DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLE

Enhancing Fieldwork Supervision During Early Childhood Inclusive Practicum Placements: Opportunity for Collaboration Between Institutes of Higher Education

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This manuscript outlines a collaborative initiative among four state universities to enhance practicum and field-based experiences for early childhood education candidates. Grounded in research highlighting the impact of early childhood experiences, the collaboration addresses challenges in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce by fostering inclusive decision-making and engagement with ECCE partners. Through dialogue and partnership, the initiative aims to ensure comprehensive training and support for future early childhood educators. It highlights the evolution of practicum experiences, emphasizing collaborative relationships between novice teachers, mentor teachers, and university supervisors. Key components include the creation of universal training modules and an open-source platform to house training materials. The manuscript concludes with recommendations for enhancing practicum experiences and addressing workforce challenges, emphasizing ongoing collaboration and partnership in promoting high-quality early childhood education.

Keywords: early childhood, field experience, inclusion, practice-based coaching, practicum

One afternoon in early spring, the conference room at the university department meeting buzzed with animated discussion. An endowed, early childhood faculty member leaned forward, her eyes bright with enthusiasm. "We need to rethink our approach to field experiences," she asserted. "Our candidates deserve the best preparation possible, and that starts with well-trained mentor teachers and clinical supervisors." Another seasoned faculty member from the department nodded in agreement. "Absolutely. The impact of a skilled mentor can't be overstated. We need comprehensive training modules that not only address the basics but also delve into advanced mentoring strategies."

Across the table, a professor with a passion for innovative teaching methods chimed in. "Why don't we collaborate with other state universities? We can pool our resources and expertise to create a robust training program that benefits all of our candidates." The room fell silent for a moment as everyone considered the proposal. Then, a chorus of agreement echoed through the room, marking the beginning of a groundbreaking initiative. This conversation set the stage for a collaborative effort to enhance the quality of practicum experiences, ensuring that future early childhood teachers receive the guidance and support they need to thrive in their careers.

Research supports the importance of a child's early years on later development (Likhar et al., 2022). During early childhood, brain development progresses at a remarkable pace, deeply influenced by essential interactions with families, peers, teachers, and the broader community. All children thrive in environments rich with play and through opportunities to interact with others, learning language and social skills that will impact their later life (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The number of young children identified as having developmental disabilities continues to increase with nearly 18% of U.S. children, or one in six, having a disability that will impact their schooling and overall future success (Zablotsky et al., 2019). When children are identified early and can experience a high-quality inclusive early childhood setting, the strongest outcomes for the child can be achieved. Children with disabilities who receive high-quality inclusive early learning experiences with their general education peers have a much greater opportunity for later life success. However, young children may face barriers to accessing high-quality inclusive settings due to a lack of a qualified teacher workforce (Dewhirst, 2023; Rhodes & Huston, 2012).

To ensure that all young children are provided with high-quality inclusive early childhood environments, it is vital to develop ways to recruit, educate, and retain the early childhood workforce. Evidence from PreK–12 settings indicates that teachers who participate in comprehensive preparation and induction experiences are better prepared when they enter the classroom and are more likely to remain in the profession (Podolsky et al., 2016). One way to develop a highly qualified early childhood workforce is through teacher preparation programs that ensure educators leave their programs well equipped to work in inclusive settings.

Practicum Experiences

Practicum experiences are an essential component of teacher preparation (Roberts et al., 2013). When novice educators are placed within high quality environments with well-established teachers along with careful guidance from university supervisors, they can apply knowledge gained from university courses to practice (Dewhirst, 2023). Providing opportunities to work within inclusive

settings that include students with and without disabilities contribute to the developing teachers' ability to support and navigate the special education system within a school district. Such systems can be complex, requiring the novice educator to modify curricula, gather data to inform Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and/or Individualized Education Programs (IEP), and provide structures to support learner growth in accordance with IFSP/IEP goals so that learners can access the general education curriculum, all which must adhere to federal regulations.

