Disrupting and Rebuilding: Initiating Action Research to Strive for Equitable Early

Childhood Teacher Education

Maryssa K. Mitsch, Ph.D., San Francisco State University

Amber Friesen, Ph.D., San Francisco State University

Abstract

While inclusive education originally focused on having children with and without disabilities physically in the same space, it has now expanded to ensure all children can access, participate and learn together (DEC & NAEYC, 2009; USDOE & HHS, 2023). Despite this, we know many children continue to be excluded from inclusive settings including those with disabilities, children of color and other marginalized backgrounds (Lawrence et al., 2016; Love & Beneke, 2021). Further, children holding these identities have a higher likelihood of being subjected to discipline, expulsion, and seclusion (Aratani, Wright, & Cooper, 2011). It is imperative for us to critically envision the role of personnel preparation programs in advocating for a more equitable service delivery model by reflecting on how ableism and racism are commonly embedded and actively work to disrupt these norms (Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenberg, 2020). This manuscript shares the collaborative inquiry process of two faculty who intentionally entwined constructs of inclusion, intersectionality, anti-ableism and DisCrit into their ECSE preparation program. Using a four-stage model often used in action research (e.g., Sager & Williams, 2016), we share our reflective process, vision, tangible changes to curriculum and program, and seek discourse around actionable steps that further amplify these essential constructs.

Renewing an Early Childhood Program Through Collaborative Inquiry:

A Reflective Journey Towards Advancing Equitable Services and Preparation

Legislation, policy, and research evidence clearly support inclusion of disabled children with their non-disabled peers so that all children can access, participate and learn together (Division of Early Childhood [DEC] & National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2009; U.S. Departments of Education [USDOE] and Health and Human Services [USHHS], 2023). Specifically, early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of *every* infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. Yet, close to 40% of preschool aged children with disabilities receive special education services in settings separate from their nondisabled peers (USDOE, 2025; USHHS & USDOE 2023). Likewise, as shared in the Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), there is consensus from nearly 100 countries that in order to build acceptance and minimize discrimination of individuals with disabilities and differences in communities, inclusion must be centered in education.

The desired results of inclusive experiences for disabled and nondisabled children include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning support to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). Young children from marginalized populations continue to be placed in special

education programs disproportionately, particularly in preschool programs (i.e., Part B Section 619 programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA, 2004]; Aratani et al., 2011; Meek et al., 2020). Young children who are multiply marginalized are excluded, discriminated against, and have higher rates of suspension and expulsion (Gilliam, 2016; Gilliam et al., 2016). Moreover, we know that many children continue to be excluded from inclusive settings including those with disabilities, children of Color and other marginalized backgrounds (Lawrence et al., 2016; Love & Beneke, 2021). It is difficult to consider that if we are unable to address these barriers to meaningful inclusion for young children, the likelihood of providing inclusive opportunities for older students is even more slim. By affording positive inclusive learning experiences with the youngest learners, inclusion becomes the norm.

In looking outwards at local and state communities, we continued to see trends for what opportunities for meaningful inclusion were afforded to our youngest learners, or lack thereof. Taking ownership that personnel preparation and teacher education is one component that influences the ECSE system, we felt urged to explore our role and selected a four-stage model often used in action research (Sagor & Williams, 2016). In doing so, our guiding questions for our action research were: 1) What theoretical frameworks will ground this program development work and how do they connect to this work? 2) What competencies do we want our ECSE teacher candidates to have, and how can we foster exploration, collaboration, and building a sense of being leaders in the ECSE community? 3) How can we support our students to enact change as teacher leaders in order to advocate for more equitable systems in ECSE?

Literature Review

As educators it becomes imperative for us to think critically about our role in advocating for a more equitable service delivery model. This includes acknowledging the predominant White, middle-class cultural norms, void of diverse perspectives, that guide this system and practices (e.g., Brown et al., 2010). It requires us to critically reflect on how ableism and racism are embedded within early childhood education and the expectations put on families within this system, often without acknowledging their intersectional identities (Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenberg, 2020). Specifically, It is critical to recognize young children who are Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BIPOC) have their overall well-being, health, and development negatively impacted by systemic inequities and racism, discrimination, and oppression (Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2020; Heard-Garris et al., 2018; hooks, 2014; USDOE, 2016; USHSS & DOE, 2014). Further, it requires us to face the impact of these systems on children and their families including the disproportionate amount of children from marginalized populations in special education and the higher likelihood that they may experience discipline/expulsion (Aratani, Wright, & Cooper, 2011). We suggest that the defining features of inclusion - access, participation, and supports (NAEYC & DEC, 2009) - need to go further. In part, the inclusive experience for some young children with disabilities and their families is fraught with exclusion, suspension, expulsion, and discrimination. It is imperative for us to critically envision the role of early childhood education personnel preparation programs in advocating for more equitable service delivery models (Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenberg, 2020).

Theoretical Frameworks

As our intentional exploration continued, our work began to center on three main ideas to inform our work: anti-ableism, intersectionality, and DisCrit.

Anti-Ableism

Ableism can be defined as, "the negative or prejudicial beliefs about disability that arise from, and result in, the systemic oppression of people with disabilities" (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020, p. 1). At the root of ableism is the belief of what is normal and valued in terms of abilities, and if one does not exhibit these abilities they are viewed as less than. Some define ableism further, sharing how through socially constructed ideas of not only normalcy but also productivity, intelligence, and excellence, the system places a 'value' on individuals' bodies and minds directly related to their societal contributions (Lewis, 2022).

