Partners for quality: building professional pathways for diverse adult learners in early childhood education

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper describes the rationale and key aspects of how one school-university partnership leveraged resources to create, implement and refine an innovative professional pathway called the Early Childhood Certificate (ECC) program which reflects the National Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) Essential Guideline 4: Reflection and Innovation. The ECC program is an innovative, career-building model that leverages resources between a predominantly white regional state university, a nonprofit organization serving as a Head Start grantee, a large urban school district and community-based education settings across a Midwestern metropolitan region.

Design/methodology/approach – This descriptive narrative documents how the ECC program developed as a professional pathway for early childhood educators to scale up their skills for teaching young children while strengthening their capacities and credentials within the early childhood education (ECE) profession pipeline. The narrative includes relevant literature and examples from the field.

Findings – This paper includes a discussion of the benefits and challenges related to the design, implementation and refinement of the professional learning ECC program.

Research limitations/implications – This is a descriptive narrative. As such, generalizability is lacking. Research is needed to determine the effectiveness and sustainability of innovative teacher education programs.

Practical implications – Relevant research and lessons learned provide guidance for other school–university partnerships to consider how to meet workforce and career needs for educators in the field of ECE.

Social implications – School–university partnerships can be change agents and positively impact early childhood educators' career development.

Originality/value – This paper addresses the need for understanding how predominantly white early childhood teacher education programs can partner with schools and agencies and then together leverage resources to support workforce and career development opportunities.

Keywords Workforce development, Credentials, Certificate program, Early childhood teacher education, Professional pathways

Paper type Research paper

NAPDS nine essentials addressed:

Essential 1: A Comprehensive Mission: A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner and that aims to advance equity, antiracism and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities and their respective community and professional partners.

Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation: A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation and generative knowledge.

Understanding the pathway to quality

Large-scale initiatives to improve early childhood education (ECE) in the United States demonstrate that effective ECE programs contribute to children's outcomes throughout their life (i.e. Campbell *et al.*, 2012; Schweinhart *et al.*, 2005) and that teacher effectiveness is critical in the equation of quality (Barnett, 2011; Hamre, 2014; Perlman *et al.*, 2016; Pianta, Downer, & Hamre, 2016). To foster a pathway toward quality, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) recommends that states require lead early childhood educators to, at a minimum, hold a bachelor's degree with specialized knowledge and professional learning in ECE (Friedman-Krauss *et al.*, 2022). NIEER's recommendation is based on comprehensive evidence showing that educators with higher educational levels generally provide higher-quality learning environments for young children. Variations in educators' backgrounds, educational preparation and access to adequate compensation and system supports also contribute to program quality (Phillips, Austin, & Whitebook, 2016). For instance, teachers of color are particularly important in fostering quality learning outcomes of racially and ethnically diverse students (Bond, Quintero, Casey, & Di Carlo, 2015; Carver-Thomas, 2018).

An uneven path

The need for credentialed ECE educators is juxtaposed next to a fragmented profession where training, education, experience and compensation varies across programs, communities, regions and states. For example, unlike their peers teaching in public school district-operated ECE programs, educators working in community-based classrooms may or may not have a bachelor's degree in early childhood or child development. Lead and assistant teachers in Head Start, the largest federally funded ECE program in the US serving children in families with income less than poverty level, may have entry-level requirements such as a Child Development Associate or an associate/bachelor's degree in an area related to ECE (Head Start Act, 2007). In addition to varied credentials, Head Start teachers typically still earn less than the district funded ECE teachers. Austin, Edwards, Chávez, & Whitebook (2019) suggest "the historical and pervasive undervaluing of labor performed by women and minorities in the United States has combined to create one of the most underpaid workforces in the country: those who care for and teach young children" (p. 2). Such inequities experienced by the ECE workforce are attributable to structural racism and bias related to gender and class (Vogtman, 2017).

