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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# An Instrumental Case Study of Blended Preservice Early Childhood Preparation

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Blended and other collaborative models of early childhood personnel preparation center on the belief that they can improve the quality and availability of inclusive services for children with diverse abilities and their families. Little is known, however, as to their relative efficacy to impact the inclusive practice of graduates. Further, current understanding of this approach is complicated by a lack of common terminology, conceptions, and a dated, primarily descriptive literature base. To provide a contemporary empirical contribution, we applied a conceptual framework derived from activity systems theory coupled with a research framework for collaborative models to examine one preparation program as a system through qualitative case study. Findings outline parameters of practice specific to collaborative program dimensions, elements of harmony and tension within the system, and cultural tools specific to the program's attempts to meet its desired outcome. Implications for current and future collaborative early childhood personnel preparation are discussed.

**Key words:** collaborative teacher education; early childhood; special education; teacher education reform; activity systems theory, blended preparation

## AN INSTRUMENTAL CASE STUDY OF BLENDED PRESERVICE EARLY CHILDHOOD PREPARATION

Critical examination of the preparation of educators for inclusive practice is necessary to ensure they are equipped to meet the diverse needs of children within the complex educational contexts in which they will teach (Artiles, 2003). The prevalence of inclusive models of service delivery for children with identified special education needs has increased across the pK-12 landscape over the past two decades (Author et al., 2020). Concurrently, increasing levels of diversity within ethnic, linguistic, economic, and family circumstances continue to alter the demographics of children and families with whom educators practice (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2020). Formal preparation of teachers and their positive dispositions about inclusion have been shown to be highly influential factors in the successful implementation of preschool inclusion (D'Agostino & Douglas, 2021; Odom, et al., 2002; Winton, et al., 1997; Macy, et al., 2009).

Therefore, an important factor in the implementation of high-quality inclusion is the effective preparation of early childhood teachers to meet the needs of all children [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) & U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), 2023]. Nevertheless, scholars have continued to lament that many educators are not adequately prepared for the realities of meeting the diverse needs of children in inclusive contexts (Blanton, et al., 2011; Chadwell et al., 2020; Pugach et al., 2014). Recently, Chadwell and colleagues (2020) reported that only 20% (n = 1,296) of early childhood educators felt well prepared to teach children with disabilities while 70% felt well prepared to teach typically developing children. However, research as to how to best prepare educators for inclusion has been sparse (Author et al., 2022; Pinter et al., 2022).

Collaborative models of preservice preparation, those marked by efforts to unify general and special education higher education curricula (Pugach et al., 2011), are viewed as having the potential to produce the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to prepare candidates to teach in inclusive classrooms (Author et al., 2022; Pugach et al., 2014; Stayton, 2015). In the early childhood context, collaborative preparation combining early childhood education (ECE) and early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) has historically been seen as a movement toward a common purpose of providing inclusive education for all children (Author et al., 2022; Piper, 2007; Pugach, et al., 2011; Stayton, 2015). While this movement now has a significant history, it is marked by confusion and misrepresentation due to a lack of common terminology (e.g., unified, blended, interdisciplinary), definitions, or guidance (Author et al., 2022). While many terms are used to describe collaborative preparation in early childhood contexts, *blended* appears to be the most common and appears in documentation from leading professional organizations [i.e., the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)]. Therefore, the term *blended* will be used throughout this article to refer to collaborative early childhood preparation programs. The term *collaborative* will be used as a more general term to refer to preparation programs that combine preparation in general and special education regardless of targeted population.

The initial impetus for the onset of blended early childhood preparation programs was to address and promote increased inclusion, yet there is a lack of empirical evidence, and little is known as to the ways in which or whether any particular model improves the preparation of teachers for inclusion (Author et al., 2022; Brownell et al., 2010). Indeed, while the prevalence of inclusion has increased over time, data from the 42nd Report to Congress on inclusive services suggest that inclusion for preschool children has seen only a small increase (4.8%) since 2013 (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2021). Therefore, it is unclear whether the field has made progress toward the goal of increasing quality inclusion.

Leading teacher education scholars assert a need for in-depth examination of preparation approaches using a systems perspective (Brownell et al., 2011; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2010; Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Pugach & Blanton, 2009; Pugach et al 2014). Further, Brownell et al., (2011) extoll the need to make linkages between theory, practice, and context in research on blended and other forms of collaborative teacher education (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2006; Desimone, 2009; Wayne et al., 2008). Analysis of collaborative preparation programs as holistic, comprehensive systems can uncover linkages as well as other aspects of program coherence and effectiveness thereby increasing understanding of not only how blended and other collaborative models of early childhood teacher education operate but also of their effectiveness and outcomes. However, Pugach and colleagues (2014) found the existing empirical literature lacking in examinations of programs as holistic systems and consisting primarily of the investigations of isolated program components (e.g. course or practicum format).

To provide a contemporary empirical contribution to the literature, we employed qualitative case study methodology (Stake, 1995) to investigate:

*How can an early childhood teacher education program be understood as an activity system in the preparation of candidates for inclusive practice and in relation to models of collaborative (blended) teacher education?*

## **Methodology**

We conducted this instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) to produce a rich analysis of a contemporary instance of early childhood collaborative preparation through an activity theory perspective (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, & Miettinen, 1999). Our examination centered on how participants interpreted and made meaning of their experiences within the program, which compelled a constructivist paradigm of research. In the following sections, we describe our conceptual framework, selection of a research site, and participants. Details as to data collection and analysis follow.

