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# Journal Issue Theme: "Early Childhood Education"

For many years research findings have documented the crucial role the early childhood years play in children's long-term cognitive and physiological development. Although early childhood educational programs have expanded, funding limitations have constricted their growth, especially in resource scarce high-need schools. Reflecting this slow growth and the sluggish recent market for new teachers, many colleges and universities have been slow to develop new early childhood educational programs.

This has begun to change in Illinois and other states where the federal government has awarded millions in preschool development grants. Illinois received a $20 million four-year grant with the goal of providing full-day, full-year preschool to 3,200 children in year one. This issue of the journal will examine the state of early childhood education, including research findings, program development, and anticipated outcomes with a special focus on impacts in high-need schools. The issue contains case studies of innovative early childhood programs and college-level EC teacher preparation, as well as research on organizational and professional development in support of early childhood educational reform.

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# Publisher's Column: Introducing the Early Childhood Education Issue

*Jan Fitzsimmons, Ph.D.*

**Author Bio ……..**

Across the nation, states are clamoring to develop educational plans specific to the needs of their constituents that will address the essence of the new *Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA*. *ESSA* signed into law by President Obama in December of 2015 is the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* that focuses on "equal educational opportunity." A key component of the law is Title I funding that "gives poor children access to programs that help them attain success." This funding allows the continuation of support for the Preschool Development Programs that provide preschool to students who might otherwise not have access to preschool. Why is preschool so important *to every student's success?*

Dr. Diego, in his column, *Foundations for Success in Early Childhood,* suggests that effective early childhood programs have always been, and continue to be, the basis for success in school! Diego advances systemic steps that administrators might use to establish essential skills that are the bedrock for later learning for every student as he describes the early childhood initiative and its importance in the Chicago Public Schools.

But what are the "high-leverage" practices and conditions that are necessary for teachers, and especially leaders to bolster the kind of early student learning that frames all future learning? Pacchiano, Hawley and Klein in their cutting edge work described in, *Innovations in Early Childhood Instructional Leadership and Teacher Collaboration: From Pilot Study to Statewide Implementation* delve into these waters and equate strong leadership and subsequent organizational structures to successful early childhood programs--- noting that previous research has neglected these important connections. This article describes the research that supports and advances an approach to professional development for leaders, "Lead Learn Excel," that effectively nourishes leaders, teachers and organizations, which in turn --- and most importantly--results in student growth and development.

What provides a strong foundation for reading, writing, the study of mathematics and inquiry science? In *Benefits of Play-Based Learning in the Kindergarten Classroom*, Pang and Simoncelli-Bulak make an evidence-based case pointing to the best answer---------- play. "Play **is** child's work," Pang and Simoncelli-Bulak reiterate! Using research from several parts of the world, these authors discuss the important role play must be given from "identifying a clear definition" to intentionally selecting materials and carefully planning their placement in the classroom to achieve specific learning standards.

Moffitt's column shares an intimate lens on the critical day-to-day work in early childhood education in a blended support system for 3-5 year olds. Her detailed description amplifies the diverse nature of the early childhood population today and the ever present need for greater access and opportunity. The successful outcome of this approach prompts support for kindergarten readiness in an inclusive, high-quality early intervention setting that has the power to decrease the achievement gap.

*Innovative Approaches to the Early Childhood Education Challenges in Central Illinois*, by Page, Quigg and Bezdicek is a case study looking at how one institution developed a program to prepare effective early childhood educators for high-need communities in central Illinois. Their approach advances the importance of candidate knowledge and practices in advocacy, working with parents, and supporting diverse learner needs. Finally, the authors highlight the importance of rigorous and meaningful clinical experiences to prepare all teacher candidates.

Dauksas and Burke contribute to the conversation on preparing teacher candidates to be early childhood teachers focusing on the need to prepare educators for "multi-dimensional learning environments." In their article, *Preparing Early Childhood Teachers for Classrooms of Today*, the authors point to the need for teacher preparation programs to be responsive to the changing demographics of student populations. These changes have driven further study and deeper dialogue regarding the critical importance of both preparation redesign and ongoing support beyond licensure, which includes e-mentoring for early career teachers.

Finally, Pruitt in her article, *An Integrated Approach to Early Childhood Teacher Education at Lewis University,* calls on the work of John Baptist De La Salle, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, James A. Banks, Linda Darling-Hammond, Paulo Freire, Gail C. Furman and Robert Starratt to build a framework for early childhood teacher preparation focusing on teachers as "knowledgeable critical transformative educators, multicultural educators and social justice advocates." Using those standards, the author emphasizes the importance of collaboration among two and four year institutions to build strong programs that also address an urgent need to recruit a larger and more diverse pool of candidates for early childhood education.

At a time when federal legislation (ESSA) spotlights the need for high-quality early childhood education for all, we must not only have increased access to great programs, but we must have a well-prepared cadre of early childhood teachers and knowledgeable and skilled leaders. The authors in this issue make a compelling case for increased access to early childhood programs for a diverse student population and for teacher preparation, professional development, and leadership to serve these most needy and deserving early learners. Read more about the critical work of early childhood education, the research and the practices, and the early childhood imperative for excellent teachers and leaders in this issue of *Success in High-Need Schools!*

# Foundations for Success in Early Childhood Education

*By Dr. Diego*

Early Childhood education years are vital as they set students up for future success. Effective early education programs provide young children opportunities to develop socially and cognitively. To achieve an effective early childhood program, it is essential to provide a clear direction for all stakeholders with attainable goals. It is also imperative to engage educators, strategic partners, and parents while implementing an ongoing progress-monitoring system.

School districts can take a proactive approach to enhance their early learning education programs by developing and implementing a Strategic Plan. This tool serves as a guide to monitor action steps and track early learning strategies that are aligned with student needs and community goals.

Within this process, it is imperative to establish academic objectives and learning expectations that assess needs and are critically important for progression from PreK to second grade.

Another component is the ongoing professional learning opportunities available to teachers, school leaders and parents. School leaders that receive opportunities to learn about early learning education can effectively implement programs, while providing high-quality learning experiences essential for teachers, students and families.

For example, developing cohesive grade to grade transition expectations, implementing play-learning strategies, and identifying student needs while encouraging collaboration across grade levels from PreK-second grade provide positive benefits to student learning.

As the Strategic Plan sets action steps along the way to reach learning outcomes, it is essential to continuously monitor by calibrating the plan learning objectives. Children who are English Language Learners greatly benefit from early learning programs that support second language instruction during their developmental years.

A Collaborative Inquiry Team can effectively develop relationships between principals and teachers supporting strategic learning integration. Historically, preschool teachers have been isolated from their colleagues within a building. To avoid isolation and enhance collaboration, teachers in preschool should work with learning teams from other grade levels in implementing learning pedagogical goals such as the development of transition expectations from PreK to K, instructional program quality, and curriculum alignment.

Teacher recruitment and development in early learning programs are key factors to maintain and enhance student-learning opportunities. There is a high demand to hire teachers who have a teaching certificate in Early Childhood Education and educators with endorsements in Special Education, Bilingual and ESL. School districts can partner with universities to recruit talent and provide opportunities for teachers to secure endorsements in these high-need areas. With our new teachers, it is essential to provide them with systemic and intense mentoring during their early professional years.

In conclusion, children who receive pre-kindergarten education can benefit from early learning programs that develop essential skills, preparing them for their future academic years. Effective group participation, collaboration, the usage of language to express a need or idea, persistence, curiosity and motivation are essential skills that create successful and meaningful early learning experiences.

# Innovations in Early Childhood Instructional Leadership & Teacher Collaboration: From Pilot Study to Statewide Implementation

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**Abstract**
Across education sectors in the United States, the drive to close chronic achievement gaps has piqued interest in school leadership as a cost effective lever for implementing standards-based reforms. Similarly, the national consensus around early childhood education (ECE) as an essential component to successful K-12 reform has focused new attention on directors and supervisors as instructional leaders and collaborators in strengthening organizational capacities critical to continuous quality improvement (Pacchiano, Klein, Shigeyo Hawley, 2016a & 2016b). Little research has examined the capacity of administrators in urban, community-based ECE centers to drive organizational development and engage their staff in multi-modal job-embedded professional learning (JEPL), an approach to instructional improvement and professional development gaining prevalence in K-12 settings (Whalen, et al, in press). This article describes the theory of change for a comprehensive ECE Professional Development Intervention (PDI) implemented and externally evaluated in the city of Chicago with community-based ECE centers to strengthen instructional leadership and teacher collaboration routines, and highlights initial lessons learned from a statewide implementation of this intervention (now called Lead Learn Excel) in both school- and community-based settings.

## Overview: An Introduction to Lead Learn Excel

Strong leadership is essential to strong early learning program success. Equipping leaders with the knowledge, skills, and practical tools to support ambitious classroom interactions and instruction and practice improvement overtime yields broader impact within early childhood classrooms. Yet, interventions designed to improve the quality of early learning programs have focused almost exclusively on teachers and classrooms, not on strengthening instructional leadership and guidance or helping ECE settings become organizations designed for powerful learning and improvement. Improving young children's learning outcomes and increasing the quality of early childhood programs demands an evolved and shared understanding of instructional improvement that is based on the evidence of what actually improves teaching and learning.

In 2011, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, an Illinois nonprofit with 30 years of experience in early childhood professional development, was awarded a Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) development grant to research and develop an effective professional learning approach that builds instructional leadership and results in improved ECE teaching and learning. In 2014, the Ounce was awarded Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge funding to adapt, test, and extend this approach – now titled Lead Learn Excel – throughout Illinois in partnership with the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership. The Ounce refined the key organizational and professional learning supports most proximal to changing and continuously improving instructional leadership practice, and created additional tools and strategies to support leaders with installing and implementing systems of structured teacher collaboration to improve the quality of early education. LLE has reached more than 300 Illinois early childhood professionals in its launch year.

Lead Learn Excel is a professional development approach that translates research on school improvement into an intensive professional learning and organizational development experience and accompanying practical tools and resources. These comprehensive professional learning supports enable leaders to deepen their instructional leadership practice and strengthen the organizational supports essential to high-quality classroom practice and continuous improvement of teaching and learning. Leaders learn how to shape teaching through day-to-day practices of instructional leadership and to drive continuous improvement by facilitating routine teacher collaboration. It guides leaders as they install and learn how to facilitate job-embedded collaborative professional learning routines to generate ongoing teacher growth, development, and practice improvement. By transforming leadership and empowering professional community and teacher collaboration, Lead Learn Excel builds capacity within schools and centers to implement high-quality instruction and sustain a trajectory of continuous improvement of teaching and learning. The mindsets, behaviors, and organizational conditions within schools are fundamentally transformed into those of a learning organization capable of achieving instructional excellence and better outcomes for students.

## Why Instructional Leadership and Teacher Collaboration? Where the Research Led Us

Decades of implementation science and school improvement research indicate that leadership is the critical driver of improvement in education settings (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Leithwood, Anderson, Mascall, & Strauss, 2010). Strong leaders establish a pedagogically-based vision for ECE, a culture of shared responsibility for practice excellence and children's early achievement, and the culture and systems of job-embedded collaborative professional learning that together promote more effective teaching, practice improvement, and stronger early learning outcomes.

