first author works in both the special education and early childhood programs within her institution. The second author identifies as a Black mother scholar, Afro-Latina, and disabled. She is first-generation, first American-born, and identifies as cis-gendered. The second author is multilingual (i.e., Spanish, English) with fluency in speaking, writing, and reading. Furthermore, she has a background working in EI prior to joining the academy as an assistant professor. The third author identifies as Latina, first generation, first American-born, and identifies

as cisgendered. She is a Spanish-English multilingual with fluency in speaking, writing, and reading. She also has experience working with multilingual teachers in dual language programs and was a former primary grade teacher working in a Spanish-English maintenance bilingual program. We acknowledge that our identities and experiences influenced the ideas for the project and the need to reimagine EI preparation programs.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Once the initial call for the OSEP Personnel Preparation grant was released, we consulted with the Bureau Chief for the FIT program, a professional development specialist for the state, and administrators from EI agencies in New Mexico. We also gathered initial information from early childhood faculty at NMSU. These contributors provided invaluable information that helped to shape the idea for Project RISE.

Project RISE Competencies

To meet the needs of students, EI agencies, and infants/toddlers and their families, we discussed the importance of reimagining early intervention. This means recruiting diverse students (e.g., race, ethnicity, dis/ability status, sexual orientation, and language) and preparing them to work with the diverse children and families in New Mexico. As we wrote Project RISE, we wanted to go beyond the current standards of practice in EI (DEC, 2020a) Therefore, we embedded culturally sustaining practices (Paris & Alim, 2017) and the Community Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso, 2005) within the curriculum with a focus on equity in EI. We will use these frameworks to prepare scholars to value the cultural assets of families, use asset-based approaches, affirm family beliefs, and empower families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. It is critical to use these models so scholars recognize and include the cultural wealth of families (Yosso, 2005). Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model encompasses six forms of cultural wealth, such as aspirational, social, linguistic, resistance, navigational, and familial. By incorporating Yosso's (2005) model, scholars may be more inclusive and honor the cultural wealth of the families they serve. In addition, culturally sustaining practices foster the identities, languages, and traditions of the individuals they serve. This ensures that scholars recognize and value the cultural assets of the infants, toddlers, and families they serve. The Project RISE curriculum includes critical perspectives, supporting linguistic repertoires, centering equity, and using evidence-based practices. Centering equity in Project RISE ensures that scholars will be prepared to provide high-quality services to all infants, toddlers, and families regardless of their backgrounds, language, and socioeconomic status.

We created Project RISE competencies that integrated the following sources: DEC EI/ECSE Preparation Standards (2020); DEC Recommended Practices (2014); Knowledge and Skills for Service Coordinators ([KSSC], 2020); and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model. There are five Project RISE Competency areas: (a) Knowledge of Child Development; (b) Family-Centered Practices; (c) Culturally Sustaining Practices; (d) Evidence-Based Practices; and (e) Collaboration and Leadership (See Table 1 for Project RISE Competencies).

TABLE 1

Project RISE Competencies

Knowledge of Child Development
KCD 1- Project RISE EI Scholar understands child development theories and philosophies and their impact on assessment, intervention, and instructional decisions in early intervention (DEC 1.1; KSSC 1.1)
KCD 2- Project RISE EI Scholar understands the normative sequence of development of infants and toddlers AND acknowledges that aspects of development are socially constructed, as is disability, and are shaped by cultural, religious, familial, socio-economic, gender, and linguistic factors (DEC 1.2; KSSC 1.2)
KCD 3- Project RISE EI Scholar can describe characteristics and etiologies across a variety of developmental delays and disabilities and the potential impact on infants/toddlers and the family (DEC 1.4)
KCD 4- Project RISE EI Scholar partners with families to support their understanding of child development and to deepen the candidate's own understanding of child development from the perspective of the family (DEC F2; KSSC 1.3)
KCD 5- Project RISE EI Scholar understands and describes child development using an asset-based perspective (Yosso, 2005

