Partnering for Success: Strategic Collaborations Supporting Early Childhood Educator Development

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Abstract—This paper describes the positive influence of strategic collaboration on the development of future early childhood educators. Formal and informal in-classroom and out-of-classroom experiences including purposeful, intentional collaboration with peers, local school partners, families, mentor teachers, school administrators, and college faculty across disciplines are presented and analyzed for their impact. The authors highlight the need for teacher preparation programs to leverage strategic partnership opportunities. By supporting the professional growth and development of novice educators, teacher preparation programs can help ensure that future early childhood educators develop the requisite collaborative skill set and mindset necessary to promote positive outcomes for all young children. A specific case of collaboration utilizing a lesson study process is described, highlighting the impact on college students' skills and dispositions. The authors posit that programs providing multiple strategic collaborations are best positioned to support the preparation of effective early childhood educators.

Index Terms—early childhood education, teacher preparation, collaboration, partnerships

I. INTRODUCTION

Future Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers should be well-grounded in the content they teach, child development, and curricular content. They need to understand informal and formal assessment and relate it to students' learning and social-emotional needs while teaching through developmentally appropriate practices. Additionally, ECE teachers must develop capacities for building positive, reciprocal relationships with children, families, communities, and other professionals [1], [2]. The stakes are high for early childhood educators because it is in the earliest years when the critical foundation for a lifetime of learning is forged. Research shows that brain development in the early years is prolific and that early experiences can influence a child's success not only in school but also in life [3]. High-quality teacher preparation programs for early childhood educators are responsible for ensuring their candidates understand young children's characteristics and needs; how to create healthy, respectful, supportive, and appropriately challenging learning environments; diverse family and community characteristics; and the goals, benefits, and uses of assessment to promote positive outcomes for all young children.

Becoming a high-quality ECE teacher is a journey requiring strategic collaborations for personal and professional growth [4], [5]. At our college, we engage our ECE teacher candidates in a multifaceted approach involving hands-on learning opportunities with partners that continuously evolve to meet the varied needs of all key stakeholders and to embrace emerging technologies. These preparation experiences establish and foster mentor, peer, and community network connections as well as underscore the importance of collaboration between schools, families, and communities to support the healthy development of early learners. In this article, we share the formal and informal classroom and field experiences undergirding our ECE program to develop teacher candidates' awareness and understanding of the power of collaboration. First, we describe the strategic partnerships and collaboration opportunities. Next, we share how collaboration benefits early learners of all levels and abilities. Finally, we present a specific case of collaboration regarding the lesson study process. It is through these multiple strategic collaborations where we support the preparation of our early childhood novices.

II. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

At every advising session or open house we host, our prospective ECE teacher candidates ask similar questions: "Will I have opportunities to observe and practice? Where will my field experiences be? What schools will I be placed in? What ages will I get to work with?" Although their questions speak to their eagerness to interact with children, what they do not yet realize is how multiple, rich, and beneficial those field experiences in early childhood settings will be in their journey towards becoming a highly qualified educator.

A. Collaboration with Local School Partners

The partnerships we have forged with our local school system's Professional Development Schools (PDS) and on-campus lab school provide a tapestry of learning experiences in a variety of settings so that our ECE candidates have opportunities to observe and practice in each of the early childhood age groups—birth-3, 3-5, 5-8.

The opportunities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have leveraged in-person as well as virtual experiences. We believe field experiences should be authentic, multiple, paired with course learning, and scaffold the understanding and development of teacher-student engagement.

The first field experience that early childhood teacher candidates engage in involves observation in an elementary school setting in one of our local public schools for a minimum of three hours per week. To process the learning in their coursework, students complete an observation log, discuss what they observe, reflect on the observation, ask questions they have about what they have seen, and connect what they learn each week in the college course with what they see in their elementary school placement. Next, our candidates have a field placement in our on-campus, private provider-run early childhood laboratory school serving children ages 2, 3, and 4. In this placement, the teacher candidates observe for an hour each week. Teacher candidates learn about child development and the processes and acquisition of reading in their college coursework, and their observations in the lab school provide the authentic learning environment for observing firsthand children's developmental domains and preschoolers' language and literacy development in action.

