Examining Contemporary Approaches to the Preparation of Early Childhood Education Professionals for Inclusion

Ann M. Mickelson, Ph.D., Editor
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Changes in federal law (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2019; Hebbeler, et al.,1991) and societal needs (Burton, e al., 1992), in the 1980s led to an increase in the number of young children, with and without identified disabilities, participating in early childhood programs across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In response, the field experienced a paradigm shift regarding the way in which services for children were designed and delivered (Buysse & Wesley, 1993). This in turn spurred increased attention as to the preparation of the early childhood workforce. The anticipated shift toward inclusive practice created the impetus for the movement toward blended and other collaborative models of educator preparation (Mickelson et al., 2023; Pugach et al., 2011).

Blended and other collaborative models of preparation have long been lauded as promising approaches to effectively preparing candidates for inclusive practice. The historical literature from the beginning of the blended movement includes several program descriptions and other research as faculty responded to the needs of the field. (See Mickelson et al., 2022, 2023 for more in depth accounts of the history of this movement). While blended and other collaborative approaches to preparation for inclusion have remained highly valued across the field, very limited literature has been published in recent decades resulting in the practice going forward without empirical support or contemporary practical guidance (Brownell et al., 2011; Mickelson et al., 2022). Further, the dated literature base is increasingly difficult to apply to the increased diversity of educational contexts (Mickelson et al., 2022). Contemporary contexts necessitate a broader view of inclusion that considers the diverse and intersectional identities of the children and families served. Further, these contexts call for recruitment of similarly diverse professionals into the field. Indeed, recent definitions of inclusion come from a broad, shared equity agenda designed to ensure educational success for every group of learners experiencing marginalization (Pugach et al., 2020; U.S. Department of HHS and U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

The aim of this special issue is to showcase the contemporary landscape of early childhood preparation for inclusion and highlight how higher education and community partners currently respond to the varied programmatic, licensure, clinical, and other contexts observed across the field. In essence, the purpose is to help update our aging literature base on blended and other approaches to the preparation of early childhood educators for inclusion. We received a strong response to the call for papers and the result is a robust collection of articles spanning multiple contexts and including descriptions of programs and program development processes, empirical studies, and a call to action. Readers will undoubtedly benefit from the experiences and wisdom included. It is with great pleasure that we bring you this issue. We hope it will lead to further collaboration in pursuit of providing clear guidance for contemporary programs, and that it will

spur more research to develop a strong empirical foundation for our efforts as inclusive early childhood teacher educators and preparation programs.

DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLES

The special issue includes six descriptions of early childhood educator preparation programs and/or program development processes. The preparation programs depicted here include both newly developed and long-standing programs that have evolved over time. Across these articles, authors explore what it means to be a "blended" program and to effectively prepare early childhood professionals for inclusive contexts. The programs described range in structure (e.g., single programs, distinct collaborating programs, dual certification programs), focus (e.g., standards, identity, definitions, specific elements of preparation such as diverse populations served, age ranges, and field components) and delivery format (e.g., campus-based, online).

First, **Meyer and Northey** provide an overview of their experience at their university where early childhood education (ECE) and early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) faculty were confronted with the task of reconceptualizing their blended undergraduate teacher preparation programs. Their article attends to how faculty critically examined how "blended" was defined for their specific context and what it means for a program to be "blended" in general. In their contribution to this special issue, they explore influences that shaped faculty conceptions of blended in regard to sustaining inclusive values yet maintaining two distinct teacher education majors and programs. The authors conclude with recommendations for other ECE and EI/ECSE faculty who may also need to reimagine their conceptualization of blended teacher preparation due to current realities within IHEs.

Next, **Harbin and Purcell** provide a description of a blended preparation program with particular attention to the influence of professional standards. They describe their innovative model of blended preparation for inclusive early childhood environments by detailing how the program aligns with the most recent professional standards in the fields of ECE and EI/ECSE (CEC & DEC, 2020; NAEYC, 2020). Their account shares how coursework, fieldwork, and embedded learning opportunities (e.g., reflection), leverage the current personnel preparation standards to "blend" ECE and EI/ECSE preparation within one program. Their article also shares their perspectives on factors that contributed to contemporary blended programs, briefly describing the history and providing a description of the field's professional standards. Finally, the authors present a sample of current blended program offerings in the field.

Winchell, Rahn, Linzmeier, Tillett, Becker, and Heimer describe the blended, dual-certification program at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, a longtime and highly respected example of blended preparation. They provide a detailed programmatic overview of the ECE dual-licensure personnel preparation program at this Midwest institution. They also describe how factors including the collaboration of a blended faculty (i.e., one including general and special educators), a cohort model, a commitment to field placements throughout the program, and continual review and innovative practices form the foundation of the program. Current program offerings including both campus-based and online delivery models to meet the needs of prospective students across the state and region are emphasized. The recent additions of two novel online programs to meet the changing needs of the workforce: a non-license

credential-based bachelor's degree and a master's degree in public policy, are also detailed. Finally, the authors explain how the unique components and multiple offerings position this program to prepare teacher candidates to educate all children within inclusive settings. Winchell and colleagues conclude by sharing future directions for their program which include developing a master's degree in ECSE.

Evans, Joseph, Bartlett, and Jozwik provide an account of the development of an inclusive preparation program that united ECE, EI/ECSE, and bilingual/English as a second language (ESL) programming. The authors highlight the importance of long-term collaborative efforts in pursuit of inclusive preparation by detailing a 10-year process that led to the development of their Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education Program (IECTE). Importantly, this article illuminates the transformation that occurred within individual areas of teacher education that led to an evolving shared paradigm of critical inclusivity in ECE. The authors detail this paradigm and its three tenets: (1) a dialogic approach, (2) curriculum revision, and (3) pre-service teacher guidance. The article offers 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.

Wiegand, Matute-Chavarria, and Hernández share their process of reimagining a preparation program to better address preparation for IDEA Part C EI. In so doing, they highlight the critical need for preparation in EI from the perspective of a state that does not currently require licensure to practice as an educator in Part C. Despite the critical importance of effective preparation for EI educators and other professionals, many states, like New Mexico where this article is situated, do not require licensure for Part C leaving many providers without adequate preparation. Wiegand and colleagues share details about the development of Project RISE, **R**eimagining **I**ntervention to **S**upport **E**arly **C**hildhood, a grant funded through the Office of Special Education Programs. This innovative program created a multicultural EI concentration within an existing ECE birth-four non-licensure program. The authors describe their aim of reimagining the preparation of EI providers through the lens of culturally sustaining practices, strengths-based practices, and Yosso's community cultural wealth model. In describing the development and resulting program, Wiegand and colleagues stress the importance of relevant local and state contexts, the specific Project RISE competencies, courses, and practicum experiences, and importantly the centrality of a collaborative team of faculty and partners in the development and execution of the program.

Bequette, Murnan, Kohart, Francois, and Wilson provide an important spotlight on field components in early childhood preparation for inclusion, a critical element of practice-based preparation and central to comprehensive training and support for future early childhood educators. This article highlights intercollegiate collaboration in one state by detailing a collaborative initiative among four state universities that sought to enhance practicum and field-based experiences for ECE candidates and address challenges in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce by fostering inclusive decision-making and engagement with (ECCE) partners. The authors describe how efforts helped emphasize collaborative relationships between novice teachers, mentor teachers, and university supervisors. Baguette and colleagues describe the evolution of practicum experiences and key components including the creation of universal training modules and an open-source platform to house training materials. The manuscript stresses the importance of ongoing collaboration and partnership in pursuit of high-quality ECE and concludes with recommendations for enhancing practicum experiences and addressing workforce challenges.

CONCEPTUAL ARTICLE

The sustained and troubling national educator shortage is at a critical level. Preparation programs are central to ameliorating this crisis and the authors provide a model to assist and promote effective educator recruitment, preparation, and retention strategies. In this conceptual article, **Lohman and Macy** describe a five-point model (STARS): (a) **S**upplemental funding during field placements, (b) **T**eacher preparation that leads to ECE and ECSE dual licensure, (c) **A**dvocacy at the local, state, and national levels, (d) **R**elationships between teacher preparation programs and local public and private early learning centers, and (e) **S**upportive and ongoing mentoring for in-service early childhood special educators. The authors also provide recommendations and discuss how the STARS model can help faculty combine research-supported strategies to develop a comprehensive and effective response to the teacher shortage.

EMPIRICAL MANUSCRIPTS

Our special issue also provides two empirical contributions. First, **Panse, VanLone, Ziegler, and George-Puskar** report a systematic review which examines the early childhood preparation literature specific to preparation for working with families. Their focus recognizes the importance of family-professional collaboration on outcomes for children with disabilities and their families. In their mixed-methods systematic review, the authors identify and synthesize the current state of knowledge behind higher education programs and curricula geared towards improving preservice educators' knowledge and practices regarding family-professional collaboration in inclusive settings. Findings indicate that various instructional strategies and outcome measures have been employed to measure preservice educators' knowledge and practices. Implications for future research are described.

In response to the current dearth of empirical literature reporting on contemporary practice, **Mickelson and Hoppey** present an instrumental qualitative case study that provides a much-needed empirical examination of one contemporary blended preparation program. This contribution recognizes the need and value for research examining programs as holistic systems. Therefore, the authors employ a conceptual framework derived from cultural-historical activity systems theory (CHAT) and a research framework for studying collaborative teacher education. The resulting framework allowed for in depth holistic examination of the program as a system through investigation of six interacting parameters of practice (i.e., subject, object/outcome, tools, rules, community, and division of labor) and as an instance of collaborative preservice preparation through examination of five program dimensions (i.e., curricular coherence, faculty collaboration, depth of knowledge, performance/ portfolio assessments, and PK-12 partnerships. Results provide an empirical description of the program and lead to implications for both research and practice. Perhaps most importantly, the novel conceptual framework provides a model for future empirical examinations of contemporary practice.

CALL TO ACTION

Our special issue concludes with a call to action from **McGuire, Sands, Skoning, Schafer, Berschback, Taylor, and Stein**. The authors highlight how the medical model of disability permeates educator preparation leading to a curriculum and approaches that encourage candidates to "fix" or "cure" young children with disabilities. The authors problematize the prevalence of the

medical model in preparation programs from the perspective of disabled preservice candidates who are ostracized as they see themselves in the very children spoken of as in need of "fixing." McGuire and colleagues offer an alternative perspective and practical, useful strategies that can be implemented to build on the unique strengths and assets preservice candidates with disabilities bring to the early childhood field. This call to action was co-authored by teachers and candidates with disabilities to promote practices preservice faculty can use in their programs with the goal of recruiting and retaining candidates with disabilities. The recommendations shared stress that preservice preparation for equitable, meaningful inclusion must promote belonging and a positive perception of disability.

CONCLUSION

While the development of the 2020 EI/ECSE practice-based professional standards has spurred more research into early childhood preparation, there is still a dearth of literature to guide practice, and in particular, there are very few descriptive accounts of contemporary programs. This special issue presents the first such collection of articles focused on collaborative, blended and other approaches and perspectives of early childhood preparation for inclusion since the early 2000s. As these and other authors know too well, the contemporary academic publishing landscape has few spaces for descriptive work. However, it is imperative that this content be shared to ameliorate the outstanding lack of guidance and support for preparation programs seeking to design or implement collaborative (blended) and other approaches to preparation for inclusion. We hope this special issue can serve as a catalyst for further empirical research and the development of clear guidance for the field ultimately leading to effectively prepared collaborative, interdisciplinary professionals who promote positive outcomes for children and families. Please join us as we strive toward a new, reconceptualization of preparation for early childhood inclusion.

In closing, I would like to thank the HS Dialog for the opportunity to provide this special issue and the fact that by being open access, its content will be available to all.

Ann M. Mickelson, Ph.D.
Editor, HS Dial

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HS Dialog, 27(1), 7-19

ISSN: 1930-9325

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

Lori E. Meyer

Kaitlin Northey

University of Vermont

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

THE EVOLVING IDENTIFY OF UVM'S BLENDED PROGRAM

Historical Background

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

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

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

What “Blending” Meant to Us

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

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

Transformative Journey

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

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

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

Current State

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

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

VIEWING BLENDED PREPARATION FROM A SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS PERSPECTIVE

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

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

Socio-cultural Influences

National Professional Organization Level.

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

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

Department Level.

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

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

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

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

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

Faculty Level.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE CHILD AND FAMLIY-CENTERED EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER PREPARTION

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

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

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

Table 1

Recommendations for Reflection

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

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

Faculty Interactions

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

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

Curricular Innovations

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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HS Dialog, 27(1), 20-37

ISSN: 1930-9325

DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLE

The Development of Program Identity in Blended Early Childhood Personnel Preparation

Shawna G. Harbin
Megan L. Purcell

Purdue University

Blended personnel preparation programs grant teacher candidates more than one teaching license, qualifying them to provide educational services to young children and their families in a variety of early childhood education (ECE), early childhood special education (ECSE), and early intervention (EI) settings. However, there is not yet a cohesive understanding of the qualities and characteristics blended programs share. In this paper, we describe one blended program from a four-year, undergraduate educator preparation program at a large, research institution in the Midwestern United States. We address multiple key components of our program, including a brief historical overview, its curriculum and content, and several unique program features. We also discuss how our program aligns to both the EI/ECSE Standards and the ECE Standards and Competencies. We include specific examples from our program to illustrate our blended approach to personnel preparation.

Keywords: blended programs, personnel preparation, early intervention, early childhood education, early childhood special education

The Development of Program Identity in Blended Early Childhood Personnel Preparation

Early childhood educator preparation programs have evolved over several decades with an increased interest in blended programs, which qualify teacher candidates to provide high-quality educational services to young children in early childhood education (ECE), early childhood special education (ECSE), and early intervention (EI) settings (Mickelson et al., 2023). Broadly defined, blended early childhood preparation programs grant emerging education professionals more than one teaching license and include content and philosophy from ECE, ECSE, and EI, delivered with an interdisciplinary lens (Miller & Stayton, 2006). This shift towards developing and implementing blended programs has been shaped by changes to state and national policy, ongoing research, and influence from professional organizations (e.g., the Division for Early Childhood [DEC] of the Council for Exceptional Children [CEC] and the National Association for the

Education of Young Children [NAEYC]), ultimately aiming to better prepare educators to support an increasingly diverse early childhood context (DEC, 2020). Advancing efforts towards inclusion in early care service delivery, an overall increase in the heterogeneity of children and families served, and policy-driven increases in interdisciplinary collaboration continue to contribute to the growing diversity in early childhood programs and the need for education professionals to have a broad range of skills to support all children and families in their care (DEC & NAEYC, 2009; Miller & Stayton, 1999; Power to the Profession Task Force, 2020). For instance, with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) reauthorization in 2004, the definition of *natural environments* in early intervention service delivery was expanded to require that children with disabilities are educated alongside typically developing peers.

To date, there is no established empirical evidence suggesting that blended, or any other program model, specifically contribute to the implementation of inclusive practices in early childhood environments (Pugach et al., 2014). However, blended programs are believed to provide emerging early childhood educators with the varied knowledge and skills needed to serve all young children and their families (Mickelson et al., 2022), thereby potentially supporting the promotion of positive child and family outcomes (DEC, 2014).

Working Towards a Shared Understanding

Despite overall enthusiasm for blended programs, there is not yet a cohesive understanding of the qualities and characteristics they share. The structure and content of blended teacher preparation programs vary across institutions, bringing with them varied curricula and implementation. While the field's professional organizations have made significant advances in establishing personnel preparation standards valuing blended ECE/ECSE/EI content (CEC & DEC, 2020; NAEYC, 2020), efforts to advance research centering blended programs' composition and impact have been limited. Without empirical evidence and continued attention to blended programs in the literature, the development of shared terminology, definitions, and guidance for these programs has been sluggish (Mickelson et al., 2023). Considering the ongoing evolution of blended programs in the absence of explicit direction and their potential for developing educators to support inclusive early childhood settings, the field needs to learn more about blended programs currently offered. Descriptions of existing blended programs, including information about their curriculum, alignment with professional standards, level of interdisciplinary implementation, and opportunities for growth, may help continue to develop the identity and effective components of blended programs.

Purpose

In this paper, we describe one innovative model of blended educator preparation for inclusive early childhood environments. We detail how our program aligns with the most recent professional standards in the fields of ECE and EI/ECSE (CEC & DEC, 2020; NAEYC, 2020), including how our coursework, fieldwork experiences, and embedded learning opportunities (e.g., reflection), leverage the current personnel preparation standards. We first consider factors that contributed to contemporary blended programs, briefly describing the initial steps in their shared history and

providing a description of the field's professional standards. We also present a sample of current blended program offerings in the field.

Developments in Blended Program Identity

A Brief History

Blended programs originated in the 1990s, when a limited number of programs (e.g., Handicapped Children's Early Education Program [HCEEP]) (Mickelson et al., 2023) first demonstrated the effectiveness of incorporating both EI and ECSE content. Blended programs described in the literature at this time include models in which two independent licensure programs were unified for the purpose of broadening content (e.g., The University of Florida; see Mickelson et al., 2023) and those in which programs were newly developed (e.g., Western Kentucky University; see Mickelson et al., 2023). Additional characteristics unique to these various programs (e.g., faculty collaboration) were identified as programs were established and continued to develop.

Subsequent changes to IDEA (2004), input from professional organizations, and emerging research catalyzed the shift in favor of blended licensure programs (Mickelson et al., 2023). For instance, in addition to reauthorizations of IDEA, both DEC and NAEYC published guiding documents that supported inclusion and emphasized needed components in teacher preparation, such as the position statement on inclusion (DEC, 1993) and the DEC position statement on personnel standards (DEC, 1995) respectively. Recognition for blending increased as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), then known as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), began accepting documentation for blended programs in 1997 (Mickelson et al., 2023). During this time, researchers presented evidence in support of blended programs and increasingly framed the fields of ECE and EI/ECSE as more similar than different (Miller & Stayton, 1999).

In the following decades, enthusiasm for blended programs continued to expand in certain domains more than others. Notably, blended programs became available at more institutions of higher education (IHE), maintaining availability where previously established. Additionally, DEC was tasked with the development of the initial and advanced Specialty Sets of knowledge and skills, used to inform the existing CEC Standards (CEC, 2012) (Stayton et al., 2023). In lieu of a distinct set of standards for EI/ECSE, the DEC Specialty Sets and CEC Standards were used as the curricular foundation for IHEs with EI/ECSE programs. While research and policy specifically advancing blended programs waned and funding opportunities diminished for select programs (e.g., undergraduate offerings) (Mickelson et al., 2023), the field's leading professional organizations began developing strong ties that would later lead to the development of personnel preparation standards (CEC & DEC, 2020; Stayton et al., 2024) in support of blended licensure programs.

Table 1

The Two Sets of Professional Standards

ECE Standards (NAEYC, 2020)
Standard 1: Child Development and Learning in Context
Standard 2: Family-Teacher Partnerships and Community Connections
Standard 3: Child Observation, Documentation, and Assessment
Standard 4: Developmentally, Culturally, and Linguistically Appropriate Teaching Practices
Standard 5: Knowledge, Application, and the Integration of Academic Content in the Early Childhood Curriculum
Standard 6: Professionalism as an Early Childhood Educator
EI/ECSE Standards (CEC/DEC, 2020)
Standard 1: Child Development and Early Learning
Standard 2: Partnering with Families
Standard 3: Collaboration and Teaming
Standard 4: Assessment Practices
Standard 5: Application of Curriculum Frameworks in the Planning of
Meaningful Learning Experience
Standard 6: Using Responsive and Reciprocal Interactions,
Interventions, and Instruction
Standard 7: Professional and Ethical Practice
Standard 8: Field and Clinical Experience

The Professional Standards and Blended Programs

Since early in the development of blended programs, leaders of national and international professional organizations in the field have collaborated on unifying ECE and ECSE and preparing a cohesive early childhood workforce (Stayton & Miller, 1993). Initial efforts included the position joint statement on personnel standards from DEC (1995), NAEYC, and the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE). They continued with alignments between the DEC (1995) standards and the NAEYC (1996) guidelines for personnel preparation. In tandem with additional organizations in

the field (e.g., CEC and NCATE, now CAEP), these groups have continued to make significant strides towards creating a foundation for educator preparation that values blended models. Within the last two decades, a DEC workgroup aligned the NAEYC standards with the CEC professional standards and the DEC EI/ECSE Specialty Set to support curriculum for personnel preparation and training, bolstering blended program development (Mickelson et al., 2022). Continued alignments were implemented, including support from the Early Childhood Personnel Center (ECPC), as well as national advocacy efforts between DEC and NAEYC (Power to the Profession Task Force, 2020) strengthening their partnership and the links between ECE and EI/ECSE.

To date, the culmination of these efforts has resulted in two groundbreaking documents in early childhood personnel preparation. In their 2020 update, NAEYC revised what is now called the *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators*, or what is commonly referred to as the ECE Standards (NAEYC, 2020) to guide the preparation of ECE professionals. In the same year, a collaboration among DEC, CEC, and ECPC led to the creation of the *Initial Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Early Interventionists/Early Childhood Special Educators,* or more commonly referred to as the EI/ECSE Standards (CEC & DEC, 2020). These two sets (ECE and EI/ECSE) of personnel preparation standards set the foundation for the continued development and evolution of blended programs. The six ECE Standards and the eight EI/ECSE Standards share topics addressing child development, family and professional collaboration, assessment, curriculum, instruction, and professionalism (see Table 1 for a list of each set of standard titles). Following their development, ECPC conducted a cross walk of both sets of standards (ECPC, 2020a) to assist programs (IHE and professional development) with identifying how the standards intersect and with integrating them into their curriculum. In the same year, ECPC conducted a think tank (ECPC, 2020b) to gather input from leaders in ECE and EI/ECSE about how best to support blended personnel preparation programs. Specifically, participants addressed national accreditation and recognition for blended programs, needed supports for integrating the ECE and EI/ECSE standards in blended programs, and the role of organizations in influencing states. By accessing available guidance for ECE and EI/ECSE, it is easier now than at any point in history for programs to integrate philosophy and content from both fields and potentially prepare educators to effectively support children and families in a variety of early childhood contexts. Furthermore, by pairing these two sets of standards, guiding organizations (e.g., DEC) can more effectively support blended personnel preparation programs with planning and accreditation (Stayton et al., 2024).

Blended Program Characteristics

As previously stated, there is not yet a shared definition for blended programs in early childhood personnel preparation, nor is there direct evidence for their effectiveness in preparing educators to support their use of inclusive practices with young children. Also, blended programs remain in the minority of available EC preparation offerings. In 2015, Chen and Mickelson found that just 12% of ECE programs and 11% of ECSE could be considered to fit the description of a blended program. They reported that identifying blended programs within EC is complicated by the significant degree of variance within programs, including the age range of children to be served with the license/certification, (e.g., kindergarten through third grade), and state-specific degree, curriculum, and licensure and certification requirements.

With that in mind, programs offering licensure in both ECE and EI/ECSE settings, though limited in number, do exist and are described in the literature. These programs feature shared and unique components in structure, topic areas, and faculty representation. For instance, Mickelson et al. (2023) described several key characteristics of blended programs, including their social-cultural context, their origin (if they were newly established or developed by modifying existing programs), their level of administrative support, if they featured integrated fieldwork experiences, and if the content was coordinated and delivered by an interdisciplinary faculty. In their study, Miller and Stayton (2006) identified similar characteristics among blended programs, with an emphasis on an interdisciplinary faculty team coordinating and implementing the program. Indeed, they found this team to be a "core element of blended teacher preparation" (p. 61), responsible for planning, developing, and implementing content and curriculum, program planning management and evaluation, student advising and support, managing standards compliance, and coordinating students' community involvement.

Developments in One Program's Blended Identity

As described previously, blended EC programs vary significantly between institutions. In this section, we briefly describe the history of one blended program, provide an overview of its curriculum and content, and share its unique features. We also outline how this program incorporates both the ECE (NAEYC, 2020) and ECSE/EI (CEC & DEC, 2020) professional standards. We illustrate how the program demonstrates a blending of these two sets of standards and consequently prepares a generation of educators who can effectively serve children with and without disabilities and their families. We close with a brief discussion of challenges met when implementing a blended personnel preparation program.