In the context of education, disability is often viewed with a deficit lens rather than a strengths-based perspective. The systemic oppression of people with disabilities may include policy, environments, pedagogical practices, and/or attitudes (Goodley, 2014). Today in schools the medical model of disability is still prevalent, rather than the social model (Kalyanpur, 1999). In other words, young children with disabilities face academic and social challenges, including being segregated from inclusive settings with their nondisabled peers, because of the way in which schools are organized, whether or not intentionally, rather than by their individual medical limitations.

As Oliver (2013) highlights, the field needs to continue to push past discussion and take more actionable steps forward to support individuals with disabilities. In this, anti-ableist work is fluid and cannot be compartmentalized. Anti-ableist work may look like challenging individual ableism (e.g., biases, being mindful of language use);

eliminating environmental and systemic barriers (e.g., adopting inclusive policies, utilizing the social model v. medical model of disabilities); placing disabled voices as the center; and intersectional advocacy. For young children whose expressions may be difficult for adults to discern, this may look like supporting families to interpret children's expressions or centering the voices of families and supporting them in their efforts. In part, realizing that individualized families' needs may complement or be in contrast with other families, dependent on their personal goals for their family. Moreover, validating families' efforts in supporting multiply-marginalized families is central to this work.

Children begin to understand identity concepts such as gender, race, and other physical characteristics as early as age 3. It is also during this learning window that children may develop bias towards others from, including what is societally viewed as 'normal.' As children begin to construct ideas of differences at a young age (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020), it becomes imperative that educators acknowledge the ableism that is steeped into our schooling through structural oppression, and seek to disrupt it. This includes acknowledgement of disability as a form of human diversity and the active pursuit of anti-ableist curricula (Lalvani & Bacon, 2018).

Intersectionality

In recognizing ableism, it is also important to acknowledge how many disabled children and their families hold multiple, complex identities. The concept of intersectionality recognizes that oppressions intersect, and that an individual's membership in multiple identity categories can make them vulnerable to unique forms of marginalization (Crenshew, 1989). Furthermore, multiple marginalizing identities can intersect, creating compounding forms of harm and oppression (1989). This is evident in

the disproportionality of young children of Color being found eligible for special

education services under the IDEA (2004). For example, in California there is concern

about the underrepresentation of Asian students receiving special education services

(Cooc, 2016). Nationally, Black students were more likely found eligible with intellectual

disabilities and emotional disturbance, while Native Americans were likely found eligible

with learning disabilities (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). These data require us to face the

disproportionality of children from marginalized populations in special education.

Moreover, with a higher likelihood that these students may experience discipline and/or

expulsion, including in preschools (Aratani, Wright, & Cooper, 2011; USDHHS, 2014),

due to their intersecting identities, targeted practitioner supports that address this are

needed. Recommended practices in early childhood special education (ECSE) share

supports and services should emphasize building family capacity (DEC, 2014). This

includes recognition of the often privileged positionality of the service provider/educator

as opposed to some of the children and families they may be supporting.

DisCrit

Of related importance is DisCrit, a framework that draws from Critical Race

Theory (CRT), Disability Studies (DS), and other scholarly work to examine how

constructs about race and ability, and subsequently racism and ableism, are often

interdependent and work together to uphold ideas of normalcy (Annamma et al., 2018).

In other words, DisCrit can be described as an extension of the fields of CRT and DS by

examining how they are intertwined and therefore how they can be more intentionally

used. This means that individuals do not fit neatly into singular identity categories (e.g.,

race, dis/ability), and that when individuals of Color are categorized as having a

disability (i.e., or different learning needs), ableist understandings of disability are often used to position them as 'less than'. In alignment with the seminal work of DisCrit from Annamma et al. (2018), the term "dis/ability" is specifically used to, "disrupt[s] misleading understandings of disability, as it simultaneously conveys the mixture of ability and disability" (p. 24).

Our work was primarily centered on two of DisCrit's seven tenants. Specifically, DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations often not acknowledged within research (tenant four), and that activism is required for equity and social justice to honor and amplify these voices as experts (tenant seven; Annamma et al., 2018; 2013). In particular for young children, "typical" development has been historically aligned with White, Eurocentric norms (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020). While development is intricately woven into evaluation, assessment, and curricula, this becomes troublesome as it reinforces deficit-based perspectives for those who do not meet those 'standard' expectations. The essence of this may be long-lasting, from eligibility, supports, opportunities for inclusion, and more (2020).

This manuscript details a collaborative inquiry study utilized to make change within an ECSE preparation program. Part of this change included leaning into Olou's practical application and understanding of intersectionality, being multifaceted and nuanced in this work (2018). We employed a four-stage model often used in action research (Sagor & Williams, 2016) in an intentional effort to propagate the importance of inclusion, intentionally embrace intersectionality, and explicitly be anti-ableist and confront the often overlapping constructs of ableism and racism (DisCrit) with our preservice teachers. This manuscript shares the process undertaken, resulting changes

to curriculum and program elements, and the work that will continue to improve outcomes for young children with disabilities, their families, and the workforce.

Methods

Informed by the entwined constructs of inclusion, intersectionality, anti-ableism and DisCrit, we engaged in the process of collaborative inquiry in which we sought to "deconstruct knowledge through joint reflection and analysis, reconstructing it through collaborative action, and co-constructing it through collective learning from the experience" (Stoll, 2009, p. 474). Rather than linear, this type of inquiry, often categorized as action research, is cyclic and ongoing, engaging educators to work towards a shared vision and embodying the role of change agents (Love, 2009). In other words, action research is "...a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking action (Sagor, 2000, p.1).

Action Research

To structure our work, we adopted a four-stage model that can be used to structure the action research process (Sagor & Williams, 2016). Each stage seeks to design to answer key questions and are completed sequentially, including: 1) Clarifying Vision and Goals; 2) Developing an Approach; 3) Acting and Collecting, and; 4) Reflecting. Each stage is detailed below and illustrated in Figure 1: *Four Stages of the Action Research Process*.

