

Best Blends Forever: Rethinking Inclusive Early Childhood and Special Education Teacher Preparation at One University

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The University of Vermont's (UVM) blended undergraduate early childhood education (ECE) and early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) program originated as a model to dually prepare and license future educators to teach young children with and without disabilities from birth through age 6. However, strains on the university's budget, intersecting with the COVID-19 pandemic, led university administrators to recommend deactivating the program in 2020 and prompted program faculty to reconceptualize what the "blending" of the two fields of study could look like in the reality of contemporary contexts. The article begins by highlighting the evolving identity of UVM's blended ECE/EI/ECSE program. Next, using a social foundations perspective, we explore several key influences that have shaped our current collaborative approach to preparing early childhood educators for inclusive environments and how our ECE and EI/ECSE programs can be officially parted, yet still be blended, in its goals to prepare all future teachers of young children for inclusive settings. It concludes with recommendations for ECE and EI/ECSE faculty who may find themselves in need of reimagining their conceptions of blended teacher preparation for inclusive early childhood settings.

Keywords: blended teacher preparation, personnel preparation, early childhood education, early intervention/early childhood special education, collaboration, inclusion

INTRODUCTION

There is a significant need for continued integration between early childhood education (ECE) and early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) teacher preparation programs. This integration is driven by a growing shift towards inclusion and the need for educators with training to support all children and engage all families (La Croix et al., 2023). To advance the field, understanding how faculty in higher education integrate coursework, field experiences, and preparation standards for inclusive early childhood education is crucial, especially given the challenges facing institutions today (Mickelson et al., 2022). The

purpose of this article is to explore the collective journey of one university and ECE and EI/ECSE faculty as we were confronted with the task of reconceptualizing our blended undergraduate teacher preparation programs. In doing so, we critically examined how we had defined “blended” for ourselves and what it meant to be a “blended” program. We explore several key influences that shape our belief that we can remain a blended preparation program with inclusive values at our core, even if we appear as two distinct teacher education majors and programs. The article concludes with recommendations for ECE and EI/ECSE faculty who may also need to reimagine their conceptualization of blended teacher preparation for inclusive early childhood settings due to current realities within IHEs.

THE EVOLVING IDENTIFY OF UVM’S BLENDED PROGRAM

Historical Background

The origin of the University of Vermont’s (UVM) blended undergraduate Early Childhood Education (ECE), Early Intervention (EI), Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) program began in the early 2000s. Both ECE and EI/ECSE programs were situated within UVM’s College of Education and Social Services (CESS). It began with a promise to better integrate knowledge and skills across ECE/EI/ECSE fields to best train future teachers in their work to realize truly inclusive environments that supported the development of every child, and children with disabilities and their families, in particular. Undergraduate students enrolled in the blended major were formally known as EI/ECSE majors. They took coursework and had field experiences that prepared them to be licensed to teach ages birth through age 6 in general and special education settings. Simultaneously, there was a stand-alone ECE undergraduate major as well. Students enrolled in the ECE program took solely ECE coursework and were licensed to teach birth through age 8 in general education settings. The blended EI/ECSE program model could best be described as “discrete,” following Blanton and Pugach’s (2011) typology of program models. That is, pre-service students enrolled in either the ECE or EI/ECSE degree program, and the programs mostly kept a curricular division between courses. EI/ECSE degree students first took general ECE courses and then took their EI/ECSE coursework.

However, overtime, a stronger sense of collaboration was fostered between faculty affiliated with both the EI/ECSE and ECE programs, united by a common goal to enhance the knowledge and skills of future teachers of young children for inclusive settings. This was especially crucial since ECE majors were not required to take EI/ECSE coursework as part of their program of study. One shining example of this collaborative spirit was thoughtfully revamping an Introduction to Early Childhood Education course that both EI/ECSE and ECE majors took in 2014. As part of the curricular redesign, the course received a service-learning course designation, a testament to our shared commitment to practical, hands-on, inclusive learning experiences. Students had weekly practicum hours in an inclusive preschool setting, further reinforcing the importance of inclusive environments in early childhood education. Within the course itself, EI/ECSE content was seamlessly integrated, such as embedding the Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices (DEC RPs), readings focused on young children with disabilities and their families, and an assignment that focused on educating community members about the salience of inclusive settings for the development, and benefit, of young children with and without disabilities.

