



Improving the Quality of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Training through Collaborative Community Partnerships

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COMMUNITY
COLLABORATIONS
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ABSTRACT

The benefits of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) affect students, families, and the community as a whole. Shifts in the demographics of student populations in ECE classrooms have highlighted a need for improvements to teacher training, recruitment, and retention programming. In Pennsylvania, in particular, there is a substantial demand for high-quality preschool settings staffed by ECE professionals with a post-secondary degree and/or certification. As such, a more predictable pathway to ECE teacher credentials is necessary to demonstrate universal competencies between and among ECE educators. Solutions to these concerns rest with effective collaboration among stakeholders with multiple perspectives. This paper describes an Institution of Higher Education (IHE) and community-based partnership formed to address the goals of a federally funded planning grant. In particular, the partnership was charged with the development of credit-bearing coursework to improve skills and knowledge of ECE professionals and to examine the barriers that inhibit enrollment in formalized training. This paper describes how the expertise of the participant groups offered value to the team as a whole and how these personal resources propelled the work of the collaboration. Through a shared purpose and identity as ECE advocates, the collaboration became committed to the work both within and beyond their communities. As a community of learners, the partnership sponsored and sustained active engagement, reciprocity, and cohesion among the group.

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Quality early childhood education (ECE) has many long-term benefits. Students in preschool programming often make academic and social gains that can leave a lasting impression on their school performance (Bierman et al., 2017; Slicker & Hustedt, 2020). However, the role of the ECE professional must be well-defined to retain the value of preschool education to students and families. In fact, nearly all successful programs require their lead teachers, who both instruct children and manage the classroom, to have a bachelor's degree with a specialization in ECE (Kelley & Camilli, 2009). Most national accrediting bodies have mandated this as well. The reasons for this requirement are clear; teachers with a bachelor's degree are more responsive and engaging with children and better able to support and mentor other, less qualified, teachers.

In recent years, there have been many significant changes in the landscape of ECE classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). Shifts in the cultural make-up of students along with the integration of more inclusive classroom practices have necessitated changes in the ways teachers, students, and families interact and partner (Gardner et al., 2019). These changes drive a need for more teacher training. However, in most states, the training requirements for birth-Pre-K teachers are vastly different from the requirements for K-12 teachers. Among the most significant distinctions are differences in pre-service training. Although evidence indicates that teaching internships are highly beneficial for all teachers, few states require student teaching experiences, which leaves birth-Pre-K teachers missing critical teaching opportunities prior to entering the field (Allen & Kelly, 2015).

Another challenge in ECE is the diversity in career pathways. There is no typical path into or through the field. The funding source (e.g., state, federal, private pay) and/or the licensing/regulating body, will determine the education standards for preschool teachers. As such, it is not uncommon for 4-year-olds attending preschool in the same city, school district, or building to have teachers with different levels of education and preparation, ranging from a high school diploma to a bachelor's degree in ECE to a bachelor's degree with ECE teaching credentials. Aware of its effects on instructional quality, ECE advocates in many states have proposed increasing the credential or degree requirements for ECE educators, formulating a consistent message about the expectations for ECE professional practice.

Re-envisioning the training of ECE educators demands a full team effort (Darragh Ernst et al., 2016; Gardner et al., 2019; Wharff & Scritchlow, 2014). It is widely accepted that partnerships and collaboration are central to ECE professionals' roles, with benefits for the children and their families, as well as the professionals themselves (Woodruff & O'Brien, 2005; McWayne et

al., 2008). Collaborative partnerships are important because ECE professionals cannot support children's learning and development alone. Effective partnerships depend on shared goals, collaborative planning, and positive communication. When ECE professionals work in partnership with other professionals who have different backgrounds, experience, and expertise, it enhances their professional learning (McWayne et al., 2008).

Certainly, Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) take the lead in organizing and implementing teacher preparation, but a well-rounded program requires insight from the larger professional community (Darragh Ernst et al., 2016; Gardner et al., 2019; Wharff & Scritchlow, 2014). Not only do these groups supply much needed financial resources to effect change, but also, their information sharing is instrumental to fidelity and intentionality of practice (Gardner et al., 2019). As IHEs sometimes operate from an intellectual model rather than a practical, service-oriented model, it is critical to form relationships with community agencies. A well-rounded fund of knowledge from diverse professional community representatives helps to ensure that the organizational system which supports high-impact ECE programs can withstand and manage changes to policy, curricula, and student needs (Darragh Ernst et al., 2016).