Even with recent national efforts spearheaded by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2020) and 15 other national organizations to develop clear competencies and agreed-upon industry standards, these long-enduring workforce trends plague the field, especially for teachers of color. "Minority teachers remain significantly underrepresented relative to the students they serve" (Bond *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). The unresolved historical issue of grossly inadequate compensation (e.g. Ackerman, 2006) may perpetuate the difficulty ECE educators have in paying for higher education coursework that leads to strengthened credentials. Therefore, recommended national standards for education and training (i.e. Friedman-Krauss *et al.*, 2022) may be difficult to attain, especially for Hispanic or Latina educators (Greenberg & Luetmer, 2022). Relatedly, racial disproportionality is also observed across teacher education programs in design, content, recruitment and retention, especially in predominantly white institutions, exacerbating structural inequalities for teachers of color (Souto-Manning & Emdin, 2023).

These complex issues require creative approaches to support the professional and career development of educators within the ECE pipeline amidst quality improvement efforts for an increasingly diverse population of children and families (e.g. Ullrich, Schmit, & Cosse, 2019). In this article, the rationale and key aspects of how one school–university partnership leveraged resources to create, implement and refine an innovative professional pathway called the Early Childhood Certificate (ECC) program are presented (*NAPDS Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation*). Descriptions of the ECC highlight its purpose, partners and participants, design and implementation. Reflections on successes and challenges are explored in the closing.

Building a pathway towards quality: the Early Childhood Certificate program (ECC)

The fundamental aim of the ECC is to advance equity and social justice within early childhood teacher education for a workforce facing pervasive complex challenges, while improving quality programs for children and families (*NAPDS Essential 1: Comprehensive Mission*). To accomplish this long-term goal, partners conceptualized the ECC to reduce barriers within higher education and advance the professional credentials of ECE educators. ECC partners include representatives from one regional state university, a nonprofit organization serving as a Head Start grantee, a large urban school district and community-based centers within a metropolitan region of a Midwestern state. ECC educators (participants) include educators from the Head Start and community-based classrooms within the partnership network.

While the higher education partner is not one of the two Minority Serving Institutions located on the opposite side of the state, the ECC represents an intentional innovation to address racial disproportionality within the ECE workforce by increasing mechanisms to serve, support and recruit diverse educators (Carter-Andrews *et al.*, 2019; Souto-Manning & Emdin, 2023). Relatedly, while the ECC educators were recruited based on their employment within partnership programs, the diverse backgrounds and experiences of potential participants influenced the design of the ECC, from conceptualization throughout implementation. As a mechanism to move beyond persuasive "mission" and "vision" rhetoric, the development of the ECC is an effort to "interrupt the ways teacher education currently operates as a matter of justice" (Souto-Manning & Emdin, 2023, p. 27).

The pilot

The ECC began with an exploration and development phase due to an intersection of multiple local, regional and national movements to improve ECE (See Table 1).

Once a clear rationale for an education innovation emerged, the ECC partners launched an initial pilot in the fall of 2018. To participate in the pilot, ECC partners recruited educators from the partnership network who: (1) were employed as a lead or assistant teacher; (2) held an associate or bachelor's degree in a related/unrelated field and (3) completed financial aid and employment funding applications. Over the pilot's distinct phases (fall of 2018 to summer of 2022; see Appendix) 18 educators enrolled in certificate courses. ECC educators' prior educational attainment included associate degree (11), bachelor's degree (6) and graduate degree (1) in related fields to ECE. Educators' racial and ethnic backgrounds represented primarily Black (14), Hispanic (3) and White (1), and their roles included assistant teacher (4), lead teachers (13) and education director (1). Similarly, children of families in partnership programs were also primarily Black (48%), Hispanic (22%), White (19%), Biracial/Multi-racial (8%), Asian (2%), American Indian/Alaska Native (<1%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (<1%) and other (<1%).