Family-Centered Practices
FCP 1- Project RISE Scholar understands and explains Part C services and a family's procedural safeguards to ensure family understanding and to support families in advocating for themselves and their child (KSSC 2.2)
FCP 2- Project RISE Scholar develops trusting partnerships with families and exchanges knowledge and information to improve outcomes for the child and family (DEC F1)
FCP 3- Project RISE Scholar partners with families to understand their strengths, priorities, and concerns and centers all practices around the changing needs of the child and family (DEC 2.3)
FCP 4- Project RISE Scholar collaborates with families and caregivers to plan and engage in culturally and linguistically relevant assessment practices that identify a child and family's strengths, priorities, and needs and lead to meaningful and functional IFSP outcomes and IEP goals (DEC 4.1, 4.4)
FCP 5- Project RISE Scholar partners with families to explain the Part C to B transition, understand family priorities related to the transition, and advocate for inclusive and equitable services for the child and family (KSSC 5.3)

TABLE 1 - CONTINUED

Culturally Sustaining Practices
CSP 1- Project RISE Scholar develops trusting relationships with a family to understand how their culture impacts their experiences with and perceptions of early intervention (DEC 2.1)
CSP 2- Project RISE Scholar collaborates with interpreters to ensure understanding of a family's cultural and linguistic background, engage in respectful and meaningful visits, and provide resources in the family's home language
CSP 3- Project RISE Scholar conducts all aspects of intervention (assessment, instruction, and service coordination) in the family's home language
CSP 4- Project RISE Scholar honors and embeds a family's cultural wealth, including their knowledge, culture, experiences, and beliefs into assessment and instruction (Yosso, 2005)
CSP 5- Project RISE Scholar helps to develop IFSPs and initial IEPs that reflect a family's values, culture, ideas, priorities, and assets (Feeney et al., 2024)

Evidence-Based Practices
EBP 1- Project RISE Scholar partners with families and other professionals to select evidence-based assessments and instructional practices relevant to the family and child that can be conducted within a child's natural environment (DEC 5.1)
EBP 2- Project RISE Scholar uses family and caregiver coaching to support families and other caregivers to implement evidence-based practices across everyday activities and routines (DEC 6.1)
EBP 3- Project RISE Scholar partners with families and caregivers across settings to collect and use relevant and functional data to make informed decisions in assessment and intervention (DEC 4.4; DEC INS3)
EBP 4- Project RISE Scholar understands how technology can promote access and inclusion and collaborates with other services providers and the family to implement strategies appropriate to the family (DEC E4, E5)
EBP 5- Project RISE scholar views research and practice using a critical lens and adopts evidence-based practices that are culturally and linguistically relevant

TABLE 1 - CONTINUED

Collaboration and Leadership
CL1- Project RISE Scholar collaborates with families and caregivers to provide equitable and evidence-based strategies and uses family input to guide all aspects of intervention (e.g., instruction, planning, transition, due process meetings) (DEC 3.3)
CL2- Project RISE Scholar understands a variety of teaming models, and how to effectively collaborate and communicate with team members and professionals in the community such as early care and learning providers (DEC 3.2; KSSC 3.1)
CL3- Project RISE Scholar uses self-reflection and seeks out professional development and mentorship opportunities to improve practices and services for infants/toddlers in EI and their families (DEC 7.2; KSSC 6.2)
CL4- Project RISE Scholar promotes inclusive practices through collaboration with professionals such as early care and learning providers, administrators, and professionals involved in the Part C to B transition (DEC TR 1; DEC 3.2)
CL5-Project RISE Scholar advocates for reimagined services through their own practice and through participation in local and national activities and participation in EI professional organizations (DEC 7.1)

Program Placement

After identifying the need for an EI preparation concentration, we searched for a program where it could be placed. The birth to four non-licensure pathway includes three different practicum experiences; a course on advanced caregiving for infants and toddlers; a course on assessment of young children; a course on working with young children with disabilities; a course on family, language, and culture; a course on emergent literacy; as well as a course on research in child growth, development, and learning. When deciding on the best place to situate an early intervention concentration, we found many courses in which we could embed author created competencies within the existing courses in the non-licensure pathway. This led to the proposed creation of a multicultural early intervention concentration within the birth to four non-licensure pathway.