Highly vested in the policy changes affecting their schools, preschool administrators are sometimes invited to participate in discussion surrounding preschool improvement and reform. Yet, rare are the occasions that full-time practitioners are invited to share their insight (Cumming et al., 2020). Truly, this is a disservice to all as it is the teachers themselves who know their professional needs best. Ignoring teacher insight becomes highly problematic when teachers are expected to adhere to policies implemented with little regard for their interests. In contrast, collaborative interaction among ECE acknowledges practitioner-specific concerns and breeds teacher investment in instructional skill advancement. With this knowledge, educational leaders can better determine practical, authentic, and rigorous training (Ohlin, 2019).

The purpose of this text is to describe the benefits of an IHE and the community-based partnership formed to address the goals of a federally funded planning grant. In particular, the partnership was charged to develop credit-bearing coursework to improve skills and knowledge of ECE professionals and to examine the barriers that inhibit enrollment in formalized training. This paper explains how the expertise of the participant groups offered value to the team as a whole and how these personal resources propelled the work of the collaboration. Finally, the authors discuss lessons learned with respect to establishing shared purpose and identity among a diverse group of education leaders.

BACKGROUND AND GOALS OF PACT PLANNING GRANT

Initiated by a state agency and funded by the federal government, the *Pathways to Accessible Credit-Bearing Early Childhood Education Training* (PACT) planning grant was focused on improving the quality of ECE in Pennsylvania (PA) through the envision of innovative and accessible teacher training opportunities. In Pennsylvania, ECE is managed by the PA Department of Human Services and the PA Department of Education. To teach in a preschool program funded by the PA Department of Education (PDE), state teacher certification is required. It is important to note that ECE teacher certification in PA does not include infants and toddlers. This creates a need for more training targeting very young children in the state. Additionally, most preschool programs in PA are not funded by PDE and do not require state certification (Partnerships for Children, 2020). To hold a lead teacher position in a publicly funded preschool (e.g., Head Start) in PA a post-secondary degree is required. However, most preschool programs in PA, 77%, are not publicly funded (Partnerships for Children, 2020).

Prior to being awarded the grant, the researchers conducted a local needs assessment. General information about the ECE landscape as well as needs of the focus regions were identified via 2018 Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children data and 2013–2017 United States Census data. Major highlights of the data indicated two pressing and immediate needs in the focus regions. First, there was a substantial demand for high-quality preschool classrooms in these areas. Second, there was a significant need to provide high-quality ECE to children. These data supported the need for the state of Pennsylvania to make higher education more accessible to ECE teachers with many years of experience, but who lacked credit bearing training.

To bridge this gap between the needs of ECE practitioners and IHEs, the funder required a partnership between the IHE and at least one community partner. Community partners regularly engage with all ECE programs, regardless of funding status, and can help the IHE with building the bridge. The identified goal of the project was met primarily through five objectives: (1) design an infant–toddler certificate for ECE professionals that focuses on the skills and knowledge needed to support young children and their families, (2) design a preschool certificate for ECE professionals that focuses on skills and knowledge needed to support young children and their families, (3) construct hybrid courses that allow for a combination of face-to-face contact and technology-based instruction to support the needs of non-traditional students, (4) identify barriers to enrollment in credit-bearing courses for ECE professionals, and (5) propose multiple pathways for

students to progress from a certificate to an associate or bachelor's degree with certification.

Beyond university faculty efforts, facilitation of these objectives stemmed from collaborative partnerships with local community centers, early care administrative leaders, and preschool classroom teachers. The IHE in partnership with local community-based facilities (e.g., ECE professional development providers) was strategically designed to promote discussions around the proposal and implementation of meaningful higher education experiences and purposeful training for those immersed in ECE work. Collaboration among community partners and IHE faculty was crucial to ensure that the proposed curricular changes adequately address state and national standards for all post-secondary certificates and degrees. Additionally, a balance of theory and practice that promotes the direct implementation of techniques and theories into classroom instruction essential to the revision process was only possible through a collaborative process.

EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

In the Input-Mediator-Output-Input (IMOI) framework, effective collaborations are cyclical (Bedwell et al., 2012; Ilgen et al., 2005). There is no clear beginning and end; however, a repetitive series of events or steps occur when engaged in an effective collaboration. In addition to the cyclical nature, mediating factors contribute to the effectiveness of collaborations (Bedwell et al., 2012). The process or map of an effective collaboration illustrates indirect relationships between individual characteristics (e.g., cognitive skill) and collaborative outcomes. The individual characteristics combine to create both collective characteristics and collective behaviors for the group. These formed group characteristics and behaviors then predict the collaborative outcomes.

There are also moderating factors (e.g., time, resources) that enhance or reduce the association between individual characteristics (e.g., attitudes) and the overall group characteristics (Bedwell et al., 2012). For instance, if one group member has limited access to resources and very little time, this may alter their attitude. Their change in attitude can influence the group which will impact the collaborative outcomes. Monitoring and adjusting to shifts in the group are critical for overall success. Moreover, when exploring potential issues or barriers to effective collaboration, relationships and items related to relationship building (e.g., communication, culture, roles) appear most often (Kelly et al., 2002). These findings reinforce the salient role of personal characteristics and group dynamics in an effective collaboration. Thus, an earnest effort to get to know each other, communicate

well, understand one another, and understand the roles that each group member plays is essential. Consequently, the authors were very interested in creating a model to build useful collaborative partnerships across and among the ECE community.

The evaluation questions for this project followed two separate paths. First, the researchers were interested in examining how the final products of the planning grant would impact ECE training, especially for non-traditional students. Second, the researchers wanted to identify the specific components of the partnership that benefited the collaborative process. With this in mind, the evaluation questions for this project were: (1) Is the partnership influencing pathways to credit-bearing ECE training? If not, where are the barriers? (2) What worked well in this partnership? (3) What could improve the partnership? This paper focuses on the two latter evaluation questions, which address the benefits of the collaboration and areas of development.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

The collaborative team began with four faculty members in higher education programs that train ECE professionals and three ECE professionals from two agencies within Pennsylvania. All seven collaborative team members received financial compensation for their time on the project. There were four faculty members who represented two separate programs at the university: (1) Human Development and Family Science (HDFS), housed in the College of Health and Human Services, and (2) Early Childhood Education (ECED), housed in the College of Education and Communications. Only the members of the Human Development and Family Science program held relationships prior to their involvement in this grant.

Two of the four faculty members were part of the leadership team for the project. One faculty member from HDFS and one faculty member from ECED. Colleagues of one member of the leadership team recommended the community agency members of the collaboration based on the reputation of their places of employment, their vested interest, and their expertise in ECE teacher preparation programming. For the evaluation of the collaboration, only three faculty members and two ECE practitioners participated. These members who participated in the evaluation were also core and consistent members of the collaborative.

On average, the core team of five had 21 years of experience working with children, families, and ECE professionals in school and community settings, and all members held a post-secondary degree. The collaborative team members were connected, active in relative professional organizations, and regularly engaged with key agencies in the community. The team members regularly engaged with 12 local, state, and national

professional organizations focused on ECE, families, or higher education. The team members regularly partner or work with 38 community agencies in urban and rural areas that service children, youth, and families. Further, all collaborative team members had both direct practice and administrative experience in ECE.

PROCEDURES

The collaborative team members met once a month. Large group meetings where all members were present occurred four times over the 8-month period for the funded collaboration. The team members were in three different counties, most large group meetings occurred at the IHE since this location was a midpoint for all partners. One meeting occurred at a community partner site. Team members unable to attend in person, were able to Zoom into the meetings; however, the core five team members that participated in the evaluation attended all meetings in person. The team members had no prior relationship, and each meeting was facilitated by the two faculty project leaders. At the conclusion of each meeting, tasks and responsibilities were negotiated and assigned based on interest, skill, or experience. Deadlines for tasks were also set at the conclusion of each meeting.

Collaborative team members completed online questionnaires and interviews as part of a process and outcome evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the collaboration. An external evaluator sent out and collected the online questionnaire data. The external evaluator also scheduled and conducted the interviews via phone. The process evaluation included an online questionnaire submitted after each team meeting. This questionnaire took approximately three minutes to complete. The outcome evaluation included an online questionnaire and interview; this online questionnaire took approximately three minutes to complete. The length of the semi-structured interview was approximately 40 minutes. The external evaluator transcribed the respondent answers during each interview. Following, the external evaluator gave all participants opportunities to review their interview data collected. The external evaluator also analyzed the findings and reported to the team the overall perception of what worked well in the collaboration and where the collaboration could be improved.