## **Conceptual Framework**

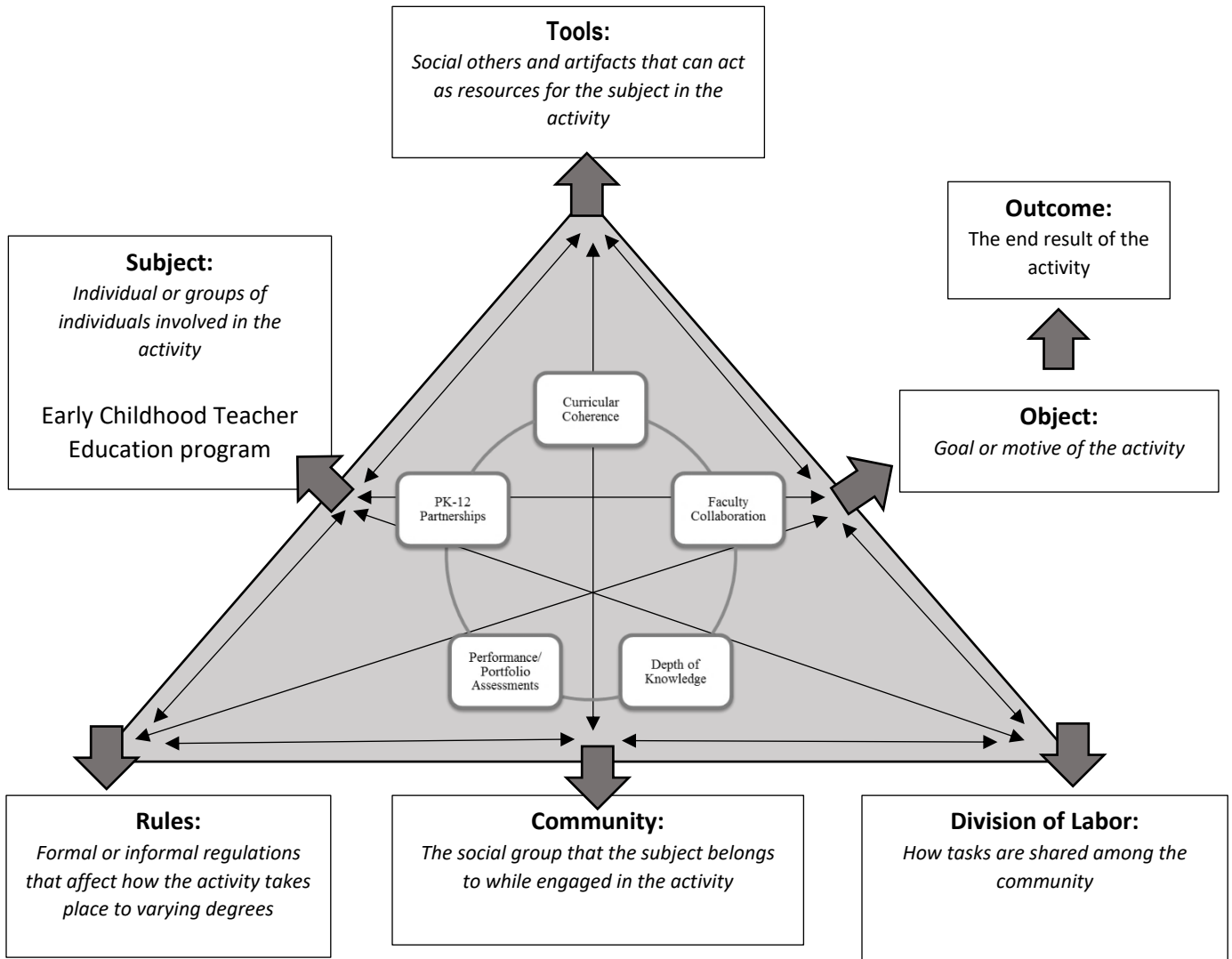
We applied a conceptual framework (see Figure 1) to understand the program as a system *and* as an instance of collaborative teacher preparation. First, we utilized cultural-historical activity

systems theory, or CHAT (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, & Miettinen, 1999; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010), to conceptualize the program as a system through the examination of six interacting parameters of practice (i.e., subject, object/outcome, tools, rules, community, and division of labor). CHAT (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, & Miettinen, 1999 ) holds that the subject of an activity system does not operate towards its object and outcome in isolation. Rather, activity is mediated through tools (Vygotsky, 1978) and influenced by the social context in which it occurs. Zeichner and colleagues (2015) call for the application of tools such as CHAT, to help preparation programs interrogate challenges and invent solutions to better prepare teachers for contemporary contexts.

Second, a research framework for studying collaborative teacher education (Pugach & Blanton, 2009) was applied within the CHAT framework to understand the program specifically as an instance of collaborative preparation. The Pugach and Blanton (2009) framework suggests a continuum of collaboration in teacher preparation with three distinct levels: discrete, integrated, and merged. Five program dimensions guide analysis and help delineate the three levels: (a) curricular coherence; (b) faculty collaboration; (c) depth of knowledge; (d) performance/ portfolio assessments; and (e) PK-12 partnerships. Taken together, our conceptual framework supported analysis resulting in an analysis of the program of interest with a focus on its collaborative nature.

**Figure 1**

*Collaborative teacher education (Pugach & Blanton, 2009) as an activity system (Engestrom, 1987; 1999; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010)*



*Note.* The teacher education program as depicted as a system through CHAT and activity systems analysis. The subject of the system is the teacher education program. That program can be understood as a system through examination of six interacting parameters of practice (i.e., subject, object/outcome, tools, rules, community, and division of labor). Since this particular study is concerned with the function of a program from the perspective of collaboration teacher education, the five program dimensions derived from Pugach and Blanton (2009) are embedded as a lens through which to consider the parameters of practice.

### ***Selection of a Research Site***

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) was used to select a blended early childhood teacher education program. To qualify, a program had to (a) share coursework across early childhood education and early childhood special education; (b) be focused on promoting inclusive practice; and (c) possess graduates who were at minimum in their second year of professional work. The program selected is located at a public, state university in an urban area within the southwest region of the United States. Expertise and professional standards from both early childhood education and early childhood special education (i.e., DEC and NAEYC) are employed in the design and enactment of the program. The program embraces a core philosophy of inclusive practice, which was evident in the program mission statement. Given that the program originally adopted a blended design in the early 1990s, the presence of graduates in their second year of post-program employment was assured.

### ***Participants***

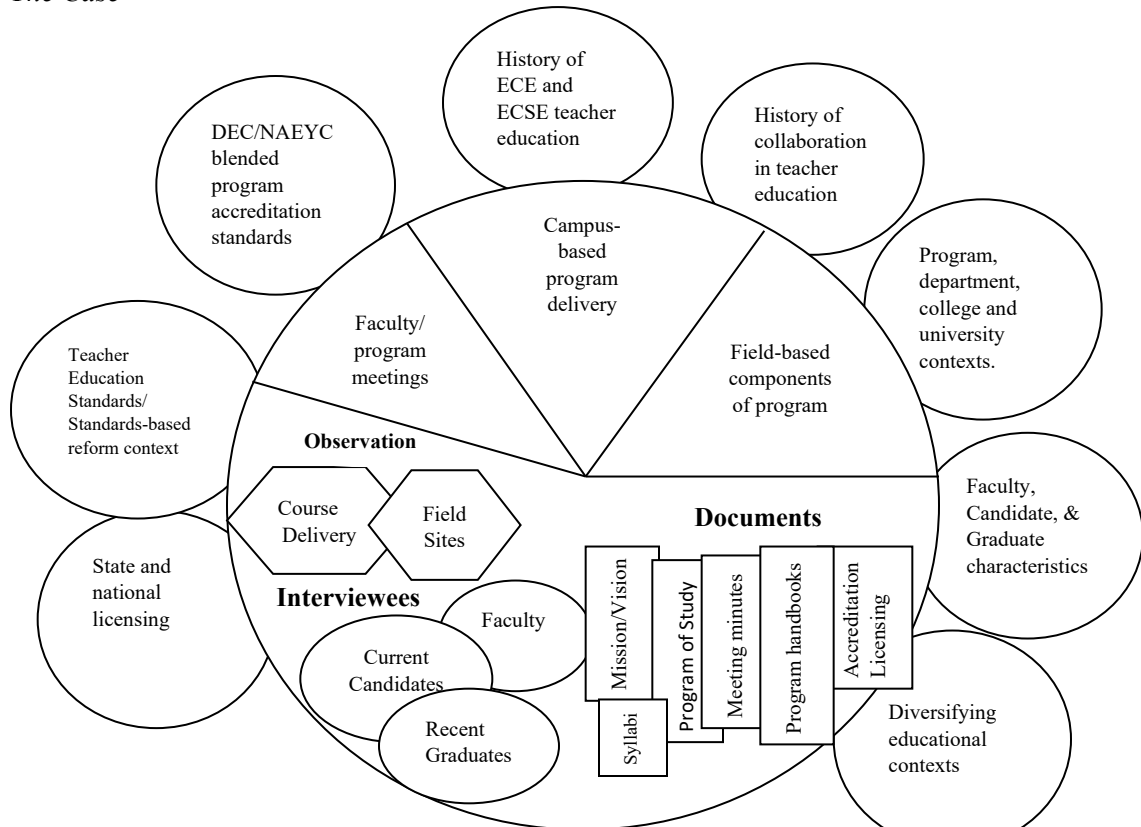
Participants included current faculty, teacher candidates, and recent graduates; pseudonyms are used throughout this article. One faculty member, Emily, served as the primary research liaison for the study. Emily helped recruit other participants through snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) including Mona, the only other full time faculty member, who serves as a clinical professor and practicum coordinator. Christine and Sue, two adjunct faculty members, also contributed significant knowledge of the program due to the duration and nature of their involvement. Christine holds dual roles as an adjunct instructor and part time practicum co-coordinator. She is also a former graduate of the program. Sue has served as an adjunct course instructor since the early 1990s. Both Christine and Mona also serve as field supervisors to candidates and liaisons between the program and practicum sites. A retired faculty member, Barbara, also participated and provided extensive historical knowledge of the original program design and enactment. Current teacher candidates enrolled in the program and recent graduates were recruited via email by the first author. A total of ten current students initially expressed interest and six agreed to participate. A total of 38 individuals who graduated from the program in the three years leading up to the study were also contacted and seven participated. See Table 1.