Figure 1. Working one-to-one with students

In teacher candidates' third and fourth years in the program, their field experiences introduce active participation and involvement with students in classroom settings that increases with responsibility and time interacting with children with each internship placement. Each semester, candidates are assigned to an early childhood level, whether pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, or the early grades, in one of our college's professional development school sites. The local school system commits to having our student interns learn and assist in their classrooms, and we provide coursework learning for the candidates and professional development opportunities for the mentor teachers. The college student and classroom mentor teacher partner in providing a nurturing and developmentally appropriate learning environment for the children that supports the young children's growth and development. The teacher candidates begin to actively participate with children in reading stories, developing relationships, problem-solving, teaching small groups of children, and providing one-to-one assistance (Fig. 1). Under the supportive guidance of the mentor teacher, gradually the teacher candidate takes on more responsibility for planning, implementing, and assessing small and whole group lessons to practice application of strategies learned in coursework.

The culminating field experience during the final semester is the full-time internship where early childhood education teacher candidates gradually assume all classroom responsibilities under the guidance and support of a mentor teacher and college supervisor. Knowing what young learners are like and what they need to thrive in school settings is critical for developing and retaining high-quality early childhood educators [1].

This experience, prior to graduation and qualifying for professional credentialing, allows students to implement unit plans and projects which they developed as part of their coursework. Having varied, scaffolded field experiences paired with coursework learning provides a solid foundation for future success as fully prepared early childhood educators. To ensure high-quality field experience requires strategic, ongoing partnership with local early childhood learning settings, including the public kindergarten-grade 12 (K-12) school system and our on-campus lab school. Faculty and leaders from these local early childhood settings meet regularly to share and discuss each stakeholders' goals and system initiatives to find opportunities for alignment and engagement. Annual planning meetings with the local K-12 school system include school principals, lead teachers, district personnel, and college faculty. The K-12 classrooms as well as the lab school classrooms provide collaborative opportunities for implementing course assignments with guidance, support and feedback as well as faculty-led research. Collaboration with local education partners provides authentic opportunities for knowledge building and evidence-based innovation for not only the teacher candidates, but for the education partners as well [6].

B. Collaboration Outside of School

For young children, learning is not limited to the school calendar; much education happens in the out-of-school hours [7]. Current research calls for teacher preparation programs to stress content and pedagogy [8]. To this end, college faculty plan many out of school learning opportunities for teacher candidates to develop their repertoire for supporting early learners. Candidates and faculty collaborate to plan Literacy Nights in our PDS as well as develop school-to-home curricular materials to support the children's reading/writing at school and home (Fig. 2). Candidates learn how to collaborate with schools to meet the needs of students' families. For example, they

learn how to encourage family member attendance at evening events by providing refreshments and babysitting.

Figure 2. Family-Child-Teacher literacy night event.

Additionally, ECE teacher candidates are involved in the college's grant funded activities. For example, the Computational Thinking Partnership grant, funded by our state's Center for Computing Education, is a collaborative project involving our college's Departments of Computer Science and Information Technology and Education, as well as an early learning and care-providing center, our local K-12 school system, and our local community college. The goal of the grant is for preservice and in-service teachers to learn and apply foundational principles of computer science and computational thinking into K-8 curriculum and teaching. ECE candidates learned about robots and coding and received mini-grants to develop instructional projects and purchase Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) materials for their early learners. Another example is the recently applied for National Science Foundation Informal STEM Learning grant where our students and faculty will provide robot devices, curriculum, and professional development to underserved children in community centers in our local region. Unfortunately, children ranging in age from 2-17 who come from low socio-economic backgrounds do not have the same opportunities to engage with computer science principles and materials. The goal is to engage children, particularly those who are underserved and underrepresented in the STEM areas, with computer science in informal environments to exhibit and normalize the power involved in acquiring computer science proficiency. The teacher candidates learn to collaborate with faculty across the college, local community partners, and with one another to develop their skills as future teachers in a technology-laden world.

For young learners, the 8-12 weeks of summer constitutes a significant portion of life and includes some of the most powerful and profound out-of-school learning. Wanting our ECE teacher candidates to understand and participate in this special time, we have developed several summer collaboration opportunities. A summer calendar of activities to support literacy was collaboratively developed and shared with all second and third-grade families in a local school. Candidates created book club

materials, session planning guides, and curated resources which were compiled into an *Engaging Families to Build Better Readers Book Club Project Handbook* [9]. Resource development is another aspect of the mentor/college intern partnership. This resource not only impacted close to 200 families in our local school network, but it also allows the teachers and school to implement an effective practice each year.

