Preparing Pre-Service Educators for Family Collaborations: Developing Partnerships to Support Learning

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Abstract: A description of a partnership between a university's child and family development program and a local program is provided. Through this partnership, pre-service educators participate in home visits to learn strategies to support effective communication, collaboration, and implementation of evidence-based practices to enhance the learning of young children who may have developmental delays and their families.

KEYWORDS: child development, community partnership, community-university partnership, early intervention, family, family development, partnerships

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:
Essential 1: 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 2: A PDS embraces the preparation of educators through clinical practice.

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

Introduction

Pre-service educators in programs for early childhood (EC), early intervention (EI), and early childhood special education (ECSE) are trained to work with children from birth up to age eight (Division for Early Childhood [DEC]; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC]). The educational curriculum needed for working with young children with disabilities and their families is vastly different from what is needed for general early childhood or school-age special education. For example, some of the unique criteria include (a) collaboration with families, (b) an understanding of the variety of settings in which children are served, (c) knowledge and awareness of the provision of services and support that may be used across developmental domains, and (d) an understanding of how teaming occurs with professionals from other disciplines (Gallagher et al., 2014).

For this skill development needed in the fields of EC, EI, and ECSE, students need to know how to implement evidence-based practices (EBPs), as well as recommended practices (RPs; DEC, 2014); however, concerns have been expressed about the ability to transfer this knowledge into practice (Bruder et al., 2013, McLeod et al., 2021; Odom, 2009). Consequently, coursework that includes the use of clinical placements is critical in supporting the knowledge and implementation that future EI/ECSE professionals will need (Busher et al., 2015; La Paro et al., 2018). In order to address this need, partnerships with community programs may support the learning needs of pre-service educators in the aforementioned fields. The purpose of this manuscript is to (a) provide a context for the unique learning needs of pre-service educators in these disciplines, including a historical and legislative background, (b) review the need for high-quality clinical placements, (c) provide an overview of Part C services, (d) describe the development of a partnership to support the learning needs of pre-service educators, (e) delineate the development of learning opportunities that align with course objectives, and (f) share benefits and challenges that have developed through the partnership. Specifically, this manuscript will describe how the partnership between a University's Special Education and Child Development department and a local Part C program has been formed to provide the experiences pre-service educators need to translate their knowledge into implementation when they enter the workforce. The University and the Part C program are in a metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. The local Part C program will be referred to as the host agency.

Context for Unique Learning Needs
Legislative History and Context for Early Intervention

The work of EI/ECSE professionals and the unique support they provide is predicated on Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which assists states in operating a comprehensive statewide program of services for individuals with disabilities. Part C is specific to services for infants and toddlers who may be at risk for or diagnosed with developmental disabilities, ages birth through 2 years, and their families. Provisions for infants and toddlers with disabilities first appeared in legislation in 1986 when Congress identified an "urgent and substantial need… to enhance the capacity of families to meet the special needs of their infants and toddlers with handicaps" (Education of the Handicapped Act, 1986, p. 1145). Thus, due to the focus on building family capacity, the preparation of personnel to support children and families who receive Part C services requires a perspective that differs from the preparation of school-age children.

The field of EI (i.e., Part C) encompasses many disciplines and practices (e.g., occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech–language pathology, social work) due to the variety of disciplines and fields of study needed to support the individualized, diverse needs of infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. Research and legislation have laid a foundation for how services are delivered. Three primary components are natural environments, family-centered practices, and teaming (Bruder, 2010; DEC, 2014). One challenge facing the field is that personnel preparation programs across study disciplines do not have effective pre-service training models to adequately prepare students to implement recommended practices for partnering with families as they enter the workforce (Bruder & Dunst, 2005; Bruder, 2010; Kyzar et al., 2019). Therefore, personnel preparation programs may consider ways to strategically focus on ways to incorporate natural environments, family-centered practices, and teaming into their curricula.

