DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLE

Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education: A Paradigm for Envisioning and Enacting

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This article describes the processes and timeline of developing our Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education Program (IECTE). In doing so, we describe collaborations that have a dynamic unfolding that took place over 10 years and united early childhood education (ECE), early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE), and bilingual/English as a second language (ESL) programming. Foundational to our collaborative work is the transformation that occurred within these individual areas of teacher education that eventually led us to the evolving paradigm of critical inclusivity in early childhood education. In our IECTE work we detail our paradigm of critical inclusivity that includes three tenets: (1) a dialogic approach, (2) curriculum revision, and (3) pre-service teacher guidance. We conclude by offering implications for continuous growth through descriptions of transformative collaboration and advocacy in inclusive early childhood settings, such as intervention agencies, Head Start programs, childcare centers, community programs, and public schools.

Keywords: teacher education, inclusive education, critical inclusivity

Introduction

Over time, teacher education programs have responded to changes in the approaches to early childhood care and education by reviewing and reforming the ways pre-service teachers are prepared to center young children in their work. These shifts in educator preparation are a result of many sociocultural factors, including changes in demographics, political oscillation, economic turns, and movements in social consciousness. As such, the development of effective practices and policies for serving children from birth through age 8 has taken up a complex space in the

landscape of early childhood education (Ryan & Graue, 2020). Wide-ranging perspectives within the early childhood field intensify this complexity for teacher education programs that prepare educators for a variety of settings (e.g., early intervention agencies, Head Start programs, childcare centers, community programs, and public and private schools). According to Ryan and Graue, "the field has developed into a multilayered and fragmented array of program offerings, and its complicated evolution continues" (p. 2).

Significant to the evolution of early childhood teacher education is how the lives and circumstances of children, families, and communities are positioned in the design and implementation of teacher education programming. Centering children and their systems of support requires pre-service experiences grounded in teaching for equity and social justice. In contrast, past practices have perpetuated notions of normalcy by downplaying social context while elevating the use of marginalizing and exclusive practices (Grifenhagen & Dickinson, 2023; Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020; Philip et al., 2019). Affirming children and families honors the legitimacy of their experiences and serves as the foundation for socially just practice. Therefore, culture, language, and dis/ability must become the locus of practice, rather than remaining on the periphery. Consequently, as early childhood care and education options expand (i.e., Head Start, community-based schooling), the need for well-prepared educators increases (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019). In this article, we conceptualize *well-prepared educators* as teachers or service providers with knowledge of, experiences with, and commitments to multilingual, culturally responsive, disabilities studies, and gender identity frameworks. Preparing educators and service providers to be teachers of all children requires a conceptualization of inclusive education that is grounded in the intersections that shape and are shaped by factors of child development and learning (Baglieri et al., 2011, Ferri & Connor, 2014; Thorius et al., 2019).

As such, this article situates the preparation of early childhood education teachers and care providers within the context of the current dynamic and discursive time. In doing so, we describe the aspects and processes we experienced in developing our Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education (IECTE) Program. The IECTE Program is an inclusive education course of study where pre-service teachers graduate with dual certification (i.e., early childhood education and early childhood special education) and the option to add English as a second language (ESL) and/or bilingual education.

Our Positionality

Our work in developing the IECTE program is guided by a framework we think of as *critical inclusivity*. We envision *critical inclusivity* as enactments that elevate access to learning for all. These enactments create a sense of belonging within the broader community, affirming the intersectional identities of each child. A critical perspective of inclusivity in early childhood addresses communities that have been historically marginalized based on race and language (among other cultural identity markers). Members of marginalized communities have been seen in educational systems as *unable* to access and achieve within conventional notions of curriculum, thus described as *at risk* (Ferri & Bacon, 2011, Artiles & Kozleski, 2007) or viewed as *needing to be fixed* (Slee, 2011). Within teacher education, our conception of *critical*

inclusivity seeks to counter the normative models that privilege some children and pathologize others based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, language, dis/ability, learning circumstances, and life conditions (Evans et al., 2024). Hence, qualities of democracy, social justice, and access to learning are essential to inclusive pedagogy (Thorius et al., 2019). Specifically, we emphasize the circumstances of young learners who require school experiences that are responsive to intersections of their identities. Our concept of *critical inclusivity* also suggests the notion of creating a space for resisting power by allowing multiple narratives to co-exist while acknowledging and actively challenging power structures that reinforce exclusive schooling practices (Annamma et al., 2018; Naraian, 2021; Patoulioti & Nilholm, 2023; Thorius et al., 2019).