Additionally, professional preparation standards from DEC and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) were interwoven.

What “Blending” Meant to Us

As Mickelson and colleagues (2022) have stated, blended preparation is a nebulous term due to a lack of common terminology, definitions, or guidance to understand what a blended preparation model means. However, our ECE and EI/ECSE faculty, like others (Miller & Stayton, 1998), turned to our collective core value of inclusion and philosophical beliefs to guide our definition of what being a blended preparation program meant. From our vantage point, it had two defining characteristics.

First, a blended preparation program had the power to embody and give our pre-service students an example of, and experiences with, what a truly collaborative, interdisciplinary program could do and be. With that in mind, being “blended” meant being a singular preparation program. Our shared unwavering commitment to inclusion led us to the second defining characteristic: dual licensure/endorsement in ECE and EI/ECSE. This dual licensure would equip future professionals to meet the needs of young children with disabilities and their families across multiple natural environments. In the absence of empirical data supporting any blended or collaborative preparation model on inclusion efforts (Mickelson et al., 2022), these two characteristics were primary in our conceptualization of a "gold star" blended program. Considering these beliefs, the movement towards a merged program model between ECE/EI/ECSE began to take shape.

Transformative Journey

In the fall of 2017, a new unified major was proposed among ECE and EI/ECSE faculty, who were all members of the Department of Education (DOE) within CESS at that time. It would create one undergraduate degree option for students interested in working with young children and merge the ECE and EI/ECSE programs for the first time. That is, students’ program of study would include ECE/EI/ECSE coursework from birth through third grade and the faculty would become one program within the DOE. Given the scope of the proposed change, programmatic and curricular modifications were approached carefully albeit slowly. However, small changes began to take effect, such as the rollout of a collaboratively created course for ECE and EI/ECSE majors on inclusive curriculum and individualized teaching practices to meet the needs of diverse young learners in the spring of 2019. Yet, at this time, the new major had not undergone formal review by the College or University Curricular Affairs Committee. Unforeseeable to faculty, as the unified major was routing through internal systems and processes, the world, including IHEs, was experiencing significant challenges.

Coupled with the national trend of declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs (Evans et al., 2021), particularly in early childhood fields (NAEYC, 2020; 2021), challenges within IHEs in preparing future early childhood

educators (Allvin, 2021) were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and IHE budget cuts (Mickelson et al., 2022). During this time, the University of Vermont's EI/ECSE undergraduate program was flagged by the college Dean and Provost and received a recommendation in winter 2020 to be phased out.

Current State

Conversations began in spring 2021 among ECE, EI/ECSE, and Special Education faculty, who were all members of the DOE. These discussions focused on how to address the recommendation and the requirement, initiated by the Provost's office, to significantly change the EI/ECSE major, if it were to remain an option at UVM. Ultimately, the teacher preparation faculty decided to reorganize the EI/ECSE program and major by creating a unified undergraduate special education major that prepares students to teach and work with individuals with disabilities from birth through age 21 (described in more detail in Kervick et al., in press). The underlying impetus for this decision was the pressing nationwide scarcity of special education teachers, particularly in rural regions, coupled with a decline in enrollment in teacher preparation programs, and elevated rates of teacher attrition attributable to stress and workload. It was initially difficult for some ECE and EI/ECSE faculty to contemplate separate teacher preparation programs that would not officially include formal "blending" between the ECE and EI/ECSE programs or faculty. That is, there would be no singular program made up of ECE and EI/ECSE faculty and there would be no pathway to a dual ECE and EI/ECSE endorsement for undergraduate majors. It seemed that our vision of a "gold star" blended preparation program was fading quickly.