### ***Data Collection***

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, data collection was conducted by the first author over a ten-month period. The data were organized into a case record (Patton, 2015) comprising broad categories of participant perceptions, researcher observation, and documents (See Figure 2). Throughout data collection, I honored the emergent design flexibility inherent to this interpretative study which allowed the inclusion of data not previously identified as relevance emerged. Details as to the continuous development of a researcher reflexive journal and data collection of each category follow. All referenced data collection protocols are available by request.

**Figure 2**

*The Case*



<p><b>ISSUES:</b></p> <p>The movement toward collaborative or blended models of teacher education now has a significant history and continues to grow particularly at the early childhood level (Author et al., 2021; Pugach et al., 2011). Yet, this movement lacks an empirical foundation informing the field as to how such programs can function as systems to represent and impact major reform of teacher education for both general and special education. In an effort to inform broader teacher education reform efforts, this study will describe and analyze how the design and enactment of a blended early childhood teacher education program functions as a system to promote its desired outcomes related to preparing teachers for inclusive practice.</p> <p><b>RESEARCH QUESTION:</b></p> <p>How can a collaborative [blended] early childhood teacher education program be understood as a system in the preparation of candidates for inclusive practice?</p>	<p><b>INFORMATION NEEDED:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documents related to program design, development, and enactment.</li> <li>• Intentions, philosophies and assumptions driving design and enactment.</li> <li>• Defining characteristics of program design and of program enactment.</li> <li>• Characteristics of various stakeholders (faculty, candidates, graduates).</li> <li>• Responsibilities of various stakeholders.</li> <li>• Mission and vision statements.</li> <li>• Rationale of program design, development, and enactment.</li> <li>• Program &amp; individual definitions of effective inclusive teaching (conception of required knowledge, skills, and dispositions).</li> <li>• Program &amp; individual definitions of collaborative teacher education.</li> <li>• Perceptions of program design and enactment from participants (faculty, current candidates, graduates).</li> <li>• Observational data of program delivery/enactment/planning.</li> <li>• Course selection, sequencing, formats, materials.</li> <li>• Characteristics of field sites preferred and available for clinical aspects of the program. Nature of relationships.</li> <li>• Accreditation &amp; licensing materials/documents.</li> </ul>
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*Note.* The case (i.e., the EI/ECSE preparation program) is contextualized in the socio-cultural and socio-political historical and contemporary context. Data are identified and organized to support investigation of the issue and research question.

### *Researcher Reflexive Journal and Positionality*

Each element of the research process was carefully documented chronologically in a reflexive journal (Janesick, 2011) which provided an audit trail (Merriam, 2009). Entries included condensed and expanded field notes (Spradley, 1979; 1980) created during and as soon as possible after each interview, discussion, or observation. The continual reflexivity supported triangulated inquiry (Patton, 2015) in relation to the research context including participant, researcher, and audience positionalities. The evolving iterative analysis recognized the first author as the research instrument (Janesick, 2011; Spradley, 1980).

Given this stance, the first author's positionality provided a foundation from which to ground the work as her personal experiences influenced study design and implementation. Specifically, she was the recipient of collaborative and interdisciplinary preparation as a preservice candidate. As a practitioner, she worked with diverse children and families as a teacher in inclusive preschool settings and as a Part C special instructor and service coordinator across urban and rural settings. She has experience as a faculty member in early childhood education at both the associate and bachelor's degree levels which informs her perspective on the preparation of both ECE and ECSE professionals. She has a particular interest in the preparation of early childhood professionals for the provision of meaningful, inclusive services for all young children and families.

The second author served as a critical friend to the first author throughout the research process. Scholars have advocated for using critical friends as part of research triangulation to validate their research data (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). As a critical friend in this study, the second author played an active and reciprocal role by asking critical questions, examining data, providing advice, and critiquing the research (Costa and Kallick, 1993). Additionally, his positionality as a former special education teacher and district inclusion specialist, as well as currently serving as university faculty member with a research agenda centered on understanding, developing, and studying the outcomes of high quality, clinically rich, and collaborative teacher education models informed the research process.

### *Participant Perceptions: Interviews*

Participant perceptions of the program design and enactment were obtained through formal interviews and informal communication. (See Table 1). The interview process was guided by semi-structured interview protocols derived from the Pugach and Blanton (2009) research framework, particularly the descriptions provided of the five program dimensions of collaborative models of teacher education. An interactive and conversational tone was adopted to produce knowledge regarding the case through the relationship and dialogue of the researcher and participants (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed to transform the data for further analysis. Formal follow up interviews coupled with ongoing informal communication and formal member checking (Brantlinger et al., 2005) provided an opportunity to clarify interpretations and support ongoing researcher reflexivity.



### *Researcher Observation*

For the purposes of this study, an “observer as participant” stance (Merriam, 2009, p.124) was embraced to allow the observation of the program design and enactment to take precedence over any sort of participation. Observation targets included an array of program components to assist in constructing thick descriptions of the program as a system including course delivery and observations at commonly used field sites. (See Table 2). A semi-structured observation protocol was used to guide the data collection process during observations to capture elements relating to the five program dimensions of the Pugach and Blanton (2009) research framework. Observations of three field sites (each 2 hours in length) identified by program faculty as representative of the most commonly utilized practicum settings were also conducted. Site visits included observation of classrooms during instruction, guided tours of the facilities, and informal discussions with directors and other staff. Debriefing conversations ensued with program faculty after each observation and contributed to expanded field notes. Additionally, the delivery of two courses was observed on campus totaling 4 hours (2 hours each course). The was supplemented with review of course syllabi and online platforms.