Step One: Clarifying Vision and Goals

The first stage of the action research process seeks to center the researcher(s) on what they want to accomplish. It is here where the vision and subsequent goals (or targets) are discussed and agreed upon. It is through this that the researcher(s) form a

mission for the work and center on what they want to learn and/or how to impact within this process.

Step Two: Developing an Approach

The second stage probes the researcher(s) to consider what approach(es) or procedure(s) would lend itself to the highest potential of reaching the vision and goals established in stage one. This is an intentional planning process in which the action research project is mapped out, resulting in a roadmap of how the inquiry may take place. While deliberate and detailed, flexibility and contingencies are embraced in acknowledgement that these types of inquiries involve many variables and relationships.

Step Three: Acting and Collecting

It is in the third stage where the planned roadmap is put into action and the inquiry is implemented. It is also within this stage where researcher(s) collect data to capture the relationship between the actions taken and the results observed. Throughout this process, the overall vision and subsequent goals are kept at the forefront (stage one) as the planned approach is followed (stage two).

Step Four: Reflecting

In the fourth stage, researcher(s) engage in intentional reflection on the cycle of action research that has taken place and grapple with what has been learned. It provides an opportunity to return to the vision and subsequent goals formed (stage one), the plan that was created (stage two), and then the action and data that were collected (stage three). This reflection includes pondering what the results of this work are and importantly, where this will now lead. It is often here where the researcher(s)

acknowledge the completion of one cycle of the action research process and ready to begin again, refining the vision based on what occurred.

Setting

This collaborative inquiry was conducted within a public, urban university that is situated within a major coastal city in the United States. The university serves over 21,000 students a year, with nearly a third of these individuals (32%) being the first in their families to attend college. Ethnic backgrounds are diverse, with the largest populations of students identifying as Latinx (37%), Asian (26%) and White (16%). The university has the official designation of a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Institution (AANAPISI). Further, over half of the student body receives financial aid to support their studies (58%).

The university supports a wide variety of degrees including within the field of teacher education. This study was conducted within a specific program that supports individuals to become special educators with a focus on young children (birth through kindergarten). At the time, students either enrolled as a post-baccalaureate or graduate student, with no undergraduate pathway option. This credential program is accredited through the state's commission on teacher credentialing, requiring that specific standards and assessments be addressed within the program. The program usually lasts 2-2.5 years and enrolls an average of 20 students annually. There are currently 41 active students in the program.

Researchers' Positionality

Our positionality and identities are interwoven within this collaborative inquiry work, and are important to acknowledge in terms of our lens we bring to all stages of

this action research process. We share some identities in that we are both cisgender, White, and nondisabled. We also both hold graduate degrees which have afforded us employment as professors at a university (13 years and 9 years). Further, we are both parents and have substantial experience working in schools and programs focused on young children with and without disabilities before coming to our roles in the university. We also both work within this ECSE program and are deeply invested in it, not only as our employment but in our shared beliefs of its importance in leading to more equitable and inclusive settings.

We acknowledge that many of our identities place us in roles of power relative to our students, colleagues, and community partners. Specifically, our positionality and institutional authority can shape whose voices are centered, how expertise is recognized, and how collaborative work unfolds. We therefore approached this inquiry with intentional strategies to try to redistribute power—inviting critique of our ideas, elevating practitioner and family perspectives, and ensuring that decision-making processes did not default to our positional authority as faculty. Further, we understand that our positionality informs how we view and operationalize constructs such as intersectionality, anti-ableism, and DisCrit within this work. We approach these frameworks as ongoing areas of learning, recognizing that our interpretations are filtered through our own identities, experiences, and institutional locations. With this, we hold a deep responsibility to learn, advocate, and amplify the voices and experiences of others that are traditionally marginalized and/or face systemic barriers. We view ourselves as learners and allies as we approached this collaborative inquiry

Our Action Research Process

In the following, we detail the action research process that we engaged within to elicit change in our early childhood special education (ECSE) program around inclusion, intersectionality and anti-ableism. We detail how we moved through each of the four stages of this inquiry, owning the complexity and learning we did along the way. We share not as experts but rather as two individuals who wanted to elicit change.

Our Stage One: Clarifying Vision and Goals

The first stage of the action research process, focused on creating a vision and subsequent goals, began to organically take shape during the COVID-19 pandemic. As with the case nationwide, our program shifted quickly to online and remote. Inevitably, this caused us to carefully consider the content of the courses as we shifted to an online platform and different learning modalities to teach (e.g., Zoom, forums, online bulletin boards, breakout rooms). It provided the often unavailable space to review content and consider what was critical for us to get across in these new mediums. Concurrently, the pandemic also exemplified the many existing and longstanding inequities in our society. For example, the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter marches, bringing to the forefront the systemic barriers and racism that have long been present. Further, the pandemic exposed the ongoing inequities across health care systems for disabled individuals, a population more susceptible to serious and/or deadly complications due to COVID-19. This included inaccessible health services, lack of transportation to appointments, ongoing stigma and discrimination from health professionals, and isolation (Goyal et al., 2023)

It was within this context that we took a winter and early spring to form our shared vision t*o intentionally and meaningfully seek to promote inclusion, embrace*

intersectionality, and confront ableism and racism within our teacher education program.
We then considered the tangible goals that would assist us in knowing that we were
moving towards our vision, we knew we wanted to directly impact the content of key
courses in the program. We also knew we could revise and strengthen some parts of
the program to better reflect this vision including our mission statement, community
partnerships, and annual events.