However, as we examined key influences shaping our programs, faculty collaborations, and curricular work, we also critically examined how we had previously defined "blending." We were buoyed to find that our aim to prepare high-quality early childhood educators for inclusion remained constant. We believe that the collective activities we engage in are potentially more potent to achieving inclusive education for children with disabilities than the two defining blended program characteristics we had previously identified. Using a social foundations perspective, we review these critical influences and their intersections with a new, intriguing conceptualization of being a "blended" program and the activities that help to sustain it.

VIEWING BLENDED PREPARATION FROM A SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS PERSPECTIVE

The social foundations perspective in education examines the complex interplay of socio-cultural, historical, political, philosophical, economic, and technological factors that influence education systems and practices (Ornstein et al., 2017). This perspective is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of teacher preparation programs in higher education. Mickelson and colleagues (2022) used such a perspective to closely examine the significant influences that have shaped blended early childhood teacher preparation programs over time. They challenged readers to define how blended early childhood teacher preparation programs are adapting to today's challenges. We respond by examining how social factors influence, strengthen, and maintain our program's focus on preparing inclusive educators. The socio-cultural influences under

consideration, and presented next, exist at multiple strata, encompassing national professional organizations, departmental, and faculty members. While ECE and EI/ECSE at UVM are, in some ways, becoming more distinct, our programs retain a strong spirit of “blending,” committed to raising future teachers prepared to serve all young children within inclusive settings.

Socio-cultural Influences

National Professional Organization Level.

National advocacy and collaboration between the two leading professional homes for ECE and EI/ECSE, NAEYC and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children, respectively, have in recent years fostered a socio-cultural context where shared norms and values, mainly linked to inclusion, are becoming more ubiquitous. Of great significance is their joint position statement on inclusion that offered both a definition for early childhood inclusion and identified critical components of high-quality, inclusive early learning programs (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). The joint position statement on early childhood inclusion marked a new phase of intentional partnership most evident in activities across both organizations now. These activities include DEC's explicit support and solidarity with NAEYC and the principles of NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice guidance (DEC, 2023) and a first-ever partnership with NAEYC in support of their Virtual Public Policy Forum with the intent to emphasize advocacy, policy, and practices associated with realizing the goal of more high-quality inclusive early care and education experiences for young children with disabilities and developmental delays (DEC, 2024).

In recent years, NAEYC has taken a proactive stance in advancing the goal of inclusion through its publications and products by intentionally including content that can help educators individualize their teaching for young children with disabilities and developmental delays and their families. This proactive approach is evident in special issues of *Young Children* (Moses, 2021), the fourth edition of NAEYC's seminal guide *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* (NAEYC, 2022), and the third edition of *The Intentional Teacher* (NAEYC, forthcoming). Collaborative efforts between NAEYC and DEC can encourage faculty members within blended ECE and EI/ECSE programs in ways that enhance their impact, strengthen their shared goals, leverage their collective expertise, and improve communication about topics, practices, and policies that impact their teacher preparation programs. By working together, especially on mutually valued topics such as inclusion, DEC and NAEYC create a context that leads the way for faculty in blended programs to advance shared priorities and drive innovation and progress in the field of preparing future inclusive early childhood educators.

Department Level.

The socio-cultural makeup of UVM's Department of Education (DOE) is characterized by its commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) in its demographic composition and its academic and social practices. The overall atmosphere of the department promotes active engagement with DEIJ topics among all educator preparation programs from birth through age 21

because it contains all faculty members inclusive of general and special education as well as the fields of American Sign Language, Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, and Think College Vermont (i.e., an innovative program for students with disabilities who seek a college experience and career path). Not only is DOE faculty commitment to DEIJ reflected in the mixed backgrounds of its members (e.g., intersectional identities and diverse areas of expertise), but also its inclusive curricula, and policies that support equity and community engagement.