### *Documents*

Documents particularly relevant to overall program function (e.g., design, enactment) and collaboration (e.g., across ECE and ECSE, as well as with field sites) were targeted with a total of 87 documents selected for review. Included were course syllabi; online course shells; the program student handbook, the program practicum handbook, practicum supervision agreement; practicum observation protocol; program marketing materials; published articles related to the original program; program meeting minutes; faculty workload documentation; faculty and adjunct faculty curriculum vitae; programs of study; state licensure standards; public materials regarding the early childhood education context within which the University functions (i.e., State Early Learning Framework, State Early Learning Professional Development Plan, State Early Intervention program brochure); and student exit surveys. All documents acquired were either available to the public or made available to the researcher.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis commenced concurrently with data collection in the form of condensed and expanded field notes. This approach allowed for continuous data collection, member checking, and analysis (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Kvale & Brinkman 2015; Patton, 2015). Interview transcripts, field notes, and completed observation protocols were transferred to Atlas.ti® to assist in data management and further analysis using the constant comparative method until saturation had been reached as evidenced by the confirmation of data and patterns coupled with the absence of novel insight into the analysis as more data were obtained (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Analysis was conducted deductively using the conceptual framework as an analytical guide to provide structure to the emerging description (Wolcott, 1994).

Open and descriptive coding (Saldana, 2021; Wolcott, 1994) was initially used to generate preliminary codes, which were further analyzed into categories using focused and structural coding to apply the analytical framework (i.e., the conceptual framework) (Saldana, 2021; Wolcott, 1994;

Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). This supported the organization of the data corpus according to the parameters of practice derived from CHAT as well as the five program dimensions from Pugach and Blanton (2009) to generate a thick description of the program as a system of collaborative teacher education. Categories from the initial coding process that did not initially appear to align with the elements of the framework were investigated further as potential additional parameters or dimensions. We then applied axial and selective coding to extend analysis (Wolcott, 1994; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Analytical memos (Saldana, 2021) were developed throughout the coding processes as a means of extending the researcher's reflective journal process and assuring the inclusion of all data in the overall analysis.

### Credibility and Trustworthiness

The researcher's reflexive journal served as an audit trail (Merriam, 2009), and documented the application of the analytical framework (Wolcott, 1994). Credibility and trustworthiness were addressed through the use of source (observations, interviews, documents) and stakeholder (faculty, current students, graduates) triangulation (Fontana & Frey, 2005). These strategies also provided a means to search for alternative explanations (Merriam, 2009) and disconfirming evidence (Patton, 2015). Finally, emerging descriptions of the program were continually shared with participants to solicit feedback, clarify, expand, and correct any inconsistencies or inaccuracies. A final description of key tenets and characteristics of the program was emailed to all program faculty who had participated to garner further feedback. Collectively, these member checks helped confirm trustworthiness of the data and analysis ensuring results reflected participant perspectives accurately (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Glesne, 2011; Patton, 2015).

### Findings

By developing analytic descriptions of each of the parameters of practice within the program as an activity system (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, & Miettinen, 1999; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) through the lens of collaborative teacher education program dimensions (Pugach & Blanton, 2009), an analysis of the program as a system was generated. We first provide an empirical description of the program as an activity system by detailing our analysis of the parameters of subject, object, outcome, tools, rules, community, and division of labor. Second, we provide our analysis of that system from the perspective of collaborative teacher preparation using the collaborative program dimensions posited by Pugach and Blanton (2009). According to activity system theory, tensions and harmonies develop throughout the system as the various parameters interact. Therefore, we probe elements of harmony and tension per activity theory and highlight the program's key tenets and characteristics most salient to the collaborative approach to preparation.

## The Program as an Activity System

### *The Program as the Subject of the Activity System*

Per activity theory (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, & Miettinen, 1999; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010), the subject of a system is defined as the individual, the group of individuals, or the organization involved in the activity; in this case, the preservice preparation program. Interviews with faculty indicated the program has been regarded as a collaborative model since the early 1990s. Retired professor, Barbara, stated the original rationale for developing a collaborative program stemmed from national calls to blend the fields of early childhood education and special education in response to the 1986 reauthorization of IDEA. Barbara also shared additional factors including state licensure changes and recommendations from national professional organizations, namely CEC/DEC and NAEYC, for developing blended programs.

More of the early childhood preschool programs [in the community] were becoming inclusive. Our early childhood program offered a license in ECSE and a masters in ECE. That combination made them strong leaders in the field...change agents...leaders in the community. Many were the administrators of these inclusive settings and so they needed both perspectives to make it work. So our program was responding to a need that the the community had for professionals who knew both fields very well.

Review of the program handbook revealed the philosophical foundation of the program uses key literature from both fields to inform five fundamental and guiding program tenets, namely that early childhood education should: (a) be viewed from an ecological perspective, (b) be inclusive, (c) be family centered, (d) utilize collaboration and interpersonal skills, and (e) be culturally responsive. (Student Handbook, n.d., p. 5). The program offers a variety of degree/licensure options that represent both fields: Master of Arts (MA) in ECE only, ECSE license only, ECSE endorsement only, MA in ECE and Licensure in ECSE; and MA in ECE and endorsement in ECSE. Document analysis of the associated programs of study, coupled with interview data confirmed the presence of six core courses that are common to all candidates and designed to include knowledge, skills, and dispositions from both fields.

### *The Object and Outcome of the Activity System*

The *object* within an activity system is the goal or motive of the activity while the *outcome* is the end result (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, & Miettinen, 1999; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). In this program, the general *object* is the preparation of early childhood educators. The assumptions and philosophies embraced by the program are evident in the program mission and philosophy statements. Barbara asserted that the original program mission focused on “preparation of leaders who could act as change agents” to develop and sustain more and higher quality inclusion for young children. The current program mission is,

To prepare early childhood professional leaders with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of young children and their families within a rapidly changing and diverse society.

Our program aims to foster leaders who share a commitment to equity and excellence and an understanding of the strengths and needs of a diverse student population in order to optimize developmental, academic, and behavioral outcomes for children with and without disabilities from birth to age 8 (Student handbook, p. 4).

The focus on preparing leaders has been sustained over time. Mona stressed that “every mission statement [they’ve] had for I don’t know how long has always talked about the fact that we are preparing leaders because we are a graduate program.”

While inclusion is not an explicit component, the statement illustrates a desire for candidates to demonstrate understanding of the strengths and needs of children with and without disabilities. Further, Emily and Mona indicated that an attitude and philosophy of inclusion has been a sustained, core element of this program. Mona specified that the program has historically focused on preparing candidates “across the two fields to work with diverse populations of children with and without disabilities.” The program’s commitment to preparing candidates to address issues of diversity in a “rapidly changing and diverse society” is also evident.

Faculty interviews coupled with document analysis revealed that the mission statement was derived from a conceptual framework that explicitly draws from the theoretical foundations of both ECE (i.e., developmentally appropriate practice) and the EI/ECSE (i.e., evidence-based practice). The student handbook includes the following description,

The ECE Program is grounded in a sound theoretical basis and a commitment to *developmentally appropriate, evidence-based practices*. The ECE specialization *combines* a theoretical, research, and clinical base from fields such as *early childhood education, psychology, communication disorders and sciences, medicine, sociology, and special education* (p. 4, emphasis added).

Also evident is the focus on combining interdisciplinary perspectives in the foundation of the program.