National	● From 2017-2020, the NAEYC engaged education stakeholders in the *Power to the Profession* initiative in order to develop a framework to create a unified, diverse, equitable and effective early childhood profession
	● In 2017, the University of Washington's Early Edu Alliance initiative engaged with higher education constituents to consider possibilities of transformative teacher development approaches
State	● In 2019, state level efforts led to increased funding and implementation support for the overall ECE system. The state, who had been ineligible to receive the federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) B-5 until 2019, subsequently received funding in 2020 enabling an interagency effort to provide regional access to coordinated early childhood services to better meet a family's needs, enhance and streamline training opportunities for early learning professionals, and improve systems to better inform decision-making about early learning
Regional	● In 2017, within the partnership's urban metropolitan region, a tax initiative was placed on the voting agenda to support a goal of recruiting 200 new, talented professionals to pursue a career in early childhood education & increase training for 200 current early childhood practitioners to ensure that they are properly qualified to teach early childhood
	● In 2017-2018, the early learning lead agency, led education, civic and community stakeholders in launching the early learning strategic plan to assist in the coordination of early learning initiatives across regional partners and strategic investments

Table 1.
Intersection of National, State and Regional Initiatives in ECE Workforce Development

Source(s): Author

Design and development

ECC partners applied the *NAEYC Unifying Framework's* (2020) professional designations to create a vision for a regional ECE workforce pipeline (see Figure 1). Partners anticipated the ECC would serve as a bridge between associate and baccalaureate levels.

Further, they considered a variety of approaches to inform the ECC's design and delivery (e.g. Cheng *et al.*, 2018) such as what were the benefits and challenges to a badging program? A professional development-clock hour model? A full degree program? How could funding support educators' participation? How could courses be reimagined for experienced educators who represent diverse backgrounds working in the field? As multiple factors were questioned, priorities emerged.
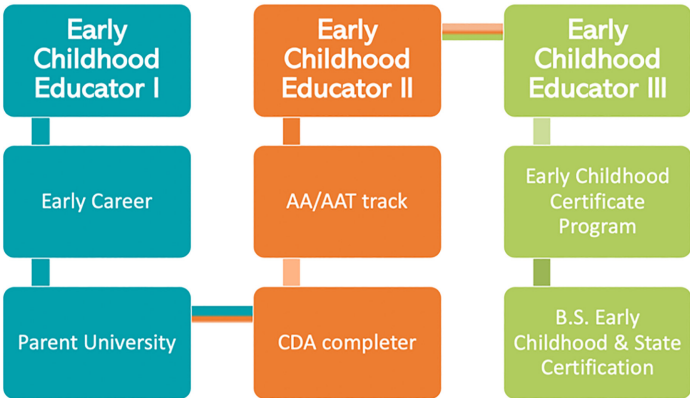
Figure 1.
Pathways for ECE professionals: development of a pipeline for the early childhood profession in Western Missouri

Source(s): Author

(1) Establish commitment and engagement from key stakeholders;

(2) Make higher education affordable for educators working within a low compensated profession;

(3) Use innovative approaches to deliver courses and integrate learning within educators' own programs;

(4) Make higher education accessible for diverse educators working full-time and

(5) Make higher education attainable through competency-based learning within the framework of educator preparation.

Designing achievable steps
As a result of comprehensive research and planning, the ECC was structured as a series of credit-bearing stackable certificates comprising state-approved teacher certification courses. Reflective discussions enabled ECC partners to reimagine the traditional early childhood undergraduate program of study to create certificates around themes of early education content knowledge, skills and dispositions (see Figure 2). Alignment to the NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation and regional core competencies for ECE professionals promoted capacity building and development of professional competencies.

The ECC's structure as stackable courses *within* stackable certificates allowed space for educators to complete coursework while accomplishing short-term and long-term career goals. For example, course experiences promoted an integration of theoretical and practical strategies ECC educators then applied within their classrooms *(Essential 1: A Comprehensive Mission; Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation)*. As their participation continued past the initial pilot, ECC educators completed multiple certificates and observed advancements toward meeting state early childhood teacher certification requirements (see Appendix). This design aided both skill and career development by providing noncertified educators the opportunity to earn credits toward a degree in ECE while strengthening their teaching skills.