The traditional tendency in ECE is to focus primarily on improving what occurs *within the classroom itself*—how the classroom is set up and the particular interactions that take place between teachers and

children to support social, emotional, and cognitive development (Ehrlich, Pacchiano, Stein, Luppescu, 2016). But this focus fails to acknowledge that classrooms do not exist in isolation from their organization and thus fails to consider how organizational conditions either support or hinder the work of teachers and the relationships among staff, children, and families. Indeed, what happens in classrooms is influenced by the conditions under which teachers engage with curriculum, with each other, with their supervisor, and with children and families (Bryk et al, 2010).

### *Organizational Leadership is Essential for Student Learning*

Groundbreaking longitudinal research on school improvement by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research has distinguished features of elementary schools that improved over time from those that stagnated and failed to show significant improvements in student achievement (Bryk et al, 2010). These researchers found that high-quality teaching and sustained student engagement within the classroom depends in large measure on whether leadership and staff engage together in a culture of ongoing support and development. They concluded that improving schools requires coherent, orchestrated action across the following five components of school organization: effective leadership, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environments and ambitious instruction.


Attending to these organization-level dimensions was shown to enhance the day-to-day work of teachers, improving classroom instruction in sustained ways that lead to better student outcomes (Ehrlich, et al, 2016). Schools strong in most of these five essentials were *ten times* more likely to realize improvements in elementary students' math and reading outcomes than were schools weak in three or more of these essentials. And, critically, they found that a sustained weakness in any one of the essentials undermined virtually all attempts at improving student learning; that is, it reduced the likelihood of improvement to less than 10%.

These researchers also found a critical interplay between two types of leadership: facilitative and instructional. Facilitative leadership provides staff with social and emotional supports that increase relational trust and commitment to the school's vision for excellent and impactful work. Instructional leadership provides staff with coherent guidance about assessment, curriculum, and instruction; assistance aligning curriculum across grade levels; and a collaborative and supportive professional work environment with a strategic focus on ambitious teaching and learning. These researchers found that in improving schools, leaders "encouraged the broad involvement of their staff in reform as they sought to guide and coordinate this activity by means of a coherent vision that integrated the diverse and multiple changes which were occurring" (Bryk, et, al, p. 199). Making sure teachers feel encouraged and supported emotionally, all while providing consistently coherent instructional guidance, was identified as a strategic focus of leaders in schools with improving performance. Indeed, these researchers state they were unable to point to a single case of sustained school improvement where local leadership remained chronically weak.

The connection between instructional leadership and children's achievement thus hinges on a large number of school processes (e.g., curriculum coordination, professional collaboration) and intermediate outcomes (Grissom et al, 2013), such as a unity of purpose among staff, high teacher expectations, family involvement, and a climate focused on effective instruction and supportive teacher-student interactions. The health and effectiveness of those school processes is the responsibility of administrators. Schools that improve student achievement are more likely to have principals who strategically hire, actively support the professionally growth and development of staff, and thoughtfully retain good teachers, in contrast to principals who spend time observing classrooms without using that information to structure and guide professional development (Grissom et al, 2013). Instead, principals in high-performing schools facilitate strong professional community and regular cycles of data-based inquiry and collaboration focused on improving practice and student learning (Anrig, 2013: Datnow and Stringfield, 2000; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003).

Alongside this emerging focus on leadership as the driver of practice improvement, a clear paradigm shift has occurred in recognizing the essential support of teacher collaboration or JEPL as the vehicle essential to realizing continuous improvement in the complex work of teachers (Croft et al, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006). Ambitious learning requires high-quality teaching that is simultaneously "personalized and precise" (Fullan, 2007, p. 36). Personalization involves understanding and addressing the individual needs of each student as these appear day by day, week by week. Precision consists of meeting these learning needs in a focused, effective way, again as they occur and evolve; "timely, on-the-spot precision, not packaged prescription" (Fullan, 2007, p. 36).

These performance expectations of teachers are demanding practice (TNTP, 2015; De Jong and Ferguson-Hessler, 1996). Michael Fullan (2007) concludes that teachers "cannot possibly" teach ambitiously unless they are deeply immersed in learning every day from their practice, their peers' practice, and children's learning in order to figure out how to improve. Highly effective teachers have an understanding of practice that is extremely coherent, comprehensive, and accurate. They have finely tuned instincts and decision-making abilities that come from this deep knowledge and ongoing collaborative discussions with peers that help them apply their understandings into changed practices. In contrast to traditional one-off modes of PD, the emerging paradigm is sustained, school-based, collaborative, focused on students' learning, and linked to curricula. It involves "teachers examining student work, developing assessments … and jointly planning, teaching, and revising lessons" (Hiebert et al, 2002).

Job-embedded approaches to professional learning are demanding. As a result, not all analyses of the merits of JEPL approaches are equally impressive or sanguine. Even convinced advocates of investment in JEPL acknowledge that they can be time-intensive for participants, expensive in terms of assets like on-site coaching, and demanding in terms of scheduling and the coordination of elements and resources (Croft, et al, 2010; Jimerson-Campoli, 2011). They expose gaps in knowledge and competence, challenge personal dispositions, promote distribution of leadership, and disrupt expected organizational patterns in favor of innovation (Smylie 2010). Moreover, quality of implementation remains a fundamental challenge. They require reconfiguring the school or center master schedule in order to carve out and protect time for teacher collaboration during the workday and week. And, while many teachers value opportunities to collaborate around lesson planning, peer-to-peer observation, and lesson study, many continue to associate "professional development" with externally-imposed expectations of compliance and be sensitive to school-based professional development that is poorly organized (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014).

Early evidence does suggest that differences in how leaders engage teachers in these efforts has significant impacts on teachers' openness and ability to take up new and progressive instructional and social-emotional practices (Fitzgerald and Theilheimer, 2013; Green et al 2012). When JEPL opportunities are integrated around protocols of improvement that are shared among teachers and leaders, professional identity benefits and instructional improvement ensues (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood et al, 2010). A common denominator in schools with improving performance is this combination of instructionally-focused leadership and the creation of a supportive instructional guidance system that allows teachers to collaboratively build craft and knowledge together, on the school site using consistently applied protocols and norms (Leithwood, et al, 2010).

What stands out in these improvement science and professional development literatures is a shift from thinking about leadership as primarily administrative and management focused toward conceptualizing leaders' essential role in facilitating trusting professional relationships and collaborative, ambitious professional learning for adults. Highly effective leaders thus influence children's achievement primarily through learning how to transform working relations among adult professionals so that all mindsets, discourse, and activity are galvanized toward improving practice and children's learning.

## Fostering Instructional Leadership in Practice: Designing the PDI Pilot

Our research review made clear that investments in leadership and organizations are required if the early education sector is to transition toward sustainable practices of evidence-based instructional improvement (Joseph, et al, 2011). Therefore, we conceptualized and designed a professional development intervention (the PDI) that builds program leaders' foundational knowledge and core competencies in supporting and improving high-quality classroom practice for children's learning in their organizations. The PDI's theory of change used two of the five essential organizational supports as entry points for strengthening the organization as a whole to improve teaching and learning:

- *Inclusive and instructional leadership is the driver of change.* Leaders are responsible for creating a climate and conditions supportive of teaching and continuous improvement. This includes establishing a vision for excellence, building relational trust, galvanizing staff activity in service of improvement, and providing teachers with coherent instructional guidance and time during the workday to collaborate with colleagues toward ambitious and improving practice.

- *Teacher collaboration is the vehicle for improvement.* The way teachers work together to develop and continuously improve curriculum and instruction, emotionally supportive learning environments, and engagement of families is far more important and predictive of achievement and school improvement than any individual teacher or school quality characteristic (Allensworth, 2015).

The substantive content of our intervention was crafted by knitting together the framework of the five essentials with the practices of effective professional development, translating the empirical research into an implementation framework for instructional leadership —a roadmap—specifying the foundational knowledge, core practices, and dispositions of leaders in educational settings strongly organized to the essentials and for improvement. We adapted the K–12 definitions of each essential for fit and relevance to early education settings and practices and thoroughly assessed why these organizational conditions tend to be so weak in early childhood settings. We determined the necessary competencies of leaders and organizational systems to address these root causes of organizational weakness and identified tasks associated with core practices to construct job aides and protocols that systematized approaches to those tasks. In the end, we designed 12 professional development modules

designed to challenge and enable administrators to become instructional leaders who do their job in a fundamentally different way.

## Description of the Ounce Professional Development Intervention (PDI)

From 2012 to 2014, in partnership with Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Department of Family Support Services, and with support from the Stranahan Foundation, The Crown Family, and a US Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) development grant, the Ounce of Prevention Fund designed, implemented, and refined our professional development intervention (PDI) in four community-based early learning programs serving infants, toddler, preschoolers, and their families. Our work involved 15 administrators and 60 teachers serving approximately 600 low-income, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse children in Chicago.

The PDI aligns the professional learning cycles of four key groups of educators—center leaders, direct supervisors, teachers, and assistant teachers—to transform centers into learning organizations collaboratively focused on excellence and on generating improvement through strong organizational conditions, including job-embedded professional learning. The PDI is grounded in a systems understanding of educational improvement and includes three core components:

1. ***Intensive cycles of job-embedded professional learning***. These cycles develop role-specific knowledge, skills and dispositions of instructional leadership aligned to the five essential supports framework for improvement, and high-impact teaching and learning aligned to the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) respectively.[42] These intensive cycles spanned six to eight weeks and consisted of training to build knowledge, coaching and consultation supports to transfer that knowledge to practice, and reflective practice groups to support collaborative examination of practice and planning for improvement (See Figure 4).

2. ***Center-wide systems of job-embedded professional learning*** that protect time routinely and structure teacher collaboration during the program week and month.

3. ***Job aides and protocols to shape complex work and decision-making processes***. These job aides and protocols systematize how people approach and deal with tasks associated with core practices, including center-wide decision–making, collaborative data dialogues, and lesson planning.

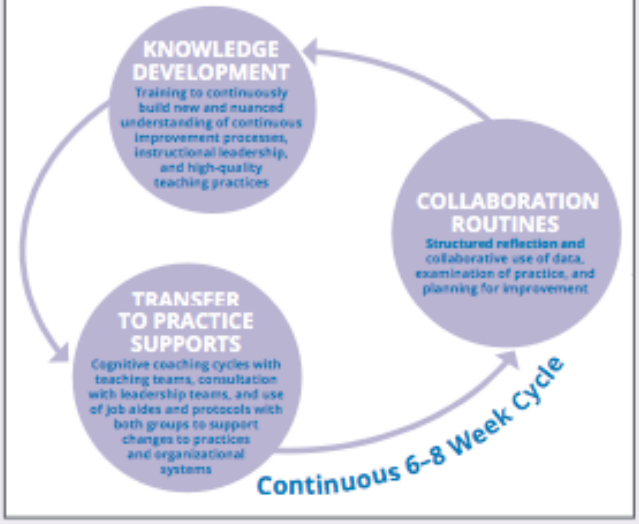
Job-embedded professional learning routines were the primary vehicle for advancing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the leaders, supervisors, and teachers during the intervention. These routines were also intended to be the vehicle leaders used to sustain gains and generate continuous learning and improvement in their centers beyond the intervention.