In terms of *outcome*, the program graduates approximately 20 candidates each year with approximately 70% pursuing the dual program option: master’s degree in ECE and ECSE license or endorsement. Emily described the primary professional role or identity for graduates was that of an “inclusive classroom teacher or ECSE specialist.” She further explained that the graduate level status of the program afforded graduates opportunities to pursue consultative/itinerant roles as well as administrative/leadership roles “out of the classroom.”

Document analysis of program records pertaining to employment outcomes of graduates (n=56) over the three years prior to this study indicated professional roles in a variety of early childhood settings including school district ECSE positions, lead and master teachers in community preschool programs, community college instructors, early intervention providers, clinicians, coach and specialist positions, and directors or other administrators of early childhood education/childcare centers. Our analysis revealed that of the 56 candidates who completed the program in the three years leading up to this study, the majority [n=52, (93%)] work full time in early intervention and/or early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) roles. The next most

common outcome is that of lead teachers in inclusive preschool classrooms serving children with disabilities who are identified as “high-risk” [n=18, (32%)].

### The Tools, Community, Rules, and Division of Labor within the Activity System.

Within an activity system, activity is mediated through *tools* (Vygotsky, 1978) and influenced by the social context including the parameters of *community*, *rules*, and *division of labor* (Engeström, 1987).

#### *Tools*

*Tools* include the social others and artifacts that can act as resources for the subject during the activity (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, & Miettinen, 1999; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). While preparation programs employ a wide range of tools, our analysis focused on those most salient to our description of this program’s function as a system and collaborative design: course syllabi, assignments, and performance-based assessments (PBAs).

Faculty interviews and document analysis of syllabi indicated that assignments are strategically placed throughout the program to provide early knowledge and skill development leading up to full implementation and demonstration of proficiency through PBAs which are embedded in practicum. Mona described the developmental intention of this structure as,

During courses they do assignments that rather mirror the types of things they will be doing in practicum, but in practicum they're implementing things under supervision whereas in classes sometimes they are just either planning or maybe not implementing.

Emily shared the PBAs had been developed by a team of program faculty, exemplary graduates currently working in a variety of early childhood settings and roles, practicum supervisors, and employers of graduates. She also indicated that the PBAs were designed to demonstrate candidate knowledge, skills, and dispositions in order to meet CEC/DEC preparation standards and state EI/ECSE licensure requirements. At the time of this study, the program included seven PBAs covering a range of topics including: assessment, challenging behavior, curriculum, intervention, literacy, mathematics, primary literacy, primary mathematics, and professional practice.

Analysis of course syllabi coupled with communication with program faculty helped in analysis of PBA enactment in relation to blended course content. We present one example from a course syllabus focused on social competence and classroom supports. The course description states,

The primary focus of this course is the cognitive and social development of infants and young children, and problems that may occur during the process. Equally emphasized are prevention, positive behavior support, and intervention approaches for children birth to eight. Knowledge, skills, and competencies related to working with children with behavioral challenges will be emphasized. There will be a focus on the practical application of intervention strategies based on current research. This class will focus on the implementation of evidence-based strategies (Course Syllabus, p.1).

While findings related to the espoused program indicated the faculty participants perceive aspects of blended content across all courses, this course description and the PBA completed in this course ( i.e., students conduct a functional behavior assessment (FBA) and develop a behavior intervention plan (BIP) reflect a primary focus on special education content.

In contrast, an interview with Sue revealed how a different course appears to demonstrate a more balanced approach to ECE and EI/ECSE content when preparing candidates to meet the diverse needs of all children pertaining to language and literacy.

I think that in the specific coursework that I teach, like language and literacy, that we really try to make the point that every child is coming from a culture...that every child is unique and diverse ...that every child and family is going to be coming from their own life ways, their own values, beliefs and that part of teaching is building that relationship with families...whether the child has an identified special need or a challenge in communication or challenge because they were born with Down Syndrome or a challenge because they have CP or because they're also a dual language learner coming from a lower SES status. There are many factors that are involved...and so I see it as diversity in its broadest sense. But at the same time teachers really need to understand specific developmental challenges that can interfere with the child's growth and development but in the context of that family.

Looking across the programs of study, analysis suggests a relative balance of ECE and EI/ECSE content, yet not within each individual course. Rather, special education content appeared concentrated in particular courses. Those courses in turn had limited ECE content as illustrated in the example above.

### *Community*

The parameter of *community* represents the social group that the subject belongs to while engaged in the activity (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The university that houses this program is a large research university located in the southwest region of the United States. It serves a diverse, non-traditional student population with more than one-third of undergraduates being first generation college students, one-third being students of color, and a robust number of international students (University website, 2023).

The program is a graduate level preservice program situated within a college of education and human development that also offers elementary and secondary general and special education programs. The university does not offer undergraduate programs in ECE or EI/ECSE. The program combines traditional evening and weekend face-to-face classes with online instruction to support candidates who are currently working. At any given time, the program has approximately 170 candidates. Each semester there are approximately 30 -35 candidates in the four practica, and lecture courses were observed to include approximately 25-30 candidates each. At the time of this study, the program consisted of two full-time program faculty, six adjunct faculty, nine field supervisors, and a network of practitioners and administrators across field sites. Current faculty

expertise and experience includes interdisciplinary roles of ECE, EI/ECSE, occupational therapy (OT), and Speech Language Pathology (SLP).

The community surrounding the university can be characterized as a large, urban metropolitan area with a rapidly diversifying population. Interviews with faculty indicated that ideal practicum sites would “demonstrate quality inclusion as well as evidence-based practice.” Specifically, Emily added settings should represent co-taught, inclusive classrooms, roles as inclusive specialists, coaches, or consultants, authentic transdisciplinary team experiences, and opportunities to engage in family coaching. However, Emily and Mona both shared that few such examples existed in the program’s community. Researcher observations of three commonly used practicum sites and interviews with participants confirmed this description. While all three sites described themselves as inclusive, two of the three included unnatural proportions of approximately 50% children with disabilities and 50% without. All were center-based community early childhood programs serving toddlers through preschool. One site also provided kindergarten through its association with a public school district.

The interactions between candidates, their cooperating teachers, and field supervisors are also important aspects of *community* within the program as a system. While some candidates and graduates shared negative relationships with cooperating teachers, most described relationships with their cooperating teachers and supervising faculty as supportive and positive. Overall, analysis revealed a mixed picture of these interactions and relationships. For example, one current candidate reflected:

The field supervisor came once at the beginning of my practicum and she was very available by email to answer my questions but she did not come to observe me when she was supposed to at the end, and when she did come, she came late so she didn’t see me when she was supposed to. My cooperating teacher had supervised some other people before and she was fantastic, but the field supervisor didn’t do her job very well.

A graduate of the program also highlighted the perceived variability of support when she stated,

My cooperating teachers were graduates of the program and were really good. That was great. Mona was my field supervisor for two practica, but then I had another field supervisor who didn’t show up for our meeting.

Finally, the program’s *community* also includes an advisory board made up of various members including families of children with and without disabilities, professionals from community early childhood programs, ECE and/or EI/ECSE coordinators from school districts, graduates, and adjunct faculty. Mona and Emily both shared that the perspectives of these various partners are highly valued and used to continually improve the program.