Another summer opportunity involved faculty and teacher candidates working together to develop and implement a variety of summer camps. These two-week STEM, STEAM (STEM *plus* the arts), and Coding camps for preschoolers were held at the on-campus lab school. Under the mentorship of ECE faculty, the ECE candidates developed an age-appropriate camp curriculum that incorporated specialized young learner activities around each content topic. The ECE teacher candidates learned to run the camps where they demonstrated classroom management and engaged with children and their families. They also evaluated and analyzed their instruction, discussed what they learned, and refined their daily activities.

III. COLLABORATION TO BENEFIT ALL CHILDREN

Our school systems are built on the belief that all children have the fundamental right to a free, developmentally appropriate and enriching education taught by high-quality educators. We know families entrust educators with their children, and each child deserves to have teachers equipped to meet them where they are and take them where they need to go in order to help each young child reach their fullest potential. Whether children come from an economically privileged or a socio-economically distressed household, or whether they have developed on a typical or non-typical trajectory, each is a bundle of diverse possibilities with unique gifts and talents.

Ensuring that our ECE teacher candidates learn about how children vary and what can be done both inside the classroom and outside the classroom to support children's healthy growth and development is part of a high-quality teacher preparation experience.

A. Strategic Partnerships to Support Young Children with Disabilities

ECE teacher candidates learn about differentiation and lesson planning strategies throughout their college coursework. To enhance ECE candidates' knowledge about how to specifically support young children with disabilities, college faculty developed a seminar on embedding specially designed instruction (SDI) in co-taught classrooms. In the United States, special education means specially designed instruction that is designed to meet the specific and unique needs of a child with a disability.

The full-day seminar was purposefully designed to include teacher candidates in their final year-long internship, their school-based mentor teachers, as well as college supervisors. Throughout the seminar, small break out groups shared ideas and strategies to delve into the

content to support candidates' growing understanding of what SDI is, what it is not, and what it looks like in elementary school classrooms. The seminar has been offered both face-to-face and virtually to harness the power of technology for strategic collaboration.

After the seminar, teacher candidates were observed by faculty using SDI planning and observation tools created by the state's department of education division of early intervention and special education [10]. These observations occurred in bimodal classrooms in which some students were in person in the classroom and other students were online due to the pandemic. Post-observation discussions that included the teacher candidates, their mentor teachers and faculty allowed for rich conversation around meeting the diverse academic and social-emotional needs of children with disabilities in elementary classrooms.

The seminar, follow-up observations, and debriefing fostered a common focus on meeting the unique learning needs of children with disabilities in general education classrooms; a clear delineation between SDI, differentiation, and Universal Design for Learning [11]; and reinforced the use of common language amongst all partners. One school partner in the local school system acts as a demonstration site for our focus on SDI. To enhance the college's collaboration with the school, faculty continue to observe teacher candidates completing their internship at that site.

A surprising finding from this professional development seminar is that the ECE teacher candidates have explicitly used this new knowledge to not only support their planning and instruction for students with disabilities but also for English language learners as well as students who struggle with reading or math. Additionally, the mentor teachers shared that they, too, benefited from participating in the seminar and follow-up activities as they shared their experiences and expertise with teacher candidates in the breakout groups.

B. Strategic Partnerships to Support Young Children from Low Socio-Economic Homes

Another collaborative project that ECE teacher candidates engage in is a literacy writing and discussion project with a local school with high numbers of children who receive government funded free or reduced-price meals. This project helps teacher candidates see firsthand the power of building strong positive relationships with children. They also learn to support children in helping them see college in their future. Some of the children come from homes where they may be the first in their family to pursue higher education.

Each year teacher leaders at the school and college faculty determine the book and the format of the project. In this partnership project, the students and the teacher candidates all read a common text and engage in either book clubs or letter writing about the content. For several years it was a pen pal project in which candidates dialogue back and forth with students at the school. Most recently, it was a book club discussion-based project in which small groups of students met with college students in book clubs to talk about the plot, characters and setting of the book.

The teacher candidates learn to engage children in talking about text and supporting their literacy learning.

In the spring, children come to the college campus to tour, have a "college" discussion, take a "college" class taught by the teacher candidates, dine in the college cafeteria, and then watch the movie version of the book to compare one to the other. This collaboration becomes one way that the elementary school promotes goal setting, even at a young age. The entire day underscores the importance of literacy and setting future goals. Teacher candidates learn that they, too, can collaborate with local partners to support students' goals and learning while also developing their skills as future teachers.