The DOE's commitment and efforts to incorporate DEIJ concepts and inclusion into coursework continues to be supported by the College's *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan* (CESS, 2020) and its comprehensive *Inclusive Excellence Action Plan* (CESS, 2022), which, together, serve as a roadmap for working towards priorities identified by students, faculty, staff, and administrators. For example, the UVM DOE integrates "core" courses into the licensure programs of all teacher preparation candidates to ensure knowledge in critical areas related to DEIJ. These courses span the topics of special education, race and racism, and education for cultural and linguistic diversity. DOE faculty are in the process of discussing the addition of other core courses based on stakeholder feedback (e.g., graduates, local administrators, employers, etc.). Much of the data that informs DEIJ coursework innovation is derived from assessment results associated with the DOE's national accreditation process for its teacher licensure programs through the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

Another influence at the departmental level that assists in maintaining the focus of preparing early childhood teachers for inclusive environments are activities linked to CAEP accreditation. Primarily, beginning in the 2023 academic year, a Program Assessment Liaisons (PALS) committee was established that consists of representatives from each licensure program (i.e., Early Childhood, Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education, K-21 Special Education, Elementary, Middle Level, and Secondary). Committee members review and discuss data, chiefly centered on the four DOE faculty-identified areas for improvement based on completer, mentor, employer, and alumnx surveys. One of those four areas is better preparing teacher candidates in supporting students with disabilities. As such, PALS members work on these goals through curriculum mapping, assessment creation, and in relation to the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Standards, Vermont Core Learning Standards, and professional standards.

A forthcoming task for PALS members is to develop learning progressions for initial licensure students that center InTASC/Vermont Core Learning Standards and professional standards and that faculty can use to measure student progress in key areas across their degree programs and not exclusive to courses specific to only their major of study. Potentially, it means that a teacher candidate's growth in their knowledge and skills for partnering with families, for example, could be supported and assessed, using a shared and collaboratively developed rubric and progression, across multiple courses that could span both general and special education coursework. Work such as this is made easier thanks to national efforts to align the newest versions of professional standards in ECE and EI/ECSE (see The Early Childhood Personnel Center at the University of Connecticut Center for Excellence and Developmental Disabilities, 2020).

Faculty Level.

ECE and EI/ECSE faculty are committed, perhaps more than ever, to social equity, justice, and inclusion for young children with and without disabilities and their families. As such, much of the coursework and field experiences within the respective programs focus on inequalities present during the early childhood years, dismantling barriers that oppress young diverse children and their families, and preparing preservice teacher candidates to work in diverse and inclusive classrooms. The ECE and EI/ECSE programs have faculty within them who have degrees in both fields. Naturally, faculty draw on their expertise and knowledge from both ECE and EI/ECSE when designing course content, assignments, and learning experiences. For several years, an EI/ECSE faculty member taught the foundational Introduction to Early Childhood Education course. Even though this course is now taught by a faculty member with a primary association with the ECE program, numerous activities, including an assignment that fosters students' growing advocacy skills and knowledge of the benefits of inclusive settings for children with and without disabilities, remain a prominent feature.

Another significant influence at the faculty level is the collaborative research between ECE and EI/ECSE faculty. This research integrates the current state of knowledge from both respective fields and works synergistically to understand problems and explore solutions within complex local, state, and national systems that influence inclusive early care and learning experiences for young children with disabilities or developmental delays and their families (Meyer et al., 2024). As faculty conducted this study, we engaged undergraduate students from ECE and EI/ECSE as research assistants. We discussed and integrated the findings into relevant courses, and we presented them to state advocacy committees. This direct engagement with state advocacy committees led to our research informing state legislation, demonstrating the practical implications of our collaborative work and its influence on policy. By approaching research holistically and collaboratively, ECE and EI/ECSE faculty members' research is not siloed. Its influences extend into the courses of our teacher preparation programs, modeling that some of the most complicated challenges within our early care and education system(s), such as exclusion, suspension, and expulsion, cannot be answered by one field of expertise alone.