### *Rules*

*Rules* in an activity system are formal or informal regulations that affect how the activity takes place (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Examples for teacher education include local, state, and national

policies, licensure regulations, and professional standards. Preparation standards and licensing regulations are particularly relevant to this study. Only one discipline (ECSE) is represented in the licensure structure of this program, yet, faculty indicated that personnel preparation standards from both fields are addressed in the program design. However, the PBAs which were described as the primary form of candidate performance assessment are based solely on EI/ECSE standards and therefore not directly reflective of ECE. Therefore, alignment to ECE standards, namely NAEYC standards, is conceptual rather than explicit and the program is not held accountable for ensuring those standards are met.

### *Division of Labor*

Finally, *division of labor* examines how tasks are shared among the members of the community (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The two full time program faculty are jointly responsible for the coordination, administration, and delivery of the program. As the only tenure-line faculty member within the program, Emily is designated as the program coordinator while Mona, a clinical faculty member, takes on the responsibility of the practicum coordinator. Both faculty teach classes and advise candidates, albeit both shared that these tasks tend to be delegated according to professional designations of ECE (Mona) and EI/ECSE (Emily).

## Analysis of the System as an Instance of Collaborative Teacher Education: Elements of Harmony and Tension

To complete the analysis and contextualization of the program in the analytical framework (Wolcott, 1994), we analyzed the program's function as an instance of collaborative teacher education. Specifically, we focused on elements of harmony and tension in relation to the dimensions of collaborative teacher education: (a) curricular coherence; (b) faculty collaboration; (c) depth of knowledge; (d) performance/ portfolio assessments; and (e) PK-12 partnerships (Pugach & Blanton, 2009). Finally, we classify the program according to the continuum of collaborative teacher education (Blanton & Pugach, 2011). Our conceptual framework helped us investigate the intersection of these dimensions with the parameters of CHAT. In particular, tools, members of the social community, and artifacts that can act as resources for the subject during the activity and cultural tools, tools that become highly valued through continued and evolving use in relation to the program's espoused object (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, & Miettinen, 1999; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) were useful in identifying aspects of harmony and tension to understand the program as an instance of collaborative teacher education.

### Curricular Coherence

Several examples of harmony in relation to collaborative teacher education and the program design were observed. Indeed, the most salient cultural tool for this program emerged as the core set of courses that exist across all plan of study options. Examination of these core course syllabi combined with faculty interviews and informal conversations illustrated ways the program seeks to blend content from both the ECE and ECSE perspectives. The program's core philosophies were



also observed to be indicative of programmatic efforts to blend the two fields. Faculty felt strongly that curricular coherence was promoted by embedding the identified core philosophies in every class. Faculty descriptions of how the program addressed diversity also illuminated aspects of harmony between the program and collaborative teacher education. Examples illustrated how attention to diversity as a means to enact blended content reflected broader definitions of diversity which when embraced can promote inclusion as a broad, shared equity agenda (Author et al., 2020).

Our analysis also revealed that the use of strategically sequenced and scaffolded learning activities (i.e., PBAs) showed promise as cultural tools yet represented both harmony and tension for the activity system. Learning activities relating to preparing candidates to demonstrate proficiency of knowledge and skills through the PBAs were indeed observed to be infused throughout coursework supporting coherence through the use of practical, authentic, and developmental learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Pugach & Blanton, 2009). Further, results indicated coherence between the program's mission and observed graduate outcomes which suggests harmony in relation to espoused and realized outcomes.

However, the singular focus on EI/ECSE in the PBAs limits the strength of the collaborative design. The distinct separation of the majority of the EI/ECSE content from the core program also signals a philosophical separation even if not intended. Additionally, due to the single license option, the program was only accountable for actual adherence to EI/ECSE standards putting the coherence across ECE and EI/ECSE curricular content at risk.

Further, participants pointed to a strong focus on preparation for the role of classroom teacher and more sufficient preparation for ECE roles than that of EI/ECSE. This presents significant tension in the activity system when compared to graduate outcomes that reveal that many of the graduates are in non-classroom EI/ECSE roles. Implications for practice are illuminated, not just for blended approaches, but for all early childhood preparation. Similar to what has been reported in the literature, considerations of adequate preparation to ensure graduates are positioned to effectively work across the wide range of settings, roles, and responsibilities must be addressed in program design and implementation.

## Faculty Collaboration

The historical literature has identified an interdisciplinary faculty team as a core element of blended teacher preparation (Miller & Stayton, 2006) and the degree to which faculty engage in collaboration in terms of frequency and purpose of shared work helps characterize the nature of the collaborative model (Pugach & Blanton, 2009). Analysis of the program dimension of community through review of faculty vitae coupled with interview data revealed a shared value in the interdisciplinary nature of the program faculty and an example of harmony within the system and in relation to collaborative preparation. While data suggest that the initial program design and implementation was marked by a high level of interdisciplinary practice, faculty collaboration is limited in the current program representing tension in its efforts to enact the espoused object. While the entire team of faculty, adjunct faculty, and field supervisors represents interdisciplinary expertise and experience, each individual operates relatively independently and the entire team

rarely if ever meets. This tension in the system compromises efforts to ensure curricular cohesion across all elements of the program or to engage in critical analysis about the purpose and nature of the collaborative nature of the program. This subsequently limits the ability of the team to engage in interdisciplinary implementation of the program or continuous program review; both of which have been touted as instrumental to collaborative approaches (Pugach & Blanton, 2009; Miller & Stayton, 2006).

Administration support, another important element recognized as a component of successful blended preparation (Miller & Stayton, 2006), for the original program development was described as “supportive” by Barbara. Currently, faculty described the program’s relationship with the department and college administration as neutral with positive and negative elements representing both harmony and tension within the system in relation to its collaborative design. Mona shared, “I don’t think there are really any barriers at the school of education college level. I wouldn’t say we get tons of support either, we’re pretty independent.” Emily added that the program’s independence can,

“be good but also can be a barrier. Since we are so independent and unique in many ways we are sometimes either ignored, or put with certain groups, or given requirements that don’t make a lot of sense as a program.”

## Depth of Knowledge

A central issue for collaborative models is related to what constitutes the respective expertise for general and for special educators (Blanton & Pugach, 2011) and demarcation as to how the knowledge of special educators is distinguished from the role and work of general educators (Pugach & Blanton, 2009). While the core program of study is reflective of both fields and completed by all candidates regardless of plan of study option, the program has designated courses that are specific to, and only for, candidates pursuing EI/ECSE licensure. It can be argued that the shared coursework represents what is seen as crucial expertise for ECE, while the additional courses are seen as EI/ECSE specific expertise beyond that which early childhood general educators need to know and be able to do. This demonstrates the program’s acknowledgement of a distinct and value-added role for special education, with specialized knowledge and skills (Blanton & Pugach, 2011). Faculty indicated the program best prepares candidates for two discrete roles, that of an inclusive classroom teacher/leader or an EI/ECSE specialist. Four of the six current candidates reported feeling that the role of ECE classroom teacher dominated their preparation. For example, one candidate shared, “I would say the [ECE] classroom is the main one and then the ECSE consult is the second.”