Program Description

The program we will use for our example and discussion is a four-year, undergraduate educator preparation program at a large, research institution in the Midwestern United States. The socio-cultural context of this institution's educator preparation program is influenced by national initiatives and state policy (Mickelson et al., 2023). The program is accredited through CAEP and completes both national recognition and state program review. While the state does not have a unified teaching license for blended ECE and EI/ECSE, graduates from this program are eligible for the state's teaching licenses of Early Childhood Education (preschool through grade 3) and Special Education: Mild Intervention (preschool through grade 3). The state does not hold licensing requirements for educators serving in early intervention settings.

Information collected from graduates through program, college-level, and Teacher Education Program surveys over the past 11 years (at the time of the development of this manuscript) report an over 90% employment rate within three months following graduation or attendance in graduate school. Those attending graduate school after graduation have attended law school, Occupational Therapy Master's and Doctoral, Applied Behavior Analysis, Curriculum and Instruction, and Special Education programs.

For those entering teaching positions, the high majority of program graduates work in preschool through 3rd grade in a public or private school, in an accredited early learning program, or in the university child development laboratory school. A small percentage (less than 20%) of those in public and private school settings for employment post-graduation are in preschool special education or kindergarten – 3rd grade special education classrooms. Those program graduates that are not in special education environments note the value of the blended approach they received as they find themselves more able to support all learners. Several local elementary schools regularly reach out to the program coordinator for suggestions for hiring graduates, noting they recognize the value in the early childhood approach for the younger grades such as kindergarten.

Faculty associated with this program are both tenure track (n=3) and non-tenure track (n=3); one of the non-tenure track faculty also holds an administrative position in the institution's child development laboratory school. Tenure track faculty (and the non-tenure track with an administrative line) only teach one course per year for the program while the other two non-tenure track faculty are responsible for up to six courses per year, including field supervision. Additionally, one of the non-tenure track faculty serves as program administrator and liaison to educator preparation administration at the institution. Finally, faculty also represent various professional foci such as child development and learning in literacy, math, and science, as well as EI/ECSE and elementary education.

Brief Program History

The deep relationship between educator preparation and the child development laboratory school on the campus where this program is housed began in 1926 with the beginning of the university "nursery school" as a practice location for those completing coursework in child care (Purdue University, n.d.; Schlesinger-Devlin & Purcell, 2019). Over the decades, the Human Development and Family Studies department built itself around the laboratory school, first being focused on home economics and ultimately moving to a broad focus on child and youth development. Then, through a series of discussions and activities in the early 2000s, multiple changes occurred at the institution. By 2010, the College of Health and Human Sciences (HHS) was formed, housing the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, now named Human Development and Family Science (HDFS). This was also a name change from Child Development and Family Studies, demonstrating the enhanced focus on the lifespan and not only child/youth development. Additionally, in 2011, the HDFS department gained a new building that expanded the child development laboratory school as well as research opportunities across the lifespan. Consequently, the faculty associated with the existing early childhood education program and separate early intervention program embraced the opportunity to update and reformulate the curriculum into one that prepared educators to work with young children with and without disabilities and developmental delays and their families. The new blended ECE and EI/ECSE curriculum launched in the fall semester of 2012.

Curriculum and Content

The faculty associated with the initial blended program carefully studied and aligned the 2012 curriculum to the existing professional preparation standards from NAEYC (2011) and CEC

(2012) as well as the EI/ECSE specialty set. This curriculum was designed to prepare educators in teaching content areas such as methods-based courses in math, science, social studies, literacy, and music/movement. Methods-based content courses all contain student learning outcomes that carry themes of care and education for children from infancy through grade 3, intervention and individualized instruction for children with or at-risk for disabilities and developmental delays, education for children who are multi-language learners, and family collaboration. Through additional courses, topics such as care and education for infants and toddlers, assessment and specialized instruction and intervention for children with or at-risk for disabilities and developmental delays, and using guidance with children are addressed. All courses are delivered in-person, with an emphasis on student participation in lecture-based application activities and field experiences.

Uniquely, in this curriculum restructure, field experiences were paired with courses/sets of courses so that teacher candidates learned content in their class and immediately applied their newly acquired knowledge in the field. Finally, the capstone student teaching experience was updated to be an entire semester in an inclusive environment for young children.

Over the next 12 years, while the structure remained much the same, the content of courses and the overall alignment to the fields of ECE and EI/ECSE have been updated. Most importantly, these updates reflect changes in the field (such as trauma-informed care; Purcell & Ruprecht, 2022) as well as what the field expects early career educators to know and be able to do through alignment with the ECE Standards (NAEYC, 2020) and EI/ECSE Standards (CEC & DEC, 2020). Table 2 provides the curriculum map along with field experiences effective fall semester of 2024.

Table 2

Curriculum Overview

Semester	Course Content	Field Experiences (FE)
1	· General Education	None
	· Human Development / Education Foundations	Not ECE or EI/ECSE specific
2	· General Education	None
	· Human Development / Education Foundations	Not ECE or EI/ECSE specific
3	· General Education	None
	· Human Development / Education Foundations	Not ECE or EI/ECSE specific
4	· Human Development / Education Foundations	None
	· The Inclusive Classroom	20 hours in elementary special education
	· Language Development	Not a specific number of hours but engagement with children is expected
	· Guidance in Early Childhood · Professionalism and Music and Movement in Early Childhood	45 hours of shared FE in campus child development laboratory school
5	· Developmental Foundations of Infant and Toddler Curriculum	45 hours of FE in campus child development laboratory school
	· Developmental Assessment · Literacy Development in Preschool and Primary Grades · EI/ECSE: Issues and Professional Practices	45+ hours of shared FE in public school ECSE programs
6	· Approaches to Early Childhood Education	None
	· Positive Behavior Supports	16 hours in elementary or preschool special education or inclusive early childhood classroom
	· Mathematics in Preschool and Primary Grades · Science in Preschool and Primary Grades · Social Studies in Preschool and Primary Grades	45 hours of shared FE in inclusive Kindergarten – 3rd grade
7	· General Education	None
8	· Supervised Teaching in Inclusive Programs for Young Children	16 full-time weeks in inclusive classrooms for children ages 6 weeks through 3rd grade

Note. Adapted from Purcell and Schmitt (2023).

Unique Features

Features of this program that promote a blended approach to preparing educators to work with children with and without disabilities and their families include being housed in the content area of human development, faculty collaboration, paired courses and fieldwork, and the integral relationship with the institution's child development laboratory school. Each of these will be discussed, and examples will be provided for the unique aspect of a blended approach to ECE and EI/ECSE educator preparation.

Content Area

One unique feature of this preparation program is that it is housed in the Department of HDFS, College of Health and Human Sciences (HHS). Hence, it is retained in the content area of human development rather than the College of Education. The institution uses a partnership model for educator preparation so many of the educator preparation programs are spread throughout the institution. With this location of the program, there is a stronger connection to the content of child development and working with families. Teacher candidates enroll in courses with experts in these areas and have opportunities to participate in research and community engagement to expand their knowledge and application of theories and practices. Additionally, being housed in the College of HHS, we are able to more seamlessly collaborate with other departments such as Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences where, beginning in the 2024-2025 academic year, teacher candidates will take courses from experts in the study of language development.

While the partnership model of educator preparation provides our program a unique situation of being housed with our content of child / human development and family studies, this can also present some challenges. Being one of two educator preparation programs in HHS means that many other faculty and administrators within this college are naive to the nuances of educator preparation, such as the level of mentoring needed for field experiences, data collection and events associated with accreditation, and the alignment to professional preparation standards. As well, the program coordinator role is extraordinarily valuable to ensure collaboration and communication is maintained between HHS and the College of Education. Thus, the coordinator has administrative and collaboration responsibilities, which reduces their time for effectively teaching and mentoring the candidates.

Faculty Collaboration

Interdisciplinary faculty teaming, with shared responsibilities around program planning, implementation, and evaluation, as well as student support and standards compliance, is considered an essential component of blended programs (Miller & Stayton, 2006). Historically, our program has engaged in monthly program area meetings. During these meetings, topics such as successes, as well as concerns of the program, including individual course experiences, field work, teacher candidate needs, are discussed. Additionally, our logic model (Figure 1) along with program evaluation and continuous improvement assessment (e.g., key and common assessments [see Table 3]) data are shared and analyzed. Through this collaboration, faculty note areas for individual

course adjustments or overall program modifications along with continued alignment with the ECE and EI/ECSE Standards and expectations of the field.

Figure 1

Logic Model for Program Evaluation

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-term outcome	Intermediate outcome	Long-term outcome
Program curriculum ECE Standards EI/ECSE Standards	Content / methods-based coursework Early field experiences Semester-long student teaching Continuous reflection on others' and own professional practices	Key Assessments Common Assessments	Improved reflection during clinical and field experiences Improved mentoring focused on the skills and behaviors as noted in the standards Data directly related to candidate skills and behaviors based on the standards	Improved candidate professional practices Improved candidate reflection Identification of gaps in curriculum	Highly effective ECEs and EI/ECSEs Continuous program improvement in blended ECE-EI/ECSE preparation

Note. Adapted from Purcell and Schmitt (2023).

Table 3

Assessments for Continuous Improvement and Program Evaluation

Semester	Course	Key Assessment	Common Assessment
1	N/A	N/A	N/A
2	N/A	N/A	N/A
3	N/A	N/A	N/A
4	Professionalism and Music and Movement in Early Childhood	N/A	Foundations Portfolio
5	Developmental Foundations of Infant and Toddler Curriculum	Collaboration / Intervention Plan with Families	N/A
	EI/ECSE: Issues and Professional Practices	Child Intervention Project	N/A
6	Science in Preschool and Primary Grades	Common Lesson Plan	Common Lesson Plan
	Social Studies in Preschool and Primary Grades	Collaborative Integrated Unit Plan	N/A
7	No specific course	Licensure Exams	Licensure Exams
8	Supervised Teaching in Inclusive Programs for Young Children	Licensure Exams Standards Based Reflection CPAST* edTPA^{+}	Licensure Exams CPAST* edTPA^{+}

Note. *CPAST is the institution's student teaching evaluation instrument for teacher candidates in birth-3rd grade settings; $^{+}$edTPA is the institution's chosen performance evaluation during student teaching across settings.

As previously noted, program faculty have both tenure track and non-tenure track lines as well as administrative responsibilities. As well, the program faculty have a range of backgrounds and research and engagement foci. Due to the team of faculty approaching educator preparation from a more interdisciplinary approach, current research and broad needs of the field are embedded into the curriculum through content/methods-based coursework, field experiences, and in additional opportunities for teacher candidates (i.e., research and community engagement).

Finally, the program is designed in a cohort model with teacher candidates traveling through the curriculum together. With this model, the non-tenure track faculty experience multiple opportunities for instruction as well as field supervision and mentoring with each teacher candidate. This provides a natural system of support for each teacher candidate as they have peers and professors with whom they develop strong relationships for academic, professional, and personal supports.

Pairing Courses and Field Work

A unique aspect of the reformation that occurred with the 2012 curriculum that has been maintained is the pairing of courses/sets of courses with field work. With this, the teacher candidates learn about theory and practice in their methods-based courses and immediately apply in the paired field experience (see Table 2). As well, they have multiple and varied experiences with different age ranges, abilities, and teaching practices as they are partnered with various early learning programs, public or private school settings, and practicing educators. Teacher candidates report (Purcell & Schmitt, 2023):

- Experiences with various age groups and developmental abilities lead to a broader understanding of teaching and learning with all young children;
- They more fully understand the expanse of their credentials / licensure and recognize the variety of possible career opportunities;
- Experiences with multiple cooperating educators and professional practices lead to more profound learning of their own craft;
- Direct connections to content through class assignments and reflection increases confidence in abilities; and,
- Observing and reflecting on the application of content – cooperating educator and own practices – improves professionalism.

Child Development Laboratory School

Finding high quality field placements is an identified need in our state (Knight et al., 2023). However, our program has the benefit of a strong relationship with the institution's child development laboratory school. As noted previously, the HDFS department evolved around this child development laboratory school. Consequently, since our program is housed in HDFS, the laboratory school is an integral part of the preparation experience of our teacher candidates. The laboratory school director is faculty in the program serving as a course instructor as well as overseeing field experiences that occur in the laboratory school. Teacher candidates engage in two

field experiences at the laboratory school and have the option to complete their capstone student teaching there as well (Table 2). The philosophy of the laboratory school is one of inclusion:

> *...a variety of activities designed to engage and challenge the diverse developmental levels and interests reflected in each group of children. We strive to maintain an atmosphere of acceptance, allowing children to develop a strong sense of self-worth* (Purdue University, n.d.).

In their field experiences, candidates experience innovative practices as well as intensive mentoring from the laboratory school professional staff whose job description includes professional preparation in addition to their classroom responsibilities.

Connection to Standards

As noted, our program is aligned to both the EI/ECSE Standards (CEC & DEC, 2020) and the ECE Standards and Competencies (NAEYC, 2020). As well, since the institution's educator preparation program is accredited through CAEP and goes through routine state reviews, there is a dedicated focus on continuous improvement measures and data analysis to demonstrate teacher candidate competencies related to the EI/ECSE and ECE Standards. Standard alignment and data collection methods (e.g., key and common assessments) are integrated throughout the program.

The program faculty use a logic model (Figure 1) ensuring standard alignment and teacher candidate outcomes in relation to the standards are routinely measured. As well, a curriculum map is maintained noting the linkages of coursework and field experiences to standards. Along with the curriculum map, major area course syllabi display the EI/ECSE Standards and Indicators and the ECE Standards and Competencies that are addressed in the course content, experiences, and assessments. Since courses are paired with field experiences, standard alignment with field work is also reflected in course syllabi.

To enhance the alignment with standards, to assess teacher candidate competencies in relation to the standards, and to be in compliance with CAEP and state expectations, the program incorporates a series of both key (direct demonstration of teacher candidate competencies aligned with ECE and EI/ECESE Standards) and common (across the institution's educator preparation program) assessments (Table 3). One particularly innovative approach for linking teacher candidate outcomes with the ECE and EI/ECSE Standards is through reflective practice and an assignment that is incorporated throughout the program (McLeod et al., 2024). Through this assignment, we facilitate reflection for teacher candidates connecting growth in their content knowledge and professional practices and behaviors as indicated by the professional preparation standards (Purcell & Schmitt, 2023). The reflection prompts (Table 4) were created based on the ECE and EI/ECSE Standards. Purcell and Schmitt (2023) discuss that teacher candidates reflect on these same prompts throughout the program so they and the faculty may note growth and change in teacher candidate professional perspective and practice across the semesters that this assignment is completed.

Table 4

Standards-Based Reflection Assignment Writing Prompts

Learners and Learning **(Aligns to ECE Standards 1, 4 and EI/ECSE Standard 1)**
1. Learner Development and Individual Learning Differences: How did you provide meaningful and challenging learning experiences for all children based on theories and philosophies of early learning and development? 2. Learning Environments: How did you provide a safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environment so that all children were active and engaged learners? How were emotional well-being, positive social interactions, and self-determination developed and supported?
Content Knowledge and Professional Foundations **(Aligns to ECE Standard 5 and EI/ECSE Standards 5, 6)**
1. Curricular Content Knowledge: How did you integrate knowledge of the content being taught as you planned for universally designed learning experiences that address the strengths and areas for growth for all children?
Instructional Pedagogy **(Aligns to ECE Standards 3, 4 and EI/ECSE Standards 4, 6)**
1. Assessment: How did you use multiple methods of assessment and data-sources in making decisions about instruction and intervention? 2. Instructional Planning and Strategies: How did you select, adapt, and use a repertoire of evidence-based instructional and developmentally appropriate strategies to advance learning of all children?
Professionalism and Collaboration **(Aligns to ECE Standards 2, 6 and EI/ECSE Standards 2, 3, 7)**
1. Professional Learning and Ethical Practice: How did you use knowledge of the field and professional ethical principles to inform your practice in instruction, intervention, and collaboration with families and other professionals? 2. Collaboration: How did you collaborate with families, other educators, related service providers, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways to address the needs of children across a range of learning experiences?

Note. Adapted from Purcell and Schmitt (2023).

Challenges and Limitations

Much of this program operates very smoothly due to supportive administration at the department level. Department administration funds resource needs and often advocates for faculty positions to continue to build the capacity for ensuring the early childhood courses are taught by full-time, both tenure and non-tenure track, faculty. However, there is a sense of constant scrutiny about the number of enrolled students from the college and university. Enrollment numbers dropped considerably during the COVID-19 global pandemic from 22 graduating in the 2020-2021 academic year down to 8 graduating in the 2022-2023 academic year. As of the creation of this manuscript, enrollment has increased but not back to pre-pandemic numbers. Currently, cohorts are maintaining around 15 students each. This is a constant challenge with college and university administration who have a lack of understanding of the environmental impact of the pandemic on the early childhood and educations fields writ large. Additional internal issues identified are associated with university offices, such as admissions, referring potential early childhood students to the College of Education (CoE) rather than to HDFS. Additionally, recruiting efforts can get confusing. Often, recruiters in HHS incorrectly assume the recruiters in CoE have events managed. Hence, the early childhood program may not be represented at vital recruiting events. The program coordinator, with the assistance of the HDFS undergraduate curriculum committee, is in regular contact with recruitment staff to ensure accurate advertising and representation of the program.

Finally, challenges identified at the state level that impact this blended program center around two main issues: (1) early childhood educator compensation and (2) lack of a philosophy of inclusion in early childhood (Purcell et al., 2024). Unless an early childhood classroom in a public school is a designated early childhood special education program and supported with IDEA funding, a lead educator in an early childhood classroom, both public/private schools and community-based programs, is likely not being compensated (salary and benefits) equivalent to degreed and licensed educators. This lack of compensation causes many of the program's graduates to not accept early childhood positions. Second, there is a state-wide lack of a philosophy of inclusion in early childhood education. Hence, early childhood programs are often not appealing to these graduates who have been explicitly prepared to serve an inclusive setting.

Even with the challenges and struggles, this program continues to lead the state in the number of dually licensed early childhood educators as noted by the state department of education. As well, as noted above, program graduates are sought after as employees and are successful in their chosen employment and/or post baccalaureate work.

Conclusion

Blended early childhood preparation programs hold promise for preparing teacher candidates to effectively serve a diverse population of young children and their families in a variety of settings. By integrating curriculum from the broad field of ECE with specialized information from EI/ECSE, blended programs support the unification of both content areas, reflecting the knowledge presented in the ECE (NAEYC, 2020) and EI/ECSE (CEC & DEC, 2020) personnel preparation standards. Despite the lack of a common definition or shared terminology, blended programs continue to evolve with the support of professional organizations and research. We present

information about one IHE personnel preparation program to support our collective understanding of how contemporary blended programs function in their unique sociocultural context. We hope that by sharing this program's history, content, unique features, and alignment with the professional standards, we can contribute to the literature addressing blended programs while catalyzing the ongoing development of high-quality early childhood personnel preparation.

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HS Dialog, 27(1), 38-57

ISSN: 1930-9325

DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLE

Preparing Teacher Candidates for Inclusive Practice: A Program Overview

Brooke Winchell
Naomi Rahn
Kristen Linzmeier
Anne Tillett
Lori Becker
Lucinda Heimer

University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

This paper provides a programmatic overview of an early childhood education (ECE), dual-licensure personnel preparation program in the Midwest. The foundation of the ECE program includes blended faculty from general and special education, a cohort model, field placements every semester, and continual review and innovative practices. The ECE Program is offered in both campus-based and online delivery models to meet the needs of prospective students across the state and region. Faculty have recently expanded the program array to include two additional online programs to meet the changing needs of the workforce: a non-license credential-based bachelor's degree and a master's degree in public policy. The ECE program's unique components and multiple offerings position it well to prepare teacher candidates to educate all children within inclusive settings. Future directions include developing a master's degree in early childhood special education.

Key words: early childhood, personnel preparation, dual-licensure

INTRODUCTION

It is well established that high-quality early childhood programs support the healthy development of young children (Bustamante et al., 2022; Center on the Developing Child, 2010; Heckman, 2017). Competent and caring educators with specialized training and credentials are at the heart of high-quality early childhood programs (Manning et al., 2019; National Research Council, 2015). Early childhood educators are guided by Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP),

which is the core framework of principles and guidelines for implementing best practices in early childhood education (NAEYC, 2022). Early childhood educators who work with children with disabilities start with a developmentally appropriate foundation, and then layer additional supports and individualized intervention strategies to facilitate each child's growth and development within a blended practices approach (Grisham & Hemmeter, 2017). Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE) practitioners must have specialized knowledge and skills in many areas including collaborating with families and implementing evidence-based interventions (Bruder et al., 2021). The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices provide guidance to practitioners for promoting optimal learning outcomes for young children with disabilities and at risk for disabilities (DEC, 2014). In addition to these recommended practices, NAEYC and DEC have developed professional preparation standards to guide programs in higher education in preparing educators. NAEYC's professional standards and competencies outline the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions needed for early childhood educators to promote the development and learning of all young children (NAEYC, 2019). In 2020, DEC developed the first set of EI/ECSE Standards which emphasize the unique skills and knowledge needed for professionals who work with young children who have or are at-risk for disabilities and their families (DEC, 2020).

To effectively work with all young children including those with disabilities and their families, early childhood educators must have the knowledge, skills, and training to understand and use both DAP and DEC Recommended Practices as described in the NAEYC and DEC personnel preparation standards. Blended teacher preparation programs train teacher candidates (TCs) to teach all young children, including typically developing children and children with identified disabilities (Grisham & Hemmeter, 2017; Mickelson et al., 2023). University faculty developed the first blended early childhood teacher preparation programs several decades ago to prepare TCs to meet the needs of all children within inclusive settings (Grisham & Hemmeter, 2017; Mickelson et al., 2022). In blended or merged programs, TCs are prepared in a "single curriculum with a complete integration of courses and field experiences designed to address the needs of all students, including those who have disabilities" (Blanton & Pugach, 2011, p. 226). In blended programs, faculty from both early childhood and EI/ECSE disciplines collaborate to develop and implement the program which includes courses and practicum experiences needed to prepare TCs to teach in general and special education settings (Blanton & Pugach, 2011). Core assumptions of a blended program model are that general and special education teachers require the same body of knowledge, TCs can be adequately prepared within the program (e.g., a 4-year curriculum), and graduates will be willing to assume roles in either general or special education (Blanton & Pugach, 2011). Blanton and Pugach (2011) suggest the following markers of practice for blended programs: a) a preservice curriculum with intentionally related and sequenced components, b) faculty collaboration at the course and program level, c) depth of TC knowledge in both general and special education, d) shared review of TC assessment by faculty from both disciplines, and e) partnerships with school districts and other community agencies.

Despite efforts of teacher preparation programs, the early childhood field is grappling with an ongoing shortage of early childhood educators, early interventionists, and early childhood special educators (Bruder, 2021). Although teacher shortages are not new (Darling-Hammond, 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated and amplified existing shortages (NCES, 2022). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023), 86% of public schools in the U.S. reported challenges in hiring teachers for the 2023-24 school year, with the highest vacancies

reported for general elementary and special education teachers. The early care and education field was hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). The pandemic exacerbated long-standing challenges within the early care and education workforce including low compensation, inadequate benefits, limited opportunities for professional development, and high levels of stress and burnout (Maier & Roach, 2023; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). The EI/ECSE workforce has also experienced ongoing shortages which is concerning given the growing number of children with identified disabilities (Bruder et al., 2021). According to a survey of Part C coordinators across the United States, 100% of respondents indicated a shortage of qualified early intervention providers, with 71.7% reporting shortages of special educators or developmental specialists (IDEA Infant & Toddler Coordinators Association, 2022). Ongoing workforce issues in the early care and education field have had negative impacts on young children and their families. Following the pandemic, teacher shortages led elementary school leaders to implement stop gap measures like increasing class sizes, sharing teachers and staff with other schools, and having staff in roles outside of their normal duties (NCES, 2022). In early care and education programs, many classrooms or entire programs shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lin & McDoniel, 2023). These program closures led to a decrease in the number of high-quality early care and education programs available to families, with disproportionate impacts on low-income families and communities of color (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The shutdown of community early childhood programs also impacted the ability of ECSE programs to provide inclusive services for preschool children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

As our societal context continues to evolve, teacher preparation programs must change to meet the needs of the children and families served and the workforce (Mickelson et al., 2022). One strategy to address these needs is to prepare a more diverse workforce that reflects the children and families being served (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Higher education programs must develop innovative program models to attract and retain TCs. The Early Childhood Education (ECE) program described in this paper was developed nearly 25 years ago and is continuing to evolve to meet the needs of the field. In this paper, we provide an overview of our current ECE program models, describe unique components of our program, and highlight recent innovations designed to meet the needs of the field. We also describe the impact of the program, current challenges, and future directions.