Our Stage Two: Planning Our Approach

With a commitment to move forward with a shared vision, we proceeded to
develop an approach throughout the duration of the subsequent spring semester. To
organize this roadmap, we focused on the following three areas: ongoing growth,
curriculum change, and key programmatic changes. Our plan for each is detailed below:

Ongoing Personal Growth Plan

Throughout this entire process, we were committed to continuously learning and
reflecting ourselves. In turn, we wanted to address the following in this project:

- What training at our university could we enroll in to further our learning?
  We knew, for example, that the Center for Equity and Excellence in
  Teaching and Learning (CEETL) at our campus was planning on offering
  numerous learning modules and a teaching collaboration class for faculty.
  We also knew there may be other opportunities through connected
  organizations or initiatives we could take part in.

While it was unclear during the planning specifically on what professional development
would be offered, we were intentional about wanting this to be a foundational part of this
work.

Curriculum Development Plan

We knew we wanted to look specifically at seven methods courses within the ECSE teacher training program that we coordinated, advised, and taught within. Within each of these syllabi, we planned to evaluate and consider the following:

- Do the course titles and summaries of the class reflect what we wanted the content to be as it pertained to inclusion and equity?

- Do course materials reflect expertise from those holding different perspectives than our own? Specifically, did we have the experiences and knowledge of individuals that hold identities related to disability and/or BIPOC within our courses?

- Are there assignments within these courses that provide opportunity for the student to reflect on their own positionality, beliefs, and the experiences/ identities informing these? Further, can students critically reflect on how their positionality informs the lens and experiences they have with ableism and racism?

- Are there opportunities within these courses to bring in guest speakers that would provide different perspectives and expertise that would further the understanding of inclusion and equity?

Programmatic Changes Plan

We also knew that we wanted to look at our program as a whole and consider what we could plan that would make change on a programmatic level. In turn, we were guided by the following questions:

- Does our program mission statement reflect our values including our commitment to inclusion, intersectionality, and anti-ableism?

- Do our two annual program events (Partnering with Families Institute, Meaningful Collaborations Conference) include speakers that reflect diverse experiences and identities including lived experiences as disabled and/or BIOPC?

- Can we expand our community/school partners to include some new partners that exemplify inclusion, intersectionality and/or anti-ableism

Our Stage Three: Acting and Collecting

With a plan in place, we proceeded to collect data over the course of a summer, fall, and spring timeframe, representing an academic year. The inquiry drew upon multiple qualitative data sources aligned with three areas of focus: personal growth, curriculum development, and programmatic change. The specific data collected for each area are detailed below and also presented in Table 1: *Summary of Data Collected*. While the three areas of focus are discussed separately, it is critical to note that the collection process was iterative, participatory, and action-oriented. Each data source informed subsequent phases of the work, allowing for continuous refinement through cycles of feedback and analysis. The year-long timeframe supported sustained collaboration between the authors, enabling findings from one domain (e.g., professional learning) to directly influence developments in others (e.g., curriculum and program design). Collectively, these data sources provided a comprehensive foundation for examining and advancing inclusive, equity-focused practices within the program.

Personal Growth Action

In response to our desire for professional growth, we were fortunate that our university continually offered professional development opportunities through the Center for Equity and Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CEETL) during this time. We both signed up for the inaugural, semester-long teaching square, an initiative to bring faculty across the university together consistently to gain knowledge, practice and reflection pertaining to equity and inclusion in their teaching. We were able to intentionally share about the process we were undertaking and elicit feedback on the course development we were undertaking.

In subsequent semesters, we both enrolled in shorter, professional development modules to support our learning with topics ranging from Universal Design of Learning, Equitable Grading Practices, and Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies. Author 1 also took advantage of CEETL consultation services to review a class structure used in many of our classes for feedback and support.

Two other larger professional development opportunities emerged during this time that supported the vision of this inquiry. Author 1 was appointed a member of our college's Inclusion Teaching and Learning Advisory Committee, providing opportunity for inclusion and equity to be considered throughout our college. Author 2 enrolled in two different trainings that allowed her to be certified as a mental health first aid trainer as well as a safe zone ally training for our LGBTQIA+ colleagues and students.

We realized quickly that our professional development would be immersed in the other two goal areas. Specifically, we would need to read, design, collaborate, and more in order to make curricular development changes and programmatic changes. We also knew that our commitment to learn would not be confined to this inquiry project.

Course Development Action

      Our first goal was to ensure that the names and summaries of the seven courses of focus were reflective of the content that we wanted to teach. While we, like most teacher preparation programs, are required through accreditation to include certain content, we also knew that there was room to ensure that this was done in a way that upheld inclusion, intersectionality, and anti-ableism. In turn, all seven courses underwent a name change (a one+ year process at our university) to better reflect our overall vision (see Table 2: *Sample of Readings and Resources Used in Key Courses* for revised course names).

      A second focus was to ensure that the books and resources that were utilized in these seven classes reflect expertise from those holding different perspectives than our own including authors of color and/or those with disabilities. In turn, each course was carefully examined and resources were added or switched out. A selection of some of the resources that are now utilized are provided (Table 3: *ECSE Methods Courses Name Change*).

      A third goal was to examine assignments within these courses to see if there were more opportunities for the students to reflect on their own positionality, beliefs, and identities. We realized that many assignments may have included reflection sections but that the prompts and expectations for these areas could be better defined to include these different aspects. For example, within an assignment called Family Partnership Project (Figure 2: *Sample Revised Assignment - Family Partnership Project*), we explicitly made the first section of the assignment a personal narrative that built on readings they were doing around positionality and intersectionality.