Additionally, we expect that as pre-service teachers begin and move through a teacher education program, their knowledge and dispositions about teaching and the social contexts of teaching and learning are in constant flux. Responding to this dynamic, we consider perspectives that emphasize stages of teacher development (Benner, 1982; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Teacher development frameworks suggest that experiences during preparation and novice phases can significantly impact educator effectiveness as practitioners move toward proficient and expert teaching (Grifenhagen & Dickinson, 2023). However, we view teacher education as a fluid and dynamic learning process, rather than as distinct periods in the journey of becoming a teacher. Figure 1 illustrates our understanding of the continuous nature of teacher development. Our conceptualization suggests that movement in teacher learning has critical pivot points that happen throughout an educators' development at any stage. The shape of the figure suggests continuous learning within a life of practice. The lower righthand opening of the illustration proposes that all teacher learning (i.e., as a novice, mid-career, or advanced learner) begins with the orientation to and exploration of concepts, theory, and pedagogy. This is followed by movement through pivot points categorized as *development and practice*, *application and reflection*, and *advocacy and mentorship*, which cycle back to *orientation and exploration*. Our representation of teacher development intentionally depicts movement from left to right and bottom to top to intercept and disrupt teacher development as linear.

Figure 1

The Continuous Nature of Teacher Development
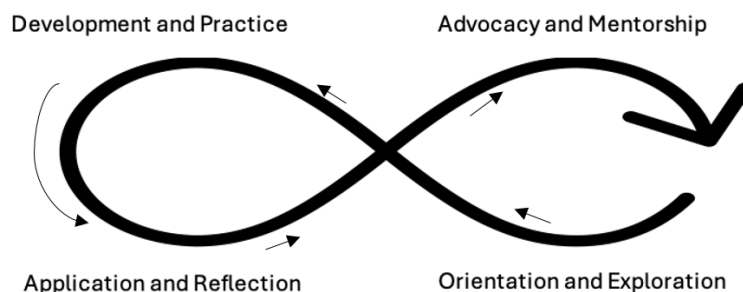
From a *critical inclusivity* lens, the continuous nature of teacher development is significant, because teachers must respond to ever-changing qualities of teaching within the nexus of learners' own intersectional identities (e.g., across culture, language, dis/ability, and gender identity). We suggest that teaching for *critical inclusivity* hinges on a commitment to the nuances of each new interaction, concept, or relationship. For example, one teacher, in the learning of an unfamiliar instructional strategy, will orient and explore; develop and practice; and apply and reflect, until reaching a level of expertise where advocacy and mentoring occur. Another teacher, discovering the same instructional strategy, will also have movement toward learning the approach, but may linger in places along the pathway of development because of their prior experience, level of familiarity with similar practices, or the circumstances of the learners they serve. Our work is situated in the notion that teacher education, focused on the tenets of *critical inclusivity*, builds the propensity in pre-service teachers to engage in the continuous process of *becoming* inclusive educators who advocate for the circumstances of all children.

We, the authors of this article, are grounded in our critical approach to this work. The four of us are university teacher educators and researchers who work in a multidisciplinary collaboration. Below, we offer our individual positions as they are significant to building a collective that disrupts conventions of siloed, isolated mechanisms inherent in institutions of higher education. We have chosen to use a lowercase "w" in writing the racial descriptor "white" with intention when referencing racial identities for Leanne, Maggie, and Sara. We acknowledge that whiteness plays into systemic oppression and is often invisible to those who benefit from it. We also recognize that capitalization of "White" (as preferred by the American Psychological Association; Transue, 2019), subtly conveys the legitimacy of white supremist beliefs. Therefore, in disruption of legitimizing racial hierarchies, we use a lowercase "w."

Leanne

Leanne engages in this work as a white woman from a Midwestern working-class background. She entered the education field as a teacher of young children believing that all children have inherent rights to equity and excellence in their schooling. As a practitioner focused on the intersections of language acquisition and emergent literacy, she works to disrupt established practices of discrimination and marginalization in early childhood education, particularly in multilingual environments. A critical scholar and teacher educator, she explores how teachers can become critically conscious teachers of all learners. Leanne grounds her work in the belief that the sociocultural-historical and racial context of education is necessary to discourses that advance antiracism in PK—12, teacher education praxis, and research and the critical work that happens within partnerships across educational settings.

Tatiana

Tatiana identifies as a 1.5 generation, English Language Learner, Latina immigrant who came to the U.S. as a child. As a young, undocumented child, her personal experiences with discrimination, linguicism, and racism became the steppingstones for a career in language education. Tatiana entered her teaching career as a Spanish teacher and an "after hours" English as a second language (ESL) teacher for students who were denied the opportunity to strengthen their language learning in their regular school day. As a practitioner, Tatiana approaches her

teaching and research in multilingual education with a lens of equity while fostering critical consciousness, which is envisioned as a structured approach to training teachers that emphasizes awareness of social injustices and the role of education in addressing them. Her goal is to help create classrooms and community spaces that are inclusive and that uplift the voices of our children.