In a carefully crafted field experience placement, a collaborative relationship is formed between the novice teacher, mentor teacher, and the university supervisor (Dewhirst, 2023). Within this triad, however, issues can arise (Valencia et al., 2009). Mentor teachers are selected because of their skill with young children, but they may lack experience mentoring adults (Parker et al., 2021). They may be unfamiliar with how to articulate the "what and why" of their decision-making and provide effective feedback. Mentor teachers may receive little guidance from higher education faculty and may be ill-prepared for their role, thus limiting opportunities for learning on the part of the novice teacher (Roberts et al., 2013). While university supervisors can help foster collaboration between the mentor and mentee, this role can also be challenging due to working with multiple sites that may include virtual supervision due to location. In addition, university supervisors may lack understanding of the varied placements within early childhood care and education settings that can take place in Part C Early Intervention programs, community-based early childhood programs, and public schools. These issues can lead to a fragmented clinical experience, limiting the professional development of the novice teacher. A way of solving these problems is a collaborative training program to prepare mentor teachers and university supervisors with skills to effectively support novice teachers across placement settings in reflecting on their learning, thus charting a positive path forward for the mentor/novice teacher partnership.

Additionally, there is recent reform emphasizing the necessity for a more clinical approach to teacher preparation (Dewhirst, 2023; Lafferty, 2018). In such an approach, field mentors and university supervisors take on more of a coaching stance when working with adult learners, promoting collaboration in planning, providing constructive feedback, identification of short- and long-term goals, and building in rich opportunities for reflective practices (Parker et al., 2021). This intersection between academic understanding and application of pedagogy to the contextual setting of the classroom is even more pronounced in inclusive settings (Roberts et al., 2013). Within a community of practice, scaffolding learning experiences for the novice educator can be ongoing as the field mentor makes visible the many decisions made throughout the day.

This article aims to detail the collaboration among four state universities to enhance practicum and field-based experiences. This was achieved through a series of training modules designed to improve the effectiveness of university supervisors and mentor teachers. First, the collaboration between the institutions of higher education will be described. Then we will review how grant funding impacted the collaboration including creation of training modules easily accessed through an open-source Canvas site, drawing on expertise from the field of early childhood. This article will conclude with recommendations for enhancing the quality of practicum experiences.

Collaboration Between Institutes of Higher Education

This innovative project was part of a collective endeavor by four state institutions of higher education (IHE) located in Kansas. The project directly addressed challenges in recruitment and retention within the early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce. The envisioned outcome was a group of well-prepared, supported, and reflective early childhood educators who will positively influence the quality of infant/toddler and preschool settings. This, in turn, contributes to the long-term success of the ECCE workforce. The partnership involved the development of a set of universal training modules that can be accessed by all ECCE educator preparation programs in the state as well as other early childhood constituents (i.e., Head Start). The following is a review of how the collective endeavor was carried out.

Initial Collaboration

A state-wide training office dedicated to providing high-quality, accessible professional development opportunities for family childcare providers, childcare center staff, and other early education professionals issued a call for grant proposals. In response, program leaders from four early childhood teacher preparation programs within the state convened to explore the potential for collaboration, aligning their efforts with the objectives outlined in the call for proposals to better support early childhood teacher candidates. Very quickly, the desire for training focusing on both mentor teachers and university supervisors to support high-quality fieldwork/practicum experiences became the forefront of the conversation. Collaborators identified university supervisors and mentor teachers as the primary audience for the training modules, focusing on settings involving infants/toddlers and preschool-aged children. Consequently, four specific target areas were established: (a) university supervisors working with infants/toddlers, (b) mentor teachers working with infants/toddlers, (c) university supervisors working with preschoolers, and (d) mentor teachers working with preschoolers. Each IHE selected a targeted area based on individual program needs, including upcoming practicum/clinical experiences. A driving force was the opportunity to ensure mutually beneficial partnerships amongst all constituents involved in the program.

Secure Grant Funding

Each IHE worked independently to submit a proposal to the funding agency to promote the collaborative venture. A similar grant project title was adopted across institutions to signal to reviewers that, while each submission was independent, they were part of a larger, collaborative effort. For instance, each institution titled their project "Kansas Teacher Educators Unite," followed by their specific target area (e.g., preschool mentor teachers). Additionally, in their respective grant proposals, each IHE identified key training areas tailored to their specific targets. For example, one IHE determined the necessity of modules that emphasized collaboration within the school environment, engagement with community members and families, and the delivery of effective feedback as an area to target within their comprehensive training modules. Central to the grant funding was the opportunity to address the challenges of recruitment for and retention of the ECCE workforce and to build awareness of and support within the state.