Our work was independently evaluated by the University of Illinois at Chicago, Center for Urban Education Leadership (urbanedleadership.org). The evaluation found that we successfully:

- Increased leaders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions with instructional leadership, including inclusive decision-making and facilitation of job-embedded professional learning that shaped a culture of collaboration, excellence, and improvement
- Established a system of instructional guidance and feedback, and weekly and monthly job-embedded professional learning routines structured by job aides and protocols
- Increased teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions with intentionally planning and deliberately implementing higher-quality interactions and instruction as measured by the CLASS[43]
- Realized statistically significant improvements in children's social-emotional learning and development

FIGURE 4

PDI Learning Cycle




We spent three years implementing, studying, and refining our instructional leadership framework and intervention in four community-based, birth-to-five, early education programs in Chicago. That process

involved developing leaders' foundational knowledge of improvement, grappling with their doubts, illuminating their concrete responsibilities in creating strong organizational conditions, and transforming how leaders interact with teachers to support continuous professional learning and practice improvement. Amid struggles to shift their identity toward that of an instructional leader and how to be in learning-focused relationships with teachers, leaders steadily grew their comfort and confidence by increasing their knowledge and understanding of high-quality teaching practices and skills with facilitating teacher inquiry and professional learning.

To strengthen the essential organizational support of teacher collaboration, the PDI fundamentally shifted how leaders thought about professional development, and, critically, the leader's role in building the capacity of staff in sustained and systematic ways resulting in improvement. Our aim was to support leaders in creating organizational systems that protect time— time for leaders to guide instruction and time for teachers to collaborate—during the program day, week, and month. Ideally, these collaborative times have explicit purposes, structures, and outcomes that result in professional learning. Leaders came to understand that job-embedded professional development is the vehicle for organizational change and instructional improvement. Teacher professional learning became embedded within the structure, schedule, and daily work of teachers in participating centers.

Building on these two foundational transformations, we saw further shifts unfold for ambitious instruction, supportive environments, and engaged families. These other three essentials were strengthened as leaders redefined their role, challenged their assumptions about leadership and about how teachers' actually grow and improve their practice, reordered their priorities to shape teaching, and evaluated policies and decisions through the aims and lens of the five essentials framework for improvement.

## Instructional Leadership at Scale: Delivery Across Illinois

After three years of piloting, refining, and evaluating the PDI, we iterated the logic model for feasibility of implementation at scale and then began implementing Lead Learn Excel throughout Illinois in partnership with the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership and the state's quality rating and improvement system, ExceleRate Illinois. Our statewide implementation has been supported by a federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant, in partnership with the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, the Illinois State Board of Education, and the Illinois Department of Human Services.

Lead Learn Excel builds on the principles of the PDI pilot and intensifies the focus on developing effective instructional leadership practices including installation and facilitation of JEPL routines. Through Lead Learn Excel, instructional leaders create learning organizations with structures and conditions that continuously support teachers in improving their practice. Lead Learn Excel helps leaders transform their role from one focused on individual elements of quality, compliance and administration, to one intentionally focused on instructional quality and the systematic support of teachers in pursuit of improved outcomes for students and families. In Lead Learn Excel, leaders learn about the multiple contexts for JEPL beneficial for practice improvement and how to install and facilitate three such routines, including collaborative data dialogues, team lesson planning, and peer learning groups.

Using a parallel design to the one leaders will implement with teachers, Lead Learn Excel engages diverse administrators in three professional learning contexts to help them (a) develop new knowledge about ECE teaching and learning and the organizational supports essential to improvement processes;

(b) apply that new knowledge into practice, and (c) reflect, improve and sustain change with leadership peers. The Lead Learn Excel program thus includes four core supports critical to effective adult learning, harnessing motivating, and enabling change in practice:

- Training & Knowledge Development: Training cultivates leader knowledge and understanding of instructional leadership, organizational conditions, and job-embedded learning necessary for improvement.
- Technical Assistance (TA): TA supports leaders to apply knowledge, change their instructional leadership practice, and embed learning routines with teachers.
- Peer Learning: Leaders engage in peer learning to reflect on what works, examine their practice, and collaborate on improvements with a group of peers.
- Tools & Resources: Protocols, templates, and videos scaffold effective leadership, equipping leaders to systematically and sustainably improve practice over time.

Recognizing that early learning programs often lack resources to implement organizational change, Lead Learn Excel leaders were also eligible to apply for "mini-grants" which provide a small monetary grant to support quality improvement efforts in their school - such as the purchase of curriculum materials, payments for substitute teachers to allow classroom teachers to meet together during the workday, and other instructional resources. To expand the reach of the initiative, Lead Learn Excel launched an online resource library available to all leaders across the state. The library curates high-quality and current information and tools specifically on cultivating an effective instructional leadership practice, facilitating structured JEPL routines, and achieving instructional excellence.

## Implementation Experiences from Diverse Settings

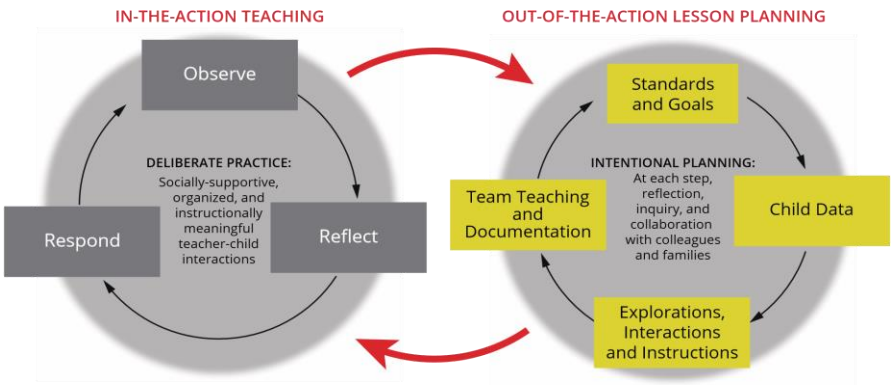
Lead Learn Excel brought the PDI's approach into a broader array of ECE program settings and classrooms, all of which surfaced a variety of instructional leadership development and implementation challenges and opportunities.

For example, working with public school districts meant not only working with the ECE program administrators and principals to ensure a vision for instructional excellence and corresponding JEPL routines was established and maintained, but also working with system-level administrators in the district to develop the expectations and district-level supports that allowed administrators to prioritize and engage in a daily practice of inclusive and instructional leadership to improve learning outcomes. For public school districts, helping leaders chart a course for gradually evolving their role and changing building-level systems to install JEPL routines took multiple steps - including working with their unions to negotiate staffing allowances for protected time for teachers and leaders, strategically reconfiguring master schedules, and exploring the benefits of JEPL with improving children's learning outcomes. Lead Learn Excel actively supported leaders with planning and installing the infrastructure for JEPL while also helping leaders grow their skills with facilitating teacher collaboration and structured JEPL routines of team data dialogues, team lesson planning for ambitious interactions and instruction, and peer learning to examine practice. The Lead Learn Excel advisors supported districts in aligning Pre-K with K-3$^{rd}$ grade teaching and learning expectations and quality improvement efforts so that teachers across the early-grades receive coherent instructional guidance and opportunities to collaboratively plan and improve practice.

Lead Learn Excel instructional leadership development involved complex work, and to be successful drove sweeping changes. In one urban elementary school, the principal (a) introduced a Lead Learn Excel framework and protocol – the *focused teaching cycle* and *team lesson planning protocol* – to systematize lesson planning for greater rigor and use of standards and data, (b) revamped her school's

process for analyzing and using both child and classroom data, (c) began facilitating routine peer learning groups for teachers to share problems of practice; and (d) purchased and introduced a new math curriculum to make a major improvement in the one curriculum area her staff assessed as weak. Using Lead Learn Excel mini-grant funds to assist with the cost of the supplemental math curricula, the teachers received training on the new math curriculum and also spent time in principal-facilitated peer learning groups to problem-solve implementation issues they were experiencing with the new curriculum. In addition, the principal also participated in weekly lesson planning meetings to help teachers tie the math objectives to state standards, to other learning and development objectives, and to differentiate and individualize the math experiences for their students.

LLE Focused Teaching Cycle




After this principal's participation in Lead Learn Excel concluded, several colleagues and a head teacher (who co-facilitates many of the peer learning groups at their school), started participating in a Lead Learn Excel cohort of their own. The head teacher is now collaborating with the principal of a K-8$^{th}$ grade school into which many of the pre-k students transition into kindergarten. The intention is for the K-8$^{th}$ grade principal and his leadership team to begin participating in the peer learning groups facilitated by the head teacher in an effort to extend those supports into their school's early grades.

Lead Learn Excel frameworks and professional learning routines hold many implications for district- and state-level systems work. For some school districts, Lead Learn Excel has been helping to shape the organizational structures, systems, and birth-3$^{rd}$ and 8$^{th}$ grade alignments that are critical to school performance and student success. One medium-sized school district in the northern region of the state has made a commitment to building those district- and building-level systems that provide those aligned and sustained JEPL supports to teachers by having not only the Pre-K principal, but also the K-3$^{rd}$ grade principals, assistant principals, and its deputy superintendent participate together in a cohort of Lead Learn Excel.

After a year of Lead Learn Excel participation – trainings, technical assistance, and peer learning – a school-based pre-K center has been conducting regular peer learning groups for teachers to deepen teachers' knowledge and skills with analyzing and using child data. This instructional leader has used the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS, Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) domains and dimensions to structure peer learning and advance teachers' understanding of highly impactful teacher-child interactions. Teachers are also supported with applying this knowledge and reflection directly to their instructional practices because they meet with their instructional leader weekly in team lesson

planning meetings. Instructional leaders facilitate teachers' teamwork to make sense of their child data, classroom data, and state learning standards to plan more rigorous and ambitious learning experiences. Teachers then carry that intentionality forward into their everyday activities and teaching.

Seeing the value of the CLASS as a conceptual framework for teacher professional development and the benefit that has of cultivating teachers' shared understanding of high-quality teacher-child interactions, the deputy superintendent secured a private foundation grant to cover the costs of training all K-3rd grade administrators, instructional specialists, and approximately 10 teacher-leaders on the CLASS – K-3, so that these leaders can also infuse the CLASS lens and language into the work of K-3rd grade teachers. The deputy superintendent is also in the process of strengthening district-level systems, including cross-grade implementation of collaborative, JEPL routines so that there is consistency across teacher learning and a like-minded focus on implementing the same high-quality interactions and instruction Pre-K – through elementary grades regardless of the curricula or special initiatives undertaken by the district. The district's focus on developing these systems helps ensure the instructional leadership practices and JEPL routines cultivated during Lead Learn Excel will be sustained and grown district-wide.

While Lead Learn Excel has brought innovative approaches to instructional leadership and JEPL into school district ECE settings, it continues to transform practice in community-based ECE programs and settings. At a community-based center, the preschool program coach was initially skeptical that the schedule would be able to accommodate regular meetings for JEPL and teacher collaboration. Indeed, all professional development occurred off-site, three days per year, and as follow up to that training the coach met with teachers individually to focus on monitoring and directing. Through Lead Learn Excel, the coach now takes a relational, inclusive, collaborative, and competency-building approach to her work with teachers. She has begun implementing the JEPL routines and using Lead Learn Excel protocols, including the data dialogue protocol to support each teaching team to establish baseline performance information and set goals. The coach is advocating with the director for changes to the program schedule that will better protect (a) collaboration time within and across teaching teams, and (b) leadership involvement in teachers' professional learning and practice improvement. The coach is laying the foundation for a stronger instructional leadership practice that includes routine JEPL, but has already made substantial transformations in her own instructional leadership practice.