Making professional pathways affordable. Partners prioritized the investment of resources to fully fund ECC educators' enrollment. With the establishment of a memorandum of

Understanding the Child
Five courses/13 credit hours

Understand influences on children's development to strengthen teacher-child interactions that maximize learning

Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom
Five courses/14 credit hours

Create optimal learning environments by increasing creative, intellectual and social-emotional effective teaching strategies

Program and Community Partnerships
Six courses/12 credit hours

Strengthen your skills to effectively engage and conned with diverse families and communities

Source(s): Author

Figure 2.
Themes and credit hours across stackable certificates

understanding, the university reduced tuition (50%) and the agency/school representatives identified matching funds. Over the pilot phases, multiple funding streams supplemented tuition and fees, such as local workforce development funds, annual budgets, grants and other alternatives partners identified.

Creating accessible pathways together. As recommended by Cheruvu, Souto-Manning, Lencl, and Chin-Calubaquib (2015), ECC partners examined programmatic changes to learn how to better support educators with diverse backgrounds, such as reorganizing delivery of content, using varied engagement activities and implementing equity-focused assessment practices (e.g. Feldman, 2019; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017) (*NAPDS Essential 1: Comprehensive Mission*). For instance, instructors modified assessments to include oral and creative modalities, which benefited students, especially English Language Learners. These options enabled ECC educators' confidence with the content while increasing their skills written communication skills.

Ongoing feedback gathered from ECC partners and educators via surveys and interviews during course evaluations, focus groups and program meetings promoted further responsive change across all development phases *(NAEPDS Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation)*. For example, reflection on feedback prompted faculty to transform face-to-face courses initially held Saturday mornings into hybrid and online modalities. As a result, barriers related to transportation, work and family needs were removed. ECC educators' feedback enabled the redesign from traditional 16 week, in-person courses, to include 6-, 8-, 12- and 16-week online options, depending upon the credit hour and subject matter content. As courses shifted toward an increase of asynchronous online learning segments, ECC educator feedback informed adoption of software applications to enable virtual class sessions and regular check-ins.

Reflective feedback from ECC partners influenced new methods for collaboration. For example, mid-way through the pilot, course instructors met periodically with ECC educators in their school settings and communicated course themes to educational coaches who regularly supported ECC educators in their respective programs. These activities allowed for stronger connections between course goals and professional goals. Additionally, the university learned of opportunities to utilize employer documentation to provide educators experience-for-credit, circumventing enrollment in practical and student teaching experiences. These programmatic improvements honored ECC educators' prior teaching experiences, current work-related environments and time to teach and learn effectively.

Reflections on successes and challenges

ECC partners established feedback mechanisms to create ongoing dialog and input cycles to further the ECC's development. Insights gathered from advisory board meetings, focus groups, informal reflections and course evaluations prompted real-time and reflective change. Opportunities, successes and challenges emerged in the themes of time, implementation support, unique needs of students, funding, policy and retention.

Time. Time was a unique challenge in a variety of ways. Early in the pilot, partners observed ECC educators needed adequate time to develop "college student" skills (i.e. using learning management systems) and transfer learning into their professional practices. ECC educators, who often had multiple responsibilities outside of their teaching roles, expressed difficulties in finding adequate time to complete coursework and to learn and apply strengthened skills. Few employers were able to support this need consistently, but those who could provide release time during the workday (i.e. extra planning period one time a week), which aided educators in completing online modules or assignments.

The time it took to complete all three certificates within the ECC was a challenge. All members wanted a more accelerated program. For example, ECC educators felt the pace of

an eight-week course was manageable but indicated it was more challenging to complete more than six to eight credit hours (two to three classes) per semester. Toward the end of the pilot, innovative ideas emerged to place coursework alongside identified experience-for-credit opportunities to shorten time across the ECC.