Blanton and Pugach (2011) state that another central issue related to depth of knowledge is whether there is sufficient program space to fully address all aspects seen as necessary for preparation in the two fields. The graduate level nature of this program appears to pose a significant issue as it does not afford the same curricular space as an undergraduate program. Further, this program serves as both an initial licensure program and as an endorsement program. Therefore, some candidates enter the program with little to no experience serving young children and families, or pedagogical training to do so. This presents a challenge for faculty to adequately prepare

candidates for teaching in general, not to mention for both ECE and EI/ECSE. Collectively, these issues represent areas of tension within the system in relation to the program aims and its actual capacity to enact those aims in relation to its blended approach.

## Performance/Portfolio Assessments

The design of candidate performance assessments illuminates the level of collaboration in a program as it reflects how faculty consider the relationship between special and general education (Blanton & Pugach, 2011). Blanton and Pugach (2011) assert that redesigning preservice teacher education as collaborative models necessitates reconsideration of performance assessments with particular attention to what constitutes adequate or appropriate depth of knowledge from each field. Results of our analysis indicate that PBAs are a strong feature and highly valued component of this program. Faculty expressed that these learning experiences promote a developmental pathway culminating in the demonstration of proficiency through completion of the PBAs in practicum settings. However, while all candidates experience these related learning activities, only those pursuing the EI/ECSE licensure complete the actual PBAs, significantly limiting the ability of the PBAs to support a collaborative approach to preparation for all candidates. Further, this suggests faculty maintain a mindset of separate ECE and EI/ECSE preparation.

## PK-12 Partnerships

According to Pugach and Blanton (2009), the parameter of PK-12 partnerships relates to how preservice programs work with PK-12 partners to build capacity and develop high quality field sites in the schools. Faculty participants described the local inclusive ECE context as of variable quality but also marked by increased quantity and quality of inclusive options for children, marking harmony and tension for the system. Often inclusion is defined regionally by the mere presence of children with and without disabilities in the same setting and proportions of children with disabilities are often higher than would naturally occur, thereby limiting the program to sites that did not share the program's definition of inclusion. The challenges reported by faculty in this study regarding securing and collaborating with field sites reveal significant tension regarding the program's ability to provide adequate field experiences across the full range of the early childhood context; thereby compromising the blended approach. Mona shared that, "finding practicum placements is a continuously evolving process" as relationships can be unreliable due to field practitioners' own issues with capacity and perceptions of their responsibility related to supporting candidates. Mona expressed that the availability of appropriate settings is, "a little bit sketchy" noting that, "it really depends on who the principals and special educators are." Further, she described inconsistencies that complicate relationships such as when "we might have a longstanding relationship with a particular site, with a particular school within a district, and if they have a change in principal or change in special educator then all of a sudden they are not willing to take students."

Interviews with Christine, adjunct instructor and co-coordinator of practica, illuminated additional difficulties in the process of finding and supporting field placements. She stated the program, "isn't using the role of the field supervisor effectively." She also indicated that resource allotment for practicum supervision is a significant factor in the nature of the university-field structure and

relationships. Cooperating teachers received stipends in the past. However, the university is no longer supporting that form of compensation as they “have a hard time reimbursing (mileage for) cooperating teachers...So to require that a cooperating teacher does more, which is really what I think probably needs to happen, how do you justify it?”

Data across participants also illustrated that the program has significant challenges securing practicum experiences for special education roles with birth to three-year-old children and primary sites (grades 1 – 3) is an additional area of challenge. Christine shared, “programs that implement Part C pulled back a lot from us a few years ago. I think they were feeling stretched, under-resourced.” Therefore, the capacity of the program to prepare candidates for professional roles as early intervention providers is significantly reduced. Indeed, one graduate shared,

I didn't actually get really to do any home-type things. There were definitely bits and pieces talked about throughout our courses, what that might look like, but I did not get to experience or shadow anybody doing that. Therefore, I am not as confident in that area.

In contrast, the program's relationships with preschool settings were described by Mona as relatively “solid” with “ongoing, steady relationships” with several school districts that continually welcome candidates. She expressed value in this continuity as she shared that “the students that are placed in those districts and specifically with cooperating teachers who have had previous students have better experiences because the cooperating teachers get better at it the more students they host.” However, faculty shared that few sites align with the program's ideals regarding best practices around inclusion and evidence-based practice, representing additional tension by limiting the program's ability to enact its espoused collaborative design.

Despite the value in the advisory board, Mona shared that it has not been convened in recent years due to limited time and resources. While the existence and value in this aspect of community represents potential harmony in the system, this fact presents significant tension. Of particular importance related to collaborative preparation, program and adjunct faculty expressed hesitancy to challenge practice at field sites out of fear of losing practicum placements for candidates. Therefore, critical examination of field sites and discourse around issues is avoided creating tension related to candidates' support and space within the program to critically analyze practice. This represents an unfulfilled promise of the collaborative design and its object of producing leaders who in turn facilitate systems change toward inclusion. Taken together, these descriptions illustrate the relationship between the field supervisors, sites, and candidates is marked by a limited level of interaction and therefore potentially limited ability to impact candidate learning or enact the blended model of the program.

## Overarching Analysis: The Collaborative Nature of the Program

We compared our complete analysis to the indicators for the three models of collaborative preparation: discrete, integrated, and merged (Blanton & Pugach, 2011; Pugach & Blanton, 2009). The program is best classified as an integrated model as it demonstrates acknowledgment that there is a “distinct and value-added role for special educators – a role that requires specialized knowledge and skills beyond what every teacher should know and be able to do” (Blanton &

Pugach, 2011, p. 225). The core assumption of integrated models is that the redesign of both general and special education programs can link and integrate curricula to better prepare all teachers by providing a solid foundation for teaching all children. Alignment with the integrated model was further evident in that the program adheres to aspects outlined in the typology of collaborative models for integrated models (Blanton & Pugach, 2011). For example, ECE and EI/ECSE teacher candidates study together for much of their initial preparation. Common assessments exist in both areas (i.e., special and general) based on the portions of the program students complete together in the form of embedded learning activities.

However, the classification of this program as an integrated model of collaborative teacher education is not without question. This particular program is a solo program offering a degree in one field (ECE) and a license in the other (EI/ECSE). Therefore, coordination across different programs is not necessary. However, the single program design aligns somewhat with the original definition for blended early childhood preparation (Miller & Stayton, 1998). Additionally, significant issues were identified related to the level of actual collaboration and interdisciplinary work within the program and between the program and field sites. These compromise the classification of the program as data pointed to a culture of delegation along disciplinary identities. This reality affords little opportunity for faculty to collaborate not to mention for candidates to observe or practice blended knowledge and skills. However, data in this study also point to clear and intentional coordination across the various program outcome options.

## Limitations

Prolonged field engagement is seen as necessary to produce a rich description of the case (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Patton, 2015; Stake, 1995). While the data generation period spanned ten months, the on-site observation period was limited to two weeks. This potential limitation was addressed through careful attention to issues of credibility, ongoing member validation as data generation and analysis ensued, attention to the audit trail, and triangulation strategies. Further, extensive conversations with the faculty liaison and interaction with the collection of documents occurring for months prior to the on-site period supported preliminary data analysis and informed the on-site data collection.