Early Childhood Education Program Models

The ECE program is a 4.5 year long, interdisciplinary undergraduate professional education program at University of Wisconsin – Whitewater (UW-W), a public University in the United States. The dual-license program is robust and placement intensive to ensure TCs are prepared to teach ALL children from birth to 8 years old (i.e., typically developing children and children with disabilities). The mission of the ECE program is to:

> provide innovative interdisciplinary pathways to undergraduate and graduate degrees focused on meeting the unique needs of all children from birth through third grade. We prepare pre- and in-service teachers to use content knowledge and evidence-

based practices in inclusive settings, to use relationship based and equitable approaches to support children's learning, to engage and collaborate with families and other professionals, and to facilitate developmentally appropriate learning within the context of families, cultures, and communities.

Campus-Based ECE Program

The ECE program is offered in two program models: campus-based and online (i.e., ECE4U Program). The impetus for the development of the original campus-based program was to prepare early childhood educators to meet the needs of all children and to support their families. Faculty in the Curriculum and Instruction and Special Education departments discussed the separate early childhood programs offered in each department and the philosophical similarities between the faculty and programs. Because of these discussions, the group members decided that a new "blended" program was in the best interest of UW-W students and children and families. After a decade of planning, the dual-license blended ECE program was launched in 2001.

The face-to-face, campus-based program accepts up to 30 new TCs each year into a cohort. TCs apply to the program in their first semester of their sophomore year and complete 148 credits across six semesters. Upon graduation, TCs are eligible for licensure in early childhood and early childhood special education. The most important impact of the program is the development of high-quality teachers, many of whom stay in the state to teach in preschools, Head Start programs, birth to three programs, and in kindergarten through third grade classrooms in public and private schools. Teachers prepared through the ECE program are neither "regular" nor "special" education teachers, but instead are well-prepared to teach all young children.

Online ECE Program (ECE4U)

Beginning in 2010, the University began offering the ECE dual-license program in an online format. This new, innovative program was designed to attract and retain TCs working full time in the field and TCs living in rural areas of the state. The ECE4U program was created based on recommendations from advisory board members who knew that working educators needed a pathway to a bachelor's degree and licensure that allowed them to continue to work while earning their degree. TCs entering ECE4U have an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree in ECE and typically bring years of experience working with children and families in childcare, Head Start, or elementary settings. The state technical college system has a consistent AAS degree program which allowed UW-W to develop and maintain one articulation agreement with the entire system. The University also has articulation agreements with regional technical colleges and local community colleges.

TCs complete the online program in six semesters over a 2-year period including summers. Most courses are 8 weeks long (i.e., half semester), allowing TCs to carry a full course load while juggling fewer classes at a time. Classes are offered in an online, hybrid format with

TCs meeting synchronously online six times per semester on Saturdays. The program is predominantly staffed by a core group of adjunct faculty who are partnered with full-time tenure track faculty for mentorship and review.

ECE4U is unique because of the articulation agreements with AAS programs and the strong relationship with instructors and advisors at the transfer institutions. Furthermore, the program serves the entire state. Most TCs in ECE4U transfer from AAS programs within a one-hour radius of campus. However, TCs attend from all over the state, many from locations that are not within driving distance of an ECE degree and licensing program. In addition, few universities offer a transfer program that is online, allowing TCs to work while earning their degree and license.

Unique Components of the ECE Program

There are several unique aspects common to both the campus-based and Online ECE programs. These components are essential in providing high quality experiences to prepare TCs to work with all learners.

Blended/Dual-licensure Program Curriculum

The ECE program was the first blended program in the state University system. In the development of the ECE program, faculty and staff were cognizant of the need to develop course content that was reflective of all children and families, and that addressed both NAEYC and DEC personnel preparation standards. This blended program includes courses related to language arts, math, literacy, music, science, social emotional development, working with caregivers, and methods for working with children with disabilities. In all courses, the emphasis is on how to meet the needs of ALL children from birth to age 8 through high quality, high impact teaching. For example, across curriculum courses taught by Curriculum and Instruction faculty, TCs develop lesson plans that not only address learning outcomes for the whole group, but also include modifications and teaching strategies designed to meet the individualized needs of children with identified disabilities. The introductory course in early childhood education includes content in both general early childhood education and EI/ECSE. Assessment courses, which are taught by Special Education faculty, focus on EI/ECSE-specific assessment knowledge and skills including developmental screening and assessment for eligibility for special education. However, these courses also address best practices in assessment for typically developing children including authentic assessment, portfolio assessment, using assessment data to make instructional decisions, and monitoring children's progress. In the course focused on families, the instructor, who is a faculty member in the Curriculum and Instruction department, has updated the course to include a textbook focused on the experiences of families of children with disabilities. In these and other similar instances, faculty have designed the ECE program curriculum and courses to blend early childhood and EI/ECSE content.

Blended Faculty

Our program consists of a small core of six full-time employees: two faculty in Curriculum and Instruction, two faculty in Special Education, one Instructional Academic Staff in Curriculum and Instruction, and one Academic Staff housed in Special Education. Faculty in both departments are equally invested in the ECE programs and have contributed their time and expertise to the development of the blended programs. There are additional staff who teach courses in the ECE program from departments such as Math, Reading, Music Education, Communication Sciences and Disorders, and Educational Foundations. All faculty and staff hold a related Ph.D., Ed.D., or Master's degree and have a minimum of 3 years of relevant teaching experience with young children.

Our core faculty and staff meet weekly for two hours as part of our commitment to continuous review and high quality. During weekly meetings we (a) provide updates on the program array, (b) address challenges and barriers within each program (i.e., ECE, ECE4U, Early Child Care and Education [ECCE], and Master of Science in Education-Early Childhood Education Policy) (c) work collaboratively on current initiatives, and (d) address any concerns with TCs to promote retention and success. Our ongoing communication assists with cohesiveness of the interdisciplinary team, allows for continuous monitoring of the program, and provides opportunities to address barriers as they arise. Moreover, the meetings provide built-in space for innovation. During these meetings, we generate new ideas, collaborate on current projects, and build upon existing initiatives.

Our core faculty and staff are leaders in their Departments, the College, the University and the community. All core members who have been at UW-W for at least a year have been nominated for College advising and teaching awards. In addition to teaching and advising, the roles and responsibilities of staff and faculty are manifold. Academic staff maintain program structures, pursue grant work, and participate in visioning and planning for meeting new program goals. As educator scholars, faculty pursue research that is community-based to benefit professionals and learners in the field of ECE regionally, nationally, and internationally. We see ourselves as teachers, scholars, past practitioners, learning facilitators, curriculum planners, and theory-to-practice negotiators. We share a common belief that early childhood is a critical time for children and their families, and it is our position that there are a variety of ways we can have an impact.

Cohort Model

Cohort-based teaching and learning is an important focus of the ECE Program. TCs complete the program together, moving through required courses and field experiences while deepening their knowledge and skills. We strongly believe in the power of the cohort model. While TCs have individual lives outside of school, they have common ground they can all relate to as they have made the commitment to earning their degree while balancing work, family, and other personal responsibilities. During the first semester, TCs may feel apprehensive about having the same people in classes throughout their training. However, throughout the program, they build formal and informal supports that contribute to a positive cohort climate and acquire effective communication and team building skills, which they will continue to apply in professional settings

where team-based decisions affect the lives of young children and their families. During a study on cohorts, we found that many TCs believe that cohort-based learning is a positive aspect of the program and that it allows them to develop supportive relationships that they hope will continue throughout their professional ECE careers (DeVore et al., 2008). Faculty get to know TCs individually and support them in creative problem solving. Additionally, the cohort model provides a sense of community and equity (e.g., responding to diverse perspectives, learning approaches, individual needs) for TCs and instructors.

It is likely the TCs will have the same faculty/staff member more than once during their university career which can lead to deeper understanding of concepts. Each course does not necessarily need to start with the TCs and the instructor getting to know each other. It also means the TCs know each other so the second semester and beyond looks different from some other models of instruction where there are new TCs in every course. This familiarity can lend itself to jumping into content sooner and going deeper into the pedagogical underpinnings of truly meeting the needs of all children. The cohort model also alleviates some anxiety about being able to enroll in all of the courses needed for graduation in a timely manner. TCs are guaranteed to have a "spot" in all classes from the time they enter the program until they graduate. Reducing this stress means TCs can focus more of their energy on the content of the courses, planning experiences for children in their field placements, or participating in faculty-led professional development opportunities. For example, TCs have presented with faculty on the ECE program models and undergraduate research at state and national conferences. We support TCs who seek out these opportunities as a way of beginning to network in professional circles, gaining valuable experience in presenting, and developing interests professionally that go beyond the classroom.

Placements and Applied Projects

The ECE program was designed around a core belief that TCs need meaningful opportunities to apply theory to practice. TCs are in a placement every semester, in placements ranging from 50 hours to full-time student teaching with children across the licensure age range in general and special education settings (See Table 1). While most placements last 15 weeks, the placements in the sixth semester last 18 weeks as the TCs follow the district calendar for the first semester and continue their placement post-graduation for approximately two weeks.

There are nine field experiences so that TCs experience the theory and pedagogy they are learning about in their courses in various settings. We strive to provide placements in which services are provided to young children with disabilities in inclusive environments. Head Start placements are inclusive given the federal requirement that Head Start programs ensure that 10% of their enrollment are young children eligible for special education services (Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, 2007). General education placements (e.g., Infants/Toddlers, Kindergarten, Student Teaching: Preschool placements) are chosen based on the quality of the programs and vary in the number of children with disabilities enrolled at any given time. We consistently place CTs in our campus-based program which provides inclusive programming for children from 3 months to 5 years of age. General education placements in public schools (i.e., Pre-Student Teaching: Elementary and Student Teaching: Elementary) often include children with identified disabilities or children currently being evaluated for special education. Special education placements (i.e., Pre-Student Teaching: Special Education and

Student Teaching: Special Education) include a variety of service delivery models and settings for children with disabilities. These include services provided by the special education team in inclusive classrooms as well as services delivered in small group and one-on-one formats in resource rooms and self-contained settings. TCs work directly with special education cooperating teachers and often see services delivered in a variety of ways based on child needs. TCs in Early intervention placements are placed in Part C programs serving infants and toddlers with or at-risk for disabilities and their families whenever possible, however these placements are challenging to secure and some TCs are placed in programs serving typically developing infants and toddlers and their families (e.g., school district playgroups for young children and families).

Table 1

ECE Program Placements

Semester	Placement	Hours
1	Head Start	75
2	Infants/Toddlers	50
	Kindergarten	50
3	Student Teaching: Early Intervention	300
4	Student Teaching: Preschool	150
5	Pre-Student Teaching: Early Elementary	50
	Pre-Student Teaching: Special Education	50
6	Student Teaching: Early Elementary	Full-time 9 weeks
	Student Teaching: Special Education	Full-time 9 weeks

We believe it to be our responsibility to teach and learn about diverse perspectives and viewpoints. Every attempt is made to ensure that TCs have a variety of placements (e.g. rural, urban, with learners who speak English as a second language, programs designed for families with low incomes) so that TCs have opportunities to work with children and staff who are different from themselves. TCs from both program models can participate in international placement opportunities, two coordinated through the ECE program. Our campus has a long-standing relationship with the Centers for Interamerican Studies Foundation (CEDEI) in Cuenca, Ecuador, where TCs can spend half of their final semester of student teaching, living with a local family and teaching in a private school while also taking classes on the language and culture of the country. Future opportunities in Ecuador may include a three-credit summer preschool placement which would be shorter and less expensive making it more accessible to a larger group of TCs. In the past, placements were also made in a sovereign nation in the northern part of the state. TCs spent three weeks living and learning within the community where they engaged in fieldwork in Pre-K

through 3rd grade classrooms at the community school and took a course introducing the culture of the sovereign nation at the Tribal College. In addition, TCs worked with a community liaison to attend traditional and community events and visit historic sites.

While in field placements, TCs take concurrent courses and implement what they have learned through various applied projects. Each placement provides opportunities for TCs to plan and implement instruction, adapt and modify instruction for children with disabilities, conduct assessments, evaluate student learning outcomes, and collaborate with families and professionals (Linzmeier et al., 2022). Placements allow TCs to explore, practice, and apply new skills and strategies in real time. Just as we believe young children learn by doing, we believe our courses should be an extension of this philosophical belief. Faculty and staff provide opportunities for TCs to learn new content in coursework, and then TCs have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of concepts in field placements.

The cooperating teacher, University supervisor, and TC complete evaluations of the TC's core knowledge and skills based on NAEYC, DEC, and Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards. They also complete a dispositions assessment based on values, commitments, and professional ethics as defined by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). These evaluations are completed at midterm and the end of the semester during pre-student teaching and student teaching placements. Midterm feedback is discussed during a meeting with the TC, cooperating teacher, and University supervisor. University supervisors also conduct observations during student teaching placements to provide feedback to TCs on their teaching. Additionally, throughout the program, TCs attend two reflective seminars in which they discuss their work in the field and develop three electronic portfolios for assessment of their knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Key Assessments

As a blended program that prepares TCs for license endorsement through the state department of education, TCs must demonstrate proficiency across three different sets of professional standards: InTASC, NAEYC, and DEC standards. In this spirit, the ECE team developed seven key assessments to measure TC learning. Initially, we wrote our own integrated standards and measured candidate learning on those standards using key assessments and associated rubrics. In 2019, our team embarked on the journey to earn NAEYC Higher Education Accreditation. As part of the NAEYC self-study process, the ECE team revised all key assessments to align with NAEYC standards and key elements, adding relevant DEC standards not explicitly outlined by NAEYC.

All seven key assessments are embedded into courses and field placements completed by *all* TCs regardless of program delivery model. The key assessments are completed during the second half of the program; four are completed during TCs' final semester student teaching. This was an intentional decision because many of the courses taken by TCs in the campus-based program model during the first year of the program are transferred in for candidates in the Online ECE program delivery model through the articulation agreement. For example, during final student teaching TCs conduct a functional behavior assessment and develop and implement a behavior

intervention plan. Other key assessments include an integrated curriculum project and the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

To meet the reporting needs of the state department of education, our institution's Audit and Review (A&R) committee, and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the core team members are responsible for ensuring we have and use an assessment plan that allows us to make data driven decisions. While the program has gone through three A&R cycles to date with no stipulations, the NAEYC self-study process has forced us to reevaluate and revise our assessment plan, beginning with the development of our own mission statement and conceptual framework as well as identifying student learning outcomes outside of the teacher preparation standards. While we always informally reviewed the data from key assessments and made changes as a result, this process was formalized as we prepared for NAEYC accreditation.

Each semester, course instructors and supervisors complete a scoring rubric, providing TCs with feedback on their key assessments against NAEYC and DEC standards. These are separate from grading rubrics as they may not include all considerations that go into grading, such as grammar. TCs receive a rating of advanced, proficient, basic or no evidence on each standard; the goal is for TCs to meet the standard with a rating of proficient. Data from these rubrics are collected through a Qualtrics survey each semester which provides evidence of TC proficiency on the standards every semester. Each TC has seven data points across their time in the program. The data are used to inform program scope and sequence, key assessment directions and rubrics, course experiences and learning opportunities, and TC successful completion of final student teaching. These data have also been used to inform decisions about program scope and sequence during redesign efforts.

Continual Review and Innovation

The ECE program has evolved since 2001 and undergone many changes. The commitment of the ECE team to continual review and intentional improvement has allowed the ECE program to maintain high quality programming while being responsive to the field. The continual review process has led to innovation in curricular redesign and adding to the program array.

Response and Impact from COVID-19 Pandemic

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 created a need for major shifts in higher education (Marinoni, Land, & Jenson, 2020), including changes in how teacher education programs prepare future educators (Barnes et al., 2020; Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Quezada et al., 2020). Both our courses and field placements shifted during the pandemic. Initially, our team offered ECE courses in remote format with both synchronous and asynchronous components, with courses gradually shifting back to primarily in-person instruction later in the pandemic.

The pandemic presented unique challenges for providing TCs with meaningful field experiences that were safe, and followed policies of universities, school districts, and early childhood agencies and centers. Our College made the decision that all field placements would be virtual with the exception of final semester student teaching. Throughout the pandemic, we coordinated

approximately 149 placements per semester in seven different practicum and student teaching experiences and pivoted to online placements. TCs who started the ECE program during 2020 or in semesters to follow, had little, if any direct contact with children or experience in schools, community centers, or agencies. Some TCs graduated from our program having all virtual placements leaving them with less hands-on experience prior to graduation.

From these challenges, we learned two important lessons. First, strong relationships with community partners are critical to creating meaningful field placements, both for TCs *and* the partnering school or agency (Linzmeier et al., 2022). Second, the significant shifts in field placements and student teaching experiences during the pandemic reinforced the importance of placements in preparing early childhood teachers (Linzmeier et al., 2022). Ultimately, we discovered that it is not only the number of placements or hours in a placement that mattered, but also the quality and depth of the placements (Linzmeier et al., 2022).

Curricular Redesign

Great care was taken in the development of the program, and that level of care has continued as the faculty and staff are in a cycle of continuous curriculum development and redesign to ensure this rigorous program meets the needs of young children and their families today. The last redesign was implemented in 2019. The focus of those curricular changes included: (a) updating course titles and descriptions to more current terminology, (b) changing credit hours for five courses in the program to better represent shifts in course content and requirements, and (c) creating and eliminating courses. We created a second course on social emotional learning and two new courses on math content including one on STEAM strategies. Three courses were eliminated; the content from two were combined with the new math courses and one reflective seminar was eliminated. One significant shift was that we changed the prerequisite for three introductory courses so that TCs could take the courses prior to admission to the ECE program. This allowed prospective TCs to take courses within the ECE major earlier to ensure the major was a match for their career goals.

The ECE team is currently in the process of an additional curricular redesign. The impetus of the latest redesign is to address recommendations made by the College's administration team to reduce credits to degree and increase enrollment capacity. Other considerations include the feasibility of maintaining the ECE program's rigor given current resources (i.e., staffing) and revising our licensure plans in accordance with our state department of education's licensure criteria. The primary objective is to reduce the ECE program from a 4.5-year program to a 4-year program which aligns with the University system goal to offer programs that allow all students to graduate in 4 years. In order to reduce credits to degree, the redesign efforts include: (1) reducing the number of placements, (2) reducing credit hours for some placements, and (3) eliminating or combining some courses. While reconceptualizing the ECE programs, the components valued most were prioritized. While placement credits were reduced, the wide variety of experiences was not. The placements allow the faculty to continue utilizing an applied project approach to much of the coursework. The inclusive nature of the programs is paramount and was a key consideration throughout the curricular redesign process. Specific examples include making the special education content more visible to TCs by changing some course prefixes from EDUINDP (education interdepartmental) to SPECED (special education). Another example includes taking

the two 3-credit assessment classes and merging the content into one 4-credit course to address redundancy across the two courses. Additionally, TCs were having difficulty understanding the differences among the purposes of assessment. By having all aspects of assessment in one course, confusion over the purposes of assessment should be minimized. We are also responding to needs of TCs and the field by adding a special education field placement and an additional course on differentiation and planning for individual needs. We are also adding a course on bilingual education. The proposed changes streamline course content while maintaining rigor. Moreover, the ECE program will remain placement intensive to provide various and diverse experiences with children and families. Reducing the program by one semester will allow TCs to graduate within 4 years which should be favorable for recruitment.

Revising our licensure plans in accordance with our state department of education's licensure criteria has been a significant challenge. As part of the redesign process, we opted to create alternate pathways for students to complete the Foundations of Reading Test. In order to do that, we were required to submit two separate licensure plans (i.e., regular education and special education). Each licensure plan had to meet separate requirements from our state department of education. On paper, it looks like we have two separate licensure programs, when in actuality, we have one blended program resulting in two licenses (i.e., regular and special education).

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation

NAEYC has served as the sole accreditor of early childhood programs since 2006 (NAEYC, 2024). Our ECE program is the first baccalaureate program in the state to achieve this recognition. Benefits of earning accreditation and participating in this reflective process included improving our knowledge of aligning student learning outcomes with course assessments, providing TCs more opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of national professional standards, and an increased awareness of the program and its value to the college community (NAEYC, 2024). Furthermore, the process forced our program to become structured and consistent with our data collection system, described earlier. We have been able to draw from this data for other reporting requirements. In addition, knowing how proficient our TCs are on NAEYC standards also helped inform program redesign decisions.

Course Syllabi Alignment with Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Standards

As part of continual program improvement efforts, ECE program faculty updated the EI/ECSE standards used in course syllabi in 2020 when DEC published personnel preparation standards for training EI/ECSE professionals (DEC, 2020). ECE program faculty participated in national efforts to advance blended preparation and the use of the newly developed EI/ECSE standards. In 2019, two members of the ECE program team, one Curriculum and Instruction faculty member and one Special Education faculty member, participated in a think tank focused on blended preparation (Early Childhood Personnel Center [ECPC], 2020). The Special Education faculty member also participated in a workgroup to develop a crosswalk for the new EI/ECSE and NAEYC standards (ECPC, 2020).

New Program Offerings

Since the development of the ECE campus-based and online programs, the ECE team has developed two additional programs to meet the needs of the field. These innovative programs were designed to attract new TCs and increase the diversity of the workforce by appealing to a broader audience through different degree pathways than those offered in our undergraduate programs with licensure.

Non-license Online Bachelor's Degree Program (ECCE)

Our state has long had a system of education and credentials within the field of ECE that are supported and organized by an independent not for profit organization. Credentials are sets of courses designed around a topic relevant to the field of ECE. These courses are offered and transcripted through the technical college system schools and state University system. A Preschool Credential is currently incorporated into the AAS degree program that can be earned through technical colleges. However, there was no pathway to use earned credits toward a bachelor's degree. In response to this situation and need in the field, UW-W created the non-license online major, Early Child Care and Education (ECCE).

The ECCE program is designed for working professionals who have earned at least one credential and want to stack credential-based credits toward a degree. This degree is best suited for those who want to work in child care, preschool, Head Start or Early Head Start, or for organizations supporting young children and families. There are two emphasis areas: Teaching and Leadership. The program is transformative by allowing for a high level of credit transfer (up to 90 of 120 credits) and completion of a final capstone placement in the TC's place of employment while conducting action research in the field with the support of a community-based mentor.

The focus of the major is to articulate credential courses already taken to build the major. This is a degree completion program, allowing TCs the opportunity to round out their bachelor's degree building off those transfer credits as the foundation. The University offers five credentials: Supporting Dual-Language Learners, Diversity, Leadership, Program Development and Nature Based Learning. There are eleven credentials that can be accepted into the major. TCs must take at least one credential at another institution. This ensures that it is truly a collaborative degree completion degree.

Several credentials and the AAS degree program are offered in Spanish through multiple technical colleges. One institution approached the University regarding establishing a pathway for these TCs to earn their bachelor's degree as well. ECCE received a grant from the state early childhood association to support the development of several bilingual courses and provide bilingual support services such as tutoring, text resources and advising. UW-W briefly offered general education courses bilingually on a rotation, however these courses had low enrollment and were discontinued.

The ECE online degree programs (i.e., ECE4U and ECCE) have had an impact on the ECE workforce in the state, particularly through preparing TCs in rural areas and addressing the needs of non-traditional students. In the northern portion of the state, there are large areas with low

population density and no state university within driving distance. However, the entire state has been divided into service regions within the technical college system with the goal of providing access to an AAS program in all areas of the state. Online programming, such as that offered by UW-W, is able to fill the gap left for students who want to continue with their education by earning a bachelor's degree.

In addition to meeting the needs of students in rural areas, both ECE4U and ECCE were designed to meet the needs of nontraditional students. This has been done through several key program features. The online courses provide students who are juggling work and home responsibilities with the opportunity to continue their education. Other programs offered through UW-W that support nontraditional students include online and evening tutoring, mailing textbooks from our bookstore and rental office, mailing library resources, and credit for prior learning. The programs also utilize intensive and consistent advising. Potential students meet the program advisor at information or recruiting events. Advising often begins before the student transfers to the University, helping with transfer credit questions. Then, the student works with the same advisor from admission through graduation. Students meet with the advisor individually every semester to check in, plan courses, track program progress, and answer questions.