A final curricular goal was to strive to bring in more diverse speakers into these classes as guest speakers. Instead of being confined to the structured time slot that the class was offered, we decided to find times that worked better for individuals to chat with us over Zoom, recording our conversations. In gratitude for their expertise and time, we were able to offer speakers an honorarium. We then created a program YouTube channel in which we uploaded the videos for use with students. The benefits of this became apparent immediately as we were able to include close captioning to promote greater accessibility. Further, students were able to access the videos and watch in a time that worked best for them. We discovered we weren't geographically confined or limited to a time table that complemented guest speakers availability; we were able to tap into the expertise of guest speakers from across the country. Lastly, we were able to go back to videos and use them in further classes instead of asking an expert to come back repeatedly. Currently, there are 55 videos on the YouTube channel and some of the videos have been viewed hundreds of times.

Programmatic Change Action

An important programmatic change that we undertook was developing a shared understanding of our programs goals and values by developing a mission statement. We drafted the beginning and then sought feedback from our teaching team, community partners, and students. The result was a statement that could be posted and shared, helping center our program and being explicit about what was fueling our work (Figure 3: *ECSE Revised Program Mission Statement*). This mission is seen as dynamic and necessary to revisit periodically, letting it grow and evolve.

A second key programmatic change was dedicated to planning and implementing two events each year: Partnership for Families Institute (Fall) for students in our family-centered courses (see Figure 4: Example of Partnership with Families Institute Agenda) and the Meaningful Collaborations Conference (Spring) for all students in the ECSE program as well as other programs including speech language therapy and early childhood. As the primary planners, we had the opportunity to ensure that these events reflected diverse voices. The events provide an opportunity to bring community partners, families, and current students together to share expertise and experiences. In particular, the keynote and guest speakers are invited to the conference each year based on the selected, timely theme. Examples of themes are: "Is Your Teaching Future Ready?", "Re(finding) Joy in Our Work", and "Representation Matters: The Importance of Culturally Relevant Content and Pedagogy."

A final programmatic change was to intentionally create some new community partnerships with early childhood programs. We specifically hoped to create new relationships with sites that could potentially be used as student teaching placements that exemplified inclusion, intersectionality and anti-ableism. Through meetings, site visits and email correspondences, we were successful in creating five new partnerships that included: 1) A program focused on early intervention and mental health services; 2) a school specializing in serving Deaf communities; 3) An inclusive, family co-op early childhood program; 4) a new, inclusive early childhood setting serving families in a predominantly Black neighborhood, and; 5) a program that supports both young children and mothers who are unhoused and/or seeking support for addiction recovering. All of

these sites are active student teaching sites and many of the professionals within them have been involved as guest speakers, advisory board members, and/or grant projects.

Our Stage Four: Reflection

Our reflection lasted throughout a summer, marking a year and half into this process. The overwhelming emotions at this time of pausing was both pride and urgency. Specifically, we felt tremendous pride in the intentional and meaningful change we had elicited by working through these stages. It had provided a means for us to systematically move through our goals and as presented, create instrumental change. Simultaneously, we were met with the feeling that we had much to still learn and do. While we had indeed completed an action research cycle (Figure 1), we were dedicated to starting the process again.

Our reflection included looking at the impact of this change on students. Once we began to teach the revised classes and implement the programmatic changes, the most tangible examples of the impact began to become apparent through class discussions and online forums where we saw some students engage in difficult conversations that acknowledged ableism and racism, as well as share about their own intersectional identities. Further, this growth was reflected in their writing in how students made connections with these topics to their own practices. Through ongoing discussion, we saw what was working and are now ready to continue this work. This reflection is continued in the Implications and Significance section below.

Implications and Significance

Early childhood practitioners play a critical role in supporting the learning and overall development of young children with and without disabilities. Practitioners must

commit to nurturing children's sense of identity and creating learning communities that embrace all dimensions of human diversity, including nuanced, intersecting identities and specifically disability. The ongoing decisions practitioners made related to instructional decisions, such as children's literature and curricula materials, did not embrace the scope of human diversity that has been represented in American classrooms (Souto-Manning et al., 2019). As we reflect on our action research, we detail the implication on our preparation program, collaboration with others, and impact on the field.

Our action research extends the work in ECSE teacher preparation by sharing the process undertaken by two higher education faculty. As the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, the landmark federal law that inspired the more recent and commonly known the IDEA (2004), celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2025, 50 years have passed and yet the field and society are still working on elements of acceptance, belonging, inclusion, and disability rights. As we continue to learn (and unlearn) from our past for a more just future, we continue to revisit and reflect on how else we can connect with others in this work. As part of the action research process, we continue to revisit the ECSE program to ensure its content remains relevant as the field evolves. In sharing our personal growth plans with course instructors, we modeled and supported them to develop their own personal growth plans. Many instructors sought out similar professional development opportunities that centered on equity and inclusion in their teaching, such as Universal Design of Learning.

Acknowledging that while a more simplified path would be to continue working independent of other programs and colleagues, preservice professionals or the future

workforce, and therefore, young children with disabilities and their families may be negatively impacted. Due to this, we sought out ways to break down disciplinary silos that existed so that interdisciplinary preparation and collaboration focused on equity and inclusion became the norm. We also considered untapped university and community partners to expand our intended impact (Mitsch et al., 2022). In leading this work and striving for effective collaboration with different disciplines, we were able to promote a shared vision of teamwork (Bricker et al., 2020). Collaborative efforts may take more time, energy, and compromise than working independently. Likewise, when exploring multiple partners for collaboration, this may be even more so. Yet, our motivation remained steady as we saw the immense possibilities at positively impacting the workforce and in return, young children with disabilities and their families.