At a large inner-city child care center, two administrators (the director and assistant director) have introduced to teaching teams and begun implementing the following JEPL routines with their teachers and teacher assistants: data dialogues, team lesson planning, and peer learning teams. Through Lead Learn Excel, these center administrators are prioritizing time to shape teaching and learning and to focus deliberately on improving practice and children's learning. For example, using the LLE protocol, the assistant director facilitated a data dialogue with one teaching team. That teaching team then presented a version of the data dialogue to their peers in the program and encouraged broad adoption and use of the protocol. The ensuing collaborative discussions of the data resulted in the staff deciding together to set a goal to focus on improving math instruction, center-wide.

## Outcomes and Impact

During the pilot study and through implementation of Lead Learn Excel state-wide we have observed notable growth in ECE leadership, teaching and young children's learning taking place in schools and centers with leaders equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Lead Learn Excel.

For leaders, we observe:

- Transformed understanding of instructional improvement as an organizational process they are responsible for leading
- Improved inclusive and instructional leadership skills with building trust, collective responsibility, facilitating teacher inquiry, and galvanizing staff persistence with ongoing practice improvement
- Fully-implemented systems for collaborative job-embedded professional learning in which leaders learn together with staff through ongoing cycles of inquiry, data use, and practice improvement

Leaders grew in their understanding of the impact of their leadership and organizational conditions on supporting effective teaching, children's learning, and instructional improvement. We also saw evidence of growth in their respect for the complexity of teaching, the competencies teachers need to hone, and that collaborative, JEPL is a more effective approach than traditional professional development for improving teaching and learning. And we observed participants succeeded with creating a sustainable schedule for weekly team lesson-planning meetings, monthly classroom observation and dialogue, and one monthly reflective practice group.

For teachers who were recipients of leaders' enhanced instructional guidance and facilitation of JEPL routines, we observe:

- Improved rigor of lesson planning practices, including the design of standards-aligned, data-informed, ambitious interactions and instruction
- Improved quality of teacher-child interactions as measured by direct observation using the CLASS, with 76% of classrooms providing mid-to-high-quality emotional supports, classroom organization, and instructional supports by the end of the pilot.
- Increased emotional support from colleagues and increased positive dispositions towards collaboration
- Increased supportive relationships with leaders
- Increased commitment to continuous learning and improvement, specifically, by the end of the pilot 85% of teachers reported that they were part of a professional community that supported them in making practice changes.

For young children in the classrooms of teachers receiving enhanced instructional guidance and routine opportunities to collaborate with peers, we observe notable growth in social-emotional development compared to preschool children enrolled in matched samples of programs that did not enhance their organizational supports for teaching and improvement. As leaders developed a more inclusive, strengths-based approach to their relationships and instructional guidance with teachers, the teachers in turn interacted with children in more positive and organized ways. We observed an indirect impact on children's learning of leaders' developing a more emotionally supportive and collaborative environment for teachers. Specifically, positive impacts were observed on closing the gap in social-emotional learning and development for those children with two years of exposure to enhanced leadership and JEPL. Given that two of the aims of transforming administrators to a stronger daily practice of inclusive and instructional leadership is to increase professional trust and community in order to advance teachers'

pedagogical knowledge these results reflect the effectiveness of this approach in supporting and improving instructional practice.

Through Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge funding, the State of Illinois has commissioned an external evaluation of Lead Learn Excel that is being conducted by the University of Illinois-Chicago, Center for Urban Education Leadership. This evaluation will examine the implementation of Lead Learn Excel, explore change in leadership mindsets and practices in all participating settings, and analyze impacts on teaching and children's learning in a small number of programs. Final implementation evaluation findings will be available in fall 2017, followed by final outcome and impact evaluation findings in late winter 2017.

## Conclusion

Lead Learn Excel deepens leaders' understanding of how essential strong and sustained organizational supports are to actually improving teaching and learning. It focuses leaders' attention on the responsibility they have with cultivating a trusting and collaborative community of practice, and with facilitating inquiry and innovation instead of monitoring for compliance. It replaces traditional disjointed professional development with a system of collaborative JEPL It motivates leaders to expand their identity beyond "running the ECE program" into those of an instructional leader whose day-to-day practice provides teachers with the relationships, guidance, conversations, and collaboration that generates professional learning and practice excellence and improvement.

Efforts like ours, however, did not and cannot fully address the larger conditions—such as inadequate and disjointed funding and burdensome and complex compliance demands—that contribute so mightily to the challenges programs face in their efforts to improve teaching and learning. These essential sustained supports and the instructional improvement that flows from them are far more likely to thrive when the underlying context of the program, the center or school, the community, the school district or agency, and the early childhood system are adequately strong and well resourced (Bryk, et al, 2010). Our PDI, and comprehensive improvement efforts like it, could be successfully implemented in many more programs, schools, and centers if there were a concerted effort to thoughtfully align program metrics and child outcomes to structural supports—and if leadership competencies and the essential conditions for improvement were kept at the forefront of accountability conversations about what gets measured, funded, and supported (Regenstein & Romero-Jurado, 2014).

The more we explored the essential supports for improving educational settings, while emphasizing inclusive instructional leadership as the primary driver of change, the more leaders co-constructed a systems understanding of instructional improvement and their essential role in leading it. They shifted from striving for buy-in and compliance to cultivating the collective understanding that ignites teachers' attention, responsibility, and action for improvement. They began to aspire to lead something greater than compliance. They began to know that together with their staff they could strive for excellence for themselves and the children and families they serve.

Our vision and our work was timely. In 2015, (one year after we concluded our work to design, develop, refine, and independently evaluate the PDI), the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council released its seminal report, "Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation." Two of the 13 recommendations specifically target early childhood program leaders, including that the field specify knowledge and core competencies leaders need to support high-quality practice in their organizations, and establish revised leadership standards, especially in the area of

instructional leadership. This is what Lead Learn Excel is designed to do and what promising evidence from our pilot demonstrates that it is able to accomplish.

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## Appendix. Five Essential Supports Adapted for Early Education

Inclusive and Instructional Leadership: Leaders focus strategically on children's health, learning, development and school readiness, and with actively supporting teachers to be effective in their daily work with children and families. Leaders establish a vision for child-centered supportive learning environments, ambitious teaching and learning, and partnerships with families in accomplishing that vision. They hire staff determined to continuously improve learning opportunities and outcomes for young children and families. In daily activities and interactions, leaders build and maintain mutually trusting and respectful relationships. They galvanize staff activity in service of improvement and direct resources toward a vision for sustained learning and improvement. Leaders build collective responsibility for excellence and improvement by enlisting teachers in improvement efforts and practicing shared leadership that cultivates a cadre of leaders among teachers, parents, and community members. Leaders ensure the school is managed effectively, including the facility, budget, staffing, and resources.

Routine Teacher Collaboration: Leaders use supervisory and professional development resources, performance feedback and social resources within the staff to build their professional capacity. Leaders work together with staff to define their strategic focus and practice improvement goals, and to solve learning and implementation problems along the way. Leaders protect time for routine teacher collaboration during the work week, and facilitate those routines to ensure teachers are reviewing data, examining and reflecting on practice, and collaborating to design instruction and try out practice improvements. All staff work in collaboration to promote their own and their colleagues' professional growth. In such centers, teachers and staff are active partners in quality improvement, committed to the center and the children and families it cares for and educates, and focused on continuous professional learning, effectiveness, and improvement.

Child-Centered Supportive Learning Environments: In child-centered supportive learning environments, all adults build supportive relationships with each other and with children and their families—the most basic prerequisite for learning. In the earliest years, it is critical that children experience child-centered supportive learning environments in order to develop a positive sense of themselves, the ability to trust others, and successful approaches to learning. Leaders use resources and establish policies that ensure all adults in the school community create consistently child-centered supportive learning environments. All adults attend daily to the use of physical space, materials, daily structure and routines, continuity of care, group size and ratio to create child-centered supportive environments. All adults interact with each other and children in warm, positive ways that create a positive emotional climate allowing children to consistently feel safe, liked, able to build relationships and actively explore. Teachers are trust-worthy and responsive to children's individual emotional and intellectual needs, they hold high expectations for children's capacity to learn, and they affirm and promote children's exploration, friendships, engagement, and persistence.

Ambitious Interactions and Instruction: All adults are provided guidance that articulates the what and how of effective teaching and learning for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. All adults endorse and use early learning and development standards and assessment information about children's progress toward the standards to design meaningful learning opportunities. Teachers reflect on and plan intentionally for their role in providing children with interactions that are emotionally supportive, organized, instructionally meaningful, and individualized to each child's needs. All adults partner with families in continuing to learn about meaningful and effective learning opportunities for children both at home and at school. A guidance system supports high-quality implementation and continuous improvement of teaching interactions, instruction, and children's learning. Structures for the implementation of curricula, assessments, and use of materials are coordinated across the program. While teachers may have substantial discretion in how these resources are used, teaching effectiveness depends on the community of practice and supervisory dialogue and feedback that supports implementation.

Strong Ties and Partnerships Among Families, Schools and Community: Children do not exist alone; they are a member of a family that lives within a community. When families, schools and communities focus collectively on children's needs, children are healthy, competent, motivated learners who realize long-term social and academic success. Early parent-school partnerships shape parents' awareness and capacity for partnering with educators and advocating for their children's needs to ensure positive experiences and success in school. Through systematic approaches, the entire staff works to build responsive, respectful relationships with families that motivate engagement and goal-oriented partnerships. Parents are partners in developing and achieving goals for their child and their family. Staff value parents' perspective and participation and are willing to be influenced by it. All staff share and seek information from families to build mutual respect and understanding. They make decisions collaboratively with parents and work cohesively across home and school to support children's participation, health, learning and development. All staff cultivate strong ties with elementary schools and actively support parents, children and teachers to make successful kindergarten transitions. Through referrals and connections to community resources, staff work to reduce material hardships, promote well-being and increase family capacity to engage with the children's learning and development. By building social networks among families, staff work to reduce isolation, increase social-emotional supports and open life and learning opportunities that strengthen families and entire communities.

# Benefits of Play-based Learning in the Kindergarten Classroom

*By: Erica Pang and Lisa Simoncelli-Bulak*

## Author Bios:

## Introduction:

According to the late Fred Rogers, "Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood," (Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning, 2014) The Benavides Kindergarten Center houses 500 preschool and kindergarten students drawn from 12 different elementary schools in Aurora East School District #131. Benavides offers full day preschool and full day kindergarten. Our full day kindergarten program balances academics with social-emotional learning and play based learning. We have found much success in this well-balanced program to support the development of the whole child. Educators often say letter names and sounds are the most essential skills a kindergartner should know upon entering first grade. However, one of the most critical components of a kindergarten program needs to be the development of oral language skills. Oral language is how we express knowledge, ideas and feelings. This is the foundation of learning. One of the best ways to develop oral language is to give students opportunities to listen to and use language in the classroom (Trehearne, 2003). Listening to and speaking the English language are the first domains to develop in English Language Learners. With seventy percent of Benavides students being English Language Learners it is vital to provide a classroom environment with a variety of opportunities for students to hear and speak the language. A play-based learning block in the classroom is a perfect opportunity to allow students to develop oral language skills in a natural and risk-free environment. Kids need to play. As Fred Rogers said, "Play is serious learning."