As the researchers were particularly interested in the benefits and needs of the collaborative partnership, a second content analysis of these data was conducted. Elo et al. (2014) recommends an organized process to establish trustworthiness in content analysis when multiple researchers are employed. While the collaborative team members each had a role in the data review, only one faculty researcher conducted the second content analysis.

Once the analysis process was complete, the faculty researcher shared prominent themes found in the data with the remaining members of the collaborative team and the external reviewer. Although additional insight from the collaborative team confirmed overarching themes, neither the external reviewer nor the collaborative team shared opposing ideas with respect to data organization.

MEASURES

Meeting Effectiveness

A measure adapted from a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2008) scale was used to assess the effectiveness of the collaborative team meetings. The scale includes six items rated on a four-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). Items included statements such as meeting participants worked well together, discussion at the meeting was productive, and my level of participation was comfortable for me.

Collaboration Effectiveness

A measure adapted from a Center for the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies in Health (2002) scale was used to assess the effectiveness of the collaboration. The scale includes six items where respondents indicate if they have or have not received benefits as a result of the collaboration. Responses rated as yes or no. Items included statements such as “enhanced ability to address an important issue”, “increased utilization of expertise or services”, and “ability to have a greater impact than I could have on my own”.

Semi-structured Interview

An external evaluator conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the collaborative team members. The interview included seven questions that prompted respondents to discuss items such as the aspects of the collaboration that worked well, barriers, and ways that the collaboration influenced them professionally or personally.

RESULTS

Questionnaire data were gathered after each large group meeting to provide formative feedback to the group leadership. In the questionnaire collaborative team members were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: the goals of the meeting were clear to me, my level of participation was comfortable for me, most attendees participated in the meeting discussion, meeting participants worked well together, the discussion at the meeting was productive, and the meeting objectives were met. The response options were: Strongly agree (scored as 4), agree (scored as 3), disagree (scored as 2), or strongly disagree (scored as 1). On average, the scores for each item were 3 or higher which indicates that the collaborative team members generally felt that the meetings were productive and inclusive (Table 1).

To examine the effectiveness of the overall collaboration, team members responded to a questionnaire sent by the external evaluator and were then interviewed by the external evaluator. The questionnaire prompted respondents to answer yes or no to the following: The partnership (1) Enhanced ability to address an important issue, (2) Increased utilization of my expertise or services, (3) Acquisition of useful knowledge about service, programs, or people in the community, (4) Development of valuable relationships, (5) Enhanced ability to meet the needs of my customers or consumers, and (6) Ability to have a greater impact than I could have on my own. A yes response indicated that the respondent felt the statement was true for them as a result of the partnership. All five participants responded yes to all six items. The results here indicate that everyone felt that they learned, were valued, and benefited from the collaboration.

The remaining summative results of the collaboration were organized in two ways. First, a conceptual framework found in the literature was utilized to assess team members’ descriptions of the collaboration. Then

	MEETING 1 (n = 6; N = 6)	MEETING 2 (n = 5; N = 5)	MEETING 3 (n = 4; N = 5)	MEETING 4 (n = 5; N = 5)
The goals of the meeting were clear	3.83	3.8	3.5	4.0
My level of participation was comfortable for me	3.83	4.0	3.5	3.8
Most attendees participated in the discussion	3.17	3.6	3.75	3.8
Meeting participants worked well together	3.67	3.8	4.0	3.8
The discussion was productive	3.83	3.8	3.75	3.8
Meeting objectives were met	3.83	3.8	3.75	4.0

Table 1 Mean Scores on Team Meeting Effectiveness Items.

a content analysis was performed and identified three overarching themes: engagement, reciprocity, and cohesiveness.

INPUT-MEDIATOR-OUTPUT-INPUT (IMOI) FRAMEWORK

The IMOI conceptual framework outlines the process for collaborations (Bedwell et al., 2012; Ilgen et al., 2005). This framework also assists in describing the process observed in this collaborative effort. The collective characteristics for this group included extensive experience, on average 21 years, working with children, families, and ECE professionals. The group collectively had a high level of training, with post-secondary degree attainment for all members. The group was also organized, evidenced by team members' responses after each meeting. All respondents felt that the goals of the meeting were clear, the meeting objectives were met, and the discussions were productive. Moreover, each team member was invested in the intended outcomes, which supported a positive, productive collective attitude for the group. According to the IMOI framework, the extensive experience, high level of training, investment, and organization (collective characteristics), increased the likelihood of effective leadership and execution of tasks (collective behaviors).