Natural Environment and Part C

IDEA requires that early intervention services be implemented in natural environments, which are defined as settings that are natural or typical for a same-aged infant or toddler without a disability and may include home or community settings (IDEA §303.126; Tomeny et al., 2021). The focus also supports families within the context of natural routines and activities, using interest-based child learning, and enhancing parent responsiveness to promote child learning (Dunst et al., 2001; Workgroup on Principles and Practices in Natural Environments, 2008). The emphasis on natural environments helps to assure that young children with disabilities and their families will be included in everyday home and community activities, and that early intervention services will not be delivered in places that will isolate the child or their family (Bruder, 2010; Dunst et al., 2014). Furthermore, the provision of services in a natural learning environment assists families in understanding the important role of being responsive in everyday activities and supporting child interests as the foundation for child learning to improve child outcomes (Dunst et al., 2001; Frantz et. al., 2018).

Family-Centered Practices

In addition to focusing on the provision of services in natural environments, the preparation of pre-service educators must include an emphasis on how to partner with families in delivering the supports and services needed to facilitate optimal child and family outcomes (IDEA, 2004). Family-centered practices were introduced into early intervention literature over 25 years ago (Dunst et al., 1994; Shelton & Stepanek, 1994) and have been characterized as beliefs and practices that treat families with dignity and respect, are individualized, flexible, and responsive (Dunst, 2002). When practitioners work with family members in ways that respect their values and choices, and include the support necessary to strengthen family functioning, family-centered practices are being implemented (Dunst et al., 2007). This approach emphasizes the influence of the family system on the child. Subsequently, services must be provided with a consideration of the family context and young children cannot be viewed apart from their families (Bailey et al., 2012). As such, the preparation of pre-service educators includes considerations of the needs for both children and their families.

Teaming

Teamwork is also central to the work in early intervention (DEC, 2014; IDEA, 2004; Workgroup on Principles and Practices in Natural Environments, 2008). As young children grow and develop, convergence among the various developmental milestones occurs across domains (e.g., cognitive, communication). Due to the interplay between areas of development and the complex needs of infants and toddlers with disabilities, early intervention practitioners represent various disciplines (e.g., speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, early childhood education and special education). In addition to early childhood education and special education, discipline-specific professionals should have knowledge and expertise across all the traditional developmental domains, and teaming practices (Bruder, 2010; Shelden & Rush, 2013). To improve the effectiveness of those providing early intervention, researchers suggest that services be delivered through an integrated team approach (Hanson & Bruder, 2001). Teaming practices also support practitioners across disciplines with improving their knowledge of the implementation of the recommended practices in early intervention, such as natural learning environment practices and family-centered practices (Bruder & Dunst, 2005; King et al., 2009; Shelden & Rush, 2013). Additionally, the use of effective teaming practices during the process of administering assessments and developing child and family outcomes may result in decreased stress for the family (Lieberman-Betz et al., 2019).

DEC's Recommended Practices (RPs) and Family Practices

Recommended Practices (RPs) from the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; 2014) guide practitioners to work with families in ways that develop existing parenting knowledge and skills, and promote the development of new parenting abilities that will enhance parent confidence and competence. The RPs include seven topic areas that provide guidance for practitioners, including (a) Assessment, (b) Environment, (c) Family, (d) Instruction, (e) Interaction, (f) Teaming and Collaboration, and (g) Transition. As a key component in preparing pre-service educators in EI focuses on partnering with families, an emphasis on the 10 recommended family practices for practitioners (see Table 1) will be an integral part of their curricula. Family practices encompass three themes, including (a) family-centered practices, (b) family capacity-building practices, and (c) family and professional collaboration (DEC, 2014). Additionally, family practices refer to ongoing activities that (a) promote the active participation of families in decision-making related to their child (e.g., assessment, planning, intervention); (b) lead to the development of a service plan (i.e., a set of goals for the family and child and the services and supports to achieve those goals); or (c) support families in achieving the goals they hold for their child and the other family members.