Because of geography, the necessity to work, and life obligations, it is challenging to earn a bachelor's degree and/or teaching licenses. The course and program structures provide the opportunity to meet the needs of students from around the state. Supporting the education of our future (and current) educators ensures the best outcomes for our children.

Master of Science in Education

Early childhood educators have emerged as an essential workforce resource, and there is a dire need for ECE advocacy in the larger legislative and education policy arena. In response to this need and building on the existing successful ECE programs, the Master of Science in Education (MSE) in Early Childhood Education Policy (ECEP) at the University was developed in 2022 to give professionals and recent graduates the tools needed to address systems-level solutions.

This 30-credit program is one of few ECE Master's programs in the country to focus on policy. It is specifically designed to reach historically underrepresented practitioners across diverse economic, racial, cultural, and linguistic contexts. Studying together, students integrate self-awareness within systems of privilege and oppression, analyze ECE policies, and advocate for policy change to secure the profession. Through their interdisciplinary studies, including the history of ECE, research methodologies, and the legislative process, students become policy leaders ready to work with schools, non-profit organizations, governmental agencies, advocacy groups, and institutes of higher education. The instructional staff includes UW-W faculty as well as adjunct instructors who mirror the demographics of the students and are leaders in the ECE field bringing expertise in public policy and cross-sector communication.

The program includes an internship, offered both in-person or virtually, at the state, national or international levels working with agencies directly impacting policy for children and families. The MSE program is asynchronous online and offers supplemental synchronous sessions, small group project work, and culminates in a policy focused capstone course. The service-based tuition offers

a special rate that creates equal access for in- and out-of-state enrollment. Supports for students include flexibility in scheduling courses, individual advising, and peer support through cohorts as a scheduling choice. In December 2023, the program's first graduates earned their diplomas. The MSE program is in service of inclusive environments through advancing equity for the early childhood workforce, the children they work with, their families, and broader communities through policy and ECE systems change. Capstone and internship projects have included family care providers advocating for community support through civic engagement, and projects on trauma informed care toward a more inclusive curriculum, among others.

Areas of Needed Improvement

Placement Challenges

Given the multiple placements within the ECE program, we face challenges as we work to ensure TCs engage in a variety of experiences throughout the ECE program. The University is nestled in a rural community with three public elementary schools in the immediate community. Building partnerships with schools and agencies in the city and surrounding communities lays the foundation for providing TCs with quality placements. Our outreach extends to a 50-mile radius of the UW-W for TCs in the campus-based ECE program, and to schools and agencies throughout the state for TCs in the ECE4U program. This equates to fostering ongoing relationships with hundreds of contacts through personalized, ongoing communication.

Challenges in making placements include staff turnover, securing elementary special education placements with appropriately licensed cooperating teachers, and securing early intervention placements. One of the challenges we face with building relationships in the community is turnover with leadership and staff in schools and agencies. When the primary contact changes we often have to start relationship building over again and may experience a "waiting period" before we can place a TC while the position is being filled and the new teacher is adjusting to the position. An additional challenge is securing inclusive special education placements in elementary schools. TCs must have pre-student teaching and student teaching experiences with cooperating teachers in the same area of licensure as the focus of the placement. Due to the teacher shortage in special education, some cooperating teachers have emergency licenses or do not hold the specific license that matches the placement focus. This often means we are limited with the schools and agencies we can partner with for special education placements. Securing inclusive elementary placements can also be challenging because special education teachers are working with K through 5th grade even though we are licensing TCs only up to the 3rd grade level. This can limit the contact time a TC has with the intended age group.

Early intervention placements are often challenging to locate due to the reluctance of early intervention agencies to accept practicum students and student teachers. Feedback from early intervention programs suggests that they are hesitant to host TCs given that relationships with families are critical as is the consistency of staff who interact with children and families. This leads to some TCs having limited experience in early intervention placements serving infants and toddlers through Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). We often place TCs in alternative programs that serve infants and toddlers and their families.

Other challenges include financial barriers for TCs and placement health requirements. TCs may be asked to travel as far as one hour to attend placements, requiring that they have reliable transportation. Public transportation is generally not available and options for carpooling may be limited. The added expenses of campus parking, gas, insurance, and car maintenance present barriers for TCs. Another challenge is ensuring TCs are in compliance with the placement's health requirements. Each school and agency have a prescribed set of requirements. Given the vulnerable population that early intervention programs serve, the health requirements can be complex. The University Health Center provides support for TCs to meet health requirements but that comes with an extra cost. In addition, we also need to be respectful of TCs' personal beliefs about health requirements, including COVID-19 vaccination status.

When looking for quality placements there are many factors to consider. We must make sure schools and agencies we partner with offer quality programming, meet licensure requirements, and allow TCs to complete requirements. Gathering and maintaining placement data across semesters is essential so we can (a) identify placement qualities that align with our program's mission, (b) determine gaps in the type of placements being used, (c) make sure TCs have engaged in a variety of diverse placements throughout their degree program, and (d) efficiently access placement data as needed for reports and program monitoring.

Recruitment and Retention

As noted in the introduction, two strategies that higher education programs can use to meet the needs of the field include increasing the diversity of the workforce and developing innovative programs to recruit and retain TCs. The campus-based ECE program has experienced recent challenges in both recruitment and retention of TCs. For many years, more TCs applied to the campus-based program than could be accepted given the 30 available slots within each cohort. In recent years, however, we have observed declining enrollment with cohorts of 19-26 TCs between 2019 and 2023. Although the causes of the decline in enrollment are not clear, possible causes include program length (i.e., 4½ years to degree), changes in state licensure requirements resulting in other teacher preparation programs (both at our University and others within the state) that offer licensure in the K-3rd grade age band, and the COVID-19 pandemic. ECE4U and ECCE are designed to meet the needs of those currently working in the field and so recruitment is targeted. The enrollment for the online programs has been increasing over the years. The program coordinator conducts presentations to future TCs around the state and attends conferences that are geared toward practicing professionals. Meeting educators in these settings allows ECE program staff to share educational opportunities and potential pathways to degree. One challenge that continues to persist is that educators, especially those with teaching licenses, do not match the racial, ethnic, or linguistic diversity of the state's children. UW-W strives to alleviate this discrepancy through recruitment efforts and through creative and responsive programming. However, much more needs to be done in this area.

Retention of TCs enrolled in the campus-based ECE program has declined in recent years. We hypothesize that the same issues impacting enrollment (i.e., time to degree, availability of other programs, and the COVID-19 pandemic) are also impacting retention. Anecdotally, we have seen

an increase in mental health challenges and other stressors (e.g., financial concerns) that appear to be more pronounced following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Retention of TCs is a priority. Once TCs enter any of the early childhood program majors, the faculty and staff use a variety of tools to support success and retention. The cohort model used by the ECE major provides TCs with the ability to develop supportive relationships with peers. These connections can help during challenging times. Program whole group meetings, such as orientation, and activities, such as annual team building, allow TCs to connect with each other within their cohort and across cohorts as well. Supportive advising provides TCs with the opportunity to connect with their advisor and faculty members individually.

Adequate Faculty and Staff to Support Program Array

An additional challenge for the ECE program is ensuring adequate faculty and staff to support the growing program array. Although we have added programs (i.e., Online ECE program, MSE in early childhood policy), we have not added new full-time faculty or staff to support these programs. The work of developing, coordinating, teaching, and advising is being carried out by the same number of individuals who originally staffed the campus-based and online ECE programs. As we implement these new programs, administrative support will be critical to ensure adequate staffing. Another challenge is staffing for the Online ECE program. The courses in the Online ECE program are currently taught by adjunct instructors rather than full-time faculty. Adjunct instructors have excellent knowledge of current practices in the field but may not have a well-developed understanding of the ECE program as a whole. While we make every effort to involve adjunct instructors in course and program development, we also want to be respectful of their time as they often have other full-time employment. One possible solution may be to hire additional faculty dedicated to the Online ECE program in the future, or to have current faculty teach both the campus-based and online versions of the courses. This would likely require hiring additional faculty and gaining administrative support. Administrative support is critical in carrying out successful blended programs which are time- and resource-intensive (Mickelson et al., 2023).

Future Directions

In this programmatic description, we provide an overview of the ECE programs at UW-W which can be used by faculty at other institutions to guide the development or improvement of an inclusive blended program. The unique components of the ECE program array ensure high quality training for TCs. These components include multiple placements, blended faculty, and innovative programming. A variety of comprehensive quality placements are a cornerstone of our programming and while they may be challenging to secure and navigate, the experiences gained by TCs are invaluable. Blended faculty who are able to prioritize active collaboration provide the opportunity to participate in ongoing innovation and program improvement. Innovative programming is responsive to the field's need to recruit and support diverse TCs. Those interested in creating a blended program can utilize this program description to identify components that align with their philosophy. Those interested in revising aspects of their current program can utilize

the program description to review strong aspects of their program as well as areas in which changes can be made.

Whether an inclusive program is being created or modified through curricular redesign, there are several key supports to aid in this work. One suggestion is to seek out financial support from administration for time and effort to allow faculty and staff to deeply engage in this work. Another suggestion is to utilize the financial support to involve all faculty in day-long planning sessions to identify key priorities and areas for change, have difficult conversations about the vision for the program, and consider changes in the field that should be incorporated in redesign. Day-long planning sessions provide the needed time to fully develop new ideas, revisit former ideas, and gather input from all faculty and staff. Another suggestion is to use the personnel preparation standards from DEC and NAEYC to guide efforts when modifying a program. Using the personnel preparation standards ensures the modified program is up to date, responsive to the field, and following recommended practices.

The ECE program at UW-W has had an impact on the field by offering a variety of programming options that meet the needs of the field and of adult learners. Both the campus-based and ECE4U program models have consistently prepared cohorts of TCs who have the knowledge and skills needed to work with all young children ages birth to 8 years and their families. The program includes carefully sequenced courses and practicum experiences that address both NAEYC and DEC personnel preparation standards. TCs complete field placements each semester of the program, gaining experience in a wide variety of settings, helping prepare them to assume a variety of roles after graduation. Upon completion of the program, TCs are eligible to apply for teaching licenses in both general and special education for children ages birth to 8 years. The program has also developed new and innovative models for preparing diverse educators and policy leaders. Future directions include developing a Master's Program in ECSE to meet the needs of post-baccalaureate students seeking licensure in ECSE. The ECE programs will continue to evolve to meet the needs of the field and prepare TCs who are well positioned to meet the changing needs of children and families.

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HS Dialog, 27(1), 58-76

ISSN: 1930-9325

DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLE

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

Leanne M. Evans[1]
Tatiana Joseph[1]
Maggie Bartlett[1]
Sara Jozwik[2]

[1]*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*
[2]*Governors State University*

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

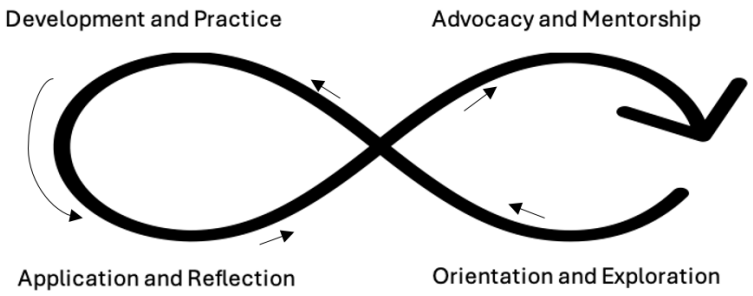
Our work in developing the IECTE program is guided by a framework we think of as *critical inclusivity*. We envision *critical inclusivity* as enactments that elevate access to learning for all. These enactments create a sense of belonging within the broader community, affirming the intersectional identities 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 *becomin*g 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

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

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.

[1]The PIECE Project is funded by the U. S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition; Grant Number T365Z220096

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

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HS Dialog, 27(1), 77-93

ISSN: 1930-9325

DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLE

Reimagining Preparation for Early Intervention Providers

Sarah D. Wiegand
Monique Matute-Chavarria
Anita Hernández

New Mexico State University

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

BACKGROUND

Part C Early Intervention

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

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

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

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

New Mexico Context

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

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

Part C in New Mexico

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

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

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

New Mexico State University

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

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

AUTHORS' POSITIONALITIES

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

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

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

Project RISE Competencies

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

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

TABLE 1

Project RISE Competencies

Knowledge of Child Development
KCD 1- Project RISE EI Scholar understands child development theories and philosophies and their impact on assessment, intervention, and instructional decisions in early intervention (DEC 1.1; KSSC 1.1)
KCD 2- Project RISE EI Scholar understands the normative sequence of development of infants and toddlers AND acknowledges that aspects of development are socially constructed, as is disability, and are shaped by cultural, religious, familial, socio-economic, gender, and linguistic factors (DEC 1.2; KSSC 1.2)
KCD 3- Project RISE EI Scholar can describe characteristics and etiologies across a variety of developmental delays and disabilities and the potential impact on infants/toddlers and the family (DEC 1.4)
KCD 4- Project RISE EI Scholar partners with families to support their understanding of child development and to deepen the candidate's own understanding of child development from the perspective of the family (DEC F2; KSSC 1.3)
KCD 5- Project RISE EI Scholar understands and describes child development using an asset-based perspective (Yosso, 2005
Family-Centered Practices
FCP 1- Project RISE Scholar understands and explains Part C services and a family's procedural safeguards to ensure family understanding and to support families in advocating for themselves and their child (KSSC 2.2)
FCP 2- Project RISE Scholar develops trusting partnerships with families and exchanges knowledge and information to improve outcomes for the child and family (DEC F1)
FCP 3- Project RISE Scholar partners with families to understand their strengths, priorities, and concerns and centers all practices around the changing needs of the child and family (DEC 2.3)
FCP 4- Project RISE Scholar collaborates with families and caregivers to plan and engage in culturally and linguistically relevant assessment practices that identify a child and family's strengths, priorities, and needs and lead to meaningful and functional IFSP outcomes and IEP goals (DEC 4.1, 4.4)
FCP 5- Project RISE Scholar partners with families to explain the Part C to B transition, understand family priorities related to the transition, and advocate for inclusive and equitable services for the child and family (KSSC 5.3)

TABLE 1 - CONTINUED

Culturally Sustaining Practices
CSP 1- Project RISE Scholar develops trusting relationships with a family to understand how their culture impacts their experiences with and perceptions of early intervention (DEC 2.1) CSP 2- Project RISE Scholar collaborates with interpreters to ensure understanding of a family's cultural and linguistic background, engage in respectful and meaningful visits, and provide resources in the family's home language CSP 3- Project RISE Scholar conducts all aspects of intervention (assessment, instruction, and service coordination) in the family's home language CSP 4- Project RISE Scholar honors and embeds a family's cultural wealth, including their knowledge, culture, experiences, and beliefs into assessment and instruction (Yosso, 2005) CSP 5- Project RISE Scholar helps to develop IFSPs and initial IEPs that reflect a family's values, culture, ideas, priorities, and assets (Feeney et al., 2024)
Evidence-Based Practices
EBP 1- Project RISE Scholar partners with families and other professionals to select evidence-based assessments and instructional practices relevant to the family and child that can be conducted within a child's natural environment (DEC 5.1) EBP 2- Project RISE Scholar uses family and caregiver coaching to support families and other caregivers to implement evidence-based practices across everyday activities and routines (DEC 6.1) EBP 3- Project RISE Scholar partners with families and caregivers across settings to collect and use relevant and functional data to make informed decisions in assessment and intervention (DEC 4.4; DEC INS3) EBP 4- Project RISE Scholar understands how technology can promote access and inclusion and collaborates with other services providers and the family to implement strategies appropriate to the family (DEC E4, E5) EBP 5- Project RISE scholar views research and practice using a critical lens and adopts evidence-based practices that are culturally and linguistically relevant

TABLE 1 - CONTINUED

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

Program Placement

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

Project RISE Coursework

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

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

Practicum and Capstone Experiences

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 1

Project RISE Course Sequence

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

Affiliated Faculty

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

Advisory Council

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

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

STUDENT RECRUITMENT AND SUPPORT

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

Recruitment Process

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

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

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

Community College Partnership

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

Interview Process

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

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

Student Support and Mentorship

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

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

Individualized Scholar Support

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

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

LESSONS LEARNED

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

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

Budget Adjustment

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

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

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

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

Conceptual Framework

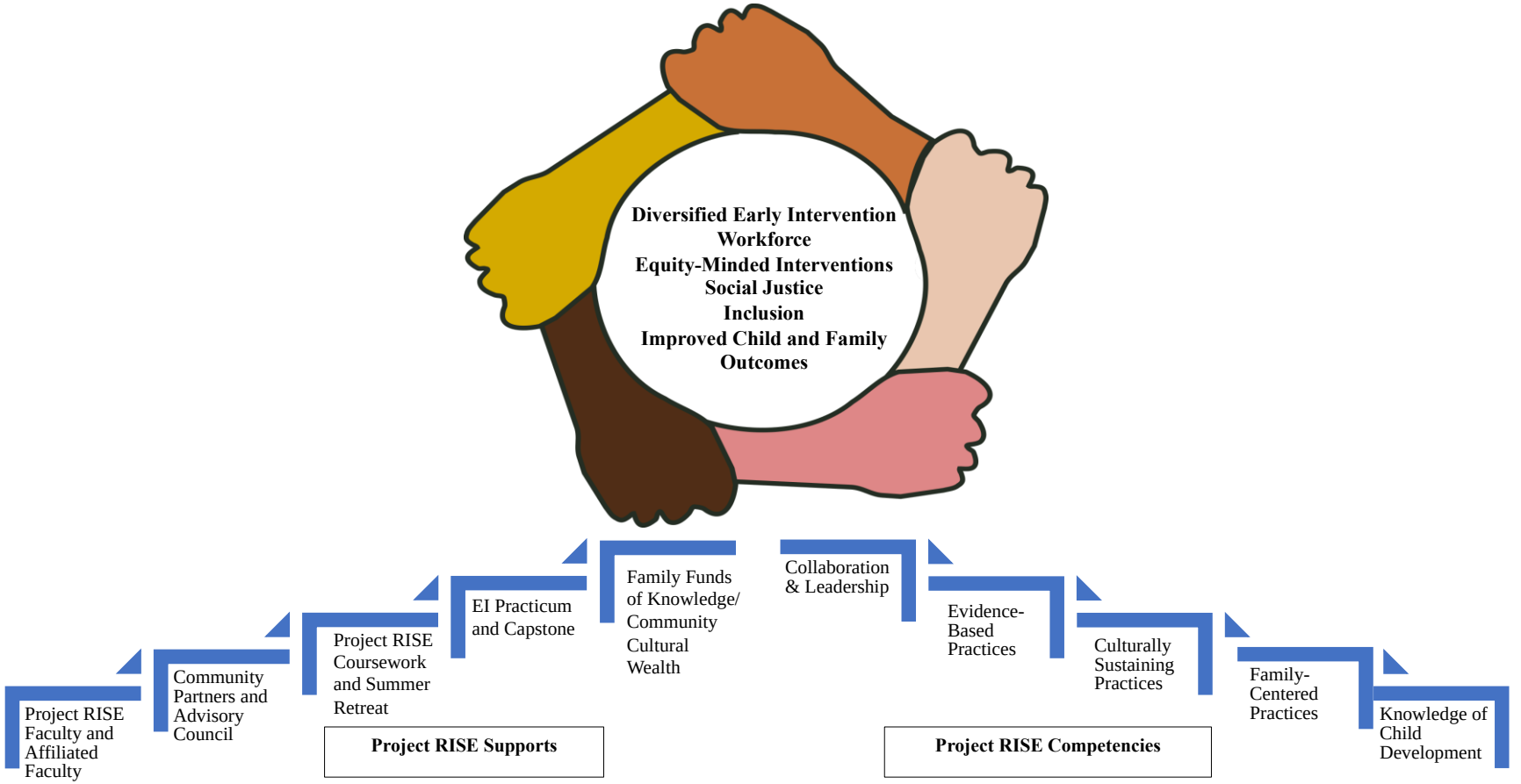
Figure 2 depicts our Project RISE conceptual framework, which integrates supports and competencies described in this manuscript to promote positive and equitable outcomes for infants, toddlers and families.

CONCLUSION

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

Figure 2

Project RISE Conceptual Framework



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HS Dialog, 27(1), 94-103

ISSN: 1930-9325

DESCRIPTIVE ARTICLE

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

Sandra Bequette EdD[1]

Reagan Murnan PhD[2]

Marie Kohart MEd[3]

Jennifer Francois PhD[4]

Kimberly Wilson PhD[2]

[1]*Emporia State University*

[2]*Wichita State University*

[3]*University of Kansas*

[4]*Kansas State University*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Practicum Experiences

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

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

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

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

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

Collaboration Between Institutes of Higher Education

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

Initial Collaboration

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

Secure Grant Funding

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

Input from Community Partners as a Central Focus

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

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

Creation of Training Modules

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

Additionally, each IHE training module consisted of three videos:

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

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

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

Open-Source Site to House Materials

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

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

Outcomes of the Collective Endeavor

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

Voices from the Field

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

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

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

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

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

Networking Opportunities

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

Outcomes-Based Assessment

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Kansas Career Pathways [grant numbers 2405, 2411, 2412; 2413].

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HS Dialog, 27(1), 104-116

ISSN: 1930-9325

CONCEPTUAL ARTICLE

Early Childhood Special Education Stars: A Five-Point Model for Addressing the Teacher Shortage

Marla J. Lohmann[1]

Marisa Macy[2]

[1]*Colorado Christian University*
[2]*University of Wyoming*

There is currently a crisis-level shortage of qualified early childhood educators, including early childhood special educators. Teacher preparation programs must address the shortage through effective teacher recruitment, training, and retention strategies. We recommend a five-point STARS model that includes: (a) **S**upplemental funding during field placements, (b) **T**eacher preparation that leads to early childhood education and early childhood special education dual licensure, (c) **A**dvocacy at the local, state, and national levels, (d) **R**elationships between teacher training programs and local public and private early learning centers, and (e) **S**upportive and ongoing mentoring for in-service early childhood special educators. This manuscript provides an overview of this STARS model with specific recommendations for teacher educators.

Keywords: Early childhood special education, Teacher preparation, Teacher shortage

INTRODUCTION

There is currently a crisis-level shortage of qualified early childhood educators (Schaack et al., 2021), including early childhood special educators trained to teach preschool children with disabilities receiving services under Part B, Section 619 of IDEA (Peyton et al., 2018). While the shortage of certified teachers existed previously, the 2019 coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic exacerbated the problem, with a higher than normal number of teachers leaving the profession either for retirement or to pursue a different career (Carver-Thomas et al., 2022). This shortage of teachers is leading to students being taught by teachers without state teacher certification (Carver-Thomas et al., 2022; Peyton & Acosta, 2022) and higher student caseloads for special educators (Peyton & Acosta, 2022).

At the same time that this shortage is occurring, there are increased expectations for young children to enter kindergarten with academic skills such as foundational knowledge in early literacy and numeracy, necessitating that all early childhood educators are well prepared for their roles (Cho & Couse, 2008; Cook & Coley, 2017). Many preschoolers with disabilities, including

children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, spend the majority of their school day in the inclusive classroom (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020), Therefore, it is vital that their teachers are fully qualified for their roles and stay in those positions for several years.

Teacher preparation programs must proactively and comprehensively address the early childhood special education teacher shortage through the implementation of effective teacher recruitment, training, and retention strategies. In order to achieve this goal, we recommend a five-point STARS model (Figure 1) that includes: (a) **S**upplemental funding during field placements, (b) **T**eacher preparation that leads to early childhood education and early childhood special education dual licensure, (c) **A**dvocacy at the local, state, and national levels, (d) **R**elationships between teacher training programs and local public and private early learning centers, and (e) **S**upportive and ongoing mentoring for in-service early childhood special educators. This manuscript provides an overview of this STARS model with specific recommendations of how teacher educators can use this model to address the teacher shortage crisis.