The collective characteristics and collective behaviors predict collaborative outcomes (Bedwell et al., 2012). The outcomes for this collaboration were achieved, and similar to what is described in the IMOI framework, the collaboration process was cyclical. The effective leadership and execution of tasks reinforced the collective characteristics. The group successfully achieved the tasks set, which increased the group knowledge and sustained the motivation to continue.

There were also contextual factors that impacted the collaboration. These contextual factors are identified as having a moderating effect on the relationship between the collective characteristics and collective behavior (Bedwell et al., 2012). In this collaboration, the amount of time that each team member had available may have had an impact. One IHE faculty member noted, "The pandemic threw us for a loop. We were managing different roles in trying to put classes online, same with our partners. We had competing priorities and had to shelf the grant for a short period of time while we prioritized other things." A community-based partner stated, "The only barrier was a lack of response. ...the return time on emails." The IHE faculty member expressed competing priorities as a barrier, and the community team member expressed that a lack of response impacted their participation. Both may illustrate that limited time affected the collective characteristics and behavior.

Despite time limitations, the collaboration yielded several significant benefits. The external evaluator administered semi-structured interviews and

questionnaires that highlighted strong relationships among the team and respect for individual expertise and knowledge. Beyond the collaborative network, the participants developed personal and professional skill sets that allowed them to better meet the needs of their surrounding communities of ECE professionals, students, and families. Further, within the learning community, themes of engagement, reciprocity, and cohesion emerged.

ENGAGEMENT

The collaborative participants all had vested interest in the work. Having professional ties to the ECE field, the daily work of each participant was centered in improving ECE teacher training in some way. Yet, this commitment to the grant focus extended beyond a simple occupational role to a means to effect change. As an IHE faculty member suggested,

I was able to contribute to the university community in a way that will be lasting... Knowing that I had a potential impact on the non-traditional students seeking certificates and possibly a degree. This will add to the diversity of our courses, experiences, and discussions in the classroom for all students.

The nature of the PACT grant work seemed to create a genuine sense of purpose among the collaborative group members. The idea that planning efforts would lead to authentic changes for students and teachers encouraged the collaborative group in different ways. One community-based partner saw this project as a way to make daily work more practical and relevant. This participant suggested, "It was different from what I do on a daily basis. It was extremely valuable to us. Something that came out of these meetings that we can use and apply in our programs."

Through the interactive discussion, questioning, and perspective-taking, participants acknowledged shared understanding, stemming from the interaction of individual and collective expertise. In fact, one IHE faculty member identified the interest of the community-based partners as unique and special. They commented, "I don't know if it was the people, but the community partners were truly invested, they really cared about what we were doing." Similarly, a community-based partner acknowledged sincerity among the IHE faculty. They stated, "Everyone was very willing to listen... in such a way that they were being thoughtful... This made for meaningful conversations and problem solving."

RECIPROCITY

Despite varied backgrounds, members of the collaboration acknowledge the expertise of their colleagues. Consequently, reciprocity was established

among the team members. Both the community-based partners as well as IHE faculty saw definitive value in working with their counterparts. One community-based partner shared, "They had so much information and insight from that academic perspective. I really appreciated that." Similarly, the IHE faculty recognized the significance of having a perspective from ECE community leaders in the collaborative system. An IHE faculty member offered, "Having community partners gave us a good understanding of what was happening on the ground. Having been removed from the field for as long as we have, we just didn't have that insight."

For the community-based partners, this mutual respect bred a sense of genuine reciprocity. Aware that the IHE faculty accepted and valued their intuition, community-based partners were willing to share ideas in the group setting and assume leadership roles. Commenting on these feelings of value, a community-based partner said, "[IHE faculty] were open to hearing our input.... They took every suggestion we made and ran with it. They took all our suggestions and put it into effect." Another community-based partner expressed a feeling of equality among the group. "Everyone coming in didn't have any airs about themselves.... Everyone's opinion was valued, no matter if you were a community partner or higher-ed partner." Equity among group members also affected how this community-based partner viewed their competencies. "[The collaboration] gave me the knowledge that I can communicate to different levels of audiences. And I became more confident in working with people of wide-varying backgrounds."