During the on-site data generation, the presence and purpose of the researcher was known to participants which may have influenced the activities observed. Care was taken to establish rapport and attend to relationships (Spradley, 1979) throughout the study, which afforded an opportunity to stay vigilant of issues of emic and etic perspectives and to collaborate with the participants as co-researchers (Patton, 2015). Emily served as the primary conduit through which access to the program was obtained and therefore as a gatekeeper (Wanat, 2008) making it possible that access to data was influenced by her perspectives. The selected data types and collection strategies also pose limitations. Interviews can lead to distortions of the data due to participant bias, researcher bias, anxiety, or politics (Patton, 2015). Observations provided a comparison to look for consistency and credibility of interview data through triangulation as described above but were likely influenced by the presence of the researcher. Documents also provided a means for triangulating data, but may have been inaccurate or incomplete (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015).

Throughout, participant involvement in selection and triangulation across data types and sources assisted in addressing and minimizing these limitations.

## Discussion and Implications

For some time now, policy recommendations have included an increased focus on the importance of adequately preparing all teachers to work with diverse children in inclusive contexts [i.e., Blanton, et al., 2011; NCATE Blue Ribbon Report, 2010; Power to the Profession Task Force (PtP), 2020]. At the early childhood level, the longstanding movement to unify the fields of early childhood education and early childhood special education in pursuit of this outcome has a 30-year history (Author et al., 2022; Miller, 1992; Odom & Wolery, 2003). Increasing collaboration between DEC and NAEYC has resulted in joint position statements on inclusion and personnel preparation standards (DEC/NAEYC, 2009; DEC, 2022) as well as formal alignments of the ECE and EI/ECSE personnel preparation standards (Chandler et al., 2012; ECPC, 2020a). Some licensing structures have also been observed to show support for blended or unified certifications in pursuit of adequately preparing early childhood teachers for inclusion (Author et al., 2022; Author, 2015; Piper, 2007). For example, in 2020, the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and the Early Childhood Personnel Center (ECPC) partnered to convene a think tank of experts focused on blended preparation. The resulting recommendations included a call for resources to support blended programs including a definition and case studies illustrating quality indicators (ECPC, 2020). Moreover, the shifting policy landscape has necessitated that teacher education embrace the integration of diverse perspectives through interdisciplinary partnerships (Hestenes et al., 2009; PtP, 2020; Stayton, 2015). Increasing levels of diversity within ethnic, linguistic, economic, and family circumstances continue to alter the demographics of children and families with whom educators practice (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2020). Subsequently, contemporary conceptions of inclusion have evolved beyond traditional, restrictive definitions (Baglieri et al., 2011) to focus on “a broad, shared equity agenda designed to assure educational success for every group of marginalized learners” (Author et al., 2020, p. 86).

### Implications

This case study produced a rich description of one contemporary program’s parameters of practice as they relate to dimensions of collaborative teacher education in its effort to design a program to effectively prepare inclusive teachers; something that was previously lacking in the literature base. This dearth of research is in itself an important implication, and this study illuminates the urgent need for research, understanding, and guidance for early childhood educator preparation, particularly for programs and faculty who aspire to design and enact a blended approach particularly given the advocacy for blended models by professional organizations and leaders in the field. Specifically, implications for research garnered here include: (1) understanding contemporary collaborative models of teacher education; and (2) consideration of appropriate depth and breadth for blended programs.

### *Understanding Contemporary Collaborative Models of Teacher Education*

The need for greater understanding and clarity regarding collaborative models of teacher education has been clearly established (Author et al., 2022; Blanton & Pugach, 2011; DEC, 2022). As the practice continues to become more prevalent, the field remains marked by vast differences in practice and terminology. This study provides an empirical analysis of one contemporary blended program and invites future similar research so the field can highlight the varied interpretations of the approach through comparative analyses. The application of common conceptual frameworks as analytic frames (Wolcott, 1994), such as the application of the Pugach/Blanton (2009) research framework, can provide a means to engage in comparative analysis to examine common program dimensions. As noted by Zeichner and colleagues (2015), methodology such as CHAT may prove particularly useful. The generation of a database of comprehensive studies could support the field in understanding the relative worth, utility, and effectiveness of collaborative preparation (Brownell et al., 2011).

Our results also offer a program-wide analysis of systemic collaboration which is missing in the literature to date. While more program wide studies such as this one are sorely needed, more in-depth analysis of collaborative program dimensions (Pugach & Blanton, 2009) and parameters of practice pertaining to programs as activity systems (Engeström, 1987) are also in great need. Importantly, investigation of cultural tools specific to collaborative or blended models could help the field identify signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005), descriptive identifiers, and quality indicators for blended approaches. Pugach and Blanton (2011) specify that collaborative teacher preparation must examine how the relationship between special and general education translates into pedagogies that are viewed as ‘‘good teaching’’ for every child. Finally, to truly validate and understand the impact of collaborative models of teacher education, longitudinal studies are also needed. Foci of such longitudinal inquiry may include: (a) maintenance of programs; (b) graduate and child/family outcomes, and (c) systems change.

### *Consideration of Appropriate Breadth and Depth for Blended Programs*

Our findings suggest this program continuously struggles to provide balanced learning opportunities across various aspects of ECE/EI/ECSE including the three distinct age ranges, the professional roles and responsibilities associated with ECE and EI/ECSE, and issues of diversity and equity. This aligns with the historical literature (Author et al., 2022, 2023; Miller & Stayton, 1998; 2006; Piper, 2007; Stayton, 2015) suggesting stagnancy and continued need since the inception of blended approaches. Brownell et al (2011) called for research into collaborative teacher education to identify the characteristics of collaborative models of teacher education and how efforts relate to quality inclusive practice. As the field continues to explore blended approaches, it is important to consider the breadth and depth individual collaborative teacher education programs can be expected to achieve. Given that the initial movement toward blended models focused on inclusion as defined by children with and without disabilities, examination of the future purpose of blended preparation must investigate how the approach can be reconceptualized to adequately prepare candidates for interdisciplinary work in diverse settings and employ a broader definition of inclusion.

Our findings also support the notion that consideration for breadth and depth of individual programs hinges strongly of various state licensure policy and requirements. At this time, only 8 states offer an EI/ECSE blended licensure option (Author, under review). This forces programs that aspire to enact a blended approach to pursue dual licensure options or focus solely on one license. Our findings suggest that a singular license removes accountability which may lead to failure to fully address all standards. Yet, attempts to pursue dual licensure add extra burden to program faculty. While acknowledging these challenges, DEC recommends that all programs, regardless of licensure, align programs to both the ECE and EI/ECSE preparation standards (DEC, 2022). Crosswalks or alignments of the respective standards have been developed to support faculty through this process (DEC/ECPC, 2020).

What may be of greatest importance for the future of blended approaches to preparation is examination as to why initial and historical reform efforts have not produced change in educational settings for young children and in regards to professional roles and identities. The reconceptualization of roles and responsibilities must be at the forefront and may support interdisciplinary practice by helping the field shift from viewing professionals as “sole guardians of exclusive sets of knowledge” (Edwards, 2010, p. 1). Without direct renegotiation of roles, responsibilities, and relationships coupled with explicit attention to preparation of candidates to succeed in multiple, reconceptualized roles, the promise and original intentions of early childhood collaborative models of teacher education remain unfulfilled.

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