Local Part C Program / Host Agency

As previously noted, the provision of Part C consists of states operating a comprehensive statewide program of services. For this state in the southeastern United States, a statewide program administers the federal grant funds for the provision of EI services across 16 local programs. The local program, or host agency, described in this manuscript is a one-county catchment area that serves a large urban area. The host agency serves approximately 2800 families a year and has 105 full-time staff including (a) service coordinators, (b) developmental specialists, (c) speech-language pathologists, (d) occupational therapists, (e) physical therapists, (f) social workers, (g) psychologists, (h) nutritionists, (i) interpreters, (j) administrative staff, and (k) support staff.

The primary role of the host agency is to provide service coordination, eligibility evaluations, and child and family assessment to enroll children into the program. Each family is assigned an early intervention service coordinator (EISC) at referral (Knowledge and Skills for Service Coordinators, 2020). EISCs are the first point of contact for families and serve as the primary and single point of contact for families during their referral and ongoing enrollment (IDEA, 2004). After referral, the child and family receive multidisciplinary evaluations (Shelden & Rush, 2013) and assessments to assist with completing the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP; IDEA, 2004). The IFSP outlines how the early intervention team, which includes the family, will work together to address the needs identified for the child and family, and the services to be provided for the family. The EISC role is distinct as they need to bring the expertise of navigating the EI system, "using family-centered practices, linking families to community resources, fostering strong family-professional partnerships, and facilitating and documenting the EI process" (Knowledge and Skills for Service Coordinators, 2020, p. 4). The service coordination role in this state is a dedicated role (Bruder & Dunst, 2008) and can be filled by a variety of disciplines (e.g., Birth - Kindergarten Education, ECSE, Child and Family Studies, Social Work, Nursing, and other human service fields). Therefore, the pre-service preparation for all team members, including service coordination, should be grounded in knowledge of recommended and evidence-based practices.

Pre-service Preparation for Educators

The preparation of pre-service educators involves consideration of many different concepts, including (a) the content that educators should know when they begin teaching, (b) how students can attain licensure, (c) an understanding of the developmental needs of children, and (d) how a program can meet the needs of the community program or educational setting. Once these constructs have been identified, faculty within an institution may focus on ways in which pre-service educators can become knowledgeable and confident in applying content learned within their pre-service programs to their work with children and families. Specifically, faculty should be intentional in targeting ways pre-service educators learn and how to make connections between research and practice (Odom, 2009).

One way to accomplish this is through the use of high-level preparation practices (i.e., clinically-rich field experiences, clinical supervision; Dunst et al., 2019). These practices, along with active student participation and engagement in knowledge and skills acquisition, may be particularly salient in supporting pre-service learning for individuals pursuing careers in EC, EI, and ECSE. Thus, opportunities to participate in clinical placements, which should ideally include a range of settings across a child's natural environment, allow pre-service educators to progress towards higher levels of learning as they observe professionals "illustrate" EBPs and then "reflect, understand, and self-monitor" (Early Childhood Personnel Center [ECPC], n.d.) their observations. Through the use of reflective practices, faculty can support pre-service educators by scaffolding (Shabani et al., 2010) their understanding of EBPs through feedback and discussion.

Where and How We Apply Learning

Within institutions of higher learning (IHEs), faculty are able to provide pre-service educators with the foundational knowledge needed for their future careers. This learning may be enhanced with opportunities to deepen their understanding of core concepts through active learning experiences in clinical or practicum settings. Barnett and Ceci (2002) discussed ways content and context can be transferred; specifically, they identified "what," "when," and "where" transfer of knowledge occurs. In their review of the six dimensions for context (i.e., knowledge, physical context, temporal context, functional context, social context, modality), they put forth the dimensions of knowledge domain, physical context, and temporal context have been deemed the most important. Therefore, they surmised that information gained, how it was applied to settings outside of school, and the retainment of knowledge were particularly relevant. As pre-service educators focus on learning to implement EBPs and RPs in a child's natural environment, the opportunity for clinical placements to take place in a home setting may be particularly salient.