The IHE faculty, however, experienced reciprocity in a more specialized way. Their roles in the academic community had already afforded the faculty a healthy sense of empowerment. Accordingly, faculty entered the collaboration with the expectation that the group would accept their values and beliefs. Instead, reciprocity among the IHE faculty stemmed from their communication and sharing with the stakeholders outside the collaboration. The success of the grant goal and objectives depended on faculty gaining university approval to develop and implement several training and credit-bearing products. With practitioner support and backing of the materials as relevant and practical, IHE faculty felt confident advocating for university endorsement of the grant materials. As an IHE faculty member remarked, "I felt like having the community agencies helped us get a better understanding of what was happening on the ground in the field. It also helped us put weight behind what we were presenting to our administrators."

In the case of the university faculty, a sense of reciprocity grew from their realized capacity to effect change beyond the university community. For instance, one IHE faculty member professed, "One of the biggest benefits is that it expanded our network of potential partners. Our community partners had a lot of contacts

in the community. That gave us an opportunity to extend the benefits of this grant." Additionally, community-based partners acted as a bridge between university and ECE practitioner stakeholders. In several cases, community-based partners promoted the work of the collaborative group and garnered support from within the ECE community. In the words of an IHE faculty member, "[The community-based partners'] connections helped us to connect really well. They vouched for us. They told their networks, '[the IHE faculty] are okay; they're here to help.'"

COHESIVENESS

Community agreements are essential to effective collaboration (Brown et al., 2006). While the grant managers never listed formal agreements for the interworking of the collaboration, common understandings emerged through an organic process. As group members interacted with each other, group cohesiveness began to develop as the group began to form its underlying culture. Within the collaborative partnership, faculty members and community partners had specialized roles which became important elements of cohesiveness. Faculty members were responsible for negotiating and gaining support among colleagues for proposed curricular changes. By contrast, community partners assumed the lead in communicating with and advocating for ECE practitioners. Although both faculty members and community partners reviewed course content for relevancy and meaningfulness, each member of the collaboration suggested recommendations based on his/her perspective as either an IHE faculty or ECE community leader.

Task leadership was shared among participants; participants shared expertise as appropriate. One IHE faculty member commented,

We tried to think about involving people with specific areas of expertise. That was helpful. There were people within the group that could keep the work moving forward.... We had individuals from a lot of backgrounds... with experience teaching preschool, managing programs, marriage, and family backgrounds. These views were all helpful in thinking about serving the whole child.

A factor that helped build a sense of equity among the group was the use of multiple meeting venues. Each community-based partner was invited to host one of the monthly meetings. In making this choice, the IHE team leadership created feelings of comfort and respect for the community-based partners while also removing the authoritarian role from the IHE faculty.

Given the unique expertise of each collaborative participant, clearly defined roles (e.g., faculty or community liaison) helped the collaborative group

to reach goals efficiently. The IHE leadership team discussed the goals of the collaboration, as written in the grant proposal. With this information, group participants selected their own tasks to complete based on their knowledge and strengths, which supported continual progress without overwhelming any one participant. One IHE faculty member offered,

All of the different perspectives.... It did work really well. We got to hear a lot from different people who worked to lighten the load. Those of us that were consistently there got to learn about people's strengths, and that helped us figure out the responsibilities and roles. The community partners had very clear delineated roles that developed over time. I knew what my role was, and what I had to do.

Each participant assumed significant responsibilities to the collaborative group. Adherence to this group dependency cultivated group cohesiveness. For this collaborative group, structure within the group advanced the grant work. One community-based partner described the procedural framework of the group. "Meetings were a good use of the time. Specific tasks were given to the team and then you completed those tasks and reported back." Connecting with the collaborative group provided members with the opportunity to get feedback on their work, revise and edit ideas, and develop new goals for future activities.

DISCUSSION

Within the themes of engagement, reciprocity, and cohesiveness, several qualities and skill sets emerged as the keys to success within the collaborative team. The combination of personal characteristics and their paid employment in the partnership created an environment conducive to effective collaboration despite the absence of prior relationships among all members of the collaboration. Further, the authors believe that the conditions of this partnership could lend themselves well to other teams without contextual history, making replication of this collaborative approach possible under a wide range of circumstances and conditions. The preceding discussion outlined lessons learned from the collaborative process.