Maggie

Maggie approaches her work using an intersectional framework that draws from critical, reflexive, emancipatory, and equity-focused concepts. Informed by an array of lived experiences, from teaching K-12 special education in the U.S. Southwest to preparing educators as they work alongside children with dis/abilities and their families in Sub-Saharan Africa, her engagement with teaching and scholarship is grounded in humanistic ways of sense-making and knowing. Her work is also rooted in foregrounding, honoring, and learning from voices and experiences that have been historically marginalized and dismissed through the manipulation of power and privilege. Acknowledging some of her identity markers such as white, queer, cisgender, and disabled alongside geographical, cultural, and linguistic influences from lived experiences in the U.S. Midwest, U.S. Southwest, and Sub-Sharan Africa, form the basis of the way she interacts and makes sense of the world. Holistically, her work is focused on creating educational spaces and practices for critical inclusive education, with attention to children with dis/abilities and their families, that honor authenticity, connection, and ability while interrogating and disrupting oppressive and harmful norms and practices.

Sara

Sara engages in this work as a white female with a Polish American background. She entered the workforce as a special education teacher, trained in applying behaviorist principles. As a practitioner in the field of bilingual special education, Sara developed a critical curiosity around discriminatory practices masquerading as inclusion. Her teaching and research centers on using evidence-building practices to make literacy and biliteracy accessible for multilingual/multimodal learners labeled as disabled. In her work with undergraduate and graduate teacher scholars, she explores mindsets and dispositions related to collaboration and implementation of accessible design principles to disrupt practices that uphold the status quo.

Through strategic collaborations, our team melded its unique experiences and areas of expertise to inform the design of a rigorous program of coursework, clinical experiences, multi-tiered mentorship, and practice-based professional development that emphasizes effective strategies for early childhood educators. In the sections below, we describe the history and background that culminated in the inception of our university's Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education (IECTE) Program.

The Development of an Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education Program

At the center of our work described here is the process of how we came together to establish our current IECTE Program. Our collaboration has a dynamic unfolding that took place over 10

years and united early childhood education (ECE), early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE), and bilingual/English as a second language (ESL) programming. Foundational to our cooperative work was the evolving transformation that occurred within these individual areas of teacher education that eventually led us to the paradigm of critical inclusivity in early childhood education.

To describe the development of our IECTE Program, we recognize the individual histories and unique courses of change that occurred within each of our teacher education arenas (i.e., ECE, EI/ECSE, and Bilingual/ESL teacher education) and the significant impact of these individual efforts on our current work. We summarized the pathways of each area to demonstrate the work that led to the coming together of the IECTE Program.

The Early Childhood Education (ECE) Program

Our awareness of the first shift toward reform within the early childhood education program went into effect in 2013 when faculty implemented significant changes to support pre-service teachers' knowledge about working with multilingual learners. Prior to the changes that occurred at that time, the ECE program reflected a traditional preparation program centered within conventional monocultural, monolingual, and ableist standards. During this period, a group of three faculty members concluded that the pre-service teachers' knowledge was "shallow and limited," and they were "sorely unprepared" (Mueller & File, 2015, p. 181) for young learners in their classrooms, specifically learners who represent a diversity of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, the ECE faculty were concerned about the disproportionality, or unequal representation of student groups based on race, that existed in retaining Students of Color, citing mandated exams as a disadvantaging factor that contributed to attrition in the ECE program.

We see the 2013 re-envisioning of the ECE program as a significant movement within our teacher education program that, over time, shifted dispositions, frames of knowledge, and increased responsiveness to children, families, and communities. The reform that took place was supported by a federal grant initiative focused on effective teacher development. The revised program, rolled out in 2013, had the primary focus on educating pre-service teachers to "engage with a variety of strengths, learning needs, personalities, cultural assets, language needs and developmental attributes evident in any group of young children with whom they would work" (Mueller & File, 2015, p. 182). Additionally, collaborations with Tatiana, program director of the Bilingual/ESL/World Languages Teacher Education Program, resulted in add-on certifications in Bilingual and ESL education. Integral to the program revision at this time, were the commitments by the ECE faculty to infuse bilingual and ESL pedagogies throughout the program's sequence of professional coursework and field placement experiences. This approach disrupted conventional teacher education methods that isolate cultural and linguistic diversity as topics reserved for consideration in only one specific course or in one designated week of a particular course (Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020).

The reconceptualization of the ECE program during 2013—2023 was grounded in equity-oriented pedagogies (i.e., specialized teaching methods that focus on fairness and equal

opportunities for all students, particularly those from marginalized groups; Muhammad, 2020) and culturally and linguistically responsive practices (i.e., educational approaches that recognize and integrate students' cultural and language backgrounds into teaching; Gay, 2018). Yet, the shift had yet to fully conceptualize *critical inclusivity* in early childhood education. There were two forces of change, however, that significantly impacted the coming together of the IECTE program. The first was an unpredictable external phenomenon that occurred during the era of remote learning and the sociocultural disproportionality (i.e., the unequal representation of different cultural or social groups within an educational context, often revealing systemic biases) revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic. As was the case for many educators, we developed a vigilance regarding the circumstances of learning for young learners during that time. We critically reflected on our practices and how we could most effectively address the education of our youngest learners, specifically learners most impacted by the health and economic challenges. We asked, "Do our teacher education practices reflect the reality of children in early childhood classrooms?" These external factors prompted us to engage in open and honest conversations that focused on our shared humanity and led to the meaningful changes we describe here.