Application of Adult Learning Strategies

In supporting families across routines within natural environments, early interventionists employ the use of adult learning strategies to support families in using EBPs to facilitate their children's learning. While pre-service educators within the CHFD program have multiple opportunities to learn about content within their university program of study such as the sequence of child development, how to write lesson plans, how to assess child development, and foundational principles about family theory, consistent with previous research (Kyzar et al., 2019), these courses do not have an emphasis on how to communicate and partner with families. As graduates exit pre-service preparation programs, this becomes problematic as a primary focus of working with young children in early intervention programs is building family-capacity and learning in pre-service programs is enhanced through rich clinical experiences.

Student Learning Outcomes and Practicum Placements

Student Learning Outcomes

In considering how to incorporate various facets of pre-service preparation for professionals who will enter the fields of EC, EI, and ECSE, many factors are considered (e.g., DEC standards, EBPs, RPs, how and where we apply learning). Teacher educators need to consider how to incorporate these components of pre-service preparation and identify the overall outcome for future graduates. Recently, researchers have placed a higher priority on student learning outcomes (SLOs; Nasrallah, 2014), which are used by faculty and programs to guide the direction of academic achievement (Maher, 2004). The use of SLOs provides guidance to teacher educators in knowing how to organize the course, make decisions about learning strategies and consider ways to evaluate student learning (Sadler, 2016). Moreover, the use of SLOs may assist teacher educators in using a more student-oriented approach to their instruction (Hadjianastis, 2017; Nasrallah, 2014).

Practicum Placements

Through the incorporation of SLOs into designing programs and courses, teacher educators will need to focus on ways to provide optimal learning opportunities for pre-service educators with a specific focus on how to develop family professional partnerships (FPPs; Kyzar et al., 2019). The development of skills needed to form FPPs may be learned most effectively through practicum

experiences which allow pre-service educators to observe and learn from professionals who are experienced in partnering with families and using EBPs to support their work (McLeod et al., 2021; Mtika, 2011). The use of practicum experiences is significant in the preparation of pre-service educators as professionals model how to use standards and practices during their interactions with young children and their families (Beck & Kosnick, 2002; Saclarides & Munson, 2021). Thus, the need to identify partners with high-quality programs and to develop a partnership is critical to supporting the needs of pre-service educators in achieving their student learning outcomes.

Need for Partnerships with Quality Programs

How to Develop a Partnership

The development of a partnership may take some time and arise in a number of ways. Partnerships between community organizations/educational programs and universities can grow through the identification of shared interests and the prioritization of supporting future educators/leaders. Finding someone to partner with may or may not happen immediately. It may involve meeting colleagues at a conference, at a community service event/organization, or it may develop from relationships made between former students and faculty members. The partnership may also develop as a result of relationships and connections formed between colleagues (past or present) and members of professional organizations. Being social, taking the time to get to know others, and focusing on having positive relationships with others are all necessary ingredients for developing a partnership.

Partnerships and Implementation of EBPs

In our partnership, the second and third authors, both administrative leaders of the host agency, were graduates of the University who received funding through a personnel preparation grant for a master's degree and an infant toddler certification; furthermore, they prioritized maintaining connections with faculty in the Special Education and Child Development department. They served as guest speakers, adjunct faculty, and on review panels to provide feedback on the quality of our educational programs. They have also provided support and mentorship for students completing internships with their program. As a newer faculty member, the first author was given the privilege of serving on the thesis committee of one author, in part, due to prior experience as a Part C provider and service coordinator.