*This is a student of Cory Mehnert, an early childhood educator at the Benavides Kindergarten School. The student is playing in the Science center during our "Things that Move" unit.*

## Why play?

With a greater push for full-day kindergarten programs across the country, many professionals, experts, and organizations see the value of early childhood learning by setting the stage for future learning and social emotional well-being. The benefits of play are recognized scientifically. The neural pathways in children's brains develop through exploration, thinking skills, problem solving, and language expression that naturally occurs during play (Canada Council of Ministers of Education, 2010). Children learn through doing and they learn through play. Teachers need to facilitate opportunities for play in the classroom while fostering a caring classroom community where all students are given ample opportunities to grow and develop. According to Cory Mehnert (2016), an early childhood educator at the Benavides Kindergarten School, "play is imperative in early childhood as children construct their knowledge from experiences." Overall, play-based learning can lead to greater social, emotional, and academic success. Play is risk-free. Play is an ideal context for learning how to read, write and communicate. Play supports the development of academic content such as literacy and math, but also, social, emotional and physical development of children. Play allows children to problem solve, inquire and begin to understand the world around them (Trehearne, 2003). Children are given an environment to grow and learn that is natural and non-threatening in order to develop critical skills that are necessary for future success in school.

## Current Reality

Common Core State Standards have intensified academic expectations for students from kindergarten to 12$^{th}$ grade. As a result time to integrate play-based learning in the classroom is being neglected in many schools. According to the authors of *Is Kindergarten the New First Grade,* there are great differences between the kindergarten classrooms of 1998 and those in 2010. After taking a look at some of the experiences between then and now, the researchers conclude that current expectations have driven the increased focus and time spent on academics and as a result, less time on nonacademic subjects like drama, music, art and play. For example, in 1998 only 31% of kindergarten teachers expected their students to learn to read; by 2010 this expectation jumped to 80% of teachers (Education Week, Feb. 2016) With higher expectations from the Common Core State Standards, we are concerned that students are now excepted to learn and do more than what they may be prepared to do, with little emphasis on how to prepare them. We need to focus on teaching students how to learn, which involves developing social-emotionally first. Play-based learning provides students opportunities to learn how to learn."

These expectations are then the focus of the kindergarten curriculum in schools with little or no time devoted to areas such as drama, theater and the arts. Comparatively in 1998, only 18% of kindergarten teachers did no theater activities; by 2010 the gap increased greatly to 50% of kindergarten teachers. Importantly, dramatic play experiences allow students to imagine different scenarios and role-play diverse characters in their play experiences. Yet, the percentage of kindergarten classrooms that actually had a dramatic play area decreased from 87% to 58% of classrooms during this twelve-year period.

Compared to other countries, the U.S. falls flat in terms of allowing time for play in schools. On average, American elementary school kids get 27 minutes a day. Their Finnish peers get an average of 75 minutes. In Japan, children get 10-15 minute breaks each hour in addition to a longer recess period based on the idea that kids' attention spans begin to wane after a certain amount of intense instruction (Eunjung Cha, 2015). By way of contrast, in America the school day is highly focused on academics, with little time for movement, arts, crafts and play. Moreover, American classrooms now spend less time on child-selected activities and more on teacher directed whole class activities using workbooks and worksheets. These activities only promote rote memorization and basic recall. They are not developmentally

appropriate for students in kindergarten and do not encourage critical thinking. Lastly, teacher-directed whole class activities of watching someone else do something may not be as engaging as "play which allows for active exploration because the student can experience a task, lesson, or experience first hand" (Mehnert, 2016).

## What is play and how does it support learning?

What exactly is play-based learning? When asked about play in the classroom, many educators believe that it means extra recess. Actually, there are many different forms of play, not simply playing outside. Although playing outdoors is important, school play needs to benefit the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of children. There are many ways to play. Some play is very free and unstructured, like playing with blocks. Other forms of play are very structured, such as playing "school" or "restaurant." The different forms of play that are used in the classroom are dependent on the teacher providing structured experiences, instruction and materials. Edward Miller and Joan Almon (2009) suggest that the following types of play should be considered for use in a kindergarten classroom:

*Large-Motor Play* – swinging, jumping, running. Students are given opportunities for recess and physical education where they can develop gross motor skills

*Small-Motor Play* – playing with puzzles or sorting objects. Students are given opportunities to develop fine motor skills.

*Mastery Play* – tying shoes. Students will continually practice task until it is mastered.
*Rules based-play* – creating games and rules. Students learn how to work with one another, negotiate and adapt to each other.

*Construction play* – building structures. This allows for creative imagination and often is free form, but can easily be scaffolded. For example, if a teacher provides toy animals to go along with blocks, children may construct a zoo.

*Make-believe play* – acting and role-playing. Children can act out any scenario, story, or event. The benefit of make-believe play is it allows for an opportunity to practice oral language.
*Symbolic play* – turning ordinary items into props. For example, a chair can transform into a car, or a pencil into a magic wand.

*Language play* – when students tell or present stories and make up songs to develop their language skills.

*Playing with art* – creating, painting, molding. Playing with art through a variety of mediums allows students to express their feelings and ideas.

*Sensory play* – playing with dirt, playdough, water, sand. Students develop their senses when playing with different items with various textures, sounds, and smells.

*Rough and tumble play* – when children play through interacting with each other in contact sports and games.

*Risk-taking play* –testing physical limits. Students can challenge their limits and learn about their physical abilities. The game limbo is an example of risk-taking play.

It is important to remember that play is fun. When learning is fun, children are more motivated to engage in learning opportunities. There are many forms of play to consider for the kindergarten classroom. Achieving balance is key. Children should have opportunities to initiate play, but teachers also need to guide learning by designing purposeful activities that are scaffolded. It's important to have variety in the classroom with careful thought on when to introduce different forms of play and play materials such as blocks, puppets, art supplies, puzzles, make-believe play clothes, kitchen utensils, and other tangible items related to particular classroom themes.

A positive benefit of integrating play in the classroom is student engagement. When children are engaged in purposeful play, they are discovering, creating and expanding their own learning, a natural response to the environment around them. By manipulating objects, acting out roles, and experimenting with different materials children are learning to take responsibility for their own learning (Canada Council of Ministers of Education, 2010). According to psychologist David Elkind, "play is not only our creative drive; it's a fundamental mode of learning." He emphasizes the interconnectedness between play and academic work for young children. Play allows children to actively construct and expand their own understandings by making connections to prior experiences (Canada Council of Ministers of Education, 2010).

Most importantly play can easily be integrated into the curriculum. Teachers can take advantage of children's high interest and engagement in play experiences by planning an entire curriculum and incorporating standards-based goals and objectives for children's learning into their lessons. Throughout these planned play experiences, the teacher incorporates standards of mathematics (number and operations, geometry and spatial sense, and patterns and measurements) by introducing these concepts in a meaningful context. The teacher may also integrate language and literacy goals and objectives by helping children to discuss and document their play, and by providing literature and informational text on specific topics or areas.

According to Benavides teacher Cory Mehnert, "Direct instruction can be utilized to introduce a new idea or new concept, but with intentional, productive play experiences used for extra support and scaffolding, children can take what they learn and apply them in context." (2016) Furthermore, in early childhood play becomes an avenue for introducing and teaching social-emotional skills to our youngest learners. "Students cannot be expected to learn without first knowing how to self-regulate, focus, share, understand, and empathize with others." (Mehnert) Overall, play is an engaging means of learning.

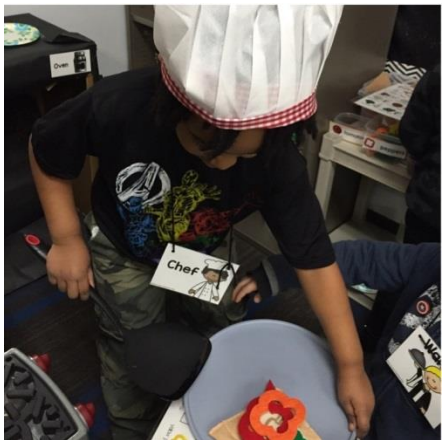
*Another one of Ms. Mehnert's students who is playing with blocks that they had painted themselves. They created Mondrian designs after we learned about the famous artist Piet Mondrian*

## How to assess play?

Standardized testing has trickled down to the early childhood classroom. Students are regularly assessed on a variety of literacy skills and math skills with the expectation that they will be reading by the end of the kindergarten year. Although this information is valuable in helping design academic instruction, there is so much more needed for understanding the whole child. In order to fully understand where a child is developmentally, a teacher needs to be a keen observer. There is much power in observation. Using observation as a form of assessment in the classroom allows the teacher to get to know each child more fully, to build relationships and to connect with children. Skilled observers reflect on their teaching practices and use observational data to determine student strengths and weaknesses and reflect on their own instructional practices.

Every child is unique and our students come from a variety of cultural backgrounds. When teachers observe how children interact with each other, they can learn so much about the cultures, attitudes and beliefs of their students, (Jablon, Dombro, and Dichtelmiller, 2007). Teachers must be given time to be able to learn about the uniqueness of each and every child. Becoming a skilled observer will give teachers very valuable data to help plan their instruction and to look at the academic, social-emotional and physical development of each child.

So when is the best time for teachers to observe? One of the best ways to observe and collect assessment data on children is when they are in a natural setting. Having a play-based learning block integrated into the curriculum allows for a perfect time for assessment through observation. Taking anecdotal notes, video recordings and pictures are all simple ways to gather meaningful information on every child. The teacher should utilize a variety of approaches during this time. They can simply observe, coach students, keep play open-ended or keep it very structured. Teachers can purposefully plan play to incorporate math and literacy skills that can easily be observed and assessed during play. An example of this would be a bakery. Having students take turns playing bakery hits a variety of academic and social-emotional standards. If teachers wants to focus on math standards, they can focus on students taking orders, counting cookies, or putting sprinkles on a cookie. Literacy skills could include store signage, creating menus, and writing student orders. Oral language development can easily be observed. Teachers can focus on social-emotional skills and see how students are sharing, taking turns, and self-regulating their behavior. Depending on the teacher's focus there really is no limit to what can be observed during play. Specific standards can easily be incorporated into the play-based learning block allowing for a natural setting for teachers to observe and learn about the whole child.




*A student role-playing as a chef, creating a pizza in the pizza restaurant play center.*

## Conclusion: Considerations about Play

Play encompasses a variety of contexts. To ensure effective play integration in the classroom it is important that teachers have the appropriate materials, such as blocks, dramatic play items, kitchens, and art supplies. Districts need to support play and build time into the kindergarten day for play. A clear definition of play and play guidelines needs to be developed in schools.

Within the classroom, we must make our play experiences engaging, meaningful, and intentional. Materials should be well thought-out to include standards, yet be open-ended so that teachers can utilize the zone of proximal development to meet each child where he or she is, and scaffold them to the next level of learning. It is not enough to put toys on a shelf and tell children to "go play." Teachers need to be diligent about providing materials that encourage rich language experiences, extend learning opportunities, and cement concepts and foundational skills. A balance of child-initiated and teacher guided activities is essential. Teachers should look at the various types of play and incorporate a variety of play activities into their classrooms. Balance is key. As Cory Mehnert declared, "Play is the time when, over and over, I see my students make connections between content and application. It is also during play that we see the love and joy of learning." (2016).