Input from Community Partners as a Central Focus

Central to this endeavor is recognition of the importance of field experience placements on novice educator development. Universities rely on early childhood partners to help educate preservice teachers. However, these placements often lack opportunities to form reciprocal, collaborative partnerships. Barriers can exist between IHE and ECCE programs, discounting educator experience and expertise developed in the workplace (Build Initiative, 2023). This collaboration looked for ways to build on the lived knowledge that ECCE partners bring to the field, applying these understandings to enrich high-quality field placements.

Collaboration with community partners was conducted in various ways. One IHE identified community partners including directors and educators to review modules and module scripts for the training videos, adding keen insights from the field. Reviewers from a variety of backgrounds were sought and provided a stipend for their efforts, including (a) expert reviewers for content validity and alignment with best practices (i.e., individuals with advanced degrees teaching in higher education); (b) field professional reviewers to verify the practical use and relevance of the training modules (i.e., ECCE program directors, professional development specialists); and (c) target population reviewers to assess "user friendliness" (i.e., practitioners). As a result, module scripts and/or videos were revised and edited based on reviewer feedback before being sent to participants likely to engage in practicum experiences either as mentor teachers or university supervisors. This comprehensive approach ensured the training modules were robust, practical, and user-friendly, ultimately strengthening the partnership between universities and community stakeholders.

Creation of Training Modules

The training modules were organized to ensure a consistent and effective learning experience. Each module for each IHE followed a common format, comprising several key components. At the beginning of each module, a clear and concise overview was provided, outlining the primary goals and learning outcomes that participants were expected to achieve by the end of the session. This helped set the stage and provided a roadmap for the mentor teachers and university supervisors. Each module incorporated instructional strategies grounded in research, specifically chosen to align with the learning outcomes determined by the respective IHE. By employing evidence-based practices, the training ensured that participants received high-quality and effective instruction. To enhance understanding and engagement, the modules included instances of case studies or "real-life" examples from the classroom. These examples helped bridge the gap between theory and practice, allowing participants to see the practical application of the concepts being taught. Each module concluded with a final slide summarizing the key points covered, serving as a recap and reinforcing the main takeaways, ensuring that participants left the session with a clear understanding of the material. The training modules were created using PowerPoint, providing a visually appealing and structured format for presenting the content. To deliver the training, screen sharing via Zoom was utilized to record the modules.

Additionally, each IHE training module consisted of three videos:

The first video in the module provided an overview of the practicum experience specific to each IHE, including both site-specific information tied to the clinical experience, such as specific evaluation tools and IHE-specific practicum handbook information, along with universal training material that could be utilized by outside constituents. For example, participants learn how to complete a clinical evaluation form for a teacher candidate's teaching, then apply understanding by completing a mock evaluation form using case study examples to promote application to the field. Such videos were created to be used across different practicum age groups such as infant/toddler and preschool placements, ensuring both university supervisors and mentor teachers understand core components of the practicum experience at each respective IHE. As such, this format can be replicated by other IHEs, ensuring that the practicum experience is tailored specifically to individual requirements.

The second video was created collaboratively amongst all four IHEs and focused on practice-based coaching to facilitate effective practice in the context of the busy classroom. Coaching has been found to both support the work and continued growth of practicing teachers and promote high- quality experiences for young children (Miguel, 2020; Varghese et al., 2022). A state-wide agency that unites higher education faculty and policymakers to enhance high-quality early learning opportunities by transforming teacher preparation and professional development and is affiliated with the grant funder, granted permission for this collaborative to use one of their training videos on practice-based coaching. Consequently, each IHE added information to a practice-based coaching video, making explicit connections to coaching preservice early childhood candidates in inclusive settings. Included were short video clips that enabled the participant to apply key learning to the practicum setting such as how a mentor teacher could work collaboratively with the teacher candidate to develop shared goals and action planning.

The final video examined principles of effective supervision tied to the specific age group (infant/toddler or preschool) and target audience (mentor teacher or university supervisor) and included a range of topics, all designed to support the novice educator including: (a) principles of effective supervision, (b) university supervisor and mentor teacher roles and responsibilities, (c) providing meaningful feedback, (d) supporting reflective practice, (e) collaboration, and (f) supervision in different contexts such as the natural setting of the home. Videos were designed to be shared amongst IHEs, providing evidence-based strategies for quality supervision for the respective age group and target audience.