The opportunity to meet and collaborate with one another in roles as a graduate student and faculty member created a context to connect and learn about one another, including a genuine interest in supporting the development of both pre-service educators and graduate students. As the relationship grew, the first author learned more about the high quality of work and service provided by the second and third authors in supporting children and families in our community through the host agency. Additionally, the first two authors had the opportunity to serve on several master's research committees together. Through this role of chairing and serving on graduate research committees, the first author learned more about ways the host agency embeds RPs and EBPs into their work and recognized potential for collaboration to support the development of pre-service educators.

Incorporation of Family Professional Partnerships into a Pre-service Program

As part of their program of study, undergraduate students within the child and family development program take two required courses about family development: "Families as the Core of Partnerships" and "Approaches to Family Supports and Resources." These courses each have a specific role in developing a pre-service educator's understanding of how to meet the needs of families with young children. In the first course students take, Families as the Core of Partnerships, the focus is on (a) family systems, (b) the developmental process of parenting through a child's life, (c) formal and informal support systems, and (d) family-driven, family-professional collaboration partnerships. As pre-service educators progress through the program, the second course they take is entitled "Approaches to Family Supports and Resources." This course builds upon previous learning through the application of research and theory so that students learn to implement EBPs for children and families both in home and community settings. Additionally, pre-service educators complete a field-based clinical assignment of approximately 20 hours in settings with infants, toddlers, and/or twos, their families, and/or prenatal families who are culturally, linguistically and ability diverse. As the selection of high-quality clinical placements (Dunst et al., 2019) is particularly relevant in helping pre-service educators transfer knowledge they learned in university classroom settings into the real-life settings and natural environments of young children, the partnership with a program who has the capacity to demonstrate the use of EBPs and RPs with fidelity and an interest in supporting the learning of future professionals must be prioritized.

Development of Home Visitation Project

Through the process of developing and preparing to teach a course, a teacher educator should closely examine the student learning outcomes within a course for alignment with required assignments or activities. Therefore, in examining the SLO's within the "Approaches to Family Supports and Resources" course, the first author noted the SLOs (see Table 2) identified for the course and observed that in meeting these student learning outcomes, pre-service educators would need the opportunity to observe the implementation of high-quality EBPs in authentic settings that could provide "rich-clinical learning experiences." Based upon previous interactions with the host agency, an inquiry was made to determine interest and willingness to provide support through clinical placements to support pre-service educators within this program.

Development of Assignments

After the initial inquiry about proceeding with a partnership to support pre-service educator learning, administrators within the Part C program verified their interest with the university and sought permission from the public health department (which oversees their agency), as well as the university's Office of School and Community Partnerships. Once approval was granted by all parties, both program administrators and the university instructor discussed the types of assignments that would best align with the SLOs and DEC's Recommended Practices, and considered assignments for other courses within the program. Upon reflection, the authors of this manuscript recognized that students (a) had minimal opportunities to learn about assessment practices for children under the age of three, (b) did not have an opportunity to observe an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), and (c) did not have an opportunity to observe an intervention session that utilized coaching and adult learning strategies to build family capacity and meet the family practices guidelines emphasized by the Division for Early Childhood (DEC).

Therefore, it was agreed to focus on (a) the development of assignments that would address each of these gaps, (b) the provision of opportunities to meet with the service coordinator prior to and after these observations to deepen their understanding about how to prepare for meetings and collaborative opportunities with families, (c) the provision of opportunities for reflection by the student after each observation, and (d) the use of checklists created by the Early Childhood Technical Assistance (ECTA) Center to objectively observe how the recommended practices are used during interactions with families. The checklists from the ECTA Center were selected due to their alignment with DEC's Recommended Practices and the needs of pre-service educators to deepen their knowledge and understanding of assessment practices, creating IFSPs, and providing intervention sessions with families.