Project RISE Coursework

The birth-four non-licensure pathway provides a promising foundation for a concentration focused on EI. To build the Project RISE program of study, we started with the required courses for the birth to four non-licensure pathway in the final four semesters of the program. These classes include: (1) Research in Child Growth, Development, and Learning; (2) Family, Language, and Culture; (3) Assessment of Young Children Birth to Eight; (4) Working with Young Children with Special Needs; (5) Emergent Literacy; and (6) Advanced Caregiving for Infants and Toddlers. All faculty members who teach one of these courses are included as affiliated faculty. Next, we took

the existing practicum and accompanying course and changed it to a practicum in early intervention, which is outlined in detail below. To fill in the gaps specific to EI and Project RISE, we then sought out existing courses outside of early childhood education and created courses. These courses include: (1) Bilingual/Multicultural Special Education, which exists within the special education program; (2) Native American Education, which exists within the multicultural education program; (3) Birth-Three Early Intervention Methods, a course co-created by the first and second authors; and (4) Project RISE Capstone, a course created by all three authors to provide scholars with the opportunity for more hours in the field as well as an opportunity to collaborate with their peers to carry out an EI related community-based project. To ensure all Project RISE competencies are addressed, Project RISE will also include a summer retreat following Year 1. The summer retreat will include presentations by affiliated faculty members and national speakers to address concepts in depth.

Practicum and Capstone Experiences

An integral component of Project RISE is the practicum placement within an EI agency, as it provides real world experiences and networking opportunities for Project RISE scholars. Currently, there is no established practicum program with EI agencies at our institution. Prior to submitting the grant proposal, the first author reached out to one EI agency in town who agreed to be a practicum site. Conversations ensued surrounding the development of this practicum, which would take the place of the third practicum requirement for students in the birth-four non-licensure pathway. Additionally, Project RISE faculty would teach the accompanying course for the practicum. This specific EI agency also connected us with the two other agencies in town. One of the two agencies responded and agreed to be a practicum site if the grant was funded.

Once funded, we began meeting with the agencies to discuss details of the practicum and capstone experiences. Administrators at the EI agency shared their needs surrounding workforce, which included retaining service coordinators and having developmental specialists and service coordinators who enter the job prepared to use best practices with infants/toddlers and their families. To address these needs, we decided on the following: (1) practicum hours will be divided between time with a service coordinator and a developmental specialist; (2) additional hours in the field will be provided through a capstone course; and (3) students will choose to spend their capstone hours either with a developmental specialist or a service coordinator, depending on their perceived fit.

In collaboration with the early childhood clinical director, we are in the process of creating a practicum handbook for students who are placed with an EI agency. This handbook will be an adaptation of the handbook used for early childhood practicum students who are placed in early care and learning settings. The handbook will include the Project RISE Competencies, expectations for the supervising EI providers and for practicum students, guidelines for hours, how to make up practicum hours, and any relevant procedures related to the EI agencies and our institution.

See Figure 1 for the Project RISE course sequence. In this figure, the red highlights the existing courses in the School of Teacher Preparation, Administration, and Leadership that will be added

to the Multicultural Early Intervention concentration. The blue indicates the courses that will be created by Project RISE faculty. The yellow indicates courses that already exist withing the birth-four applied studies program. The green indicates the required courses in the birth-four applied studies program of study that have been modified to take place in an EI setting and covers related topics.