As ECE and EI/ECSE faculty members, we share a common frustration with the policies within fragmented early childhood systems (e.g., sector- and age-based variations about early childhood teacher qualifications and compensation) and IHE metrics (e.g., using student enrollment, retention, and graduate data to promote competition among programs rather than cooperation and coordination) that may push teacher licensure programs in directions we find less than ideal. However, we firmly believe in the power of teacher agency. Each of us, as early childhood faculty, can leverage our relationships and shared values to shape the socio-cultural contexts within our spheres of influence, maintaining or innovating spaces for impactful pre-service preparation for early childhood inclusion.

With that in mind, we realized that chasing the blended program label, or specifically the physical features that we had associated with it (i.e., a merged program and dual state licensure), were characteristics outside of ourselves. These characteristics were out of our control, as well. What we sought was the *spirit* and shared purpose of being a blended program. We discovered that the spirit of a blended program meant doing things within the context of our programs that aligned

with our core values, like focusing on issues of diversity, equity, social justice, and inclusion, and things we had agency over. Namely, our interactions with each other and our influences over curriculum. This control over our interactions and curriculum influence gives us confidence and a sense of being capable of moving the program toward our goal of inclusive and equitable early learning environments.

At the same time, focusing on our spheres of influence, we realized that if our program needed a label, we would describe it as an inclusive, *child & family-centered* early childhood preparation program. Through which all faculty interactions and curricular innovations would start with the fundamental question, “How can we ensure that all young *children and their families*, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability status, or primary language have access to early learning environments, developmental resources, and educational opportunities they need to thrive?” From that center, we back further out and ask, “What skills, knowledge, and dispositions do inclusive *early childhood educators* need to effectively meet the diverse needs of young children and their families, including children with disabilities, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and children experiencing poverty?”

Using Simon Sinek’s concept of “The Golden Circle” (2009), we can communicate that our “Why” (i.e., the reason that we do what we do) is to best support young, diverse children and their families to the best of our abilities and to train the next generation of early childhood educators to do the same. As inclusive, *child and family-centered* early childhood education programs, we feel inspired, we feel in control, and we feel our power to engage with one another and develop curricular innovations that will address the answers to the questions we posed above. That is, the “What” (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) and “How” (curriculum, field experiences) of our programs, which have a profound impact on the lives of *children and families*.

In our definition of a “blended” program, the vision, coordination, collaboration, and intention can continue growing in important ways, positioning faculty as empowered change makers. We continue strengthening our programs to realize our vision of inclusive *child and family-centered* early childhood education programs. By remaining ‘best blends,’ we are creating more cohesive and inclusive experiences for pre-service students and, we hope, contributing to more inclusive early care and learning experiences and environments for children and families. As such, we extend a heartfelt invitation to our fellow ECE and EI/ECSE faculty members to join us on this journey. Your perspectives and experiences are invaluable as we share the following recommendations for ECE and EI/ECSE faculty members who wish to strengthen their IHE environments for inclusive *child and family-centered* early childhood teacher preparation no matter what form of “blended” preparation currently exists.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE CHILD AND FAMILY-CENTERED EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER PREPARATION

The recommendations below are inspired by the two characteristics guiding our reconceptualization of what it means to be a “blended” program: 1) Faculty Interactions and 2) Curricular Innovations. These are two areas in which faculty should have unwavering autonomy and full agency. Likewise, we think these are two areas that are applicable to faculty within programs of any size and made up of any number of faculty members. While some of these

recommendations draw inspiration from NAEYC guidance (see Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators, 2019), they are also informed by our lived experiences, both as concrete actions and as envisioned possibilities for future growth in this area.

As you thoughtfully consider the following recommendations, we encourage you to evaluate how they can be applied to enhance your work and personal growth. Before you begin, take a moment to read and reflect without interruptions. Approach this moment with an open mind and a willingness to be honest with yourself. It is an opportunity for personal insight and growth, and your reflection will be valuable in shaping inclusive early childhood teacher preparation within your sphere of influence. For additional questions to support your reflection on and about the following recommendations, please see Table 1.