One avenue we nurtured was collaboration with undergraduate programs. While there were external forces that also supported this collaboration, we centered the vision of promoting equity, inclusion, and diverse voices within our program and those going to work and support young children with disabilities and their families. Historically, preservice early childhood teacher candidates needed to complete their teaching credential as part of a post-baccalaureate or graduate program. In collaboration with colleagues, rather than relying on a sole pathway to the ECSE teacher credential, multiple pathways were identified. By providing a variety of options for preservice teacher candidates to complete their state teaching license requirements, the passageway to becoming a licensed ECSE teacher became more likely. In turn, these pathways afforded options for those preservice teacher candidates who otherwise may not have been able to become a licensed teacher. Moreover, a variety of options to earn

the ECSE teacher credential became a reality, affording individualization and support that may result in equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for all.

The ECSE teacher preparation program mirrored the student body at the university (e.g., receiving financial aid, first person in their families to attend college). Yet being both a post-baccalaureate and graduate program created additional financial, time, and situational barriers for many students. While not part of the original vision of this work (step one), it only felt natural to also revisit the program's recruitment and retention process. With a department-wide history of successfully securing and implementing projects that provide scholarships for teacher candidates, seeking external funding as scholarships for students felt like a natural next step. With inspiration from this action research and collaborative inquiry, the program was able to secure a federal grant whose purpose was to train teacher candidates alongside other professionals in training (e.g., social workers) focused on equity and inclusion. Seeking funding opportunities for preservice early childhood educators to advance and expand this work will continue.

A key tenant and legal requirement of the IDEA's (2004) Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) for infants and toddlers ages birth to 3 and the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for children ages 3 to 22 is multidisciplinary teaming. While there is still room for improvements in outcomes for young children with disabilities, exclusion, suspension, and expulsion data suggests collaboration on these teams must go further to protect and support young children with identified disabilities, and in particular, those students who are multiply marginalized. Without adequate practice in preservice programs and training, it is implausible to expect early childhood educators

and service providers to proficiently and effectively collaborate. Part of this preservice training includes learning about and from one another's fields' purpose, goals, and ethics of teaming, (Bricker et al., 2020; CEC/DEC, 2020). Preservice training is an ideal time to address these competencies because disciplinary identities and boundaries begin to form during this time. Particularly, practitioners must have the opportunity to learn, practice, succeed, and fail individually and in multidisciplinary teams in preservice in order to take calculated risks and feel confident when working in the field in teams to support young children with diverse learning needs and their families. Providing positive, cohesive, and equitable early learning experiences to young children and their families requires that practitioners receive training that facilitates learning with and about individuals representing different personal and professional backgrounds (NAEYC, 2019).

While this work was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, our work continued to be validated by instructors, students, and the broader professional networks the authors belonged to. For instance, the DEC published their Equity Point of View in 2023 and shared, "This work will not end, and we will consistently review our stated values, our mission, and our work…and keep this document alive by reviewing it at consistent intervals to ensure its alignment with our commitment…" (p. 11). Furthermore, it became evident in our work the need for a more equity-empowered and interdisciplinary focus in early childhood educator preparation in order to improve the outcomes of young children with disabilities and their families (Blanchard et al., 2021; NAEYC, 2019). While we have been able to expand our vision to include collaboration and sharing our work with others, we persist in our efforts.

Next Steps and Conclusion

The overwhelming conclusion to our work thus far is that we are continuously learning and we have much more that we would like to do. Undertaking a collaborative inquiry has undoubtedly unified our vision for our program and ignited our own personal growth. It has provided an opportunity to thoughtfully examine our program, strive to make intentional choices about the type of information presented and the voices we amplify, and given us confidence in facilitating discussions around important but hard conversations about racism and ableism. We continue to wrestle with many aspects of special education that are inherently ableist, including terminology used, the prevalence of a medical model/deficit approach to assessments and interventions, and the common overall goal of services to bring someone closer to an ideal of normalcy.

We hope to continue this work by collecting more formal data from our ECSE teacher candidates and those in related fields. Formal data ideas include but are not limited to forums, student created slides, assignments, analyzing master's exams responses about related topics (i.e., intersectionality and/or teaching philosophy; see Figure 5: *Example of Master's Exam Question*). We also would like to explore the possibility of a graduate certificate in collaboration with the College of Ethnic Studies. Lastly, as the university system allows, we would like to intentionally seek to hire and include course instructors within the ECSE program team that identify as a POC and/or disabled.

A key tenant of DisCrit espouses that activism is required for equity and social justice (Annamma, Ferri, & Connor, 2018). As we examine special education and inclusion, we can see that while historical progress has been made, there is also the

necessity of continued analysis and advocacy to ensure that all children, including those with disabilities and from other marginalized identities, are valued and provided equitable opportunities. In sharing this, we hope to engage others and help inform next steps for our program and the field as a whole.