Figure 1

Project RISE Course Sequence

Fall 1	Spring 1	Summer	Fall 2	Spring 2
Bilingual/Multicultural Special Education	Research in Child Growth, Development, and Learning	Emergent Literacy	EI Birth-Three Practicum	Project RISE Capstone
Native American Education	Family, Language, and Culture	Advanced Caregiving for Infants and Toddlers	Integrated EI Curriculum	
Birth-Three EI Methods	Assessment of Young Children Birth to Eight	Project RISE Summer Retreat		
	Working with Young Children with Special Needs			

Affiliated Faculty

To ensure Project RISE scholars receive high-quality instruction to improve their knowledge on all Project RISE competencies and prepare scholars to be highly qualified EI providers, we recruited faculty from our institution with specific content knowledge outside of the expertise of the Project RISE personnel. We recruited faculty who: (1) teach required courses within the birth-four non-licensure program (2) faculty who would teach courses outside of the birth-four non-licensure program that are required for Project RISE; and (3) faculty who will present content at the Project RISE Summer Retreat. In all, six faculty members agreed to be affiliated faculty on Project RISE. Project RISE affiliated faculty bring expertise in areas such as translanguaging, multiliteracies, trauma-informed care, bilingual education, assistive technology, and Native American education.

Advisory Council

An advisory council is vital to any project, specifically one impacting students, the community, the university, and the state. We reached out to individuals with broad perspectives and roles, who

all agreed to be part of Project RISE, if funded. The advisory council is comprised of seven members, including two early childhood instructors from the local community college (discussed in more detail below), the Chief Operating Officer of a local EI agency, the Bureau Chief for the FIT program, a parent of a child who received EI services, an academic success coordinator for the university, and a training specialist for an organization for Native American education for parents of children with disabilities. Since the Project's start, we have met with our advisory council once in a hybrid meeting. Members of the council were reimbursed for their time and efforts. Advisory council members provided feedback on Project RISE syllabi, scholar recruitment and support, and the practicum/capstone placements. We will continue to meet with our advisory council throughout the grant and expect to receive guidance and feedback on scholar retention and support, the Project RISE summer retreat, as well as evaluation of the first iteration of Project RISE to make improvements for Cohort 2.

STUDENT RECRUITMENT AND SUPPORT

Our first strategy to attract and retain scholars was to hire a Project RISE Coordinator who identifies with an underrepresented background, such as being Native American, Latinx, Black, Asian, or Pacific Islander, or with intersecting marginalized identities, such as being a Black disabled woman or someone from the LGBTQ+ community. We intentionally recruited a coordinator from an underrepresented background or with an intersecting marginalized identity to ensure our personnel are representative of the scholar population. Research indicates students benefit when they have a teacher from their background (Brooks-Easton, 2019). In addition, we sought a coordinator with experience building websites, recruiting, maintaining accurate records, and managing data.

Recruitment Process

Project RISE is committed to recruiting scholars from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds, including those who identify as racially and ethnically diverse, LBTQIA+, and multilingual (e.g., Spanish/English, Diné/English, Pueblo/English, Keres/English), that live in the state of New Mexico. The inclusion of scholars from these backgrounds, as well as individuals with disabilities, is essential to the vision of Project RISE. In addition, Project RISE personnel ensure that the program is accessible to all individuals, regardless of their disability, race, gender, socioeconomic status, or linguistic background.

We engaged in several recruitment activities to advertise for the first cohort of scholars. Recruitment activities included information sessions at local community organizations, community colleges, our own university orientation sessions for community college transfer students, and churches to reach individuals from diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds. The information sessions addressed the support and mentorship opportunities available to scholars to ensure their success throughout the program. In addition, we collaborated with University Diversity Programs (i.e., LGBTQ+, Black Programs, Chicanx, American Indian) to disseminate recruitment flyers to recruit students from underrepresented programs. In addition, the qualifications for selection were the following: (a) cumulative GPA (i.e., minimum 3.0), (b) one

letter of recommendation and two additional references, (c) Project RISE application, and (d) interview with Project RISE faculty. We reviewed all applications and interviewed each candidate.