The first observation related to their understanding of assessment. Through the assessment course taken earlier in their program of study, students primarily learned about assessment that takes place in pre-kindergarten classrooms and with children age 3 and older; therefore, we agreed that an assignment focusing on how assessment practices are used with children birth to age 2 would be an important opportunity that demonstrated alignment with SLOs for this course. In addition, the use of a checklist developed by the ECTA Center would be a way for students to observe how the EI practitioner's use of assessment practices with families aligned with DEC's Recommended Practices. Thus, the "Engaging Families as Partners in Their Child's Assessment" provided a way for students to objectively measure the use of these practices (https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/decrp/ASM-2_Engaging_Families_Partners_2018 .pdf).

The second observation related to their understanding of how an IFSP is facilitated and how families are supported in expressing their concerns, priorities, perspectives, and to be a part of the goal-writing process. Through this observation, an alignment with several SLOs was made. Additionally, two checklists, "Informed Family Decision Making Practices Checklists"(https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/decrp/FAM-2_Inf_Family_Decision_2018.pdf) and "Family Engagement Practices Checklist" (https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/decrp/FAM-3__Fam_Engagement_2018.pdf) from the ECTA Center were used to help students objectively measure how these practices were used during the meetings.

Finally, the third observation related to how service coordinators and/or other team members used coaching and adult learning strategies during an intervention session. Through this observation, an alignment was made with several SLOs within this course. Similar to the second observation, two checklists, "Family Capacity Building Checklists" (https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/decrp/_FAM-4_Fam_Capacity-Building_2018.pdf) and "Family Centered Practices Checklist" (https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/decrp/FAM-1__Fam-Ctrd_Practices_2018.pdf) were used to assist students in objectively measuring how these practices were used during the meetings.

For each set of observations, pre-service educators were asked to provide a short reflection of insights and perspectives gained as a result of these clinical experiences. In addition, pre-service educators and EISCs met to provide an overview of what to expect during the visit and to reflect/share insights of what happened during the visits. After completing the final observation, an overarching reflection was required that summarized their overall impressions (see Table 3) and pre-service educators asked EISCs to sign a log documenting their attendance and participation at the visits (see Table 4).

Pre-Service Educators' Takeaways from Home Visitation Project

Pre-service educators enrolled in pre-service programs focusing on EC, EI, and/or ECSE are often young women who report that a majority of the people they have interacted with in their lives have similar life experiences, religious and cultural beliefs, and backgrounds. They also state that because of their age they have concerns that families will think they are too young to know what they are talking about when they try to share information about child development or ways the families can promote learning at home. Through this project and collaboration, pre-service educators often complete the clinical placement and comment that this experience was not what they expected; furthermore, they state that they have an increased confidence in their abilities to talk with and collaborate with families. In particular, they typically share their surprise at the informality of the IFSP meetings, the communication skills used by the service coordinators and other team members in supporting and encouraging families, and that they enjoyed seeing how research and RPs discussed in class (i.e., assigned course readings, textbooks) could be applied in real settings with real families.

Through the process of their observations, several pre-service educators had opportunities to observe ways to support families who need interpretation services and observe a range of professionals (e.g., occupational therapist, audiologist, nutritionist, vision specialist, psychologist, speech-language pathologist) partner and support families and shared a range of perspectives gathered through this experience. One pre-service educator also noted that they appreciated the support of staff in processing emotions that families and professionals experience when discussing a diagnosis that may be challenging. They stated how helpful it was to finally see support to families using natural learning environment practices and delivered in a family-center capacity. Their reflections indicated they were able to observe what they had been reading was put into action and they were excited to see professionals doing what they had just read about through assigned course readings. Witnessing how the professionals helped the parents respond and process was viewed as being particularly helpful.