Implementation support. Implementing the ECC required concerted effort and determination from all stakeholders. Partners coordinated with a wide variety of university and agency personnel to ensure contractual arrangements, online learning components and financial investments were in place each semester. Partners continually examined ways to find funding and dedicated time for grant writing and investigating potential funding streams. ECC educators' employers provided release time (when able), completed student teaching observations and documented work experience to support university experience-for-credit applications. Additionally, employers, when able, provided technology support (i.e. hardware, software and high-speed WIFI connection), which was an ongoing need.

ECC educators championed their own learning by developing collaborative relationships to mentor and support one other. Peers assisted one another in acquiring improved skills to navigate coursework and strengthen application of skills in their settings. Instructors mentored ECC educators through individualized support and differentiating course content. For example, assessment practices were adjusted to provide choice in representing learning, such as video responses and oral presentations. Educators appreciated opportunities to check-in virtually or through instructor school visits, especially in the beginning of the program. They also appreciated the mix of content talks (seeing and hearing the instructor) and videos with closed captions to analyze teaching practices. Educators felt assignments were applicable to their immediate classroom teaching.

Unique needs. ECC educators faced unique challenges, such as caretaking of ill or declining family members, ongoing issues due to COVID, parenting or helping to care for children of extended family members (i.e. grandchildren, nieces and nephews), being employed in a second job to supplement income and addressing their own health issues.

Investments. Substantial financial investments supported ECC educators' ongoing enrollment. Reduced tuition, wise investment of training dollars and additional funding through grants, etc. enabled ECC partners to make financial contributions for each certificate. At the same time, availability of funding each semester dictated the number of credit hours that could be offered. ECC educators overwhelmingly reported they would not have been able to participate without the tuition barrier removed. From 2018 to 2021, the partnership's formula supplemented costs to educators for approximately US$38,610 (certificate I, with 11 educators), US$49,140 [certificate II (12-15)], US$35,640 [certificate III (13)] and US$36,000 (10) for courses in the pending fourth certificate. In 2022, a US$30,000 state-sponsored Scholarship and Loan Foundation grant provided funding to support educators' needs for ancillary services (child care and transportation, computer hardware, etc.), licensure exam stipends and enrollment to finish degree or alternative certification programs. To recruit additional cohorts, substantial funding is required.

Policy. ECC partners recently identified that state requirements for ECE degrees require nearly 30 credit hours more than most other teaching degrees (except special education sharing the same number). Attention to policy reform efforts will be important for removing barriers to degree attainment. Streamlining degree requirements may be the first step in reducing the time required of non-traditional students completing baccalaureate degrees while also in the role of educator (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Additional policy reform, such as examination of entry-level testing requirements, may further transform teacher education practices (Souto-Manning & Emdin, 2023).

Retention. Retention of teachers is a priority for education programs, particularly serving culturally and racially diverse populations (Carver-Thomas, 2018). ECC partners

acknowledged that as educators increased professional credentials, they may seek teaching positions with higher compensation. Partners reflected on the potential return-on-investment with the ECC and before starting the program made a commitment to support educators in pursuing career goals despite attrition concerns. Partners adopted sentiments that correspond to the PDS Essential 1: Comprehensive Mission asserting the regional community would benefit from educators with advanced credentials. One leader believed this innovative approach would serve as incubator for investing in educators, scaling-up their skills while working in network classrooms, which in turn would improve program quality. Partners asserted that until state compensation parity issues resolve, innovations like the ECC are imperative to support ongoing professional development needs of diverse early educators. Future ECC participants may be more apt to remain in well-compensated preschool teaching positions. For the ECC educators who completed teacher certification, they have transferred within their same district to higher paying teaching positions.