The second force of change was an internal change that occurred with the merging of two departments within our university's School of Education. After lengthy conversation and analysis of our university's budget and resources, our school's long-term equity goals, and the landscape of P—12 education, the faculty of the *Department of Curriculum and Instruction* and the *Department of Exceptional Education* decided to combine to create the *Department of Teaching and Learning* to run 12 distinct teacher certification programs. This decision was based on the shared value of unifying administrative resources and human capacity (e.g., to support faculty and staff more effectively in program implementation). The faculty also held collaborative discussions to brainstorm ways that course content could be redesigned to minimize the separation between general and special education.

This coming together of two departments led Leanne (the ECE Program Chair) and Maggie (The EI/ECSE Program Chair) toward conversations of uniting the ECE and the EI/ECSE Programs to more accurately and effectively represent the learning circumstances of all children through the creation of a teacher education program that centers preparing all pre-service teachers to be educators for each child. For Tatiana (Bilingual/ESL/World Language Teacher Education Program Director), who is a constant and unwavering advocate for multilingualism, multimodality, and linguistic liberatory practices (i.e., the advocacy and practice of supporting multiple languages within educational settings to empower speakers of languages/dialects other than mainstream English), the coming together of the ECE and EI/ECSE programs served as an opportunity for the natural continuation of her work to champion for the education of young multilingual, immigrant, and refugee children. Thus, our cross-programmatic dialogue spanned four state-designated licensure areas (i.e., ECE, EI/ECSE, Bilingual and ESL teacher education) and focused on the development of an inclusive early childhood teacher education program was in full force.

The Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE) Program

In 2011, when Maggie came to the university, the Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE) program was housed within the Exceptional Education Department in the School of Education alongside three other exceptional education programs. The EI/ECSE Program prepared pre-service teachers to offer education to children and families served through individualized family service plans (IFSPs) and individualized education plans (IEPs) and were preparing for imminent change based on the influences of pre-service teachers asking for new domains of expertise; the forces and inequities in education that became unveiled during the COVID-19 pandemic; and the institutional responses to local, state, and national trends and policies. As such, the EI/ECSE program was primed for the inception of a new inclusive model.

Pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and administrators affiliated with the EI/ECSE program were expressing the unique rewards and demands of working with a rapidly changing, diverse population of learners and families. The EI/ECSE program, like many others, was foundationally built on traditional cognitive and behaviorist approaches to teaching and learning (Bartlett & Mickelson, 2019). As influences from sociocultural theory, culturally situated and responsive practices, and the continued centering of the funds of knowledge and lived experiences of marginalized learners and families were seen to be diffused throughout the theories and practices shaping EI/ECSE, the foundation of the EI/ECSE program began to find its fault lines and make significant shifts in response.

In addition to calls from the EI/ECSE field and the previously mentioned forces of the COVID-19 pandemic and the merging of departments, state and national trends were impacting this stand-alone program. Nationally, the number of teachers entering the EI/ECSE field was descending, while the demand was ascending. Simultaneously, our state department of public instruction enacted laws that changed licensure/grade band classifications. The EI/ECSE license (ages birth to 8 years) was not directly impacted, however the expanded license area in the K—12 Special Education to include students ages 4 to 21, served with Individual Education Plans contributed to the synergy of creating an inclusive early childhood education program.

Bilingual/English as a Second Language (ESL)/World Language Program

The Bilingual/English as a Second Language (ESL)/World Language Teacher Education Program at our institution was redeveloped in 2013 after Tatiana was hired. Before 2013, the program reflected a theoretical lens with limited opportunities for application and collaboration with other teacher education programs in our School of Education. The redevelopment-centered collaboration was based on the necessity to prepare all teachers to meet the needs of multilingual and English language learners (Samson & Collins, 2012). To achieve this goal in program redevelopment, Tatiana collaborated with local school districts and various departmental programs to gain a better understanding of the PK—12 landscape concerning multilingual learners. Tatiana's collaborative conversations led to the wholesale redesign of coursework and field experiences to equip *all* pre-service teachers, regardless of their program, with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills in Bilingual and ESL education. As a result, the *Teaching and Learning* department adopted the methodology and praxis of teaching multilingual

learners as a core competency for pre-service teachers active in all 12 of the department's teacher education programs.