Figure 1

ECSE Stars Model

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Supplemental Funding During Field Placements

The "S" in the STARS model focuses on **s**upplemental funding during field placement. Traditionally, teacher preparation programs have culminated with a student teaching experience that lasts for one semester and allows teacher candidates to demonstrate their mastery of best practices in classroom instruction (Greenberg et al., 2011). Because these field experiences generally require full time, unpaid work, teacher candidates often must take out additional student loans to pay their bills during their student teaching (Meltzer, 2022). This expectation for unpaid labor has been challenging for many college students (Thompson & Russell, 2017) but is even more so now with the increasing number of nontraditional students attending college (Remenick, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics (1993) defines a non-traditional undergraduate student as one who meets one of more of the following characteristics: (a) older than the traditional 18-22 year old college student, (b) attending college part-time, (c) independence from parental support, (d) working full time, (e) having dependents, (f) being a single parent, and (g) having received a GED.

One solution for addressing this challenge is through field placements that include payment for teachers. For pre-service teachers, this model is often referred to as teacher residencies (Goodwin et al., 2018; Henning, 2018; Zugelder et al., 2021). In addition to the financial benefits to teacher candidates, teacher residency programs that last for the entire school year have been found to result in teachers who are better prepared for teaching in their own classrooms (Mazzye et al., 2023) and are more likely to stay in the classroom for several years (Goodwin et al., 2018). Fallona and Johnson (2019) suggested that schools consider using funding from Title II, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to fund teacher residencies. These federal funds are allocated for ensuring that all students have access to highly qualified teachers and up to two percent of a state's ESSA funds may be used for this purpose (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). To make this funding use possible, teacher preparation programs must work in collaboration with local school districts.

For universities or communities that do not have teacher residency programs, there are other options to provide supplemental funding during pre-service field experiences. For example, teacher candidates may be allowed to student teach in the school for a certain number of hours each week and count those paid experiences towards their student teaching. Candidates and universities can pursue grant funding to cover the tuition and living expenses of candidates. And, some states, such as Colorado, are now providing financial support to student teachers (Meltzer, 2022).

Teacher preparation programs can also increase the opportunities for paid field work by developing and offering university-based alternative certification programs. This pathway to teacher licensure offers training and support to in-service teacher candidates who are acting as the teacher of record in a classroom while pursuing teacher training (Bowling & Ball, 2018). Approximately 20% of teachers receive training through alternative pathways, such as alternative certification programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). These pathways may be especially appealing to non-traditional students who already have a bachelor's degree in another field and seek an income while gaining teacher licensure.

Teacher Preparation Leading to Dual Licensure

The "T" in the STARS model focuses on **t**eacher preparation leading to dual licensure. Early childhood teaches who are explicitly trained in both developmentally appropriate early childhood practices and special education strategies are better able to support the various academic, communication, and social-emotional needs of the young children they teach. Nutbrown (2021) argues that well-trained and highly qualified early childhood educators are vital for the success of young children. Early childhood teachers must be prepared to meet the needs of all learners. In recent years, several states have launched universal preschool programs. At this time, approximately a dozen states and the District of Columbia offer universal preschool or prekindergarten programs or are in the process of developing such programs (Guevara, 2023). Many states (e.g., Colorado, Florida, Virginia) utilize community-based preschool programs to meet the demand. Traditionally, teachers in these private early childhood centers may have minimal or training in inclusive practices (Education Law Center, 2010) but must be prepared to support children with disabilities in their private school classroom due to universal preschool mandates.

Many early childhood teachers have reported feeling unprepared for meeting diverse student needs in the inclusive classroom (Chadwell et al., 2020; Majoko, 2016). Teachers' feelings about, and preparedness for, inclusion directly impacts the learning success of children in inclusive classrooms (Tiwari et al., 2015). Teachers with dual teacher licensure have more positive attitudes towards inclusive practices and teaching students with disabilities (Kirksey et al., 2022).

In addition, teachers' self-reported perceptions of preparedness for teaching have been directly correlated with their attrition rates, with teachers who report feeling more prepared being more likely to stay in the classroom (DeAngelis et al., 2013). Inclusive classroom teachers who are also trained to teach students with disabilities are more likely to remain in the classroom, even when they are supporting a large number of children with disabilities, than are their colleagues without special education training (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). To address this feeling of not being prepared to support learning needs, we recommend that all early childhood educators are dually certified in both early childhood education and special education.

Universities that have implemented dual licensure programs have found that graduates are more prepared for meeting the needs of all learners in the inclusive classroom (Anderson et al., 2015; Kent & Giles, 2016; Kerns, 1996; Kirksey et al., 2022). Additionally, students with disabilities who are taught by dually certified teachers have been found to have better academic outcomes compared to their peers taught by teachers with one type of teacher certification (Kirksey et al., 2022).

Recent research has also found that the type of licensure held by a teacher candidate's cooperating teacher impacts the likelihood of the candidate's eventual teaching position, with candidates who were mentored by a teacher with a special education endorsement being more likely to become special educators themselves (Theobald et al., 2021). With this in mind, the authors recommend that teacher preparation programs ensure candidates are paired with

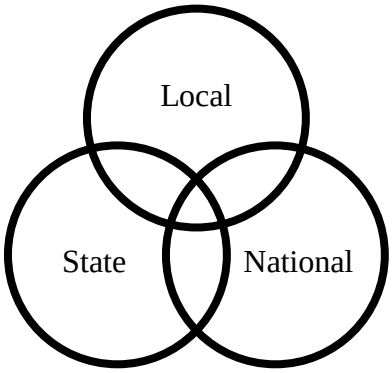
cooperating teachers who hold licensure in special education or early childhood special education. Based on the existing research, we recommend university teacher preparation programs offer dual licensure programs include explicit training and field experiences in both general and special education (Fallona & Johnson, 2019). To do this, early childhood education and special education programs must work in collaboration to support and train teacher candidates.

Advocacy at the local, state, and national levels

The "A" in the STARS model focuses on **a**dvocacy at the local, state, and national levels. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2023) defines advocacy as the process of supporting a cause. Teacher education programs are uniquely positioned to advocate for the best interests of current and future teachers in their communities, as well as at the state and national levels. Recent research indicated that teacher educators perceive advocacy to be a critical part of their roles (Akin-Sabuncu, 2022). Teacher educators' participation in advocacy efforts is vital because most legislators do not have a background, nor expertise, in education issues (McLaughlin et al., 2016). Teacher educators can engage in advocacy in a number of ways at the local, state, and national levels, with overlapping work in various areas (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Advocacy at Three Levels



Advocacy must begin at the local level, within schools and districts, as well as the community as a whole. In the local schools, this local advocacy can take many forms including (a) formal and informal conversations with community stakeholders about best practices in education (Fisher & Miller, 2021), (b) mentoring colleagues (Dubetz & deJong, 2011), (c) sharing resources with teachers and administrators that may lead to changes that will better meet student needs (Murawski & Hughes, 2021), and (d) using social media to engage in discussions about education policies (Fisher & Miller, 2021). Teacher educators should lead these advocacy efforts and should support teacher candidates in learning advocacy skills. Within their communities, teacher educators can advocate for policy changes through writing open letters published online

(Garahan, 2019). Finally, in their own teacher education courses, they can advocate for children and teachers by encouraging a variety of student viewpoints and selecting diverse course materials (Dubetz & deJong, 2011).

At the state level, teacher educators can collaborate with faculty from other teacher preparation programs throughout the state to create, and advocate for, policies that support pre-service and in-service teachers. In many states, teacher preparation programs join forces through involvement in Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) initiatives, which are aimed at meeting the unique needs of special education professionals in the state (CEEDAR, 2023). In addition, ECSE teachers can engage in state-level advocacy through contacting elected officials regarding current and upcoming legislation that impacts young children and their families (Council for Exceptional Children, 2023).

On the national level, advocacy may be accomplished through participation in advocacy groups. The field of early childhood education offers several professional organizations that engage in advocacy efforts, such as (a) the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), (b) the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAECTE), and (c) the National Child Care Association (NCCA). In the field of special education, there are several groups including (a) the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), (b) the CEC Teacher Education Division (TED), and (c) the Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE).

NAEYC is a professional organization with approximately 60,000 members and focuses on ensuring high quality outcomes for children between birth and age eight (NAEYC, 2023a). NAEYC works at both the national and state levels to support legislation to benefit young children through (a) providing members with information, (b) publishing position statements, (c) publishing letters and official comments on policies, (d) connecting early childhood educators with legislators, and (e) launching the America for Early Ed initiative (NAEYC, 2023b). NAECTE is composed of teacher educators who prepare people to work in early childhood classrooms and engage in advocacy efforts through the publication of position statements and conference presentations (NAECTE, 2023). The National Child Care Association includes members from childcare centers of all sizes and provides members with information and tools to engage in advocacy efforts that support young children (National Child Care Association, 2021).

CEC is the primary professional organization for the field of special education and has a robust policy and advocacy agenda that includes keeping members updated on national policies, supporting members in writing letters to Congress, publishing position statements, and hosting a Legislative Summit in Washington D.C. each year (Council for Exceptional Children, 2023). For example, advocacy may include becoming active in a professional organization like the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC). DEC advocacy efforts focus on professionals serving young children birth to age eight with disabilities. Like DEC, TED is a subdivision of CEC. TED builds upon the work of CEC by emailing members weekly updates about policies related to special education and teacher preparation, endorsing legislation that benefits teacher preparation efforts, and offering a Special Education Legislative Summit Short Course on policy to selected members each summer (Teacher Education Division, 2023). HECSE is an organization that was founded to support communication between programs

offering doctoral programs in special education and currently engages in organized advocacy at the national level to support legislation that benefits children with disabilities and their teachers (HECSE, 2022).

Relationships between teacher training programs and early learning centers

The "R" in the STARS model focuses on **r**elationships between teacher training programs and early learning centers. A fourth way that teacher education programs can address the early childhood special education teacher shortage is through relationships with local early learning centers. There are a variety of ways in which these partnerships can be formed and teacher preparation programs, as well as the area schools, must determine the model that is best for them.

Darling-Hammond (2017) discussed a teacher training model used at one Australian university in which university faculty collaborated with teachers and teacher candidates in a school. Together, they engaged in lesson planning, curriculum development, and research. This type of partnership model can support university faculty in staying connected to the classroom, while providing pre-service teacher candidates with highly supported field experiences and in-service educators the opportunity to continue their own professional development.

Rummel et al. (2022) shared about a partnership in which a school identified a need, specifically social-emotional learning, and reached out to the local university-based teacher education program to gain support and training to address this need. The university faculty used recent research to guide the support they provided and were able to conduct their own research, making the partnership beneficial to both parties. By building schools' and teachers' capacity to address their own needs through explicit training, teacher education programs can reduce teacher retention as teachers who feel confident in their abilities are more likely to remain in their teaching positions (Bland et al., 2014).

A third way that schools and universities can partner is through the use of grow-your-own (GYO) programs that support schools in identifying local community members who may be interested in becoming teachers and providing them the training to enter the teacher workforce (Jackson & Wake, 2022). GYO programs commonly include high school students, paraprofessionals, parents, and other community members with an interest in the teaching profession (Gist et al., 2019) and remove many of the barriers that prevent these teacher candidates from receiving traditional teacher preparation (Garcia, 2022). Identified teacher candidates complete their teacher training at a partner university and are then employed in a partner school. The school may employ the teacher candidate or provide financial assistance during their teacher training (Garcia, 2022). In addition to increasing the teacher pipeline, the use of GYO programs also increases the number of diverse candidates entering the teacher workforce (Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019; Jackson & Wake, 2022), as well as the retention rate of teachers prepared in this manner (Gist et al., 2019). Through participation in GYO programs, university teacher preparation programs can support local schools in recruiting early childhood special educators to work in their schools.

Regardless of the structure of the university-learning center partnership, there are several components that help ensure a successful endeavor. First, all involved parties must have a shared vision for the partnership; everyone should agree on the purpose and the goals for collaboration (Day, 2022; Farah, 2019). Second, there must be a benefit in the partnership for all parties; if one party does not receive a benefit from the collaboration, they are likely to not fully engage (Day, 2022). Mutually beneficial partnerships ensure success. Thirdly, both organizations must trust one another and the decisions made by the other party (Rummel et al.,2022).

Supportive and Ongoing Mentoring and Coaching

The final "S" in the STARS model focuses on **s**upportive and ongoing mentoring and coaching. While partnerships between teacher preparation programs and public schools can support pre-service teachers, these relationships can also be a means of addressing teacher attrition by offering needed training to in-service teachers. University teacher preparation programs can, and should, be involved in ensuring that teachers receive ongoing support and mentoring once they begin their careers. Teacher coaching and mentoring is a form of job-embedded professional development that is tailored to unique teacher needs (Kraft et al., 2018). Teacher mentors and coaches can support pre-service and in-service teachers by providing both instructional and emotional supports tailored to the needs of the teacher (Becker et al., 2019). Recent research (Keiler et al., 2020) found that more experienced teachers benefited the most from the feedback provided via teacher coaching, indicating that this mentoring process should be ongoing throughout a teacher's entire career.

Mentoring and coaching programs for current teachers impact teacher instructional success in the classroom (Jackson et al., 2019; Mok & Staub, 2021). In addition, ongoing teacher coaching increases teacher retention rates (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2019). With this in mind, we recommend that university teacher preparation programs are actively partnering with graduates, as well as area schools, to provide this mentoring and coaching.

Another way that universities may support school-based coaching and mentoring is by providing specific training to mentors to enhance their content knowledge, as well as their knowledge of effective mentoring and coaching. Cornelius et al. (2020) found that mentors who receive specialized instruction are effective at mentoring teacher candidates. Similarly, Melton et al., (2019) found that cooperating teachers who receive explicit training on mentoring are more effective at supporting pre-service and novice teachers.

The research is clear that ongoing mentoring and coaching has a positive impact on both teacher effectiveness and teacher retention. Additionally, the literature has identified the aspects of effective teacher mentoring and coaching. Figure 3 provides a brief overview of these components.

Figure 3

Components of Effective Teacher Mentoring and Coaching

Component	Support in the Literature
Personalized The mentor/coach offers supports that are uniquely designed to support the individual needs and goals of the teacher. Even if the mentor/coach is supporting multiple teachers, the supports provided will differ for each teacher.	Akin, 2016; Elek & Page, 2019; Hui, 2020; Randolph et al., 2019
Observations Effective mentoring/coaching models include three stages for each observation: (a) a meeting before the observation to discuss what will be taught and set goals for the observation itself, (b) the observation, and (c) a meeting after the observation to discuss what the mentor/coach observed.	Hui, 2020; Kraft et al., 2018
Teacher Reflection On an ongoing basis, the teacher and mentor/coach reflect on the instruction that is occurring in the classroom. They identify what is going well and issues/concerns that may need to be addressed	Elek & Page, 2019; Sutton et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2022; Wetzel et al., 2017; Wetzel et al., 2019
Collaborative problem solving Mentor/coach and teacher work together to identify potential solutions to the challenges that arise in the teacher's classroom	Wetzel et al., 2019
Emotional support Mentor/coach engages in active listening to the teacher and uses what is heard to support the teacher's needs, while building their self-confidence and self-reliance as a teacher.	Becker et al., 2019
Instructional support Mentor/coach aids teacher in lesson planning and offers explicit feedback on instructional practices.	Becker et al., 2019; Elek & Page, 2019; Randolph et al., 2019; Randolph et al., 2020; Shanks, 2017; Taylor et al., 2022
Explicit modeling Mentor/coach explicitly models best teaching practices for the teacher. The teacher can watch the mentor/coach engage in the teaching practice and then try it themself, while receiving feedback	Taylor et al., 2022

CONCLUSION

There is a crisis-level shortage of early childhood special education teachers. Teacher preparation programs must respond to our workforce shortage in ways that will address this crisis by increasing the pipeline and improving the retention rates of teachers entering the field. The

STARS model presents ideas to ameliorate the crisis. By focusing on the five strategies in the ECSE STARS model, we can address the challenges that face early childhood special education. We posit that the teacher shortage can be reduced through combining these five effective strategies: (a) **S**upplemental funding during field placements, (b) **T**eacher preparation that leads to early childhood education and early childhood special education dual licensure, (c) **A**dvocacy at the local, state, and national levels, (d) **R**elationships between teacher training programs and local public and private early learning centers, and (e) **S**upportive and ongoing mentoring for in-service early childhood special educators.

The key to success for addressing the early childhood special education teacher shortage is not inventing something new, but instead creating a comprehensive approach to the teacher shortage by combining research-supported strategies through the use of the Early Childhood Special Education STARS model. The comprehensive approach involves collaborations within and outside traditional boundaries to create a seamless system of pathways for teacher recruitment, training, and retention. The STARS model is a path for addressing our national teacher shortage.

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HS Dialog, 27(1), 117-141

ISSN: 1930-9325

EMPIRICAL ARTICLE

Preservice Preparation Practices to Increase Family-Professional Collaboration: A Mixed-Methods Systematic Review

Chelsea Pansé-Barone[1]

Janet VanLone[2]

Lisa Ziegler[1]

Annie George-Puskar[3]

[1]*Mississippi State University*

[2]*Bucknell University*

[3]*Fordham University*

Due to the important impact family-professional collaboration has on child outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and students with disabilities, research in special education preservice personnel preparation has evaluated the impact of higher education programs and curricula geared towards improving preservice educators' knowledge and practices regarding family-professional collaboration in inclusive settings. The resulting literature has provided the field with insights as to instructional strategies faculty have implemented to better prepare preservice special educators to collaborate with families. The purpose of this mixed-methods systematic review was to identify and synthesize the current state of knowledge behind these instructional strategies intended to increase preservice educators' knowledge and practices to collaborate with families. A total of 14 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1968-2024 were included in the study. Findings indicate that various instructional strategies and outcome measures were used to measure preservice educators' knowledge and practices. Implications for future research are described.

Keywords: family-professional collaboration, preservice teacher preparation, early intervention, early childhood special education, inclusion

Introduction

Inclusion refers to ensuring that all children, regardless of background and ability, have access to high-quality education programs and services that promote a sense of belonging and acceptance while helping to reach one's academic, social, and emotional potential (Odom et al., 2011). Research suggests that inclusion can lead to academic and social benefits for children with and without disabilities in early childhood settings (Beneke et al., 2019; Justice et al., 2014; Tsao et al., 2008). Including children with disabilities in early childhood education programs was mandated in 1986 with the passage of Public Law 99-457 and has received continued legislative support at the state and federal levels since that time (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). Professional organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), have also voiced strong support for inclusive practices in early childhood education (Cross et al., 2009).

Ideally, inclusion in early childhood education programs transcends merely placing children with and without disabilities in the same setting by considering various factors pivotal to success, such as programmatic context and implementation of effective practices (Love & Horn, 2021). Guralnick (2001) outlined four goals for inclusion in early childhood education. These include having universal access to educational programs, ensuring accommodations and feasibility, ensuring social and cognitive developmental progress for all children, and promoting social integration between children with and without disabilities. More recently, researchers reviewed these goals and recommended additional considerations focusing on the competency of teachers and staff in early childhood education and an expansion of social integration through families and communities (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016).

Family-Professional Collaboration

Family-professional collaboration is an essential component of successful inclusive practice, particularly within early childhood education (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). The term *collaboration* is defined as "joining, pooling, or coordinating resources and entities to meet goals, overcome problems, and improve service delivery" (Bricker et al., 2022, p. 2). For true collaboration to occur, back and forth communication, leadership, cooperation, and trust are just a few of the necessary components comprising collaboration as a construct (Bricker et al., 2022; Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenburg, 2018; Salas et al., 2005), and as others have noted, collaboration is a process, not an outcome (Bricker et al., 2022). Collaboration is complex, and within Parts C and B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), it is also a mandated component of special education service provision between families and professionals as a way to support child and student outcomes. For the purpose of this manuscript, the aforementioned description of collaboration applies to the term *family-professional collaboration*, wherein families and professionals work together to achieve goals, address issues, and improve service delivery for children with disabilities. In this manuscript, the term family-professional collaboration is also inclusive of family-centered practices (Dunst, 2002) and family-professional partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004) both of which are specific types of family-professional collaboration in special education between families and professionals on Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams.

Since the start of the Handicapped Children's Early Education Program (HCEEP) in 1968 which preceded the inception of the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (EHA) in 1975, research has documented the benefits that occur when families are included and provided opportunities to participate as members of their child's IEP team. For early childhood special educators (ECSE), family-professional collaboration is not merely beneficial; it is required. The EHA - now the IDEA (2004) – mandates that professionals provide families with meaningful opportunities to participate as members of their child's IFSP or IEP team (Sec. 300.322). As a result of this legal mandate, the ability to collaborate with families is a required competency that preservice early interventionists, early childhood special educators, and K-12 special educators must be able to demonstrate prior to entering the field (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2020; Division for Early Childhood [DEC] Recommended Practices, 2014).

Research suggests that collaboration with families results in a higher rate of inclusive placements for children with disabilities (Krishnan, 2024). Under Part C of IDEA (2004), families are the recipients of services and are key figures who implement interventions in the child's natural environment, which are settings where an infant or toddler without a disability would spend time, such as home, community, or childcare settings (Sec. 303.26). The aim of early intervention services within the natural environment is for the child to be included in daily routines both at home and in early childhood education programs, as well as activities that the family enjoys doing together (Raver & Childress, 2015). Overall, effective family-professional collaboration is key to ensuring young children with disabilities are fully included across all environments and settings where they spend time.

Essential Collaboration Skills for ECSE Preservice Students

Within special education, family-professional collaboration has been recognized throughout history as essential to the provision of special education services, and equipping preservice teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary for collaborating with families is a critical component of inclusion in early childhood education (Bricker et al., 2022). The initial practice-based standards for Early Interventionist/Early Childhood Special Educators (EI/ECSE) are based on evidence from the research-base and were developed using an iterative process with input from experts in the field to inform high-quality educator preparation (Stayton et al., 2023; Stayton et al., 2024). The standards outline content areas and field experiences that support EI/ECSE preservice teachers' knowledge and practices. While all eight standards are meant to emphasize family partnerships and collaboration, standard two, "partnering with families," and standard three, "collaboration and teaming," have a specific focus on content necessary for preparation in this area (Stayton et al., 2023). In addition to using effective collaboration and communication skills, EI/ECSE preservice students should understand family-centered practices, systems theory, and capacity-building practices in an effort to support families with advocacy and build confidence in their abilities to support their children (CEC, 2020; DEC, 2014). Lastly, the "field and clinical experience" standard specifies that teacher candidates must participate in planned and developmentally sequenced field experiences in inclusive settings under the supervision of licensed professionals (CEC, 2020). These standards explicitly describe the knowledge and practices that EI/ECSE preservice students should know and be able to do upon completion of their personnel preparation program (Stayton et al., 2023).

While these standards provide important guidance for faculty on the requisite knowledge and skills necessary for high-quality EI/ECSE preparation, research suggests that special education preparation programs experience challenges when it comes to adequately preparing preservice teachers in family collaboration (Jones et al., 2020; Kyzar et al., 2019). Ultimately, this may impede the successful inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education contexts (Beneke & Cheatham, 2016). For example, variation in state-specific licensure standards can also pose a challenge, because if state standards do not prioritize collaboration with families, faculty are less likely to prioritize this in their instruction (Francis et al., 2021). Variation in national organization standards could also create a challenge. The need for interdisciplinary training in EI/ECSE preparation has been stated as an important need for EI/ECSE preservice preparation (Kilgo et al., 2019). Professional organizations' standards vary in the degree that they prioritize family-professional partnerships (Burke et al., 2024) which could make it a challenge for faculty who need to make decisions regarding how much family-professional collaboration content to incorporate into their instruction. In addition, addressing the disproportionate rate of young children being suspended or expelled from early childhood programs (Gilliam, 2005; Loomis et al., 2022) points to the urgent need for preservice teachers to be prepared to collaborate with families. This collaboration is crucial for developing strategies to reduce exclusionary discipline in high-quality early childhood settings. Therefore, the efficacy behind programs and curricula aimed at preparing preservice teachers with knowledge and practices regarding family-professional collaboration are necessary - and likely very helpful - to equip faculty in special education preparation programs to make decisions about instructional methods that have been shown to prepare preservice teachers in this area.