Above all, it was paramount that each member of the collaborative team was vested in the partnership. Certainly, professional interests often attract educational stakeholders to collaborative projects (Murtagh & Birchinnall, 2018). According to Wenger (2011), such networks, or Communities of Practice (CoP), are centered in a common identity that can drive investment and commitment. Prior to this collaboration, both the

university faculty and community-based ECE practitioners advocated for improved teacher training practices. Because the participants recognized a connectedness among them, the participants were able to retain and renew their motivation over time.

Similarly, the collaborative team needed to maintain a sense of shared purpose. Shared purpose among collaborators bonds participants to the project work and creates commitments to outcomes both within and outside the team (Murtagh & Birchinnall, 2018; Smyrniotis et al., 2016). Not only did the participants recognize familiarity among their ECE advocacy, but also, they acknowledged a similar pathway toward change. In the case of this grant, the collaborative participants all envisioned improved practitioner training options as crucial to improved outcomes for ECE students and their families. A common vision propelled the progress of the project forward.

The group members had to value every member of the collaborative team. Group members impacted the functioning of the collaboration differently depending on their role as community-based practitioners or university faculty. Confident that the group recognized their value to the collaborative process, practitioners were empowered to contribute to the activities. Some research suggests that differences in educational backgrounds and experience, as seen among the participants in this collaboration, can sometimes act as barriers to empowerment (Bond & Keys, 1993). Yet, within the collaboration, the IHE faculty valued and respected the perspectives of the community-based practitioners.

With this goal in mind, team members had to make intentional choices to build mutual respect within the collaboration. When partnering with community stakeholders, IHE faculty must be explicit in their efforts to include and accept practitioners' insight (Orellana & Chaitanya, 2020). From the onset of the collaboration, the IHE faculty listened to ideas, acknowledged expertise, and extended leadership opportunities to the community-based partners.

Further, the collaboration had to hold significance beyond the planning grant. Connections within the collaborative group often act as a springboard to producing committed relationships with the larger community (Murtagh & Birchinnall, 2018; Smyrniotis et al., 2016). Both the IHE faculty and the community-based partners envisioned their work in this collaboration as impactful to ECE stakeholders beyond the university. Accordingly, the team did not see the work of this grant as isolated tasks, but rather a series of long-range changes to ECE teacher training practices, affecting teacher recruitment, retention, and preparedness.

The relatively small size of the collaborative group benefited the collaboration. Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) suggest that social cohesion is the product of the interface of close social interaction, emotional

investment, similar goals, and active involvement. The small size of the collaborative team provided the backdrop for these qualities of social cohesion to flourish. With only five group members, the team became a close-knit community with professional and personal commitments to one another.

Thoughtful routines and procedures established cohesion in the learning community. Foremost, interaction among participants was centered in compliance to agreements with respect to outcomes. For instance, team members agreed at the project onset that all outcomes would have mutual benefit to the agendas of the IHE faculty and community-based partners. These types of agreements created inclusivity among members, resulting in a unified set of beliefs and best practices (Brown et al., 2006). Additionally, all team members assumed leadership roles in discussion and tasks/activities. Governance in the collaborative team was fluid; team members readily assumed responsibilities aligned with their expertise.

Finally, each member had assigned roles and responsibilities. Assigned tasks build a sense of ownership in the work of the collaboration (Pruitt et al., 2016). This accountability to the members of the collaboration helped team partners to maintain investment in the project. Moreover, the team assumed an asset-based approach to problem-solving, using members' strengths to navigate concerns. A willingness to address needs quickly and effectively creates resiliency among the collaboration and yields continual progress (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017).

LIMITATIONS

Despite the potential usefulness of these data and findings for practice, several limitations should be noted. First, the length of time for the collaboration was short (8 months). Second, the collaboration was restricted to one state, Pennsylvania. Third, the collaboration was grant funded. Lastly, the collaboration was led by the IHE. Collaborations that extend over a longer period, in different parts of the country, without financial support, and/or led by a community agency may find different results. Thus, generalizability is limited.

CONCLUSION

Effective integration of IHE expertise with the knowledge that exists in our local communities is necessary to prepare well-rounded ECE teachers (Zeichner, 2010). The results of this collaborative partnership demonstrate that a shared investment with financial support can yield positive outcomes for those involved in ECE. As demonstrated here, university-community collaboration

allows for opportunities that may not have otherwise been realized.

FUNDING INFORMATION


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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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