CDSA Perspectives of Partnership

Perspectives of Administrators

Partnerships between this host agency and the University's Child and Family Development program have long existed in the community. Current learning initiatives with pre-service educators are the result of long-standing relationships with faculty, former graduates and new professionals who are committed to providing quality introductions to early intervention systems. Administrators at the host agency are committed to spending time and other resources to support students because they understand how critical building future EI professionals is to the field. The host agency has volunteer systems in place to support pre-service educators from various fields, but it is at the discretion of department goals and capacity to support students. Program administrators must weigh staffing needs, program strategic planning goals and other factors to determine how many initiatives staff can realistically support. The host agency provides speakers to undergraduate and graduate level courses, approves staff for outside employment as adjunct faculty, supports undergraduate and graduate student interns and serves on university advisory boards and committees. Administrators also understand that supporting student learning is a long-term commitment that does not demonstrate immediate reward but contributes to the betterment of services to children and families over time.

Partnership Impact on Hiring Early Intervention Service Coordinators

The host agency views itself as a learning organization and supports staff in pursuing professional development and higher education. Staff create individual development plans for leadership development, higher education goals, and other professional aspirations. EISCs have been alumni of undergraduate and graduate programs in the Child and Family Development program. In recent years, several staff have been recipients of fellowships via a personnel preparation grant. Graduates from the university have also come to work at the host agency as new early interventionists as a direct result of their experiences with this university's program. Staff who have graduated from this university's program have consistently taken on leadership in the organization and have also moved on to lead other community organizations who collaborate with the child and family program. Having local programs that offer pre-service educators specific instruction in early intervention and pre-service experiences has significantly improved recruiting of qualified new staff, as well as other organizations that support early intervention systems.

EISCs understand that many early intervention professionals enter the profession as a direct result of a field experience or mentorship by someone already working in the field. EISCs often report they chose Early Intervention because they were taught by faculty who were passionate about EI and encouraged them to seek out this work. Those same staff are the first to volunteer to be that connection for current students wanting to learn about working with young children and families. EISCs for the host agency must obtain a certification to provide services to families. They are also required to have a four-year degree that includes competencies associated with (a) Child Development, (b) Family Development, (c) Screening and Assessment, (d) Interdisciplinary Family Service Planning, (e) Intervention Strategies, (f) Interagency and Community Process, and (g) Professionalism and Ethics. For this state, the accepted degrees are (a) Birth-Kindergarten Education, (b) Early Childhood Special Education, (c) Special Education, (d) Education, (e) Elementary Education, (f) Child Development, (g) Child and Family Studies, (h) Counseling, (i) Human Development, (j) Family Relations, (k) Family Studies, (l) Family and Consumer Sciences, (m) Nursing, (n) Psychology, (o) Social Work or (p) another human services field. EISCs must also receive a minimum of 30 contact hours of ongoing professional development/technical assistance opportunities annually to maintain certification.

EISCs who volunteer to support pre-service educators benefit in several ways as a result of their participation. Having an observer allows the service coordinator the opportunity to articulate the work they do with families and self-reflect about early intervention visits where students have observed. EISCs are exposed to best practice self-assessment tools and are able to answer questions they are asked, as well as receive feedback from the pre-service educator on impressions of the impact of their work on families. EISCs benefit from the enthusiasm and inquiry through these interactions, and it often reminds them why they want to do work in the field. Moreover, EISCs frequently get positive feedback from the pre-service educators which encourages staff and positively reinforces the effort it takes to include them in their already challenging work.

Benefits of Partnership for Host Program/Agency

Ongoing host agency and university partnerships offer many benefits. Pre-service educators, as well as graduate students, who choose to complete research with the host agency's staff or clients offer new perspectives on the field. Student publications and presentations at conferences often include program staff and university faculty in collaboration; these partnerships strengthen work across the community. Strong relationships with the university open the door for

future research collaborations, as faculty areas of interest often align with agency needs and strategic plans. These relationships forged over time improve success on other community projects and model collaboration instead of the siloed approach that often occurs when programs attempt to work together.

Challenges with the Collaboration and Partnership

Although numerous benefits have been noted by pre-service students, host agency staff and administrators, and university personnel, there are ongoing challenges acknowledged by stakeholders. As we continue through the partnership, we have identified some concerns and ways to address them. This fall, data will be collected from both EISCs and pre-service educators about their perspectives of this partnership and learning opportunity.