Inclusion in early childhood education has numerous benefits for all children, and effective family-professional collaboration is an essential component of high-quality inclusive practice in early childhood programs (U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services and U.S. Dept. of Education, 2023). Preservice EI/ECSE teachers must be equipped with knowledge and practices in family-professional collaboration to support inclusion. To provide a holistic view of curriculum and instruction in the area of family-professional collaboration, a mixed-methods systematic review was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of instructional strategies used in teacher preparation programs to increase preservice EI/ECSE teachers' knowledge and/or practices regarding family-professional collaboration?
2. Do the instructional strategies improve preservice EI/ECSE teacher knowledge and/or practices regarding family-professional collaboration?
3. What are the implications for faculty and researchers interested in instruction and curriculum development in this area?

This mixed methods systematic review focuses on EI/ECSE preparation, rather than general education, to specifically address the unique knowledge and practices required for preservice EI/ECSE students to collaborate with families.

Methods

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021) and PRISMA for systematic review protocols (PRISMA-P) (Moher et al., 2015) were used to guide protocol development and report the methods for this systematic review. Studies were also included if they included elementary special educators, since ECSE spans PreK through Grade 3 (DEC, 2014). Studies that included interdisciplinary preservice preparation programs as well as dual preparation programs were also included as long as preservice special educators were included in the sample.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Eligibility criteria to determine inclusion/exclusion criteria were developed using Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type (SPIDER) guidelines as well as the literature in early intervention, early childhood special education, and special education. Inclusion criteria are as follows: year of publication (1968-2024, to align with the start of HCEEP); language (English); type of publication (peer-reviewed journal articles); location (conducted in the United States); research design (any empirical research design), participants (students enrolled in early intervention or special education teacher preparation programs), and outcomes (measures or explores practices and knowledge about family-professional collaboration). ProQuest was searched to identify dissertations. Dissertations are not considered peer reviewed and as such, were not included in the final list of included studies; however, the reference lists were checked as part of the hand search process. Results were excluded if: they were not a quantitative or qualitative study (e.g., book chapters, letters to the editor, conceptual papers, reports); the publication date was prior to 1968; the article was not published in a peer-reviewed journal; preservice teachers were not included in the sample; or if knowledge or practices were not explored or measured as outcomes.

Search Strategy

As this was a mixed-methods review that included both quantitative and qualitative research, the SPIDER tool was utilized to develop key components of the research question and search strategy. In addition, a standardized peer review assessment form known as the Peer Review of Electronic Search Strategies [PRESS] is recommended by the Cochrane Handbook version 5.1 to increase search strategy validity. At the time that this research was conducted, PRESS version 2015 was the most up-to-date version and was thus used for our study (McGowan et al., 2016). Consequently, a combination of the SPIDER tool and the PRESS assessment form were utilized to develop a search strategy that would: (a) be in alignment with the purpose of this review and (b) increase search sensitivity.

After developing initial search terms and search filters, the PRESS (2015) assessment form was used to obtain feedback on the search terms from a university librarian. A number of revisions were made to the search terms and filters as a result of this feedback, including: removing the English filter to avoid mistakenly excluding articles that did not tag language, including SCOPUS in the list of databases, including just “special educat*” rather than both “early childhood special educat* AND special educat*”, and revisions to Boolean operators.

The final search terms included the following: *preservice OR "pre-service" OR "student teach*" OR "teacher education" OR (prepar* AND teacher*) AND collaborat* OR partner* OR cooperat* OR involv* AND "early intervention" OR "special educat*" AND parent* OR famil* OR father* OR mother* OR grandparent**. This search was run in each of the following databases: Academic Search Complete, ERIC, APA PsychInfo, SCOPUS, and ProQuest. Journal article websites, dissertation reference lists, and included article reference lists were hand searched to identify any additional studies that were missed.

Data Collection and Analysis

Search results were compiled using Zotero software. This phase encompassed four steps: (1) title and abstract screening, (2) full article screening, (3) data extraction, and (4) risk of bias assessment. Percent agreement and weighted Cohen's kappa statistic (Cohen's *k*) (Cohen, 1960) were calculated to determine interrater reliability. Percent agreement was determined by dividing the number of agreements by the total number of titles, abstracts, or articles and multiplying by 100. Cohen's *k* was calculated according to Belur and colleagues (2018) and interpreted according to Landis and Koch (1977). Twenty percent of data entries were selected at random for inter-rater reliability during the title screening, abstract screening, full article screening, and data extraction steps.

The following information was extracted from the included studies: study design, study population, number and demographics of student and family participants, college/university type, class type (i.e., face-to-face, online, hybrid), and teacher preparation program type (i.e., licensure, non-licensure, alternative route to certification, dual certification, and interdisciplinary). Data on the following instructional strategy characteristics were also collected: Family as Faculty, simulated IFSP/IEP meetings, role play, vignette/case study, family as guest speaker, family as co-instructor, home visits, completing a project with a family, in-class activity with a family, virtual simulations, family interview, and service learning. There was an option to select "Other" and describe further if the instructional strategy was not included in the aforementioned categories. Data were also extracted on the dependent variable measured/phenomenon of interest (i.e., knowledge and/or practices), location where family-professional collaboration interactions occurred (i.e., family's home, in class, field placement, remote/virtual, IFSP/IEP meeting, family's choice), and the format of collaborative interactions (i.e., face-to-face, written, electronic/virtual, family's choice).

Results

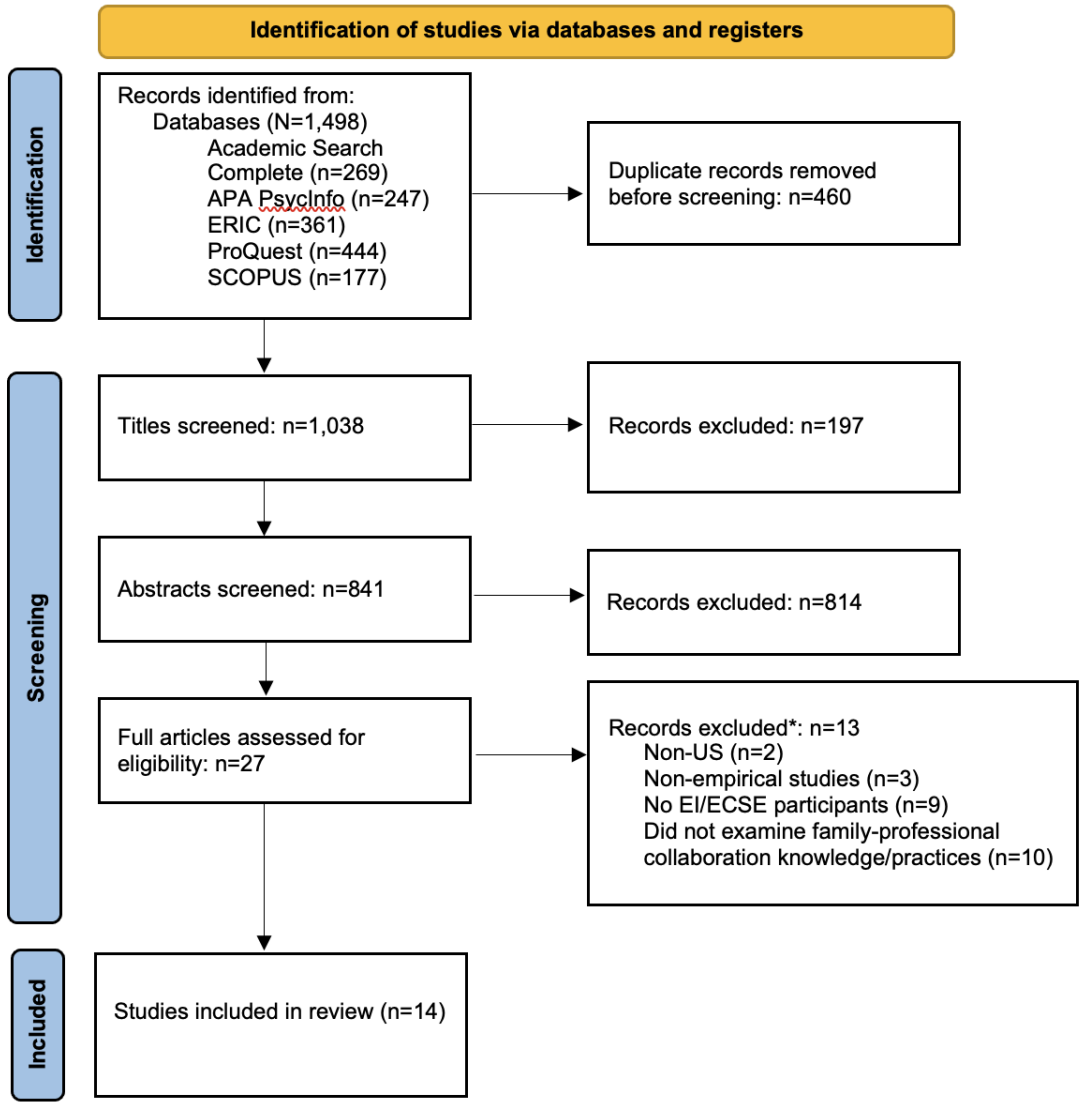
Title and Abstract Screening

After all results were compiled and duplicate records were removed (*n*=460), the first author screened N=1,038 titles and removed those that were conducted outside the US, were not written in English, were not empirical research studies (e.g., book reviews, letters to the editor), and/or examined topics outside the EI/ECSE or special education field. The second and third authors

conducted interrater reliability. The results suggested moderate reliability (90.8% agreement; k=0.52). Disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram



*Some records were excluded due to multiple reasons (e.g., were non-empirical and non-EI/ECSE).

The remaining N=841 abstracts were screened by the first author. Abstracts were coded as to whether it was evident from the abstract that the study: (a) was conducted in the US, (b) used an empirical research design, (c) included preservice special education teachers as participants, and

(d) examined knowledge and/or practices about family-professional collaboration. Twenty percent of abstracts were selected at random and screened by the second and third authors for reliability. Disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. Interrater reliability calculations at this step suggested substantial reliability (92.2% agreement; *k*=0.67).

Full Article Screening

A total of N=27 abstracts were determined eligible for full article screening. The same steps were followed as described in the abstract screening step with the exception of adding a category to code whether the article was published in a peer-reviewed journal. At this step, dissertations were removed but set aside in an Excel spreadsheet to hand search (*n*=1 study was identified as a result of the hand search, see Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2002). The first author screened all the articles. Twenty percent were selected at random and screened by the second and third authors. Disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. Reliability calculations suggested substantial agreement (91.3% agreement; *k*=0.795). After full article screening and the hand search of the dissertation reference lists were complete, a total of N=14 articles passed full article screening. See Tables 1 and 2 for the full list of included articles and their study characteristics.

Data Extraction

Study and University/Program Characteristics

A total of *n*=5 qualitative, *n*=1 pre/post, *n*=1 quasi-experimental, and *n*=7 mixed methods studies were reviewed. With regard to outcomes measured, *n*=4 examined knowledge, *n*=7 examined practices, and n=3 studies examined both knowledge and practices. Twelve studies were conducted at public universities, two at private universities, and none were conducted at a community college. Teacher preparation program type included *n*=9 licensure, *n*=1 dual certification, *n*=3 combination. Hindin and Mueller (2016) included a combination of students pursuing licensure and dual certification, Murray et al. (2013) included students pursuing teaching licensure and from interdisciplinary majors, and Carr (2000) included students on licensure, non-licensure, and alternative route to certification tracks. One study (Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2005) did not report teacher preparation program type. All included studies were conducted in face-to-face classes, with none reporting online or hybrid class formats.

Preservice Student Demographics

There was a total of N=466 preservice student participants across all included studies. Four studies reported the total number of students but did not report student gender identity (Able-Boone et al., 2002; Jenkins & Sheehey, 2009; Keilty & Kosaraju, 2018; Latunde & Louque, 2012). Studies that reported gender identity resulted in *n*=164 females, *n*=25 males. No other gender identities were reported. Four studies included students majoring in EI/ECSE, one included students pursuing PreK-Grade 12 special education licensure, four included students pursuing K-12 special education licensure, and five included a combination. Finally, out of the studies that reported

student undergraduate/graduate classification, *n*=90 were classified as undergraduate students and *n*=154 were classified as graduate students.

Family Demographics

Four studies reported including family member participants, totaling N=60 family members. Twenty-six identified as male and *n*=45 identified as female. No other gender identities were reported. Four studies that included family member participants reported family member demographics (Collier et al., 2015; Murray et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2008; McNaughton et al., 2007). Of these, *n*=46 were white, *n*=7 were Black or African American, *n*=5 were Asian, *n*=7 were Hispanic or Latino, *n*=1 were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and *n*=1 was other. One study reported family socioeconomic status (SES) (Collier et al., 2015). In this study, *n*=2 were from a low SES background, *n*=11 were from a mid-SES background, and *n*=1 was from a high SES background. With regard to family member role, *n*=20 were mothers, *n*=9 were fathers, *n*=2 were siblings, and one study included *n*=5 self-advocates who were adults with children. There were no grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, single-parents, or parents in same-sex relationships reported.

Instructional Strategy Characteristics

Data regarding the location of family-professional collaboration were extracted from studies that required students to interact directly with families. Five studies included a combination of locations; out of those four, three required interactions in class and at the family's home; one required interactions in field placements and the family's home; and one required interactions in class and in field placements. When extracting data regarding the location of student-family interactions, we counted each location individually; thus, some studies may have more than one location represented. In total, *n*=5 cited the family's home as the location where interactions between students and families took place, *n*=3 cited field placements (e.g., practicum, student teaching, service learning sites), *n*=10 cited interactions as occurring in class, and *n*=1 cited interactions as occurring virtually. None reported interactions as occurring during IFSP or IEP meetings.

The most frequent intervention characteristics were home visits (*n*=5), vignette/case study (*n*=5), and "Other" (*n*=4). The studies that used other instructional methods included the following: the Listen, empathize, and communicate respect, Ask questions and ask permission to take notes, Focus on the issues, and Find a first step (LAFF) active listening strategy (McNaughton et al., 2007); CaseQuest (Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2005), and sending reminders home to families for upcoming IEP meetings and impromptu conversations (Latunde & Louque, 2012; note that this was in addition to home visits). The remaining instructional strategies used were as follows: Family as Faculty (*n*=1), family as guest speaker (*n*=2), family as co-instructor (*n*=3), family as student (*n*=2), completing a project with a family (*n*=2), role play (*n*=2), completing an in-class activity with a family (*n*=1), family interview (*n*=2), and service learning (*n*=2). Most mixed methods studies measured intervention outcomes using thematic analysis (e.g., e-journals,

reflections, assignments submitted, questionnaire responses) and Likert-scale items. See Table 2 for specific measurements that were used in each quantitative and mixed methods study.

Risk of Bias Assessment

All included studies were subject to risk of bias assessment using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT is designed to appraise the methodological quality and reporting of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. Items included in the MMAT have been shown to have content validity of .80 or greater (Hong et al., 2019). The MMAT includes appraisal questions for the following general types of study designs: qualitative, quantitative randomized controlled trials, quantitative non-randomized studies, quantitative descriptive studies, and mixed methods studies. Each type includes five questions to appraise study quality, with response options ranging from yes, no, and can't tell. Out of a possible score of 5/5 (100%), studies ranged from 20%-100%. Two studies published prior to 2006 did not include specific research questions. Due to this lack of specificity, we were unable to respond to the five quality appraisal items for those two studies. The percentage of quality indicators that were met in each included study are presented in the last column in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Characteristics of Included Qualitative Studies

Author(s) (Year)	Study Design	Sample	Instructional Method(s)	Outcome of Interest	Key Findings	Quality Appraisal
Carr (2000)	Thematic analysis of open-ended pre/post questionnaires	N=92 students (undergraduate/graduate not specified	Video of family story, miniprojects (e.g., family agency visit), problem-solving activities, interviews, panels, role plays	Knowledge	Pre-questionnaire results found that over half of students reported being "closely involved" (p. 58) with families. Majority considered themselves responsible for students only. Value-laden terms used (e.g., "overbearing") and value conflicts with families were reported. Majority reported very little training. Post-questionnaire results found that participants' would listen more, seek parent input, and ask families questions. Some participants stated feeling better prepared to explain legal rights and the evaluation process, and that they planned to conduct home visits.	–

Hampshire et al. (2015)	Qualitative description using constant comparative method to analyze small group discussion transcriptions, reflections, and a final project	N=27 undergraduate students	Service learning projects with families (service learning sites varied)	Practices	Participants volunteered at a service learning site and participated in a forum to reflect on their experiences and make connections to class content. Students applied the Seven Principles of Partnership (Turnbull et al., 2011) at their sites and felt that they gained knowledge they would be able to apply when working with families from diverse backgrounds in their future career.	80%
Keilty & Kosaraju (2018)	Qualitative description using content analysis of text from student assignment	N=8 undergraduate and graduate students	Viewing a videotaped EI home visit	Practices	Participants developed competency in relational and participatory practices in the area of assessment and revealed a need for additional learning experiences in the area of intervention implementation.	100%

Latunde & Louque (2012)	Document collection process with topic coding of participants' activities completed during field placements to facilitate home-school collaboration	N=25 graduate students, comprised of student teachers and interns	Participants documented any activity they completed during field placement that directly aligned with state standards on home-school collaboration	Practices	Activities submitted were themed into the following categories: invitations to school programs, formal meetings (e.g., home visits, IEP meetings), informal discussions and unscheduled meetings, sharing information, and indirect collaboration (e.g., IEP writing).	60%
Murray et al. (2008)	Qualitative description using content analysis of focus group transcriptions	N=9 undergraduate students	Parents as co-instructors and project participants, virtual family scenarios	Practices	Meaningful interactions with families emerged as an impactful approach to enhance preservice students' parent/professional collaboration competencies.	100%

Table 2

Characteristics of Included Quantitative Studies

Author(s) (Year)	Study Design	Sample	Instructional Method	Outcome of Interest	Key Findings	Quality Appraisal
Able-Boone et al. (2002)	Mixed methods (Program evaluation, evaluated pre/post Likert scale items and questionnaires examining students' competencies to implement family-centered interventions)	N=45 students (graduate/undergraduate not specified		Practices	On a Likert scale from 1-3, participants' mean scores rose from 1.74, 1.57, and 1.73 to 2.86, 2.75, and 2.76 on interdisciplinary teaming, social inclusion practices, and family-centered interventions.	60%
Collier et al. (2015)	Mixed methods (Pre/post/ and follow up survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative description and comparative method were used in the analysis of reflection papers)	N=28 graduate students	Home visits, project-based and reflection assignments	Practices, knowledge	Increases in participants' confidence and understanding of home-school collaboration upon completion of the FAF program in a class.	60%

Hindin & Mueller (2016)	Mixed methods (Responses to closed and open-ended items were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively in response to a case scenario)	N=37 undergraduate students	Case scenario	Knowledge	Participants suggested instructional strategies that could improve the problematic situation described in the scenario more often than describing strategies to enhance the family-professional partnership.	80%
Jenkins & Sheehey (2009)	Mixed methods (Data collected from syllabi, projects, grades, student evaluations, and guided notes)	N=113 graduate and undergraduate students	Service learning	Knowledge	Participants' course and project grades were measured as the learning outcome. Student performance in the *Collaboration* course taught across three years received an overall *acceptable* rating. In the *Families* course taught across two years, students received an overall *target* rating.	60%
Kerns (1992)	Pre-/post- and follow-up questionnaires including open- and closed-ended questions were used to examine changes in student's beliefs and practices	N=32 graduate students	Informal interviews, projects, and guest speakers	Practices	Participants' perceptions and comfort with working collaboratively with families were found to be more positive upon completion of the class. Positive collaboration practice experiences were reported by participants at follow-up.	20%

McNaughton et al. (2007)	Experimental study calculating and comparing pre/post scores of active listening strategy use	N=10 teacher candidates	Role-plays and reflective feedback	Practices	Increases in confidence and communication skills were measured among teacher candidates who participated in active listening training. Role-play lends itself as a favorable method to prepare early childhood professionals for working collaboratively with families.	80%
Murray et al. (2013)	Mixed methods (t-test analysis of the Family-Professional Partnership Survey and Learning Objectives and Activities survey, and content analysis of pre/post focus groups)	N=19 graduate students (*n*=12 school psychology, *n*=7 special education)	Parents as co-instructor, class participants	Knowledge	Participants reported gaining new skills and tools to collaborate with families. T-test results suggest significant differences in participants' ratings for eight out of 10 items on the Family-Professional Partnership Survey and over 90% reported questioning their initial ideas about social roles.	80%

Pretti-Frontczak et al. (2002)	Mixed methods (Self-reported responses to a self-assessment inventory [SAI] were analyzed using analysis of covariance [ANOVA] to measure competencies; reflections themed to supplement course evaluation data to measure satisfaction)	N=19 graduate students	Low (e.g., role play), moderate (e.g., observing IFSP/IEP meetings), and high (e.g., family co-instructors) family involvement activities across courses and practicum	Practices, knowledge	Repeated measures ANOVA results suggest statistically significant differences in self-reported responses to the SAI on family-centered practices items. Most students reported gaining family-centered practice knowledge through coursework and their work settings rather than practicum placements.	
Pretti-Frontczak et al. (2005)	Mixed methods (Pre/post competence scores were computed and a repeated measures ANOVA test was used to determine whether significant differences in scores existed	N=28 graduate students	Case study and e-journal	Practices, knowledge	Participants reported increases in knowledge and application of skills related to family-centered practices and technology practices within ECI.	–

Discussion

The purpose of this systematic review was to identify and synthesize studies that have evaluated specific instructional strategies intended to increase family-professional collaboration knowledge and practices, which is an essential component of successful inclusive practice in early childhood education. Studies that included participants in preservice EI, ECSE, and K-12 special education preparation programs were included to ensure we captured programs that prepare preservice students to teach children with disabilities from birth through Grade 3. A review of the available literature in this area has important teaching implications for faculty members' decisions regarding how to prioritize their instruction in the area of family-professional collaboration. Our review synthesized the findings from qualitative, mixed methods and quantitative studies to provide a comprehensive summary of available research in this area.

Our review included 14 articles, and within that small number, one was a program evaluation (Able-Boone et al., 2002) and n=5 were qualitative studies. Notably, one study utilized a quasi-experimental design, which provides insights into how to design this type of study within higher education programs (McNaughton et al., 2007). The studies examined a variety of different instructional strategies, which makes it challenging to draw a definitive conclusion regarding the efficacy of any single approach. The only instructional strategy included in the final list of studies that is considered an evidence-based practice is service learning. In addition to the diverse instructional strategies used, preservice students' knowledge and practices were also measured in a variety of ways. This likely resulted from various factors, including faculty's need to tailor assessment methods to the specific instructional strategies used, their preference for employing multiple evaluation methods, and the inherent challenge of assessing a complex construct like collaboration. Taken together, we feel it's important to point out that while the findings provide valuable information regarding the landscape of instructional practices for preservice EI/ECSE students to enhance their knowledge and practices to collaborate with families, they do not allow us to determine that any of the strategies are evidence-based. This points to a dire need for additional evidence-based teaching practices that faculty can choose from to teach family-professional collaboration to preservice EI/ECSE students. The lack of evidence-based practices for faculty to effectively teach family-professional collaboration has been noted in the literature (Kyzar et al., 2019; Strassfield, 2019). For example, Kyzar et al. (2019) state, "Yet, currently, the literature includes reports of isolated methods and strategies, and it is largely qualitative in nature" (2019, p. 322), and our findings further substantiate this; although the majority of studies identified in our review utilized mixed methods rather than qualitative-only methods.

Implications for Faculty Instruction

Despite the wide variation, our findings align with what several studies in the family-professional collaboration literature have found: that requiring students to directly interact with families is an effective way to increase preservice students' confidence and competence to collaborate with families. The quantitative and mixed methods studies in this review that seemed to show the strongest effects required preservice students to interact with families of children with disabilities across the entire semester. Although dated, Murray and Mandell (2004) interviewed early childhood intervention program graduates ranging from 6-30 months post-graduation to

understand the impact that a semester-long family-centered curriculum had on their current practice in the field. Participants reported that having multiple opportunities to interact with families of children with disabilities helped them understand and apply family-centered practices, and that 6-30 months later, they were still incorporating family-centered practices into their work. Some participants also reported increased confidence in interacting with families of young children with disabilities. In evaluating the description of family involvement in the courses in Murray and Mandell (2004) (e.g., father/sibling panels, identifying competencies, serving as instructors or co-instructors), these seem to align with moderate- to high-level family involvement activities outlined in Pretti-Frontczak et al.'s study (2002) (e.g., family panels, families as co-instructors who develop syllabi).