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# Early Childhood Developmental Enrichment Center (ECDEC/Preschool For All) and District 15 (Palatine) find children at risk and prepare them for the rigors of kindergarten

*By: Elaine Moffitt*

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## Introduction

Community Consolidated District 15 houses nine sites for students (age 3-5) who have entered a screening process and qualified for the Early Childhood Developmental Enrichment Center (ECDEC) Block Grant (Illinois Preschool For All). District 15 served 575 kids, approximately 75% who are Latino (slightly over 400), during the 2015-16 school year. Five classrooms are housed in an alternative school where they blend with special education students. The remaining ECDEC classes are housed in elementary schools and facilities in Palatine and Rolling Meadows. All ECDEC classes hire a Spanish speaking instructional assistant and nearly all classroom teachers are endorsed in ESL.

## ECDEC Program

As a "blended teacher," 10 of my 15 students (per half day) are considered "at risk" and have been screened and placed in my classroom through the ECDEC, funded through the Preschool for All Block Grant. Five of the 15 have qualified for special education. ECDEC students are placed in my classroom based on highest need with regard to multiple risk factors including poverty, linguistically isolated homes, children from families involved in the child welfare system, disabilities/developmental delays, low parental education and other factors. Half of my students are English Language Learners (ELL) with Spanish as their first language. Some students also qualify for speech/language; occupational therapy, physical therapy and social work services which are available in my building. My blended classroom also serves as the least restrictive environment (LRE) for my students who qualify for Special Education. Some of my students with Individual Educational Plans (IEP) who no longer qualify for special education become part of the ECDEC program throughout the school year. All other ECDEC sites serve 40 students daily.

The Family Involvement Nurturing Development Prevention Initiative (FINDPI) program is funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and is included in the ECDEC Block Grant and offers parent and child interaction activities, parent workshops and home visits for children from birth to age three (www.ecdec.org ). The enrollment of 67 families and 72 students in fiscal year 2015 were all below the poverty level and 62 of the adults had education levels below high school. The enrollment was primarily Latino with families clustered in northeast Palatine, Rolling Meadows and a pocket of

Arlington Heights. Through May 2015, 950 home visits had been conducted and all families participated in at least one "Promise to Play" family literacy based session weekly.

Family and community involvement is a priority for both programs, ECDEC and FIND. Parent workshops and family engagement activities were frequent at all sites. Topics ranged from nutrition and discipline to literacy and math. Collaborative partnerships included libraries, park districts, villages and townships, hospitals and clinics, agencies that support basic needs, plus those that provide enhancement such as Woodfield Area Children's Organization (WACO), Toys for Tots and adult education providers.

ECDEC/PFA uses Creative Curriculum, Project Approach, Scholastic, and Literacy based additional curricula aligned with the Illinois Early Learning and Developmental Standards. By creating purposeful and productive play experiences children grow in all developmental areas. Using a variety of curriculum strategies, teachers provide children with opportunities to develop and receive support for the following skills: language, social-emotional, cognitive, fine and gross motor. Parent workshops are offered on a wide range of topics based on parent needs. These include school routines and responsibilities, discipline, nutrition, literacy, health and safety, language acquisition and kindergarten readiness (www.ecdec.org ).

ECDEC has received Gold Circle of Quality recognition from ExceleRate Illinois and two awards of Excellence in Preschool Teaching and Learning in May 2016. They also submitted a portfolio for an Award of Excellence for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Practice in April 2016, in hopes of receiving this prestigious award.

Overall the Illinois Early Childhood Policy Goals are 1) to increase the percentage of children who begin kindergarten healthy, safe, eager to learn and ready to succeed in a rigorous, developmentally appropriate K-12 curriculum, 2) to decrease disparities (racial, economic, geographic) in "readiness" at kindergarten entry and in achievements by third grade, and 3) by 2021, 80% of all children will be fully ready for kindergarten (Hernandez, 2016). ECDEC has consistently exceeded this goal. Student learning outcomes in the ECDEC program were tracked three times during the FY 16 school year. Of high importance are the kindergarten bound outcomes revealing that 95% of the students going to kindergarten met or exceeded the program goal in the science/math domain and 84% of the students going to kindergarten met the language/literacy goal.

## Conclusion

Research has proven that if at risk children come prepared for kindergarten they will close the achievement gap by fifth grade. If they do not come ready for kindergarten the gap will continue to expand. ECDEC had a waiting list of 235 children during the 2015-16 school year (Ford, 2016). Unfortunately, in spite of this pre-kindergarten program success, there continues to be a shortage of classrooms and funds to serve those who are most in need. In April, 2016 the District 15 Facilities Plan Committee v2.0 presented the School Board with recommendations for addressing the District's long-term facilities needs. Two broad goals were discussed: addressing the educational needs of students and improving the accessibility and organization of schools. By expanding the community school program near areas with families in greatest need, more young ELL students would receive intensive services for more hours of each day, minimizing transportation issues. This will also provide increased opportunity for students eligible for pre-school programs (District 15 Connections, June 2016).

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# Preparing Early Childhood Teachers for Classrooms of Today

*By: Linda Dauksas and Lisa Burke*

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**Abstract**
Institutions preparing early childhood teacher candidates in the state of Illinois must take into consideration the multiple audiences, including families; and complex student needs, including children with medical diagnosis, delays and risk factors; served in programs and schools today. Preparing teacher candidates to teach in these diverse and multi-dimensional environments is more than a 4-year task. The implementation of an e-mentoring program offers supports to novice early childhood teachers entering the profession. E-mentoring pairs teachers with the same licensure, reinforces teacher preparation content and fortifies the skills needed in today's early childhood classrooms.

*Keywords: early childhood teacher candidates, designing teacher preparation programs, diversity, English as a second language endorsement, special education, e-mentoring, novice teachers*

## Understanding Early Childhood Education

Earning an early childhood teaching license in Illinois provides teacher candidates with opportunities to work in diverse and multi-dimensional learning environments serving young children and families. Diversity is the human aspect reflecting the varied demographics of the children and families along the dimensions of age, gender, race, ethnicity, language, ability, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, first and second language development, and so on (Workforce Design, NAEYC, 2008). Multi-dimensional is the ever-expanding complexity of early environments where young children play/work, grow and learn and where families are provided resources to extend their own learning.

In Illinois schools, the early childhood teacher license provides candidates with experiences teaching young children with disabilities or delays across developmental domains including language, cognition, social emotional and motor, or delays which may result from environmental factors placing the future academic success of young children at risk. The current early education funding available to local educational agencies (LEAs), provides opportunities for young children with qualifying characteristics. Albeit termed, *Preschool for All,* the Early Childhood Block grant only serves young children meeting specific criteria. The grant ensures services to young children (3-5 years of age) and families, deemed at risk, because the home and community environment are subject to particular language, cultural,

economic and like disadvantages (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], 2015). The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures services to young children either with qualifying medical diagnoses or conditions determined by professional judgment to constitute a disability.

Early childhood services can be provided in blended classrooms with students qualified from the IDEA and Preschool for All, or in separate classrooms defined specifically by funding streams. Within each there are different levels of service, including all day and half-day programs. Some classrooms are age specific, others span the 3-5 year old continuum. Some classrooms offer instruction in a language other than English, while others accommodate children who are nonverbal and dependent on assistive technology to communicate. All include families as members of their learning communities.

In addition to disability and other risk factors, the shifting demographics of our state have propelled an increase in the number of racially and linguistically diverse children and families served in early childhood classrooms. This demographic shift presents another imperative. Teacher candidates must have the skills necessary to work with children and families in a culturally responsive manner as well as using methods that are linguistically and developmentally appropriate.

The knowledge and skills of early childhood educators are the cornerstones of high quality programs. Specialized knowledge and professional development in how young children learn is critical, as is the quality of interactions between staff and children (Institute of Medicine, 2000). In addition to teacher candidates' knowledge and skills and continuity of relationships, knowledge of diversity in all arenas of the early childhood education field is necessary to ensure educational equity for young children (Workforce Design, NAEYC 2008).

A recent national survey of early childhood teacher preparation programs in two- and four-year colleges and universities revealed that a majority of early childhood personnel—including teachers, administrators, para-educators, and specialist—did not feel adequately prepared to educate young children with disabilities (Chang, Early, & Winton, 2005). This is alarming since young children (3-5 years of age) with disabilities have been receiving services since 1975 when public law 94:142, Education of All Handicapped Children Act, was enacted. This suggests that for more than 40 years teacher preparation programs have not adequately prepared early childhood personnel to work with young children with disabilities! Early childhood teacher preparation programs can no longer exclude or minimize children with disabilities and developmental delays and families at risk and those learning English in their curricula. Serving young children with disabilities and delays in our state is the essence of early childhood education. Preparing teacher candidates for this responsibility is essential.

At the national level millions of dollars are being awarded to serve young children and families. Most recently, $80 million has been awarded to the state of Illinois for early childhood education (Office of Early Childhood Development, 2014), intensifying the need for an increased number of adequately prepared licensed teachers to work with young children and families, including those with disabilities and delays. In response to this new initiative and research demonstrating that early education matters, Illinois needs both a larger pool of early childhood teacher candidates and programs that prepare not only all teachers, but teacher leaders and administrators with a comprehensive understanding of early education today and the skills necessary to support the ongoing development of young children and families.

## Assumptions Behind Elmhurst College Program Design

The Elmhurst College early childhood teacher preparation program remains committed to preparing teachers and teacher leaders for the current needs in early education. To this end, the program is guided by the following goals. Teacher candidates will:

- Seek to integrate content knowledge across disciplines and construct pedagogical content knowledge to provide culturally relevant instruction that prepares all students for the literacies needed in a changing and interdependent world.
- Apply differentiation, evidence-based practices and assessments, and innovative technologies to meet the characteristics and needs of all students.
- Provide safe, caring classroom environments that demonstrate and encourage creative, engaged learning for become lifelong learners, critical thinkers, and responsible citizens.
- Collaborate with students, families, colleagues, and community members to create learning communities that value diversity.
- Act as reflective and ethical professionals who are committed to schools and the profession.

These guiding principles, coupled with the changing demographics of our state, provoked the teacher preparation program to respond to the diversity and multi-dimensional factors in early education. As the demands and demographics of Illinois have changed, our teacher preparation program has sought to change to meet these new realities.

Before formal changes were made, selected faculty at this institution started advising teacher candidates to take electives needed to earn the Letter of Approval for Special Education and the English as a Second Language endorsement. In a relatively short period of time, a clearer understanding of the needs of licensure course content emerged and hiring districts responded. Teacher candidates earning the special education approval and ESL endorsement and student teaching in early childhood special education classrooms were hired quite readily. Teacher candidates who did not elect to earn the approval and/or endorsement had less success in seeking employment and in some cases were directed to earn the approval and/or endorsement as a condition of employment.