In the spirit of collaboration, Leanne and Tatiana consistently pondered the most effective ways to equip pre-service teachers with both the necessary professional expertise and heightened awareness to meaningfully engage with all learners, especially multilingual learners who are marginalized by educational structures and volatile mainstream politics (Joseph & Evans, 2018). Through a process of critical reflection, Leanne and Tatiana designed a critical conscious teacher preparation framework made up of four key pillars. These four pillars include: (a) establishing critically conscious pedagogy, (b) disrupting historical regression, (c) revitalizing democratic values of public education, and (d) becoming advocates and action-oriented practitioners. The four pillars formed the foundation of the Bilingual and ESL teacher education programs. By infusing critical consciousness into our teacher preparation framework, the Bilingual and ESL teacher education program became better equipped to help pre-service teachers develop critical consciousness. This development enables them to understand, identify, and address the linguistic and cultural needs of all learners, particularly bilingual learners. The goal is that, with this knowledge, pre-service teachers from all 12 programs can proactively influence, advocate for, or transform classrooms, school districts, communities, and policies to provide high-quality, equitable opportunities that foster social emotional development, academic achievement, and language/(bi)literacy development for all students in P—12 programs (Joseph & Evans, 2018).

The re-envisioning of these three programs shares a similar goal: they all seek to address and integrate diverse learning attributes, language assets, and systemic inequities. The transformative efforts in each program are united by a commitment to moving beyond traditional, siloed approaches to create more responsive and inclusive educational practices that better serve all students. These transformative efforts paved the way for the development of the current Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education (IECTE) program.

The Current Context for the IECTE Program

The Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education (IECTE) Program is housed in the *Department of Teaching and Learning* within a public research university in the Midwest. The university's School of Education, committed to cultivating excellence in urban teaching, offers 12 teacher education programs at graduate and undergraduate levels. Guided by our IECTE principles (see Table 1)and the paradigm of critical inclusivity, the IECTE Program unites early childhood education (ECE) and early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) to cultivate critical competencies for inclusive early childhood educators (see Table 2) and create a dual licensure opportunity for pre-services committed to developing the professional qualities of becoming a teacher for *all* children.

Table 1

IECTE Guiding Principles

Principle	Description of Principle
Principle 1	The IECTE Program educates practitioners to care for and teach children from birth through third grade to become teachers of each child holding the conditions of learning and life circumstances (and the intersectionalities within) central in the development and implementation of school experiences.
Principle 2	The IECTE Program centers each child's access to just and responsive instruction; spaces of full participation and belonging; and family-centered, socially just pedagogies and practices.
Principle 3	The IECTE Program provides authentic and varied experiences grounded in supportive mentorship leading to multiple pathways of early childhood care and teacher certification (i.e., dual licensure in early childhood education and early childhood special education' bilingual education; and English as a second language).

Table 2

Critical Competencies for Inclusive Early Childhood Educators

Competency Area	Demonstrations of Competency
Language Education	Develop knowledge and pedagogy of first and second language acquisition, bi/ and multiliteracy, bi/multilingualism, history/politics of language education, and advocacy.
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	Engage in recognition and reflection of bias in oneself and the system; demonstrate knowledge and inclusion of students' cultures and identities, engagement in reflective practices, and development of collaborative relationship with families and communities.
Critical Disabilities Studies	Use collaborative strategies in the development of individualized education plans that address the cultural backgrounds and language learning needs for multilingual/multimodal learners with disability labels; demonstrate a disposition of advocacy that pushes for disrupting notions of normalcy.
Anti-Racist Perspectives	Identify and understand racism and structural inequities in society; create and foster inclusive learning environments where children can have open dialogue about race and race relations; advocate for racial justice and equity within and outside of the classroom.
Trauma-Responsive Practices	Identify and respond to adverse childhood experiences to create environments where safety, trust, and belonging are central in caring for children and their families.
Universal Design for Learning	Design and advocate for accessible learning environments that promote access to content and language for *all* students; use materials (e.g., visual aids or technology) that make content and language accessible to a wide range of learner variability.

With the merging of the three programs (i.e., early childhood, early childhood education, and bilingual education), we conceptualized the IECTE Guiding Principles (Table 1) as essential components of an inclusive early childhood teacher education program based on our experience and exploration of the evolution of the concept of inclusivity, equity-oriented practices, and supportive teacher education programs. From there, we developed the tenets of Critical Competencies for Inclusive Early Childhood Educators (Table 2), emphasizing each educator as

a teacher of all children. We implemented these principles and critical competencies within the IECTE Program by first reviewing our broad course of study to holistically evaluate how we were integrating the tenets of early childhood, early childhood special education, and language education (i.e., ESL and bilingual education). Then, we more closely examined each course by reviewing syllabi and focusing specifically on course objectives, outcomes, and benchmark assessments. From this re-design work, we began to revise how the guiding principles and critical competencies were and could be implemented throughout the course and field experiences to most effectively represent critical inclusivity and the melding of our programs. For example, we reviewed required course text and other media within the courses, and we reflected on current assignments to develop revisions that would offer students the most effective means of engaging in the course work and demonstrating their developing competencies. The assignments and our observation checklists in the field provide us with formative assessments from which we continue to inform our teacher education instruction from a paradigm of envisioning and enacting critical inclusivity.