First, when EISCs are approached to support pre-service educators, it is sometimes challenging to find enough staff to support this initiative each semester. EISC's have busy caseloads and work responsibilities; thus, having enough time to support pre-service educators at times creates hesitations to volunteer. Furthermore, through their support they meet with pre-service educators prior to and after a visit to reflect on interactions with families and decisions made. Another concern is that when new CDSA staff are hired, they need to observe experienced colleagues, and there is not unlimited availability to support their learning requirements of both parties.

Second, scheduling visits that coincide with the needs of college students is challenging. The majority of pre-service educators are juggling multiple commitments (e.g., heavy course load during the semester in which this practicum occurs, completion of a separate internship, preparing for certification and student teaching, jobs, family commitments). With the pandemic, home visits have been virtual which has made scheduling somewhat easier; however, both program administrators and university faculty wonder about missed opportunities for learning about diverse cultures and the learning that happens when you are actually inside the home.

Third, communication between pre-service educators and program staff is sometimes challenging. Emails are sometimes missed and will go to spam. Additionally, different ideas exist between both groups about how quickly to respond to emails and some of the pre-service educators are still developing email etiquette. Furthermore, there is a quick email response culture at the host agency that is not always shared by the pre-service educators.

Fourth, although pre-service educators are encouraged from the onset of this project to plan ahead and schedule visits as soon as possible, not all follow through on this suggestion. Families of young children have busy lives and are often experiencing considerable stress and concern in learning about their children's developmental needs. Consequently, their schedules may change rapidly and visits may be rescheduled at the last minute. Due to their limited experience in supporting families enrolled in Part C, pre-service educators do not always recognize the need to schedule visits sooner rather than later.

Finally, due to the pandemic, figuring out how to support virtual learning and missing out on learning opportunities that can be provided in the home has presented obstacles and challenges in supporting pre-service educators. The host agency generously purchased tripods to support virtual visits. However, some in-home learning experiences have been missed. For example, through virtual visits, pre-service educators did not get to experience the following (a) seeing children and families in person (i.e., how does a young child greet/interact with a stranger), (b) discovering what may be happening in the rest of the home during a visit, (c) considering what

happens with siblings during the visit, (d) determining what happens when you are not in charge of the home or neighborhood, (e) considering how to you handle collaborating with families when minimal furniture and play materials are in the home, (f) identifying ways to respond to all of this in a respectful manner that is family-centered (g) developing increasing awareness of one's own implicit biases through the process of encountering diverse populations, and (h) deciding what to do when the TV is loud.

Conclusion

The purpose of this manuscript was to describe the development of a partnership between an early intervention program that supports the needs of young children with or at risk for developmental disabilities and their families and a university program that prepares pre-service educators to support children and their families from birth through age eight. Specifically, this manuscript (a) provided a context for the unique learning needs of pre-service educators in these disciplines, including a historical and legislative background, (b) reviewed the need for high-quality clinical placements, (c) provided an overview of Part C services, (d) described the development of a partnership to support the learning needs of pre-service educators, (e) described the development of learning opportunities that align course objectives, and (f) shared benefits and challenges that have developed through the partnership. The incorporation of practicum experiences is an integral part of a teacher education program and high-quality practicum experiences are needed to help bridge the disconnect between research and practice (Beck & Kosnick, 2002; Dunst et al., 2019; Odom, 2009). As previously noted, minimal research exists about the preparation of pre-service educators to collaborate and partner with families (Kyzar et al., 2019). Thus, a need exists in our field to share experiences about the benefits and challenges of creating learning opportunities for future professionals in our field. The development of a partnership to support pre-service educators in learning to apply evidence-based and recommended practices, particularly with families, is a topic which needs continued focus, research, and attention. At this time, more than ever, children and families need the support of highly-qualified, well-prepared professionals.

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