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Figure 1

Four Stages of the Action Research Process
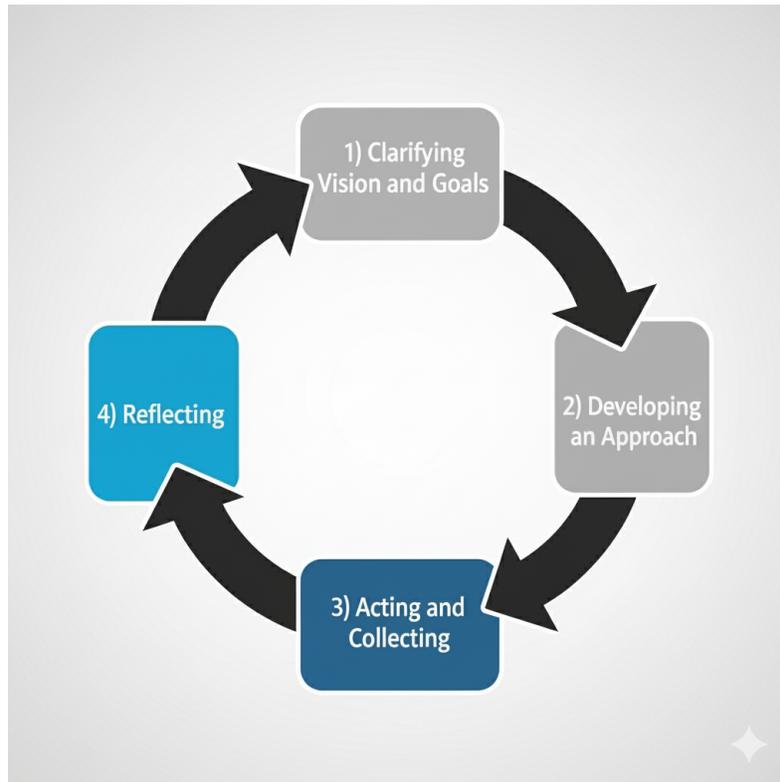
Note: This process is adapted from Sagor & Williams (2016).

Figure 2

Sample Revised Assignment - Family Partnership Project

SPED 779

Family Partnership Project Overview

This project provides an opportunity for reflection, learning and action as you consider your role as a partner to families who have children with support needs and/or identified disabilities. The assignment will be completed individually and in three parts that build on each other throughout the semester. These include:

Part 1: Constructing Your Personal Narrative (20 points)
In order to be an effective partner and professional, an individual needs to engage in a meaningful and consistent process of reflection. This process includes the acknowledgement of positionality and often privilege as a professional, beliefs and biases, and necessary growth areas. This is a lifelong process with the goal of greater cultural humility and partnership building with families. Students will be asked to construct a personal narrative, using guiding questions to facilitate awareness of the experiences, perspectives, and goals they bring to family partnerships.

Part 2: Learning About Family Partnerships (40 points)
To complete this part of the project, you will seek to learn from the experiences of those who have journeyed through early intervention and early childhood special education systems. This may include learning from an individual and/or a family member with a child who has support needs and/or an identified disabilities. The purpose is to provide space for them to share their experiences and expertise, and to gain wisdom that will allow you to be a better professional partner in your future work. You will seek to connect with the individual/family for at least one hour through Zoom or phone at a time that is convenient for them. Using the information you learned, you will describe the family you learned from using the Family Systems Framework. Further, you will share about the experience in early intervention/ early childhood special education, capturing both positive and negative experiences that were shared.

Part 3: Action Plan (15 points)
This project will conclude with a reflection of what was learned through the interaction with the individual and family and how this information, as well as what was gained throughout this semester, can inform an action plan for partnership with families. This will include making tangible goals towards:
- Acknowledging your professional role, including the positionality and privilege this may hold, and how you can intentionally address this
- Valuing and learning about a family, including their characteristics, interactions, functions, and life cycle (Family Systems Framework), and embracing an intersectional approach.
- Working from a perspective of strength and capacity building as opposed to a deficit lens
- Developing communication skills that meaningfully values the family and prioritize their voice

Figure 3

ECSE Revised Program Mission Statement

The Early Childhood Special Education Programs (ECSE) at San Francisco State is committed to preparing individuals to lead, collaborate and partner in a variety of early childhood settings that include young children with disabilities (birth through kindergarten).

The ECSE programs at SFSU including courses, field experience, and related activities are guided by the following values:

- All children/individuals have the right to be acknowledged and valued as full members of the community that honor the diverse, intersecting identities that they hold including but not limited to race, class, culture, gender, disability and language.
- We have a responsibility to continually and consistently confront individual bias and advocate strongly for early childhood programs in acknowledgement of the historical and current inequities that exist in the systems within child care/education, communities, and country as a whole.
- The foundation of all instruction, support, and services should begin from a place of strength, seeking to learn from the expertise of the child's family and community. Through this, the family collaborations with educators and other service providers should result in empowerment and capacity-building.
- A young child and family should be supported by a collaborative, transdisciplinary team. Each child and family's experiences of disability are unique, and supports and services should be reflective of this.
- Educators supporting all young children, including those with disabilities*, should have knowledge, problem solving, and collaboration skills to promote and prioritize young children's access to general education and inclusive learning environments, ensuring they all fully access, participate, and learn with their peers.
- Educators should have specialized expertise in supporting the individualized development and learning goals of young children with disabilities within the context of their family, peers, and community. This includes the knowledge and skills needed to intentionally and meaningfully support children with a wide breadth of developmental support needs and/or disabilities ranging from birth through kindergarten.

*Both identify-first and person-first language are used interchangeably with the awareness that language choice would be dedicated by the individual, or in the case of young children, the family's preference.

Figure 4:

Example of Partnership with Families Institute Agenda

Partnering with Families Institute
Saturday, October 21, 2023
9:00am – 12:15pm
Meeting ID: 893 9295 3324
Passcode: 313718
Zoom Link

9:00-9:15 am Welcome and Overview

9:15-10:00 am Learning Session #1:
Melissa Rentas earned an MEd in Early Childhood Special Education from CUNY
Hunter College & has lived in San Francisco as of 2011. She has worked within
the early childhood special education field for SFUSD as of 2013 as a preschool
special education teacher and PreK/TK Special Education Content Specialist.
She currently works at Bessie Carmichael ES, supporting students in an
integrated preschool program setting. She looks forward to sharing her
perspective on partnering with families of English Language Learners.