Critical Inclusivity: A Paradigm for Envisioning and Enacting

The Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education (IECTE) paradigm of *critical inclusivity* includes three active tenets within developing and sustaining a program emphasizing the circumstances of young learners who require school experiences that are responsive to intersections of language, race, culture, religion, gender, and dis/ability. As described here, these tenets include (1) a dialogic approach, (2) curriculum revision, and (3) pre-service teacher guidance.

Dialogic Approach

The first active tenet regarding developing and sustaining our program is the importance of a dialogic approach. While each of our individual teacher education programs were merging and changing independently, the authors were engaged in dialogue with one another about the possibilities of creating a joint program that could transform four distinct state-approved licensure programs into one inclusive program. Our brainstorming conversations were inspired by the comments and concerns brought forth by pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and field notes that the authors collected during community engagement events and classroom visits.

Cultivating an inclusive early childhood teacher education program required developing a professional learning community founded on principles of humility, respect, and equity. Each member of the community (across the four state-approved teacher licensure areas of ECE, EI/ECSE, Bilingual, and ESL education) proved an essential piece of the (re)design puzzle. Our collaborative efforts to include multiple perspectives in (re)designing an inclusive early childhood teacher preparation program began with explicit attention to stating a shared commitment to critical reflectivity. Specifically, we used four questions to guide our conversations and shared understanding of what it means to be an "inclusive educator":

1.   Inclusion into *what...*and for *whom*?

2. What considerations are essential to the development of an inclusive early childhood teacher education program that centers access and equity?
3. How can the experiences, education, and perspectives of key program personnel be identified and leveraged to develop an effective program in inclusive early childhood care and education?
4. How do teachers and educators view themselves in relation to this work?

Our weekly online dialogue provided us with the space and time to think differently (Mertens, 1999) about inclusion. Additionally, our critical reflexivity motivated us to redefine our conventional understanding of inclusion and to develop a curriculum and pedagogy centered on authenticity, agency, and identity. As a core team, we understood that our learning community had to be expanded to include academic advisors and university administrative team to help navigate the process of creating IECTE.

The process of merging multiple state-approved teacher licensure programs was not an easy feat, particularly because it involved navigating systems unaccustomed to the disruption of a binary framework. Beyond the pedagogical shifts addressed, we learned the importance of attending to the technical aspects of the program changes. Initiating discussions about and implementing the changes within the institution's systems was a process that often took a year or more to accomplish. For two years, we met regularly with the university administrative team and academic advisors (i.e., personnel collaborators) to develop processes, structures, and coding systems that could recognize and sustain a new, inclusive teacher education program.

These collaborative dialogues resulted in our identification of the need for the development of a new coding system and a new set of admission materials that would capture multiple areas of teacher licensure for pre-service teachers accepted into the IECTE program. For example, we believed it was important to create an entirely new coding prefix to describe the IECTE courses. We did not want to simply shift the *special education* courses (coded as EXCEDUC to abbreviate *exceptional education*) to a code that reinforced a division of *general education* courses (i.e., CURRINS to abbreviate *curriculum and instruction*). Similarly, we resisted simply moving the *general education* ECE courses to the *special education* course code used in the EI/ECSE program. These discussion points resulted in a philosophical and pedagogical statement to justify our development of a new code (i.e., TCH LRN to abbreviate *Teaching and Learning*). The change represented our shared stance on inclusivity and our commitment to dismantling the siloes of ECE and EI/ECSE while creating a program of study for inclusive early childhood teacher education (IECTE). It was essential to our transformation that we included collaborations with our colleagues who worked within the administrative and advising systems in collaborative, problem-solving conversations so that we could work together to move toward an unconventional inclusive paradigm of educating young learners.

Table 3 outlines other technical aspects that emerged during our regularly scheduled collaborative meetings and illustrates the collective efforts that resulted from a shared commitment to dismantling institutional barriers.

Table 3

Technical Aspects of the IECTE Program Changes

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Technical Aspect	Description	Personnel Collaborators
Recruitment	The methods used in higher education to engage, inform, and admit candidates to the Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher (IECTE) Education Program.	Enrollment Specialists, Program Faculty, Academic Advisors, and MarComm Staff
Enrollment Processes	The technical aspects in place that assist teacher candidates with the logistics of admission and registration processes.	University Administrators and Academic Advisors
Advising	A comprehensive guidance system that supports teacher candidates in all aspects of of navigating academic goals and life in higher education.	Faculty and Academic Advisors
Scheduling	The logistics of developing and coordinating courses to align with state education standard creation of systems of implementation.	Data and Information, Senior Administration, and Academic Advisors
Assessment Data Gathering	The systems in place to collect and evaluate student learning to inform instruction and program effectiveness.	Data and Information, Program Faculty, and Technology Consultant
Compliance Monitoring	The process of ensuring the institution adheres to policies, regulations, and accreditation.	State licensing liaison, Senior Administration, Data and Information, and Technology Consultant

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Each technical aspect required extensive conversations, emphasizing the possibility to think creatively to identify ways to uphold *critical inclusivity* as a core principle. Collaboration across multiple programs, engagement with relevant academic advisors, and active participation from administrative team members was essential to making changes that fostered progress toward a shared idea of IECTE program development. Collectively, this work required time and space to nurture the commitment to using an open mind, critical reflexivity, and a willingness to engage deeply with diverse perspectives.