Closing thoughts

Of the eighteen educators who participated in the ECC, ten successfully completed three certificates and a pending fourth certificate. This allowed educators to earn 66 professional education and content area credits they applied toward a bachelor's degree or alternative certification in ECE (see Appendix). The ECC served as incremental steps to advance along professional pathway designations. As a result of completing the ECC, three educators completed alternative certification (summer 2021), and seven will complete a bachelor's degree in spring 2023 and in subsequent semesters. Two ECC graduates entered a graduate program in spring 2023. Of the eight educators who took courses but did not complete the ECC, two are re-entering with a new cohort. Others experienced individual factors that led them to stop their participation.

Future cohorts from the same metropolitan area will reflect similar background characteristics and teaching positions as the pilot cohort. To be truly successful and make a long, narrow path to degree attainment wider and shorter, especially for diverse adults working within community based and Head Start preschools, ECC partners envision an expanded program that includes support to proactively address barriers, comprehensive financial support, systematic recruitment and infrastructure to support application of learning for improved early education outcomes. This long-term vision includes the need for more rigorous implementation research to demonstrate the ECC as a viable pathway for the region's professional development system and, particularly, educators of diverse backgrounds teaching within community-based preschools.

A dedicated team can create collaborative partnerships to enrich perspectives within an educator preparation program to better serve marginalized groups of students (PK-20) (i.e. Marchitello & Trinidad, 2019). Considerations such as willingness to be vulnerable, collaborate within new boundaries, take risks and reframe widely accepted teacher education practices will enable the development of an innovation that attempts to address structural inequities within the early childhood profession and traditional predominant teacher education programming.

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Appendix

Certificate	Semester	Courses (credit hours)	Course delivery
Understanding the Child	Fall 2018	ECEL 4000 Special Projects Child Development and Brain Building (3)	Face-to-Face, 8 weeks
	Spring 2019	ECEL 2830 Early Childhood Principles (3)	Hybrid, 8 weeks
		FLDX 2150 Introductory Field Experience (1)	Online, 16 weeks
		ECEL 3850 Development and Learning Through Play (3)	Hybrid, 8 weeks
	Summer 2019	EDSP 2100 Education of the Exceptional Child (3)	Online, 8 weeks
Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom	Fall 2019	ECEL 3830 Early Childhood Curriculum (3)	Online, 12 weeks
	Spring 2020	No courses due to funding	
	Summer 2020	ECEL 3225 Acquisition of Language and Literacy (4)	Online, 12 weeks
	Fall 2020	ECEL 4400 Classroom Management and Interactions (3)	Online, 12 weeks
		ECEL 2850 Integration of Arts and Movement (3)	Online, 6 weeks
Program and Community Partnerships in Early Childhood Education	Spring 2021	ECEL 3468 Community, School and Family Connections (3)	Online, 8 weeks
		EDFL 2250 Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students (3)	Hybrid, 8 week
	Summer 2021	EDSP 3150 Community and Family Resources (2)	Online, 8 weeks
		CFD 3250 Organization and Administration of Programs for Young Children (3)	Online, 8 weeks
		ECEL 4000 Special Projects in Education (1)	Online, 6 weeks
Pending 4th certificate in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment across Early Learning Content Areas	Fall 2021	ECEL 4120 Curriculum Design & Assessment (3)	Online, 8 weeks
		ECEL 4140 Communication Arts Integration (4)	
	Spring 2022	ECEL 3110 Lit and Comm Arts for Young Learner (2)	Hybrid, integrated block across semester
		ECEL 3151 Young Learner Practicum (2)	
		ECEL 3510 Social Studies for the Young Learner (1)	
		ECEL 3610 Science for the Young Learner (1)	
		ECEL 3810 Math for the young Learner (1)	
	Summer 2022	EDFL 2100 Intro to the Teaching Profession (3)	Online, 6 weeks
		ECEL 4850 Curriculum Assessment Instruction in Mathematics (2)	

Source(s): Author

Table A1.
Initial pilot of
certificates, semesters
and courses within
the ECC