10:00-10:15 am Break

10:15-11:00 am Learning Session #2:
Myrna Medina has served California Deafblind Services as a Family Specialist since
2000. She is a parent of two children, one of whom was born with deafblindness
including other disabilities because of unknown etiology. Ms. Medina is a native from
Mexico and is fluent in English and Spanish. Ms. Medina has been instrumental in
ensuring linguistic and cultural sensitivity and integrity to all CDBS products in Spanish.
She has served in various advisory committees of local and national family
organizations such as Fiesta Educativa, Dicapta, NFADB and BTFVN. Ms. Medina also
coordinates the statewide CDBS Family Support Providers group and CDBS Open
Hands Open Access (OHOA) study group in Spanish. She looks forward to sharing
more about her view on the role of the professional.

11:00-11:15 am Break

11:15 – 12:00 pm Learning Session #3:

Erica is an Assistant Professor for the School of Social Work at UNIVERSITY and is a Clinical Supervisor. Erica's professional background is in providing therapeutic support and resources to women, men, families, diverse populations and professional development to people who work in the human service, mental health fields, nonprofits and business sectors. In addition, Erica is a Mother of 4 and her and her husband Ryan have grown-up and live in Santa Rosa. Erica also has extensive training in Trauma Informed Care/Approaches, Motivational Interviewing, a Certified Center for Mind Body Medicine Facilitator, a certified yoga instructor, birth & postpartum doula and childbirth educator. She completed her Educational Doctorate in Leadership and Social Justice at San Francisco State University.

12:00 – 12:15 pm Reflection and Concluding Thoughts

Figure 5

Example of Master's Exam Question

Comprehensive Exam Question #4: Critical Reflection as an Early Childhood Special Educator/ Early Interventionist

To provide the most effective services for young children with disabilities and their families across the spectrum of diversity, EI/ECSE practitioners should engage in ongoing reflective inquiry (DEC Code of Ethics, 2022). It is vital that this process include acknowledging one's assumptions, and how these may be influencing decision-making, collaborations, or beliefs about others.

In the following response, please demonstrate your knowledge/reflections of this by addressing the following ideas:

- Defining and demonstrating knowledge of key ideas/concepts that are infused in the work that we do in ECSE/EI including:
    - Definitions/conceptualizations of disability (e.g., medical model, social model)
    - Positionality
    - Ableism
    - Intersectionality
- Consider how these key ideas/concepts inevitably influence collaborations with other professionalism and/or partnerships with families. As part of this, consider how the DEC Recommended Practices 2014; linked below) can be incorporated in your response, especially as they pertain to practices around *Families* and *Teaming and Collaboration*.
- Reflect on the importance of engaging in continuous, self-reflection on these ideas/concepts is important as ECSE/EI professionals. This includes how it can influence how one perceives their job, the way they collaborate/partner, and their role as an advocate and leader in the field.

You are welcome to use an example that spans throughout these concepts that help illustrate the process and how it would be applied. Ensure that you include at least three different citations to support your response (no direct quotes).

References for Question #4

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Table 1

Summary of Data Collected

Focus Area	Types of Data Collected	Examples and Evidence Sources
Personal Growth	Professional learning artifacts; reflective notes; consultation feedback	Participation records from CEETL professional development (Teaching Square, Universal Design for Learning, Equitable Grading Practices, and Culturally Responsive Teaching workshops); reflective memos; consultation notes; certification records (e.g., Mental Health First Aid, Safe Zone Ally); documentation of service on the College Inclusion Teaching and Learning Advisory Committee
Curriculum Development	Course and instructional design documents; instructional media; resource inventories	Revised course titles and syllabi; curated and updated reading lists reflecting diverse authorship; redesigned assignments emphasizing positionality and identity reflection; video recordings from program YouTube channel featuring diverse guest speakers
Programmatic Change	Program and event documentation; stakeholder feedback; partnership records	Drafts and feedback of the revised program mission statement; agendas, materials, and evaluations from *Partnership for Families Institute* and *Meaningful Collaborations Conference*; correspondence and site visit notes establishing new early childhood education partnerships

Table 2

Sample of Readings and Resources Used in Key Courses

Beneke, A. J., & Ostrosky, M.M., & Katz, L.G (2018). *The project approach for all learners: A hands-on guide for inclusive early childhood classrooms.* Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Cummings, K. P., & Swindell, J. (2019). Using a trauma-sensitive lens to support children with diverse experiences. *Young Exceptional Children*, *22*(3), 139-149. https://doi.org/10.1177/1096250618756898

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Story Sauer, J & Rossetti, Z (2019). Affirming disability: Strength-based portraits of culturally diverse families. New York: Teachers College Press.

Wong, A. (Ed.) (2020). *Disability visibility: First person stories from the 21st century*.

Vintage Books.

Table 3

ECSE Methods Courses Name Change

Course Number	Name Change
SPED 671 (B-K)	Supporting Social-Emotional Development and Equitable Practices for Young Children with Disabilities and Their Families
SPED 777 (B-K)	Introduction to Disability, Development, and Equity for Young Children and Their Families
SPED 779 (B-3)	Family-Centered Practices and Services for Young Children with Disabilities
SPED 780 (B-K)	Equitable Assessment Practices for Young Children with Disabilities and Their Families
SPED 738 (3-K)	Inclusive Curriculum Development and Supports in Early Childhood Settings (Preschool - Kindergarten)
SPED 737 (B-3)	Inclusive Learning and Supports in Early Intervention (Infants & Toddlers)
SPED 885 (B-K)	Developing as a Professional Educator: Allyship, Leadership and Collaboration for Young Children with Disabilities

Note: "B" stands for "Birth"; "K" stands for "Kindergarten"