Curriculum Revision

The second active tenet of program development was curriculum revision. We conceptualized the IECTE program as a space where each person and all voices are honored, and our revisioning of the curriculum paralleled that commitment. This revision process included collaboration with many people and voices. Expertise around the intersections of inclusion in early intervention,

early childhood, special education, multilingualism, and culture was cultivated to (re)vision a curriculum focused on preparing pre-service teachers as they engage with young children and families.

Through a process of cultivating expertise around curriculum, a schedule was created to revise each course over three semesters. During the ongoing revision process, considerations were specifically given to the holistic and intersectional nature of teaching and learning. Uniting the complementary standards and practices from ECE, EI/ECSE, and Bilingual/ESL education, syllabi revisions were initiated to create inclusive content. For example, the courses centered on early intervention and early childhood care and education were one of the first method and field course revisions that brought together perspectives from parents of young children with dis/abilities, practitioners, university program staff, and researchers. This group, with deep knowledge of early intervention, early care, early education, and language education came together to curate content and teaching/learning activities. As evidenced through student engagement, course evaluations, personal antidotes, cooperating teacher feedback, and advisory board review, these two courses have evolved to simultaneously offer knowledge, skills, experiences, and dispositions that support the youngest learners with dis/abilities and their families to cultivate experiences that foster humility, understanding, and advocacy. Furthermore, collaboration and revision has provided space to critically examine our status quo and move beyond.

As we continue the iterative collaborative process of curriculum review, revision, and re-alignment, inclusionary frameworks are held central. Creating and curating spaces, curricula, and practices that allow for multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression while fostering inclusion, have provided space to grapple with dilemmas of practice.

Pre-Service Teacher Guidance

The primary avenues of support for pre-service teachers within the IECTE Program are the two academic advisors and three program faculty. Pre-service teachers are highly encouraged to meet with their academic advisors every semester. The advisors provide individualized guidance and resources to ensure students are informed and successfully progress through their individualized plan of study. In addition to academic planning, the advisors offer career guidance, resource connections (e.g., mental health, accessibility, tutoring, financial aid, housing,), and overall personal support. Program faculty also connect regularly with pre-service teachers as progress is monitored throughout course work and field experiences. Faculty and advisors meet bimonthly to communicate with each other about student circumstances and plans of action in need of further collaboration for resource attainment or problem solving.

Beyond the student guidance provided through advising and program faculty interactions, the IECTE Program has identified mentoring as a highly effective student support. In our program, mentoring happens through connecting upper-level (juniors, seniors, graduate students) pre-service teachers to their first-year peers. One way this occurs in the IECTE program is through an invitation to participate in a peer mentoring program. We invite both potential mentors and mentees to complete a brief survey on their interest in mentoring. Through this approach, we

match a mentor to a mentee. A faculty member initiates an email introduction of the students, and from there, the students decide the level to which they will interact. Some students meet weekly for coffee or lunch. Some pairs connect over videoconferencing, and still others decide to check-in as needed. Each mentor/mentee pair is nuanced to their relationship established.
We also have designed more deliberate mentorship efforts through grant initiatives. We currently are involved in two student support grants: The PIECE Project and the CHESSS Program.

The PIECE Project

The *Preparing Inclusive Early Childhood Educators* (PIECE) project[1] strengthens the foundation of the IECTE program by preparing teachers who can effectively educate all children, with a particular focus on intersectional identities related to language, culture, dis/ability, race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. The PIECE Project emphasizes cultivating the knowledge and skills needed to provide high-quality instruction that improves educational outcomes for all children, including students deemed *English learners* according to the Office of English Language Acquisition. The PIECE Project focuses on creating environments where multilingual and multimodal learners, with and without disabilities, can thrive both academically and socially. Additionally, the project identified financial constraints as a key obstacle for pre-service teachers, especially multilingual and Students of Color, which hinder the achievement of teacher licensure milestones. The PIECE project mitigates financial burdens by providing stipends that cover pre-service teachers' tuition and related educational expenses. Beyond its financial incentives, the PIECE Project provides pre-service teachers with access to three tiers of individualized mentorship and practice-based professional development that remains in place through their induction year of teaching. Through its innovative design, the PIECE Project will foster IECTE program completion for 46 pre-service teachers who will be mentored through their first year of teaching in their use of inclusive pedagogies in inclusive early childhood education programs.