Even though the variety of instructional strategies studied makes it impossible to draw definitive conclusions as to the degree of evidence supporting their use, this variety can be viewed in a positive light. Incorporating instruction on partnering with families requires including this content across various aspects of teaching, including instruction, in-class activities, and projects. Faculty with limited resources to compensate for families' time as well as faculty without access to families may wish to know how other faculty have incorporated this content into their instruction. According to the studies in this review, instruction without families present (e.g., case studies, role playing) yielded positive outcomes, which suggests that these instructional strategies are better than no instruction at all. Many of these studies that utilized instructional strategies without families present may provide a helpful starting point for faculty to brainstorm ideas to include in their own instruction. In addition, some of the instructional strategies described in these studies can be applied to different types of classes (for example, family interviews could be assigned in both traditional and online courses).

In-Class Activities and Instruction

A variety of in-class activities and instructional strategies were used in the included studies. Examples of in-class activities and instructional strategies reported in these studies include case studies, role playing, reflective feedback, panels, and viewing videos. Some studies also included families directly and frequently. These methods invited families to serve as co-instructors, faculty members, and guest speakers. The key findings presented in Tables 1 and 2 suggest that all of these instructional strategies led to increased knowledge and practice application with regard to family-professional collaboration. It is important to note the variation in family participation with each of these methods. While we are unable to draw definitive conclusions based on the available evidence, we do hypothesize that the higher the family involvement (e.g., Family as Faculty), the more impactful and long-lasting the outcomes will be. By inviting families to collaborate to create the syllabus, provide students with feedback on assignments, and facilitate discussions, we can be certain that family voices are heard by our students and that families are placed in a position of having invaluable expertise to share.

However, since these findings suggest that activities with lower family participation also offer benefits (e.g., case studies, e-journals; see key findings in Tables 1 and 2), these should be considered for use in instruction as well. Of the studies that incorporated these strategies, students were required to submit written reflections and/or participate in whole group discussions. Questions and prompts specific to family-centered practice or family-professional collaboration were used to guide students in their reflections and to facilitate discussions.

Field Experiences

Direct interaction with families presents an invaluable opportunity for students to apply instruction and theory to practice. Latunde and Louque (2012) and Pretti-Frontczak et al. (2002) evaluated family-professional collaboration activities during field placements. Latunde and Louque required students to document any activities they completed during field placements that aligned with state standards on family-professional collaboration, the activities documented ranged from direct interactions with families (e.g., informal discussions, home visits, observing IEP meetings) to indirect interactions (e.g., invitations to school events, IEP writing). Many of these documented activities are important experiences for students to have, such as observing IEP meetings. However, research on family-professional collaboration across both general and special education, such as family-centered practices (Dunst, 2002), the Dual Capacity-Building Framework (Mapp & Bergman, 2019), family-professional partnerships in special education (Blue-Banning et al., 2004), and the overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2019) all emphasize the need for bi-directional, diverse opportunities for family-school collaboration; as well as the need for schools to move past only viewing school-centric forms of family participation as valuable (e.g., inviting families to school events and sharing information, as documented by students in Latunde and Louque's study). This body of research suggests that schools should support and encourage family capacity to advocate, share their expertise on their child, participate as active members on IFSP and IEP teams, and empower them to support their child's development and learning. Latunde and Louque's study suggests that students may not realize they are only engaging in basic forms of family-professional collaboration, which makes it imperative for faculty to provide guidance to support students to engage in diverse forms of family-professional collaboration during field experience that are in alignment with the DEC Recommended Practices (DEC, 2014) and CEC EI/ECSE Initial Practice-Based Standards (CEC, 2020).

Pretti-Frontczak and colleagues (2002) found that students in their study reported gaining more knowledge about family-centered practices through coursework and work settings than through practicum experiences. This discrepancy may stem from the limited opportunities preservice teachers have to observe family-professional interactions during their field experiences (Accardo et al., 2020; Collier et al., 2015). Accardo et al. (2020) also note that many preservice students face restrictions at their field placement sites that limit their ability to interact with families. To address this, faculty could collaborate with mentor teachers to emphasize the importance of family-professional partnerships and create opportunities for students to engage with families more actively during their field placements.

Implications for Future Research

There are several areas that can be explored in future research. The ability of higher education programs to measure students' collaboration practices after graduation would be an informative and important outcome to measure (Bricker et al., 2022). A consideration for future research is to measure students' retention of family-professional collaboration knowledge as well as their use of practices taught in preservice preparation courses to understand the long-term effects of these instructional strategies. Strassfield (2019) shared several recommendations to enhance family-

professional collaboration curriculum content that could be considered in future research. For example, examining the effects of a standalone course on family-professional collaboration could be a potential study, or evaluating methods to teach instruction on advocacy and dispute resolution resources. None of the included studies published after 2004 examined specific characteristics of family-professional partnerships outlined in Blue-Banning et al. (2004), and only two measured specific aspects of family-centered practice (Keilty & Kosaraju, 2018; Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2002). Examining whether instructional strategies align with family-centered practices and/or family-professional partnerships is an important area to explore in future studies, as these two areas outline key skills and professional behaviors that preservice students will need to collaborate with families. Studies on curriculum and instruction used in community colleges are an important area of future research. Given their affordability and accessibility, community colleges can reach non-traditional students and offer certifications and transferable credits in a variety of early childhood fields. Research on instruction that faculty are implementing in community college coursework is an area that needs to be explored. Similarly, additional research is needed in hybrid and online class formats, as all of the studies in our review were conducted in traditional, face-to-face courses. An additional area to consider for future research would be curriculum and instruction focused on enhancing preservice student competence to collaborate with families to address challenging behaviors specifically. None of the included studies focused on this area in particular. Due to the rising number of suspensions and expulsions in early childhood, this is an area of great need for program graduates entering the field. Finally, since the focus of this review was on early childhood special education, future research could explore the role of instructional strategies aimed at enhancing early childhood educators' practices to collaborate with families.

Limitations

While the findings presented here are a valuable starting point, there are a few limitations. First, while we wanted to include studies that included preservice EI/ECSE and K-3 special educators, some of the descriptions of study participants were vague and only described as K-12 special education preservice students. This made it difficult to know for certain whether the participants were in fact intending to teach in the early grades or if they were aspiring to teach in later grades or high school. Another limitation was difficulty determining the quality appraisal for included studies. We found that the more recent studies were easier to appraise due to more specific and detailed reporting requirements, which provided clearer descriptions of participants, methodologies, and outcomes. Our decision to limit articles to those published in English and to exclude dissertations presented an additional limitation since studies could have been excluded that could have offered valuable insight. Lastly, we did not extract data on child disability type. It is possible that families' experiences and availability to participate in preservice preparation may be impacted depending on disability type and severity, so extracting this information may have provided helpful information for faculty.

Conclusion

Inclusion in early childhood education has numerous benefits for children with and without disabilities (Beneke et al., 2019; Justice et al., 2014; Tsao et al., 2008), and it has received legislative support at the federal and state levels (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). One essential component of inclusion is family-professional collaboration (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). Findings from this systematic review provide a clearer understanding about curriculum and instruction in teacher preparation programs regarding family-professional collaboration. Across 14 included studies, this review supports previous research regarding the importance of direct interaction with families for preservice teacher development in family-professional collaboration. The results of this systematic review also revealed a significant gap in our understanding of effective strategies in teacher training aimed at bolstering preservice teachers' grasp and implementation of family-professional collaboration. Given the importance of family-professional collaboration when it comes to successful inclusion in early childhood education, this points to an urgent need for further research on this topic.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge and extend their sincerest gratitude to Bradley Brazzeal at the Mississippi State University library for his service as a search strategy peer reviewer for this study.

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HS Dialog, 27(1), 142-168

ISSN: 1930-9325

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Instrumental Case Study of Blended Preservice Early Childhood Preparation

Ann M. Mickelson[1]

David Hoppey[2]

[1]*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

[2]*University of North Florida*

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

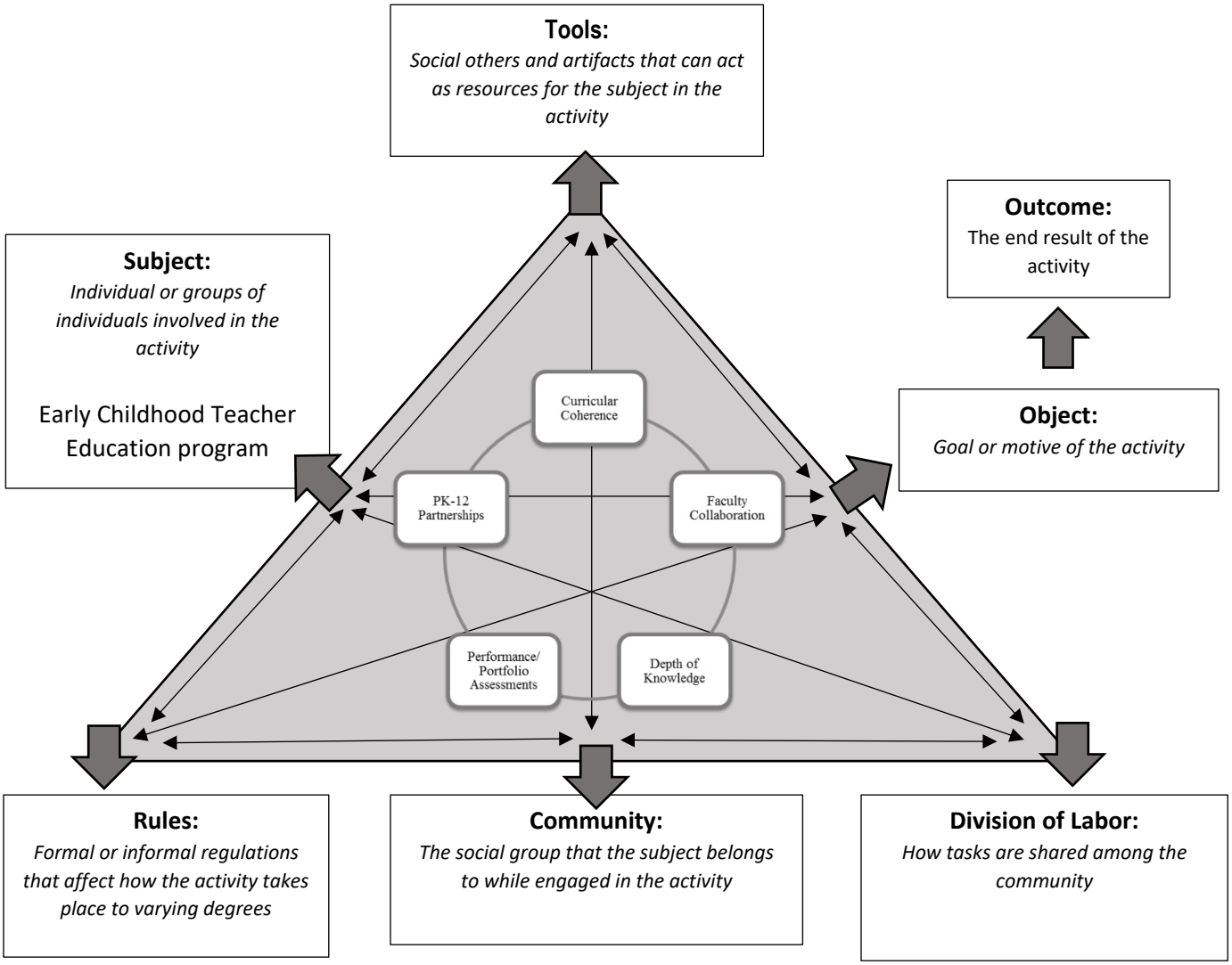
We applied a conceptual framework (see Figure 1) to understand the program as a system ***and*** as an instance of collaborative teacher preparation. First, we utilized cultural-historical activity

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

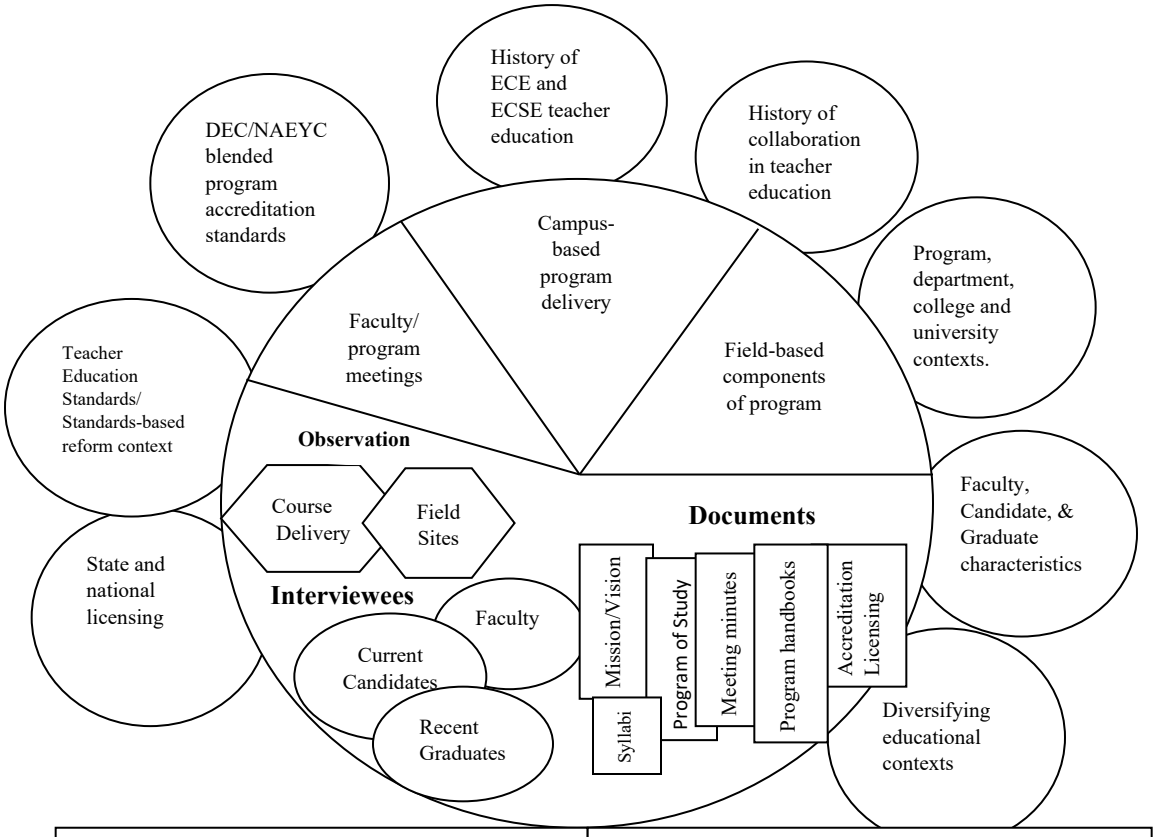
Participants included current faculty, teacher candidates, and recent graduates; pseudonyms are used throughout this article. One faculty member, Emily, served as the primary research liaison for the study. Emily helped recruit other participants through snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) including Mona, 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



ISSUES:	**INFORMATION NEEDED:**
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. **RESEARCH QUESTION:** How can a collaborative [blended] early childhood teacher education program be understood as a system in the preparation of candidates for inclusive practice?	• Documents related to program design, development, and enactment. • Intentions, philosophies and assumptions driving design and enactment. • Defining characteristics of program design and of program enactment. • Characteristics of various stakeholders (faculty, candidates, graduates). • Responsibilities of various stakeholders. • Mission and vision statements. • Rationale of program design, development, and enactment. • Program & individual definitions of effective inclusive teaching (conception of required knowledge, skills, and dispositions). • Program & individual definitions of collaborative teacher education. • Perceptions of program design and enactment from participants (faculty, current candidates, graduates). • Observational data of program delivery/enactment/ planning. • Course selection, sequencing, formats, materials. • Characteristics of field sites preferred and available for clinical aspects of the program. Nature of relationships. • Accreditation & licensing materials/documents.

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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HS Dialog, 27(1), 169-185

ISSN: 1930-9325

CALL TO ACTION

Inclusive and Equitable Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Programs: Recruiting and Retaining Teacher Candidates with Disabilities

Stacy N. McGuire[1]
Michelle M. Sands[2]
Stacey N. Skoning[3]
Madison D. Schafer[4]
Benjamin D. Berschback[1]
Arielle Taylor[2]
Sawyer Stein[2]
[1]Bowling Green State University
[2]Northern Illinois University
[3]University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
[4]Neenah Joint School District

Inclusive early childhood education teacher preparation programs are tasked with preparing teacher candidates to work with young children with and without disabilities. Yet, many teacher preparation programs continue to function in a medical model of disability, where teacher educators teach candidates to "fix" or "cure" young disabled children. Working from a medical model of disability positions young disabled children as problematic and ostracizes disabled teacher candidates as they see themselves in the very children spoken of by their teacher educators. Instead, practices can be implemented to build on the unique strengths and assets disabled teacher candidates bring to the early childhood field. This call to action has been co-authored by disabled teachers and candidates to highlight the practices teacher educators can instill in their programs with the goal of recruiting and retaining disabled teacher candidates.

Keywords: disability, early childhood, special education, teacher candidates, teacher preparation

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive early childhood education (IECE) teacher preparation programs equip teacher candidates with the skills and knowledge necessary to serve as both early childhood general and

special education teachers, and as both direct and consultative agents. IECE teachers are expected to support and follow policies and practices that align with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and the policy guidance that supports young disabled children's inclusion in high-quality early childhood programs (2015, 2023). Additionally, in the Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs, they described its shared vision which includes "people of all abilities be included in all facets of society throughout their lives as it benefits not only individuals with disabilities but also all individuals in all communities" (2023, p. 2). Young disabled children who are educated in inclusive settings deserve to see teachers who are like them: also disabled.

Persons with disabilities make up the largest minority group in the world (United Nations Enable, n.d.) and the percentage of college students with disabilities has increased over the past two decades (US Government Accountability Office, 2024). In 2019, 21% of undergraduates reported having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023) and many students with disabilities choose not to disclose their disability to their institute of higher education (IHE). Disabled persons hold unique and crucial insights on challenging cultural beliefs about normalcy and addressing the structural ableism embedded within education, including those held by many teacher educators in teacher preparation programs (Keefe, 2022). Though almost every university class is likely to have one or more disabled students enrolled, every disabled teacher candidate has a unique identity, set of strengths, and areas of needs. Most importantly, they offer unique knowledge and expertise that will better support their future students with disabilities and their families (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2016). Furthermore, "the experience of disability is relevant to all marginalized groups – for all groups have people with disabilities in them" (Anderson, 2006, p. 367). It is essential IECE teacher educators and teacher preparation programs act as models and create educational spaces that promote inclusivity, and work to recruit and retain disabled teacher candidates (Siuty & Beneke, 2020). Therefore, we call the field to ensure inclusivity and representation of individuals with disabilities in IECE teacher preparation programs.

Traditional Teacher Preparation Programs

Traditional general education and special education teacher preparation programs focus on identifying and "fixing" children with disabilities and their deficits, which has long-lasting impacts on students, teacher candidates, and teacher educators. Within general education teacher preparation programs, there persists a rigidity and battle between ensuring equity and quality with achievement of standards and maintaining accountability (Kofke & Morrison, 2021). Meanwhile, special education teacher preparation programs have prepared students to work with children with disabilities using practices that further exclude and ostracize disabled children and teacher candidates (Keefe, 2022; Lukins et al., 2023). Relying more on a medical model of disability, traditional teacher preparation for special education has positioned disability as a deficit, problem, or deficiency within the individual that needs to be "fixed" or "cured" through intervention or therapy (Ashby, 2012). The social model of disability, which positions disability as a social construct in which the environment, not an individual's impairments, creates barriers (Lawson & Beckett, 2021), may be most often described when discussing inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting (Freedman et al., 2019). However, mandates

associated with IDEA, including requiring students be labeled with a specific disability in order to receive services, or creating individualized goals specific only to a student's area(s) of deficit, are inherently more aligned with medical model approaches to disability (Freedman et al., 2019).

Past research has noted how deficit-oriented, non-normative approaches to disabilities can impact not only students, but also teachers and teacher candidates. Use of approaches where the focus is on a student's challenges or deficits can impact teachers' perceptions of disability and may result in students feeling stigmatized and struggling to be included by their non-disabled peers and teachers (Bialka et al., 2024). These same approaches also can impact teacher candidates and in-service teachers who may not choose to disclose their own disability because they fear exclusion and ostracism from teacher educators and colleagues (CEC, 2016; Strimel et al., 2023). Teacher candidates with disabilities have also reported feeling onerous to their teacher preparation programs and have encountered reticence or disinclination from program members concerned that accommodations could jeopardize the program's ability to maintain professional standards (Baldwin, 2007; Griffiths, 2012; Leyser & Greenberger, 2008, Strimel et al., 2023). Barriers such as these exist even though CEC (2006) (a national organization that, with its Division for Early Childhood [DEC], has established standards for professional preparation of special education teachers) has specifically acknowledged how teachers with disabilities can perform tasks with success when provided with the proper supports and accommodations.

GAO Report on Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

In April 2024, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) published the Report to Congressional Addressees on Higher Education - Education Could Improve Information on Accommodations for Students with Disabilities. This report includes the findings of a study conducted by the GAO to determine trends and characteristics related to college students with disabilities, challenges students with disabilities encountered in accessing college education and how these were mitigated, and how the Department of Education (DOE) helps mitigate these challenges. Because IHEs have a legal responsibility to ensure equal access to qualified students with disabilities (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973), colleges and universities must provide accommodations to students who self-identify as having a disability and provide documentation of their disability, and these institutions are prohibited from discriminating based on disabilities. However, the GAO's study found that disabled students continue to encounter barriers to academic success and graduate at a rate far less than nondisabled students. The GAO report cites data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017) which found that 47 percent of disabled students leave school without obtaining a degree, compared to 30 percent of students without disabilities. As a result of their study, the GAO suggests that disabled students may not receive the adequate preparation needed to self-advocate for accommodations in the collegiate environment, and IHE disability services staff may need additional means of staying current on key information specific to accommodations for disabled students.

Considering the field of IECE understands the need for and has had a commitment to providing high-quality education and care to *all* our youngest learners and their families (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2022), this is a call to action to

those in higher education to take further steps to model those inclusive early childhood teacher preparation program practices to support disabled teacher candidates. Within this paper we: (a) identify examples of current IECE teacher preparation program practices and the potential impacts they may have on teacher candidates with disabilities, (b) call on IECE teacher educators and preparation programs to utilize inclusive practices which can support all students, and then (c) suggest opportunities in research and policy to support and evaluate inclusive teacher preparation practices. This call to action has been co-authored by faculty members from three teacher preparation programs and disabled teacher candidates and teachers who are currently enrolled in or have recently completed their undergraduate teacher preparation programs within one of three midwestern public universities. Each disabled author has independently determined what information they wish to disclose about their disability.

- Arielle Taylor (she/her) is a first-generation college student. She is a 22-year-old African American woman entering her third professional semester in the Early Childhood program at Northern Illinois University (NIU). She is on the path to graduate in May 2025. Arielle has been diagnosed with Bipolar II Disorder and receives accommodations through the NIU Disability Resource Center.
- Benjamin D. Bershback (he/him) is a 2024 graduate of Bowling Green State University where he majored in special education. Ben received special education and related services for dyslexia and auditory processing disorder.
- Madison D. Schafer (she/her) majored in Early Childhood Special Education and minored in Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh. She is currently teaching first grade. Madison identifies as a person who is neurodivergent and received disability related services while attending University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh.
- Michelle M. Sands (she/her) received her doctoral degree from the University of Illinois in Special Education. She is currently Assistant Professor in the Department of Special and Early Education at Northern Illinois University and teaches courses in the inclusive early childhood education program. Her research interests focus on supporting the alignment and continuity of practices between early childhood and elementary programs and supporting children with disabilities and their families during the transition to kindergarten.
- Sawyer Stein (they/them) is an autistic advocate entering their third professional semester at Northern Illinois University, with the hope of becoming a preschool teacher post-graduation in 2025. Motivated by their poor treatment by schools since early childhood, Sawyer was drawn to education with the goal of assisting disabled students who may not be identified for accommodations due to inequitable assessment practices. When referring to Sawyer in this paper, they will most often be referenced using identity-first labels (i.e. autistic, disabled, etc.) as is their preference.
- Stacy N. McGuire (she/her) received her doctoral degree from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in Special Education. She is currently an assistant professor of special education in the School of Inclusive Teacher Education at Bowling Green State University. Her research interests focus on providing equitable education for students with behavioral support needs and emotional and behavioral disorders. She has been diagnosed with a neurological disorder and identifies as a disabled individual.
- Stacey N. Skoning (she/her) is a professor in the Department of Special & Early Childhood Education at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, where she also spent 13

years as the department chair. Her research focuses on improving inclusive support for all students in general education settings. She has supported hundreds of students with a range of disabilities in PK-12 and in higher education.