This data was supported by interviews with district administrators from across the region. The administrators explained their challenges and hiring needs. Districts were opting to serve young children with disabilities and young children deemed at-risk in blended classrooms, a model supporting the least restrictive environment (LRE) designation. Hiring a teacher candidate who had earned the Letter of Approval for Special Education, allowed that teacher to provide services outlined in students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP). In addition to supporting LRE, this was a cost saving measure for the districts, since the early childhood teacher could also provide special education services.

District administrators also acknowledged changing demographics in their schools and the growing numbers of children and families learning English upon entry. Administrators expressed a need for teacher candidates with the ESL Endorsement and explained that beyond the endorsement, their need for bilingual teachers was expanding and intensifying.

## Program Redesign and Alignment

It became clear to teacher education program planners at Elmhurst College that all, not just a few, early childhood teacher candidates needed to be prepared to teach *all* young children. Elmhurst program planners concluded that it was the College's responsibility to assure that teacher candidates would understand and be prepared to serve their future student populations. Coincident with the institution acknowledging these factors, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) issued new standards and expectations for the redesign of early childhood teacher licensure programs (ISBE, 2015).

As a product of the Elmhurst College teacher preparation redesign, early childhood electives have been replaced with requirements. All candidates will earn the Letter of Approval and the ESL endorsement and/or the bilingual approval when appropriate. Teacher candidates will move through courses in a cohort exposing all to the same content in a developmental sequence mirroring child development. Each semester's courses focus on specialized knowledge including diversity, age bands and families. Courses will be taught by a cadre of experts in each of the designated grade bands. Assignments and authentic assessments will be completed in field-based placements under faculty supervision.

Upon entry, teacher candidates' first semester consists of studying the birth-year three age band. Fieldwork will be completed in natural environments alongside families and professionals serving young children deemed at risk and young children with medical diagnosis and/or disabilities. Teacher candidates will focus on engaging families as learning partners including those who are learning English. Teacher candidates also have the option to complete an internship required to earn the credential as a developmental therapist under the Illinois Department of Human Services.

The following semester teacher candidates study the 3-5 year old age band with a focus on young children with disabilities (per IDEA) and young children deemed at risk for future school success (per the Early Childhood Block Grant). Their assignments are field-based and supervised in selected school districts where Elmhurst has signed agreements. Teacher candidates will work with teachers who earned the Letter of Approval for Special Education, the ESL endorsement or bilingual approval when appropriate. Aligned with the institution's goals, teacher candidates will be taught to employ culturally responsive methods for *all* children, integrated content and methods including science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics (STEAM), instruction driven by assessment for all children including English language learners (ELL) and practices engaging all families in early learning environments and experiences.

The third semester of course-work focuses on the 6-8 year old age band (kindergarten-second grade) and will be coordinated with selected elementary schools. Teacher candidates will again work alongside a teacher with the ESL endorsement two days each week and prepare for an ESL action research project. Concurrently, the teacher candidates will take courses that include primary methods for literacy, integrated methods for mathematics, science and social science, and data driven decision making to positively impact the learning environment and students' learning.

The final semester will be comprised of two student teaching placements. One placement will be in a 3-5 year old learning environment including young children with disabilities and their families. The other placement will be in a kindergarten to second grade classroom. One or both placements will be

completed in a classroom supporting students learning English in order to complete the action research project during the student teaching semester.

## Moving Forward: Challenges or Opportunities

As the demographics of our nation shift and the racial and linguistic diversity of young children continues to increase, it is imperative that early childhood teachers and administrators have the skills to work with children and families in order to be culturally as well as linguistically and developmentally appropriate. Approximately 45 percent of children younger than five are racially, ethnically, or linguistically diverse, and this percentage is expected to grow over the next decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Moreover, diversity among early childhood teachers encourages and supports children's positive identity development and prepares them for success in an ever-changing and increasingly diverse society. Diversity of early childhood leadership encourages young professionals in their novice teacher roles (NBCDI, 1993; Calderón, 2005; Ray, Bowman, & Robbins, 2006). Change is often perceived as a challenge. Elmhurst College teacher educators saw change as an opportunity to cultivate teacher candidates prepared to teach *all* young children and families, most importantly those children with disabilities or delays and those families learning English.

## Support for Novice Teachers in High Needs Classrooms

The previously described initiatives and preparation program for early childhood educators describe the expectations novice early childhood teachers now experience. These professionals are charged with the important task of being the first teacher young children and families encounter, so it is imperative that novice educators in these high needs teaching positions are confident in their problem solving, decision making, and teaching abilities. Ingersoll & Perda (2010) reported that 40% to 50% of novice teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching. Consequently, implementing supports beyond a four-year preparation program are imperative. Supports may include induction programs and mentoring opportunities for novice teachers, but these require attention from policy makers, administrators, and higher education faculty to ensure successful implementation. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) cited lack of support as a reason educators leave the teaching profession, affirming that providing support to novice teachers in high needs positions, such as early childhood education, should be a priority. Teacher retention must also become a consideration for teacher preparation programs as institutions of higher education reflect the current needs of early childhood education.

Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) confirmed that in order to retain successful teachers supports need to begin during the pre-service years, then follow the novice teacher into the induction years in comprehensive and cohesive ways. The Elmhurst College early childhood teacher preparation program saw the need for continuation of support for their novice early childhood teachers entering high needs teaching positions, often in high-need settings, and designed a study of support. Their study paired novice and experienced early childhood teachers from the same teacher preparation program in an e-mentoring relationship. E-mentoring is a form of mentoring between a novice and experienced teacher designed to support novice teachers' needs and concerns. The e-mentoring relationship is conducted using technology, involving the use of mentors across schools, districts, and possibly states (Smith & Israel, 2010). The goal of their study was to develop e-mentoring relationships as a tool for developing problem solving skills for novice early childhood teachers, with the intent of retaining these teachers in high needs position and viewing teaching as a lifelong career.

Our study was conducted during the 2015-16 academic year and ran from September to March. The experienced mentor and novice early childhood teachers established a synchronous meeting time using a Facetime platform on an electronic device. The participants engaged in weekly synchronous and asynchronous meetings to discuss topics of their choice supporting the novice teachers' abilities to make decisions and problem solve, thus leading to professional growth for both the novice and experienced mentor educators. To capture the essence of synchronous meetings topical log sheets were compiled. Topics discussed ranged from balancing personal and professional responsibilities, family communication, student needs (academic, functional and behavioral), collaborating with team members, teacher evaluation, and administrator support and interactions. The mentor teachers were able to share advice and revisit teacher preparation content on how to best deal with challenging students or families, keep reliable and valid data for challenging behaviors and academic needs, navigate the Danielson teacher evaluation protocol, create effective academic accommodations and interventions, establish positive and collaborative communication techniques with co-workers and team members, and acquire resources and support inside and beyond their school district.

At the conclusion of the study, the participants engaged in exit interviews about their e-mentoring experiences. Both the novice and mentor teachers commented that they felt comfortable with each other due to the commonality of their preparation experience within the same early childhood teacher educator program. Participants were grateful for the experience and felt they were able to discuss a wide range of topics based on what they were experiencing in an unbiased and non-judgmental exchange of information. The novice teachers explained it was reassuring to know that someone in the same situation, albeit outside their school district, supported them and would be there if needed. Both the mentor and novice teachers commented that initiating the e-mentoring relationship during a teacher candidates' student teaching semesters and carrying the relationships into the first year of teaching would be a positive and beneficial opportunity as the mentor teacher would also be able to advise on resume and interview preparation and getting ready for the first professional teaching experience. Overall, the teachers were positive about the e-mentoring experience and felt the relationships developed will be initial steps in building a network of professionals outside their own school. (V. Zurbuch, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

## Conclusion

As teacher preparation programs are in process of redesign faculty must remain responsive to the internal and external demands impacting stakeholders beyond their campus. Programs must acknowledge the challenges and opportunities faced in early childhood education today. In order to effectively prepare teachers, the process of teacher preparation cannot be completed in four years. It must be ongoing. Teacher candidates, school administrators and teacher educators need to continue to incorporate new knowledge and skills through a coherent and systematic program of learning experiences. These experiences must be grounded in theory and research, be outcomes based be structured to promote linkages between theory and practice, and be responsive to each learner's individual background, experiences, and the current context of his/her role. (Workforce Design, NAEYC, 2008).

One evidence-based practice that deserves further attention in early childhood teacher preparation programs is the inclusion of mentoring for novice teachers. Due to the broad spectrum of services

teachers provide and the ever-changing needs of young children and families, e-mentoring is a viable support for early childhood educators. Districts may have as few as one early childhood classroom, prohibiting the pairing of teachers of the same licensure area in a mentoring relationship. E-mentoring allows pairing from the same licensure area. E-mentoring is believed to provide an additional benefit to the building administrator who may not have early childhood licensure and finds the opportunity to supervise early childhood educators beyond the scope of elementary grade supervision. Additional research exploring the benefits of e-mentoring for building administrators is warranted to improve student outcomes and teacher retention.

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# An Integrated Approach to Early Childhood Teacher Education at Lewis University

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Rebecca Pruitt is Assistant Professor and program director of Early Childhood Education at Lewis University. Pruitt holds a Ph.D. in Education, Curriculum Studies. Teaching areas of focus are culturally responsive family-school partnerships, early childhood curriculum, and child growth and development. Research interests are constructivist approaches in higher education and novice teacher beliefs and development.

## Introduction

Recent recognition of the lifetime impacts of early childhood education follows many years of neglect, if not outright resistance. The effects of this indifference to the quality and availability of early educational experiences are being documented in a surge of mounting evidence (Couse & Recchia, 2016). Although this acknowledgement reflects only rhetoric for some, growing resources being made available at the federal and local levels are helping to increase access and quality of early childhood experiences. Responding to such initiatives inevitably will require improvements in the preparation of early childhood educators. Calls for reform in early childhood teacher education is in fact growing at such an exponential rate that it is now being referred to as a "national outcry" (Couse & Recchia, 2016) representing a "dramatic shift from earlier decades" (Whitebrook & Austin, 2015). Stemming from an urgent need to improve the quality of educational experiences for our most vulnerable children, this call for reform demands a well-informed understanding of how teachers of young children are best prepared (Couse & Recchia, 2016; Whitebrook and Austin, 2015).

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC) (2015) recently released a comprehensive study that expands on decades of research demonstrating the crucial role of the early childhood years in establishing lifelong outcomes. Their large scale meta-analysis articulates factors that impact growth and development in the early years, adding impetus to the focus on early childhood education currently seen in federal and local initiatives. Included in the IOM & NCR report are results of studies on the current state of early childhood workforce preparation. Key recommendations reinforce the long-time goal of early childhood teacher education programs to align with the science of child development in order to create field based experiences that provide opportunities for connecting theory and practice. Cross-institutional relationships and partnerships with community child and family service providers such as early intervention professionals and family support service providers are recommended in the report as imperative in improving the quality of higher learning experiences (IOM & NRC, 2015, p.525).

As the population of the United States grows ever more culturally and linguistically diverse in states such as Illinois, especially in the Chicago metropolitan area (Heineke et al., 2013), it is critical that teacher education programs increase teacher candidates' ability to serve the various needs of all children and families (Couse & Recchia, 2016; Heineke et al., 2013; Thorp & Sanchez, 2013). This requires a rejection of the traditional deficit-based, add-on, superficial implementation of multicultural education and special education. Effective early childhood teacher education programs employ a more

holistic approach that prepares candidates to develop contextualized, strengths-based practices (Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016) through a fully integrated approach to the teacher preparation program of study.