The CHESSS Program

The IECTE Program addresses specific circumstances experienced by pre-service teachers through a grant-funded program titled, *Collaborating for Higher Education Student Support and Success* (CHESSS)[2]. The CHESSS Program centers support for pre-service teachers with English language development, first-generation navigation, and associate degree transfer processes. CHESSS supplementally fulfills the need to advance inclusive early care providers and educators who have the skills and knowledge to support improved academic outcomes for all young children. The CHESSS grant provides funding for a student support liaison who works individually with students and cultivates networking and peer-support sessions centering shared experience, English language supports, and higher education processes.

As the IECTE Program seeks to embody the principles of critical inclusivity, its foundational tenets pave the way for transformative practices and a collaborative approach to curriculum and student support. Sustaining the IECTE Program requires ongoing reflection to ensure continuous growth.

Implications for Continuous Growth

As we continue to prepare pre-service teachers for a variety of settings (e.g., early intervention agencies, Head Start programs, childcare centers, community programs, and public and private schools), we reflected on some of the challenges that we experienced to identify areas for continuous growth within our teacher education program. Above all, the work of inclusive education requires a critical look at existing systems that reinforce traditional perspectives and exclude diverse voices. Challenging these perspectives is not easy, requires collegial support, and calls for substantial time and perseverance. For example, revising curriculum to reflect diverse perspectives (i.e., materials created by culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse authors/theorists) suspends conventional approaches focused on mainstream normative viewpoints. We intentionally seek publications, webinars, speaker series, and guest speakers who offer a perspective beyond the traditional teacher education perspective (i.e., the female, white, ableist, heteronormative).

Additionally, we understand the need for program faculty and instructors to develop and increase knowledge of inclusivity and effective practices that center identity intersections experienced by learners. We value the agency that each of us holds in making meaning and applying knowledge to our daily interactions. The continuous nature of teacher development, as illustrated in Figure 1, provides us with a conceptualization of teacher educator learning and collective growth. We encourage each instructor and faculty member to engage in professional learning experiences of exploration, practice, application, and reflection. We utilize many of the university-offered programs and professional organization networks available to expand our understanding of inclusive education. Through the PIECE project grant, we provided funds for instructors to engage in professional development, purchase resources, and engage in a series of speakers emphasizing the intersections of language, culture, and dis/ability. We seek avenues for compensating instructors for their professional learning endeavors.

Further, the work of inclusive education requires an openness of teacher educators and pre-service teachers to explore and build identities as inclusive educators. Within this dispositional aspect of teacher development there is a wide spectrum of embracing or rejecting the notion of being educated as a teacher for all children. This includes considering what it means to be a teacher within a community of diverse colleagues and asking the critical questions to identify who is being excluded and marginalized, whose knowledge is being elevated, and whose voice is missing and should be present.

Our continuous growth as a teacher education program (centering inclusivity) leverages what we learned about the power of collaboration in the context of a complex and shifting teacher education landscape. Our transformative collaboration reaches across areas of expertise, both within higher education and with school and community partnerships. We understand there is power in identifying our individual and collective knowledge limits and recognizing the value of the intersections of expertise. To explore these intersections of expertise requires humility and vulnerability that leads to transformative collaboration. We understand transformative collaboration as a shared commitment to deliberate and conscious sensemaking that results in unapologetic liberatory practices. Grounded by socially just principles, these practices establish

access, equity, and belonging that honor and respond to the authenticity and agency of each individual in contemporary learning contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of the Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education (IECTE) program exemplifies a robust commitment to *critical inclusivity* (i.e., a dialogic approach, curriculum revision, and pre-service teacher guidance) that was nurtured through transformative collaboration across disciplines, with key personnel from the Early Childhood Education (ECE), Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE), and Bilingual/ESL teacher education programs. This multifaceted endeavor required extensive dialogue and coordination among faculty, academic advisors, and administrative personnel from these five state-approved licensure areas. Each collaborator continues to exude a willingness to think creatively while activating an advocacy disposition that impacts pre-service teachers access to financial and mental health resources as they complete their teacher education goals. In modeling our practices of advocacy, we work to eventuate pre-service teachers' agency to leverage their communication and collaboration skills in advocating for resources and conditions of learning that will foster a sense of belonging for all children in their future classrooms.

In our work, tensions along the way were negotiated by devoting time and space to (re)examine and (re)articulate our conceptions of *critical inclusivity*. Through ongoing dialogue in spaces where each voice was valued, we preserved a shared commitment to maintaining open minds, practicing critical reflexivity, and fostering a culture of willingness and cooperation that permeated every aspect of IECTE program development. We envision an outcome in which the next generation of early childhood educators will enter the workforce prepared to enact the ongoing process of teacher development as they cultivate the praxis of an inclusive educator.

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[2]The CHESSS Project is funded by the U. S. Child Care Block Grant; Grant Number 93-

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