Community College Partnership

One of our most successful recruitment strategies was partnering with a local community college, Doña Ana Community College (DACC) to recruit scholars graduating with their associate's degrees in early childhood. DACC early childhood faculty assisted in identifying and engaging students who want to pursue their bachelor's degree and a career in early intervention. DACC faculty invited us to join their courses to hand out recruitment flyers and discuss Project RISE, and reached out to former students who they believed would be interested in Project RISE. Additionally, there is a meet and greet event hosted by NMSU where DACC students finishing their associate's degree in early childhood come to campus to hear about early childhood programs from NMSU faculty. DACC early childhood faculty asked Project RISE to do a presentation at the meet and greet to answer student questions and generate interest in Project RISE. Through targeted outreach and recruitment strategies, DACC played a critical role in ensuring that students from underrepresented backgrounds have access to the academic and professional development opportunities that Project RISE will provide. In addition to recruitment efforts, DACC faculty members are actively involved with Project RISE. Two early childhood faculty from their institution are members of the Project RISE advisory council. This partnership enriches the experience for Project RISE scholars and strengthens the ties between the community college and the university community.

Interview Process

One key component of the interview process involved scenario-based questions developed by Project RISE personnel. The questions required the candidate to provide a background of their experiences and knowledge of best practices in early intervention and working with families of young children with disabilities. For example, scholars were asked to describe their teaching philosophy with children who speak a home language other than English and with infants/toddlers/children who have dis/abilities. This question allowed us to understand the scholar's teaching philosophy and strategies they would apply in real-life situations when working with families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds. In addition, this provided an opportunity to assess the scholar's skills. For example, this provided insight into the scholar's problem-solving abilities, communication skills, and understanding of the importance of building trust and fostering collaboration with CLD families in their homes.

Furthermore, the interview process emphasized the critical role of equity, diversity, and inclusion in education. The applicants were asked to discuss their teaching philosophy, particularly regarding how they ensure an inclusive environment that supports young children with disabilities from CLD backgrounds. The focus on equity, inclusion, and diversity ensures that scholars are not only familiar with best practices in early intervention/early childhood but also have a commitment to learning best practices to foster an inclusive and supportive environment for the young children and families they will serve.

Student Support and Mentorship

We are dedicated to mentoring the scholars throughout the program to ensure their retention, academic success, and professional success. We have strategically recruited affiliated faculty and advisory board members from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds to represent the demographics of the scholars. Our plan is to foster a sense of community among the scholars, beginning with community-building activities. One of the key activities will include creating a culture map, which will allow scholars to learn about their peers' cultures, values, and goals. This activity promotes mutual respect and teamwork and builds teacher-student relationships. In addition, we will host fellowship events each semester to maintain a strong sense of community and support. We will collaborate with the diversity programs on campus (i.e., American Indian Programs, Black Programs, Chicano Programs, LGBTQIA+ programs, and Disability Access Services) to provide office/fellowship hours for our scholars. We will co-host activities such as culture chats within the diversity programs. Culture chats consist of scholars presenting their cultural background (e.g., spoken language, traditional food, customs). We hope scholars will build a strong connection with faculty, staff, and students within these programs that greatly impact their experience at NMSU.

Scholars will also be provided with resources to seek accommodations from Disability Access Services (if applicable) to ensure success in all courses. Furthermore, we will provide scholars with a tutor to provide additional support in completing assignments. The tutor will be a senior in the early childhood department pursuing a degree in the birth-four non-licensure program. The scholars are also offered additional support through regular drop-in hours, both in-person and online via Zoom. The sessions will allow scholars to ask questions related to assignments, request resources, and receive accountability from we and their peers. By fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, we aim to empower scholars to achieve their full potential and contribute to the communities they will serve.