## Lewis University Early Childhood Education Program

In response to this urgent need for comprehensive early childhood teacher preparation programs, the Lewis University early childhood program was uniquely designed from its inception to prepare pre-service teachers for work with all young children and families, specifically culturally and linguistically diverse children and children with exceptionalities. Offering dual-licensure in both early childhood and early childhood special education with an added third endorsement in ESL/bilingual education, this program was launched in the fall of 2012, as one of only two early childhood bachelor degrees in the state to embed all three endorsements. As such, this endeavor not only was unique but required substantial collaboration among multiple program directors and administrators.

Situated within the College of Education, the early childhood program benefits from a guiding theoretical framework adopted to facilitate the design and implementation of initial licensure and advanced preparation programs within the college. Based on the work of John Baptist De La Salle, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, James A. Banks, Linda Darling-Hammond, Paulo Freire, Gail C. Furman and Robert J. Starratt, the framework employs a lens of critical pedagogy to encourage the challenging of dominant discourses. Specifically, all programs are designed to facilitate a commitment to critical reflection and action (Freire); acknowledgement of the social forces at work in schools that create and re-create existing culture, beliefs and practices (Dewey, 1938); and the ability to make subject matter accessible and relevant to all students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2008). Three guiding standards stem from this framework and guide all course and field experience development:

1. Candidates and faculty are knowledgeable critical transformative educators.
2. Candidates and faculty are multicultural educators.
3. Candidates and faculty are social justice advocates.

## Program Design

All coursework, field experiences, and key assessments within the early childhood program were developed with these standards in mind. Beginning in the first course and carried throughout the program, candidates are engaged in an ongoing dialogue about how to best serve the diverse needs of students and families. Embedded throughout the coursework are assignments that facilitate "critical reflections of their worldviews and racial, social, and cultural locations" (Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016), analyzing curriculum for bias and creating anti-bias curriculum, analyzing contexts and approaches related to critical pedagogy concepts, and critiquing traditional parent involvement and teaming approaches to develop more strengths-based, value added, collaborative approaches.

As demonstrated in a wide range of studies, field-based experiences are a critical component of any pre-service education program (Bueno et al., 2010; Couse & Recchia, 2016; Heineke et al., 2013; Thorp & Sanchez, 2013). To bring meaning to the learning experiences described above, pre-service teachers must directly engage with diverse and under-resourced children and families in classrooms and community settings. In the Lewis EC program candidates are required to complete 150 field experience hours within four distinct placements: infants/toddlers, pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, and first

through third grades. Candidates must complete a practicum in at least one school setting and at least one community setting. The infant-toddler field experience provides an opportunity for candidates to observe and/or volunteer in a homeless shelter serving families with young children. They are also given the opportunity within this field experience to participate in an early intervention home visit in Chicago with culturally and linguistically diverse families, many of them with low- or no-income. The PreK field experience is completed at a public school early childhood center that serves multi-age (3-5) children in an inclusive and diverse setting. Specifically, this is a classroom that includes under-resourced children, children with special needs, and dual language learners. Within our region, there are multiple early childhood centers that employ a percentage- based system of placing children in classrooms (for example, 30% identified with special needs, 30% regular education tuition paying, 30% "at risk"). Multiple schools using this 3/3/3 model serve as regular placement sites for our candidates. For the Kindergarten and 1st–3rd general education placements, candidates are placed in classrooms with a significant population of students that are bilingual in at least one of these grade levels. There is an additional 1st–3rd grade placement that is completed within a high-needs/low-incidence special education classroom. Candidates are required to complete a child assessment project/portfolio in collaboration with site coordinators and families. The intent of this project is to introduce candidates to the process of working collaboratively with diverse children and families to address their needs.

For many of the candidates, these classroom learning activities and field based experiences can be difficult or uncomfortable in the beginning. As they are mentored through the program by instructors, advisors, mentor teachers and field supervisors, most begin to gain a new perspective. Some who begin the program with the intention of teaching in their hometown experience a change of heart at some point in their journey. It is common for these candidates to seek out positions in high-need schools upon graduation because of a new sense of purpose and a growing confidence in their ability to contribute to the well-being of children and families in an environment that was previously unfamiliar and intimidating.

### Recruiting Diverse Teacher Candidates

While maintaining this commitment to preparing candidates for work with culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse children in high-need schools, we must also increase efforts to recruit new teacher candidates with diversified linguistic and cultural knowledge who can draw from firsthand community experiences in their work (Nelson et al., 2012; Couse & Recchia, 2016). To this end, we seek to provide a supportive environment to receive adult working students in both the undergraduate and graduate programs. In particular, we reach out to adults who are currently working in schools in various positions, such as bilingual classroom teachers, teacher assistants who provide translation services within the school, long-term substitute teachers, and other para-professionals. As a result, the most recent graduate level cohort is only 50% white female, as compared to the national demographic for early childhood educators recently reported to be 78% white female (Saluja, Early & Clifford, 2002). The linguistic and cultural knowledge, as well as the classroom experience these candidates bring are invaluable components of the Lewis EC learning community.

Receiving transfer students from community colleges that serve a more diverse student population is another effective way universities can increase diversity in bachelor level teacher education programs. Formal articulation agreements between community colleges and universities can facilitate the recruitment of these transfer students by formalizing transferability of coursework between associates

degree and bachelor degree programs (Couse & Recchia, 2016; IOM & NRC, 2015). In the four years since the launch of the Lewis program, one such agreement has been formalized, while three additional agreements are currently in process.

These agreements will serve students well and provide support for those who might otherwise choose to end their formal education at the associate degree level. However, the alignment of coursework is only one part of what is needed to effectively support students in accomplishing their degree completion goals. When transitioning from the community college to the university, there are many barriers beyond transferability of coursework. Vicki Garavuso outlines multiple obstacles that must be overcome by these adult learners. Describing situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers, Garavuso presents the many personal obligations, beliefs and attitudes, and financial challenges that must be overcome to complete a bachelor's degree. Situational barriers include any responsibilities beyond their studies, such as caring for family, managing finances, and holding down jobs. Dispositional barriers often include beliefs about their own relationship to schooling, which have been shaped by prior experiences in under-resourced contexts. While many do experience high levels of community and familial support, their cultural capital can differ significantly from that which defines success in higher learning institutions. Institutional barriers include prohibitive class scheduling, limited work hours of college staff, and program field experience requirements that conflict with work schedules (Couse & Recchia, 2016).

As an institution serving a student population that includes many transfer students, Lewis University has the infrastructure to support the needs of both traditional and non-traditional adult learners. In addition, the early childhood program offers all professional education requirements for the Lewis bachelor of arts degree through multiple formats to provide greater flexibility. For each course offered, students have the option of either a daytime traditional course section or an evening course section. Evening courses are designed for adult working students, and many are hybrid courses in which class sessions are delivered in both face-to-face and online formats to ease the burden of the commute to campus. The master of arts program is delivered alongside evening bachelor of arts courses for adult working students, providing a community of learners with similar work experiences and daily demands. Accommodations are made for students currently working in schools, so that time away from work is minimized while still providing some field experiences in other classrooms and contexts.

### Current Initiatives: Program Redesign

Ongoing program development includes efforts to prepare culturally responsive teacher candidates effectively for work in high-need schools. New courses have recently been developed and others have been revised to embed additional content and experiences that can support candidate growth in the dispositions and skills that will address the various needs of young children and families. Continuing to reject the "add-on" approaches of multicultural education and special education, coursework throughout the program is now more meaningfully integrated with elements that facilitate multicultural and inclusive teaching as a consistent daily practice. As Mariana Souto-Manning states, "multicultural teaching is good teaching for *all* children" (Souto-Manning, 2013).

Field-based experiences play a crucial role in developing the cultural responsiveness and effectiveness of teacher candidates as pre-service teachers. Consequently, much of the program revision has been focused on enhancing these experiences by integrating them meaningfully into the coursework. New partnerships are developing with high-need schools that will host early childhood candidates, and a

new partnership has formed with Child and Family Connections to collaborate in hosting free pre-school screenings on campus.

### Race to the Top Grant

As part of the allocation of funding to support early childhood work in Illinois, the Lewis early childhood program was awarded a grant to fund new cross-institutional partnerships in early childhood education. Due to this funding, Lewis is now partnering with three community colleges in our region to create seamless pathways for degree completion and licensure in early childhood education. The development of meaningful pathways that allow early childhood professionals to move seamlessly and flexibly from one step to the next in their educational journey is an idea that enjoys widespread support (IOM & NRC, 2015; Nelson et al., 2012).

Implementing this ideal was especially daunting for us in light of the various challenges we faced in aligning program components. As a program that prepares teacher candidates for both general and special education, plus embedding additional coursework to confer an endorsement in English as a Second Language, the Lewis EC bachelor of a arts curriculum is large and dense, with 60 credit hours in professional education requirements. Our decision to align this BA licensure program with an associate of applied science (AAS) degree from each of the three other institutions within the consortium complicated the process even further because of the limited number of general education courses required to obtain each of these AAS degrees. However, we maintained our commitment to the AAS students in particular, as they typically are those that have already demonstrated a commitment to the field of early childhood and are more closely connected with early childhood faculty as mentors. This viewpoint was corroborated by advisors from each campus who confirmed that these students were the most likely to be supported by an articulation agreement. Our collective commitment to overcome these challenges serves as the foundation for our partnership, a collaboration that produced three fully aligned pathways to degree completion that are now in process toward formalized agreements between institutions. These partnerships will continue to serve transitioning students as they navigate the difficult road between institutions.

### ACI Project LEAD

Associated Colleges of Illinois's Project LEAD (Leaders in Education Advocating for Diversity) is supporting the work of member colleges in the endeavor to recruit and retain a more diverse student population in teacher education. Serving as an ambassador with my students in this program has provided me with extensive resources, such as new and relevant research, connections with colleagues at other ACI member colleges who are "kindred souls," and many creative ideas for how to attract and retain candidates from the greater Lewis student population. Current initiatives include the distribution of candidate recruiting videos, collaborating with the Office of Multicultural Student Services on high school college fairs, and providing Project LEAD student ambassadors as college ambassadors.

### Conclusion

The Lewis University early childhood education program launched in the fall of 2012. As of the spring semester of 2016, 35 candidates have graduated from the program. Many of these graduates now teach in high-need schools with the intention to continue to grow as teachers who invest in their communities. Some are already emerging as leaders in their schools and districts, advocating for

change to better serve the diverse needs of their young students and families. As funding grows to support the expansion of early childhood classrooms and services in the state of Illinois, early childhood teacher education programs must increase efforts to recruit qualified candidates. There is growing concern about the gap between the expected number of early childhood education program graduates and the number of new classroom teachers that will be needed over the next several years. The Lewis program has grown from 10 students (undergraduate and graduate) in the first year to now over 50 current students. We hope to see our numbers increase even more as additional articulation agreements are formalized. Our program will continue to focus efforts on preparing culturally responsive and inclusive pre-service teachers, as well as on recruiting new teacher candidates with diversified linguistic and cultural knowledge. Together with the many other early childhood education programs around our state, we hope to meet this growing demand and raise the quality of educational experiences for our youngest citizens.

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