Table 1

Recommendations for Reflection

If it is helpful to you as you read and reflect, please consider the following advice.

1. Read each recommendation and take your time to understand each recommendation thoroughly.
2. Reflect and consider how each recommendation applies to your current practices and experiences.
3. Consider the following questions:
 - a. How do you currently incorporate this recommendation into your work?
 - b. What benefits have you observed, or can you anticipate from following this recommendation?
 - c. Are there any challenges or barriers you face in implementing this recommendation? How can you address them?
 - d. What specific actions can you take to better align with this recommendation moving forward?
 - e. Name a colleague or potential collaborator you could work with to incorporate this recommendation.

Faculty Interactions

- Develop a commitment with colleagues to share relevant resources, publications, and products across ECE and EI/ECSE fields. For example, if DEC develops a new webinar on inclusive practices, share the webinar abstract and registration link with ECE colleagues who may not regularly get DEC updates and announcements.
- When hiring ECE or EI/ECSE faculty look for expertise across fields including, but not limited to research, teaching, personal experience, or mentoring that span both areas.
- Additionally, when interviewing potential new colleagues, ask questions that tap into the strengths and assets that they bring to the established ECE and EI/ECSE faculty team. Ask questions that invite answers related to their approaches to collaborating with others and working with colleagues (e.g., teaching, research, service) across disciplines.
- Invite ECE or EI/ECSE colleagues and students to collaborate on research and publication opportunities, to strengthen relationships, expand perspectives, and support each other's professional development and success.
- Take time to nurture relationships among ECE and EI/ECSE faculty. Doing so can promote understanding of all early childhood academic program options, more robust cooperation

and collaboration, alignment across programmatic content and sequencing, and more informed student advising, which, we believe, can contribute to overall program health and sustainability.

Curricular Innovations

- If participating in national accreditation processes, create opportunities to share assessment results across ECE and EI/ECSE programs to consider the results and possible implications or action steps that may be synergistically addressed.
- Consider developing learning progressions that can measure students' progress towards shared values, learning outcomes, and professional standards that are aligned and can be measured across various courses, including those outside of students' major coursework.
- Maintain or create courses that enroll students from ECE and EI/ECSE majors and embed learning opportunities that promote the beginning of collaborative relationships and learning across disciplines during preservice experiences.

- Create extracurricular activities for students that speak to their interests and topical issues that span both fields and build community among students by demonstrating the importance of collaboration for ECE and EI/ECSE professionals (e.g., a book club that is open to ECE and EI/ECSE students, brownbag lunch discussions for both majors, etc.).
- Focus effort on measuring and researching the preparation of ECE alumna and their perceived competence and confidence to teach diverse students, in particular, children with disabilities and developmental delays.

CONCLUSION

Using a social foundations perspective, we have explored socio-cultural influences that currently shape our “blended” teacher preparation programs in ECE and EI/ECSE. Even though our blending looks different than it has in the past, we would argue that we still maintain the spirit of a “blended” teacher preparation program for ECE and EI/ECSE. In spite of, and perhaps due to, forces within our IHE that drove the current state of our programs becoming more formally separated, we actively fight against the notion that separate ECE and EI/ECSE teacher preparation programs must yield, or perpetuate, a system that separates young children within their educational experiences. As we look to the future of blended ECE and EI/ECSE, it is reasonable to think that faculty in other IHEs might face similar constraints related to finances and enrollment (Grose, 2024) that could shape their current collaborative models to early childhood teacher preparation. However, we encourage every teacher educator to remember their power, to consider what they are striving to accomplish, and to find their “Why.” In doing so, we were able to tap into our core values of inclusion, children, and families, and center them, their future teachers, and find ways of interacting and transforming the curriculum within our programs to give everyone what they need. Overall, no matter what challenges lie ahead for IHEs and teacher education, we hope that our recommendations will strengthen teacher educators’ resolve to keep the goal of graduating inclusive educators for early learning settings at the forefront and remaining “best blends forever.”

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