Individualized Scholar Support

Project RISE faculty developed a needs assessment to identify and address the various aspects of scholar's well-being, work-life balance, and personalized support strategies. The needs assessments, conducted in July 2024, assisted us in understanding each scholar's needs, allowing us to individualize resources and supports effectively. Scholars were asked to complete a form indicating their strengths, how they learn, specific academic areas where they may need support, and how Project RISE faculty can support them throughout the program. We then met with each scholar individually to develop a support plan. By evaluating the scholar's needs, financial status, academic needs, and emotional needs, we hope to create a supportive environment that will enhance each scholar's overall experience in the program. In addition to tuition, we are committed to ensuring all Project RISE scholars receive the necessary resources to thrive, including but not limited to funding for books, housing, childcare, transportation, mental health supports, and wellness. The goal of the needs assessment is to gain a thorough understanding of each scholar's needs to be successful in the program so that the support can be individualized each semester. This will be an ongoing process, and we plan to routinely monitor and address each scholar's financial

needs, academic progress, and well-being to alleviate as many barriers as possible that may hinder their success in the program.

LESSONS LEARNED

We have learned a great deal in the first year of the project. One of our goals is to recruit indigenous scholars to be part of Project RISE. However, as a cultural norm, scholars from indigenous communities are not always able to leave their communities. We were novice and did not learn this until recruitment had begun. Indigenous scholars often remain in their communities due to cultural, familial, and social obligations to their community. Moreover, moving to the university means leaving significant familial and community support networks and established jobs.

This was a critical learning point for us to create future programs that are flexible, remote, and hybrid to meet the needs of indigenous communities. Therefore, it is important in the future to create programs that support indigenous scholars' learning while respecting their cultural ties to their communities. There is a critical need in New Mexico to prepare scholars from the Navajo nation and Pueblo to serve their communities. We have learned the importance of recruiting scholars from indigenous backgrounds. Furthermore, we have brainstormed the lessons learned and will revise the program for cohort two (e.g., hybrid courses, remote learning, practicum placements in different areas of the state) to meet this critical need in New Mexico.

Budget Adjustment

Initially, we budgeted for 24 scholars to take part in Project RISE across two cohorts. After the recruitment process, we selected four eligible scholars. EI as a program of study is a new pathway and not well known. We found ourselves educating students about the employment opportunities in EI agencies as well as educating their university advisors. The early childhood major is not solely becoming a preschool teacher or a special education preschool teacher. The opportunities of working in EI agencies were enlightening to many of the recruits. Moreover, the responses on the needs assessment and the needed support facilitated our rethinking of the budget.

Through the recruitment and interview process, it was apparent that the financial needs of the students applying to the program were higher than we anticipated. There was a potential risk of students dropping out of the program due to financial need. We addressed this barrier to ensure success during the program and made the decision to reduce the total number of scholars.

By decreasing the number of scholars, we can provide more financial support to each scholar. This will ensure scholars have the resources they need to focus on their academic and personal development without the added stress of financial insecurity. We believe this reduction will enhance each scholar's overall retention and success in the program. To further support each scholar, we have increased their stipends for essential needs such as food, daycare, transportation, and home security. The larger stipend will reduce financial barriers and hardships that can ultimately impact the success of the scholars in Project RISE. Therefore, we have prioritized these critical needs to create a supportive community and classroom environment that allows the

scholars to thrive academically, personally, and professionally. This proactive approach demonstrates our commitment to ensuring all scholars have the support to succeed in Project RISE.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 depicts our Project RISE conceptual framework, which integrates supports and competencies described in this manuscript to promote positive and equitable outcomes for infants, toddlers and families.

CONCLUSION

Project RISE has the opportunity to make a significant impact on the preparation and recruitment of EI providers, and the diversification of the EI workforce. By reimagining EI preparation, Project RISE will integrate multicultural education, culturally sustaining practices, and evidence-based practices into the curriculum for future EI providers. Project RISE also legitimizes a career in EI as a future employment option. This approach equips the scholars with high-quality training and provides the skills for them to be responsive in their practices. Therefore, Project RISE scholars will be prepared to meet the culturally and linguistically diverse needs of the infants, toddlers, and families they serve in New Mexico by fostering inclusive and culturally rich environments. Preparing highly qualified EI providers from a reimagined program will help to promote inclusive practices for infants, toddlers, and their families in New Mexico and beyond.