Open-Source Site to House Materials

A shared YouTube page was established for use across all participating IHEs. Once module videos were recorded, each IHE uploaded their videos to this YouTube page as unlisted. To support accessibility of the training materials, the state funded organization responsible for grant oversight partnered with the IHE collaborative to host and maintain an open-access site using their Learning Management System (i.e., Canvas). Mentor teachers and university supervisors involved in ECCE practicum experiences were directed to the Canvas site to access their respective IHE training videos. The Canvas site was structured to include institution-specific modules which include the three videos, and any additional resources as needed (i.e., evaluation forms). Participants were provided with a direct link to the Canvas site along with instructions to complete the training.

Each IHE utilized the training modules during the semester that were most conducive to their program needs. For example, some IHEs incorporated the training during the summer semester, allowing for concentrated professional development outside the regular academic year. On the other hand, other IHEs integrated the training modules during the fall and spring semesters, aligning with ongoing practicum and field-based experiences. This approach allows for immediate application of learned concepts in real-time settings, enhancing the relevance and impact of the training. By offering flexibility in the timing of the training, each institution was able to tailor the use of these resources to best support their mentor teachers and university supervisors, ensuring that the training is both timely and effective.

Outcomes of the Collective Endeavor

This section illuminates the transformative journey of clinical placements for early childhood candidates and the collaborative strides made with ECCE partners resulting from this undertaking. From historical one-sided arrangements to inclusive decision-making, this section charts the evolution towards empowered engagement and enriched learning experiences. It highlights the emergence of heightened dialogue on course design and assessment, facilitated by newfound networking avenues.

Voices from the Field

Clinical placements for early childhood candidates across various sites are often one-sided, with the early childhood program bearing most of the responsibility (Roberts et al., 2013). Information about the clinical placements is typically shared, but there is often little opportunity for partners to influence the clinical requirements. This grant has enabled a closer engagement with ECCE partners, fostering partnerships within the community that will continue in future years. Previously, clinical requirements were predetermined without input from partners. Now, directors, mentor teachers, and expert reviewers feel "heard," and their suggestions are being implemented.

The emergence of enhanced collaboration amongst ECCE partners is regarded with enthusiasm, promoting increased dialogue on course design and assessment. This ensures that candidates graduate from IHE program with a solid understanding of early childhood programs for ages birth to eight, with and without disabilities. An example of such collaboration occurred when working with clinical partners to inform them of the grant project and discuss clinical requirements for candidates working with ages 0-3 within Part C/Early Intervention programs. Prior to the start of the clinical, information about course requirements was shared with clinical partners via an interactive Zoom session. Typically, assignments are created at the IHE level without input from partnership agencies who then must make the assignments work within the constraints of the placement. While meeting with site directors and mentor teachers, ownership of the clinical experience shifted from the IHE coordinator to shared ownership between all stakeholders involved in the meeting. Rather than imposing on partner agencies to fulfill IHE requirements, the clinical became an opportunity to draw on the expertise of the field/site to impact practice. Afterwards, drawing on partner feedback, the IHE coordinator adjusted course requirements to provide more of a shadowing experience within the collective agency, drawing out the rich experiences that occurred rather than limiting learning to a "one size fits all" experience. This collaborative effort extended to course design with input from community partners impacting what was shared in the early intervention clinical course. Course outcomes, assignments, and content were enriched through the opportunity to gain insight from the field of early intervention. As such, a mentor teacher noted the following when discussing the teacher candidate:

> "She is an exceptional teacher. She had the best primary coaching lesson plan that
> I have ever received from a student. When I asked her what prepared her for this,
> she highly praised your birth to three early intervention course and the videos that
> were shared in this course. I thought you would appreciate knowing how the
> coursework was being applied in such a great way. I don't often get to see this
> level of understanding of coaching and questioning. So, it was really exciting to
> see how your courses are preparing students to do this level of coaching with
> families."

This quote is just one "slice" of feedback and is not comprehensive as the modules have not yet been implemented for all four universities to assess the complete impact. However, it speaks to the collaborative nature started with this endeavor with an opportunity for further conversations to occur between all stakeholders to enrich inclusive field experiences and ensure reciprocal partnerships are formed.