IV. COLLABORATIVE LESSON STUDY

At the half-way point of the teacher preparation program, candidates take a theory to practice in early childhood education course while also taking various teaching methods courses. They are simultaneously involved in a field placement at either the on-campus lab school or in a pre-kindergarten or kindergarten placement in the local school system. During the pandemic, virtual pre-kindergarten placements also have been used to ensure that teacher candidates continue to have high-quality internship experiences and develop their skills as virtual teachers as well. This combination of engaging in core coursework and a field placement is a fruitful opportunity for collaboration, support, and the continued development and refinement of important teaching skills. In addition, it provides faculty an opportunity to understand candidates' perceptions of collaboration both in the virtual space and in person [12].

Lesson Study is an important part of the ECE course. Using a Lesson Study framework, teacher candidates and the professor form a lesson study team. Together, the team learns about the lesson study cycle [13]. As a group, the team studies the curriculum area and identifies a lesson to be taught. The team co-plans the lesson ensuring that the lesson contains all the important elements the candidates have learned about in their methods courses to date. One teacher candidate teaches the lesson while the other team members observe the lesson. An adaptation, given COVID-19's impact on the program, lessons are recorded and posted to the college's secure Learning Management System, and teacher candidates watch the recordings to observe their peers' teaching. After everyone has either watched the lesson being taught focusing on student engagement in the lesson, the team reflects on what went well with the lesson and why, what did not go well with the lesson and why, and what changes the team thinks should be made. The lesson study debriefing provides a window into collaborating with peers and professional conversations about teaching, learning and engagement.

Lesson topics for lesson study vary and are selected as a team. One recent area of focus was Dialogic Reading [14], [15]. Teacher candidates learned about this effective strategy for reading aloud with young children. They co-planned a lesson using the book *Carrot Soup* [16]. A volunteer taught the lesson, integrating the prompts to support the conversation and interactions between the teacher and the young children (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Dialogic reading lesson study.

The lesson was recorded, and peers observed the lesson using a Dialogic Reading observation form [17]. After thoughtful review, ideas were shared amongst the lesson study team. Changes were made and another teacher candidate then taught the lesson, this time in the virtual PreK classroom. And the cycle continued.

Another example is a lesson focused on developing young children's executive functioning. The lesson study team researched executive function primarily using materials from Harvard's Center on the Developing Child [18]. Again, the lesson study team designed a lesson. The lesson for this cycle was Freeze Dance. The challenge this cycle was that a teacher candidate in the three-year-old classroom and the four-year-old classroom both wanted to try to teach it. The lesson study team differentiated the lesson for the two classrooms. The teacher candidates taught the lesson the same day and both recorded their lessons. The rest of the team watched the recordings to observe their teaching with a focus on the young children. After the debrief, the lesson was then adapted for a kindergarten classroom.

Peer collaboration through lesson study provides a rich opportunity for team co-planning while also encouraging collaborative reflection, the intentional use of technology, and a common focus on effective lesson planning, ongoing formative assessment, and maximizing student engagement.

V. CONCLUSION

For teacher preparation programs to provide high-quality learning opportunities for early childhood teacher candidates, a concerted effort to in-school and out-of-school partnering needs to be valued and in place. These strategic partnerships and activities can evolve each year as the connections are strengthened to meet the contextual needs of the learners and setting (e.g., virtual-based with COVID-19). Field experiences for teacher candidates cannot be limited to observation, nor should they only occur in the final year of teacher preparation. Instead, programs can leverage partnerships with community partners such as early childhood centers and local school systems to create a tapestry of authentic field placements which challenge candidates to create, develop, and design engaging and meaningful developmentally appropriate activities, assess learning and development in authentic ways, strive to promote inclusive environments where all children feel welcome and valued, and partner with families to promote positive outcomes for all children.

Providing opportunities for teacher candidates to go beyond the formal collaboration between schools and education programs allow them to be more involved in the community and build positive relationships with young children and families. The myriad settings help future educators understand where they might want to teach, and the hiring administrators get an on-the-job view of the teacher candidate in action thereby providing a win-win situation for all, especially the young children in each of these settings. Fostering strategic collaboration with faculty, community partners, students and their families will help ensure that future teachers have the skills and the mindset to work effectively with key stakeholders to ensure that all children receive a high-quality education.

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