CURRENT ISSUES IN TEACHER RECRUITMENT, PREPARATION, AND RETENTION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As we consider the need for more inclusive teacher preparation programs, it is important to consider the current issues and how we can best address those issues. In preparing this paper we worked with our student writers to identify ways in which they have experienced issues within their teacher preparation programs, as well as the possible solutions and recommendations they have for addressing those issues based on their own experiences. Additionally, we have turned to the literature to support their recommendations and move towards more inclusive teacher preparation programs. The issues we will address in this call to action include: (a) belonging and perception of disability; (b) relationships, representation, and universal design for learning; (c) accommodations, accessibility, and supports; and (d) teacher dispositions.

Culture of Belonging and Perception of Disability

Belongingness is an important part of student academic success (Strayhorn, 2018; Sotardi, 2022). Ensuring all preservice teachers, including those with disabilities, perceive themselves as belonging at the IHE, in their program, and in the field of education is crucial. Yet, the stigma of, or negative attitudes towards disability that can exist among faculty, instructors, or support staff can create barriers that lead disabled teacher candidates to feel as if they do not belong, to struggle with imposter syndrome, or feel as if they are not capable of being a teacher. It is this unconscious or conscious ableism that can hinder disabled teacher candidates within IHEs (Strimel et al., 2023), including IECE teacher preparation programs. This can be seen through some of our authors' experiences:

> For me, it is not easy to talk about my mental health, and as a Black woman, most of our real everyday problems are seen as "excuses" rather than a problem. I find it hard to let people know my weaknesses because I want to be seen as strong, independent, and smart always, and not as the girl with bipolar disorder. I need to prove that I am just as smart and capable as my white counterparts, and I don't need anybody's help. It's hard for me to say, but in everyday life as a Black woman, I have to prove myself.

Teacher educators have an important role to prepare teacher candidates to be inclusive of all children in educational environments. When teacher educators promote and foster inclusive environments that cultivate strong, individualized identities, they are actively demonstrating how individuals with disabilities and their identities as disabled individuals matter. Yet, preservice teachers, particularly those preparing to become special education teachers, have traditionally been trained to identify and remediate problems or deviations from what is "normal" (Ashby, 2012) as part of the medical model of disability (Hayes & Hannold, 2007; Zaks, 2023). This medical model is the antithesis of one that supports a sense of belonging – rather it establishes

the individual with the disability as being abnormal or something that needs to be changed or normalized. Though it seems obvious that teacher educators should promote and foster inclusive environments and teach within this social model of disability, Strimel and colleagues (2023) recently identified several barriers to access and equity within teacher preparation programs. Barriers encountered by teacher candidates with disabilities include negative perceptions of teacher candidates, treating teacher candidates differently based on their disability, and a lack of access to varying educational experiences because of the candidates' disabilities (Bergerhuff et al., 2012; Parker & Draves, 2017; Siuty & Beneke, 2020; Squires & Countermine, 2018; Squires et al., 2018). Some of the long-term consequences of these barriers include lower likelihood of teacher candidates with disabilities' disclosing their disability or accessing adequate support from their teacher educators, particularly during field placement, and an increased likelihood of candidates leaving the field, having a damaged sense of identity, or both (Strimel et al., 2023).

The cultivation of a sense of belonging and critical awareness of disability may influence how teacher candidates with and without disabilities also educate young children with disabilities within IECE. Additionally, the creation of inclusive environments that place value on diversity is one way of supporting students' sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2024). It is the responsibility of teacher educators to create, model, and promote inclusive educational environments and practices for teacher candidates that can contribute to disabled individuals' sense of belonging and all teacher candidates' use of inclusive practice. These practices also align with those within DEC's Recommended Practices (2014) and NAEYC's position statement on Advancing Equity in Early Childhood (2019) and Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment (2011).

Recommendations

- Create and facilitate a safe and student-centered classroom community for all students. At the start of the semester, having students identify core values, beliefs, create social norms and sign student commitments not only helps ensure a positive student-centered classroom community, but are opportunities to model practices they can use when collaborating with others in a school environment.
- Teach within a Disabilities Studies framework or use a critical lens to challenge biases which exist that can rely on assumptions and/or exclude children with disabilities and other minoritized populations (Ashby et al., 2012; Love & Beneke, 2021; Urbani et al., 2022). Teaching using the book *"Rethinking Disability: A Disability Studies Approach to Inclusive Practice*" (Valle & Conner, 2019) has helped all our candidates (early childhood, elementary, secondary, special education…) better understand the biases they hold and identify them on our campus. Last year the class reading this text searched for biased language on our campus and found many examples including a presentation being given that announced "All who walked through the door would…" They recognized that whether you could walk or not made little difference in the amount of benefit someone would gain from participation.
- Use an asset-based approach when discussing individuals with disabilities (Urbani et al., 2022). "To better support disabled teacher candidates, a colleague and I hosted a session on navigating the job market. We discussed when and how to disclose a disability when applying for teaching jobs and how to leverage our assets during the interview process."
- Use inclusive language and offer opportunities for individuals to share their own unique

perspectives, acknowledging that there may be individuals with disabilities within the classes being taught. Use language that includes students in possible disabled populations, does not assume that students are all neurotypical and able-bodied, and is respectful of adults with disabilities having unique perspectives and contributions non-disabled people can't provide.

- Incorporate perspectives of or resources from individuals with disabilities in classroom discussions. "I always appreciate it when professors talk about the differing perspectives of disabled adults on aids and therapies provided to disabled children. Recognizing that disabled people age and can advocate for their communities sends an important message to disabled students and abled peers who are not used to hearing disabled narratives."

Relationships, Representation, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Positive relationships with students, as well as transparent representation of disability among faculty and staff, and use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in coursework can support students with disabilities and their sense of belonging. A new theme among college courses is the limited representation of marginalized groups in course materials (Bird & Pitman, 2020; Brandle, 2020). However, when discussing marginalized groups, disability is often missing from the conversation. For example, a recent study examined open educational materials in political science to identify the extent to which marginalized groups were represented, specifically looking at race, ethnicity, LGBTQ+, and women (Brandle, 2020). Similarly, another study examined course materials in the hard and social sciences, only reporting on gender and ethnic representation (Bird & Pitman, 2020). Little attention is paid, however, to disability representation in course materials, especially in education. Scholars agree that representation is important and valid (Redding, 2019), and yet are not promoting representation when it comes to recruiting and retaining the group of educators who will work with our future disabled students.

In addition to using representative course materials, having faculty who have disabilities and are willing to disclose those disabilities can be beneficial to students. Just as before, there is literature supporting college student success when they have university professors of the same racial or ethnic background or of the same gender (Llamas et al., 2019). A disabled college student likely benefits in much of the same way. As reported by one of our authors:

> As a college student, I completely benefited from faculty disclosing about their own disabilities and about their own transparency of disabilities. This conversation that happened a couple times, allowed myself to feel comfortable talking about my disabilities, it allowed me to relate and build connections with my professor, and to become more knowledgeable to share to others with and without disabilities.

When faculty are open about their own disabilities, teacher candidates can see themselves succeed, see advocates in their teacher educators, and have a sense of belonging they may not have otherwise had.

Faculty can also use UDL when teaching. UDL is a framework for teaching built on Universal Design. Universal Design is a phenomenon that began in architecture, wherein structures

originally created for the disability community can be used by the general public for many reasons (Persson et al., 2014). A common example is the curb-cut effect. Curb cuts were originally designed for wheelchair users to access sidewalks. However, many people soon realized they were also useful for parents of young children in strollers, delivery persons with shipments on dollies, and travelers pulling luggage behind them.

Universal Design has since moved into educational spaces, where faculty (and teachers) can now use educational designs originally meant for the disability community for all students. UDL, one of the most common forms of Universal Design in education, provides multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement (CAST, 2018). As teacher educators we can teach, implement, and model appropriate UDL principles for our students. Our teacher candidates should be prepared to use UDL in their future classrooms; therefore, we should be prepared to teach them how to use such principles with fidelity. We also should feel comfortable implementing UDL in our own classrooms. By implementing UDL principles we can reach all learners, including those who have disabilities, in our teacher preparation courses. Finally, we should intentionally model UDL principles by explaining why we are making instructional decisions for our students. When we explain our instructional decisions, we show teacher candidates how they can make similar decisions in their future classrooms.

Teacher educators who recognize the importance of using representative materials in their classes, including materials that represent the disability community, can disclose their own relationship with disability, and/or are able to implement UDL principles through their teaching are more likely to build strong relationships with their students. We stress the importance of teacher-student relationships with our teacher candidates, and these same relationships are important for our teacher candidates. For example, one of our authors indicated:

> The relationships that I had between faculty was the reason that I was able to be successful in the program. Professors who were willing to open up and have conversations were extremely impactful.

Recommendations

- Use class materials that include people with disabilities (e.g., reading materials, videos, podcasts). If possible, use materials that include people from intersecting identities. “A classroom assignment I created was called a social media nano-ethnography. Teacher candidates explored a search term or hashtag that was created by the disability community (e.g., #AbleismExists, #WhenIWasADisabledKid, #DisabledWhileBlack) on a chosen social media platform. Then, they developed themes around the posts they found, discussed what they learned from the assignment, and how they could create more inclusive spaces for their disabled students.”
- Create inclusive classroom norms and expectations. Create a class expectation that states, “Assume disabled people are in the class. Not all disabilities are visible so you may not know if there are people with disabilities in class. When discussing issues related to disability, be cognizant of the language you use.” By creating a rule such as this, teacher educators are doing two things: (a) acknowledging that adults, too, have disabilities; and

(b) allowing teacher educators to consider how they discuss disability.

- Discuss your own relationship with disability. If you have a disability, disclose that information, the strengths you have because of your disability, and the accommodations you have in class. If you have a family member with a disability, discuss their strengths and the ways in which you accommodate their needs.
- Provide an open space for teacher candidates to share how they can accommodate class activities, assignments, and assessments, regardless of disability status. This allows teacher candidates to be an active part of their learning and for them to consider how they may accommodate their students in the future. All students regardless of ability benefit from accessibility. Options such as captions available during a lecture, multiple ways to access lecture notes, models available for assignments, and clear rubrics make all students more successful, and allow students with disabilities that are not identified to access coursework more easily. Basic accessibility should be baked into all pre-service programs.
- Collaborate with other faculty in creating spaces that are UDL friendly. "I co-taught methods courses in our elementary education program as a way to support teacher candidates and faculty simultaneously as they learned about UDL. This provided an opportunity to model co-teaching strategies and universal accommodations within the college classroom that would transfer to K-12 and support a wider range of teacher education candidates on our campus."

Access to the Accommodations and Support Necessary for Success

All students, regardless of ability, are entitled to an inclusive learning experience (Ashby, 2012). These supports can be provided through accessibility or accommodations. Accessibility is a change made to class materials or environmental structures that are provided to everyone (Iwarsson & Ståhl, 2003). An example of this might be to provide a copy of the slide deck on a course website so students can access it on their individual laptops in addition to seeing the slides on the board. Teacher educators can use accessibility to meet the needs of all teacher candidates in their classroom while also attending to the needs of an individual learner. Accommodations, in contrast, meet the needs of an individual learner by changing the way a task is presented but not what is being presented (Lazarus et al., 2006). An example of this may be providing a paper copy of the slide deck for an individual student to use for note taking while also presenting the slides on the board for the rest of the class. We, as teacher educators, are trained to understand that accommodations do not reduce the difficulty of a task but instead change how our students access the material (Lazarus et al., 2006). We also teach our teacher candidates how to use accommodations and accessibility in their own instruction, and our modeling of these techniques should be at the forefront of our repertoire. Both accessibility and accommodations are necessary and should be considered for academic coursework, assessment procedures, and field placements (Strimel, 2022). One of our authors explained the importance of accommodations this way:

> Accommodations should be personalized, specific, clear, and meaningful. The system as it is now is impersonal and difficult to navigate. The easier it is for students to get accommodations, professors to understand them, and students to make use of them, the better students with disabilities will perform.

Teacher educators do not need formal letters to provide accessibility or accommodations to individual students. However, having a formal accommodation letter is helpful in ensuring accommodations are legally required to be provided to teacher candidates. University Disability Resource Centers (DRCs) or services are those dedicated to supporting college students with disabilities. According to the National Center for College Students with Disabilities' Campus Disability Resource Database (2024), 200 public universities and 162 private, not-for-profit universities currently provide some type of disability-related services (i.e., coaching, tutoring, or testing to provide documentation of a disability). However, in most cases documentation of a disability is needed to access academic accommodations or services through DRCs. In the most recent survey from NCES, only 37 percent of students who identified themselves as having a disability disclosed their disability to their college (2022). Disabled teacher candidates may not know that additional support could be available to them through disability resource centers (DRCs) at their IHE or they may not think they need additional support. Although disabled students in college report using academic support services more often than those without a disability (NCES, 2022), there are more supports and services available that are underutilized. Our authors indicated they also had concerns related to accessing accommodations through their DRCs:

> Accommodations are too broad to be helpful, mental health is an area with additional challenges as many don't see it as a disability and financial aid only lets you use it 'as an excuse' one semester, college classroom accommodations don't transfer to the field well, and in general there is a lack of accountability for the provision of accommodations.

> Due to the length of time it took for accommodations to properly be put into place through the university, I was not able to receive the appropriate accommodations. The accommodation that I needed was simply, access to the lecture online through a recording or virtual meeting. When I was not able to receive this support, my grades were a reflection.

When students do utilize DRCs to access accommodations, barriers such as instructor's lack of implementation, and/or lack of relevance to courses not completed in a classroom or lecture room setting still exist. For example, DRCs are not always equipped to understand the goals and expectations placed on teacher candidates during their field and student teaching placements (Strimel, 2022). When teacher candidates are in the field, they are more likely to be unsuccessful or quit their program because of limited support. Keefe (2022) shared a vignette of an autistic student who excelled in her coursework, but upon entering her student teaching placement was not provided with support beyond what her nondisabled peers received. The teacher candidate failed her student teaching placement but was able to graduate with a degree in special education. Without a teaching license, though, she was only able to get a job for which she was overqualified.

Instructors in IHEs often do not understand how to apply a non-educational law to an educational space (Dieterich et al., 2017). There is no "IDEA" or other special education law to support the inclusive instruction in which teacher candidates should still be engaging. Instead, teacher

candidates are protected under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, neither of these laws are meant to be education laws, and instead provide supports to individuals in public places (Antilla-Garza, 2015). Although there is a legal responsibility for instructors to provide accommodations to students with disabilities, there is also an ethical one. Not providing or being hesitant to provide accommodations to disabled teacher candidates can make it challenging for them to access their instruction. In some cases, faculty have expressed concerns regarding fear the application of accessibility needs or accommodations will unfairly tailor instructional practices towards a small portion of the teacher candidates in a class, which will either make it easier for those candidates to complete class material or not allow them equal access to material therefore not allowing them to be fully prepared for their careers. One of our authors explained,

> I have often gotten pushback, confusion, and frustration with my needs from professors. Sometimes, they never confirm they read my letter or subsequent email clarifying my needs.

Another author explained that requesting accommodations provoked an anxious response:

> Being able to self advocate on what my accommodations were and how instructors were going to reply to me was anxiety provoking, due to the mystery of the unknown.

Our authors also shared ways that accommodations were helpful in their education:

> The adaptations that were granted to me were ones that would benefit my learning and allow processing time for me to answer questions at the right level.

Recommendations

- When provided with a letter of accommodations, identify ways in which the provided accommodations could be changed to accessibility needs for all teacher candidates in the classroom. “If a teacher candidate has an accommodation for a peer note taker, create a system that allows for a peer note taker for all students during each class session so all teacher candidates benefit from class-wide notes.”
- Create opportunities for accessibility that will benefit all teacher candidates by providing as many materials as possible in open access methods. Use of open educational resources (i.e., open textbooks) are a more affordable or no-cost option for all students, and in most cases are easily reproduced in a variety of formats and modes to support a variety of learners’ needs. Alternatively, e-book versions of a textbook can be purchased with unlimited use access; in many cases these are available in printable, text only, and screen reader friendly formats.
- Create opportunities for accessibility that will benefit all teacher candidates by providing materials in multiple formats (e.g., visually, auditorily, captioned). “The first night of class, I always teach students how to turn on captions in PowerPoint. The second class, they learn how to add alt text to images. The third

class, they learn how to add captions to videos. Each class adds another skill. I model all of these by using them throughout the class to discuss accessibility of educational materials. In addition, I model having multiple options for learning by providing readings, podcasts, and video links to give students the opportunity to access information in multiple modes."

- Provide accommodations that can be implemented in field placements or create accommodations for field placements. "Some examples of such accommodations include, but are not limited to: assignment to clinical placements easily accessible to public transportation routes, provision of more frequent check-ins with university supervisor, etc."

Teacher Dispositions

Many teacher preparation programs use "dispositions" as a tool or measure to identify what skills a teacher candidate has prior to entering the field. Truscott and Obiwo (2020) describe dispositions as "the tendencies to act based on beliefs, values, attitudes and prior experiences" (p. 23). Fellner and Kwah (2018) explain that "one of the central goals of teacher education is to instill and support dispositions in future teachers that welcome and value differences, whether in race, class, culture, language, or ability" (p. 520). However, Fellner and Kwah (2018) explain that although teacher educators are fostering a mindset that welcomes and values difference, they are doing so in a way that aims to target one set of teacher candidates: middle class, white teacher educators, who are the predominant teachers (i.e., 80% of teachers) in the field of education today (NCES, 2022). This targeting of one group of teacher candidates is problematic because it does not account for variance in race, ethnicity, class, culture, language, or ability, the very dispositions we, as teacher educators, are trying to instill in our candidates.

Truscott and Obiwo (2020) interviewed teacher candidates about their perceptions of dispositions. Teacher candidates reported that dispositions depend on context. They may implement some of their dispositions differently with one child than they do another. The authors also found that teacher candidates felt it was important to have a core set of dispositions based on who they were as individuals. This core set of dispositions can be grounded in one's values, based on an individual's race, ethnicity, class, culture, language, or ability. As teacher educators, we have the duty to foster our candidates' values, based on their background, and help them establish their own core set of dispositions. Then, they can adapt those core values to the specific context in which they are being applied.

While the conflation of dispositions and disability is described and deconstructed in the literature (Bialka, 2015) in relation to the ideas of power and privilege within teacher education programs, the focus is primarily on the beliefs about disability held by the teacher candidates. What is missing from the literature is any discussion regarding the beliefs held about the teacher candidates themselves. The authors of this paper have observed that dispositions can be easily blamed, targeted, and rationalized as another way to exclude disabled teacher candidates from completing education programs. One example from the field is a candidate who was regularly arriving late or absent from her clinical placement. A meeting was scheduled to notify that candidate of a dispositional concern and a remediation plan was to be written. However, when

meeting with the candidate it became clear that she was staying up late to complete assignments from a previous semester (when health concerns arose leading to several incomplete grades in courses) while trying to complete a new full semester of assignments and clinical work. She was staying up late working on assignments, then sleeping through multiple alarms. This candidate was demonstrating exactly the dispositions that she should be, but did not have the organization and planning skills to do this in a way that still allowed her to meet all her requirements. Rather than remediating a disposition, that form was put away and appropriate accommodations were provided to help with sequencing work, organizing timelines, and allowing focus on one task at a time. With those supports in place, the candidate was able to successfully complete two semesters of course work in a semester and an additional month in the summer. She is now back on track to complete her licensure programs.

Recommendations

- Avoid using standardized dispositions for all students. Have each teacher candidate create their own self-assessment of teacher dispositions which can be used by themselves, their university supervisors, and their cooperating teachers.
- Instead of "remediating" teacher candidates based on missed/failed dispositions, consider ways in which a teacher candidate's strengths may be used to support their areas of need. One situation that comes to mind is when an autistic teacher candidate was not greeting students as they came into the classroom. A university supervisor began to tally the number of students this candidate greeted, unbeknownst to him. The university supervisor used this information to point out that the teacher candidate lacked appropriate dispositions and needed remediation so he could form proper relationships with students. Instead of providing remediation, it is helpful to identify the teacher candidate's strengths, leverage those, and use them to support possible areas of need.
  Another teacher candidate with a learning disability, struggled to write on the board with proper spelling. After discussion, this was identified as not disposition-related and appropriate supports were provided that included preparing slides in advance and projecting type-written materials on the board instead of writing to make use of spell-check and grammar-check, which was also a great model for his middle school students.

CONCLUSION

Teacher educators in programs specifically designed for IECE are positioned to develop teacher candidates who will educate and support our newest generation. Many of these youth will come from the world's largest minority group: the disability community. Yet, disabled teacher candidates are more likely to drop out of college, never enter the field, or leave the field early (BPS, 2017; Strimel et al., 2023) because they feel ostracized by a field that should be embracing them (CEC, 2016; Keefe, 2022; Lukins et al., 2023). Instead, we, as teacher educators, should be setting up systems that embrace the many strengths disabled teachers and disabled teacher candidates have. When we create teacher preparation programs that promote belonging and a positive perception of disability, develop relationships through representation and UDL, provide accommodations and accessibility, and allow teacher candidates to design their own dispositions

based on their unique strengths and needs, we can recruit IECE teacher candidates who will be more likely to remain in the field. More importantly, young, disabled children will see a teacher who is just like them. To ensure we are recruiting and retaining disabled teacher candidates we propose implications for research, policy, and programs.

Implications for Research

Much of the current literature pertaining to disabled teacher candidates is limited and focuses on their perceptions of teacher preparation programs. Researchers may consider broadening their view to include the success of both teachers and students with disabilities, so we have a better understanding of why disabled teachers are needed in the field. Such research may draw upon similar research which has been done to examine the importance of racially and ethnically minoritized teachers in classrooms. Similarly, very little research has been conducted examining teacher dispositions for disabled teacher candidates and for teacher candidates from intersecting identities. Researchers may consider ways in which dispositions can be further explored and how they can be developed in a way that is more relevant to a diverse group of teacher candidates. Finally, researchers may consider examining the benefits of a disability studies informed teacher preparation program compared to traditional teacher preparation programs, specifically examining how such programs may help teacher candidates better understand the experiences of disabled students.

Implications for Policy

With only 37 percent of disabled students disclosing their disability to their university's DRC, it is important to consider how DRCs are supporting (or not supporting) their disability communities. IHEs may consider establishing more rigorous policies to ensure faculty are educated on the implementation of accommodations in coursework so students are more comfortable disclosing their disabilities. Similarly, programs may consider working with their DRCs to explore policy changes for field placements and other in-vivo experiences. Ensuring disabled teacher candidates can access both coursework and field placements equitably is necessary for them to be retained. However, the current structure does not always allow for accommodations to be available during field work experiences.

Implications for Programs

Programs may consider the ways in which faculty within the program view disability. As one of our authors indicated, many programs view disability as a "child issue" instead of an "adult issue." This can be problematic because there are teacher candidates with disabilities. If we want to retain our disabled teacher candidates, we need to approach disability with the understanding that there are always disabled people around us. Creating a common language and structure for how disability will be supported within a program is an initial step that can be taken to ensure disabled teacher candidates are adequately recruited and retained within an IECE program. Then, programs can consider how they are representing the disability community within their program

and courses. Using materials and hiring faculty that represent the disability community will show disabled teacher candidates that disability is seen as an asset to the program instead of a problem that needs to be fixed. This will further ensure disabled teacher candidates are retained within the IECE program.

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