Additionally, an unexpected result arose from the rich dialogue among reviewers of the module scripts. These scripts, shared in Google Docs, facilitated open editing, suggestions, and comments. The collaborative process led to a dynamic exchange of ideas, with reviewers contributing insights, examples, and expanding the collective knowledge within the community. As such, upcoming clinical experiences are expected to be significantly enhanced by a deeper understanding of how all constituents in the process operate, ultimately ensuring high-quality learning experiences for young children.

Networking Opportunities

As a result of the collaboration, new networking opportunities emerged, fostering increased dialogue on course design and assessment. This ensures that IHE early childhood candidates graduate with a comprehensive understanding of early childhood and early intervention, birth to age eight and the roles of all constituents involved in the process. Leveraging field experts serving in various capacities (e.g., teacher educators, professional development specialists), the IHEs were encouraged to make the content publicly accessible for use by respective organizations. For example, one participant who is an early childhood professional development specialist, voiced her request to use the content for future training by noting, "I am really loving the information… I work with rural providers and there are directors of centers who are struggling! I wonder if this could be a tool for them to use in guiding the teachers they have to get on the correct path." This unexpected outcome led to the Canvas site being made available to any organization upon request including two-year institutions that expressed interest in utilizing the resources. Everyone agreed that the training modules could enhance their programs by providing learners with higher-quality field experiences. In addition, they noted the importance of incorporating continuity between two-year and four-year institutions and appreciated how this initiative could support this endeavor. These conversations helped facilitate a redesign of the site home page to ensure that any organization or institution with a link could access the materials.

Outcomes-Based Assessment

Each IHE implemented specific methods to ensure participants effectively comprehended the content as well as gather feedback from mentor teachers and university supervisors who completed the modules. One IHE used the Canvas site for an upcoming 0–3-year-old Early Intervention clinical. Mentor teachers accessed the training module via Canvas and completed an outcomes-based assessment using a Qualtrics survey, which included reflective prompts drawing on content from the training videos. This allowed mentors to share feedback and ask clarifying questions. Another IHE asked university supervisor participants to write a one-to-two paragraph synthesis of the key ideas from the modules, fostering ongoing dialogue and further insights. All participants received stipends for completing the modules. Finally, after completing the clinical, feedback from mentor teachers and university supervisors will be sought to impact future use of the training modules, ensuring an on-going cycle of collaboration between IHEs and partnership agencies.

Conclusions

The fervent dialogue surrounding solutions to ensure high-quality inclusive early childhood settings catalyzed a transformative journey towards enhancing the quality of field experiences for early childhood educators. Recognizing the pivotal role of mentor teachers and university supervisors, the collaboration among state universities was born, driven by a shared vision of providing the best preparation possible for teacher candidates or those serving in early childhood education capacities. Through rigorous research and a commitment to inclusivity, the collaborative effort addressed critical issues in the early childhood workforce, ensuring that all young children have access to high-quality inclusive environments.

The collaborative effort among the four state universities has made significant strides in enhancing practicum and field-based experiences for early childhood educators. Through the development of universal training modules, this initiative has addressed critical challenges in recruitment and retention within the ECCE workforce. This venture not only led to the development of universal training modules but also fostered a culture of collaboration among institutions. By pooling resources and expertise, the participating universities created a framework for ongoing dialogue and shared learning, transcending traditional boundaries. The resulting networking opportunities and exchange of ideas have enriched course design and assessment practices, empowering early childhood candidates and those in early childhood education roles with a comprehensive understanding of inclusive practices while also promoting mutually beneficial partnerships with community stakeholders. Moving forward, it is essential to sustain and build upon this collaborative spirit. Recommendations for practice include ongoing professional development for mentor teachers and university supervisors, further integration of inclusive practices into teacher preparation programs, and continued engagement with community partners to ensure relevance and responsiveness to evolving needs. Enhancing the use of technology in training and supervision can help overcome geographical and logistical barriers, while robust mechanisms for ongoing research and evaluation can identify best practices and areas for further improvement. Establishing formal support networks for novice teachers, including peer mentoring and professional learning communities, can provide additional layers of support and foster a sense of community and belonging. By continuing to prioritize collaboration over competition, we can collectively advance

the profession of early childhood education and, most importantly, positively impact the lives of young children and their families.

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