Figure 2

Project RISE Conceptual Framework
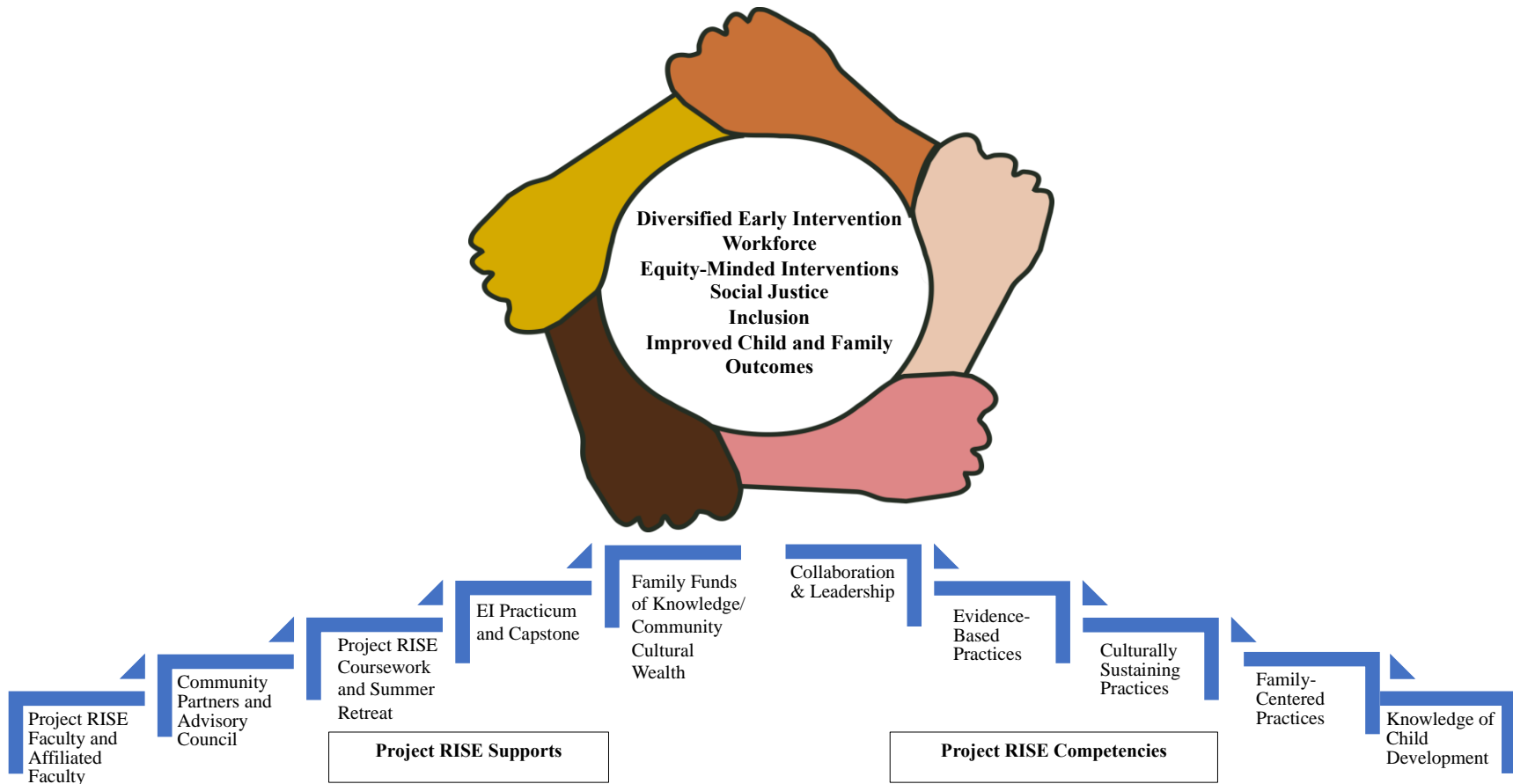
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