

Early Childhood Education Expansion at the Higher Education Level

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Abstract

This article describes the road map for designing an early childhood teaching degree. The article begins with a description of how this degree attends to the content of teaching young children and addressing the specific pedagogies appropriate for working with early learners. The article continues with the program of study, the objectives of the program and recruitment of students to the program as an example of how to design an early childhood degree to meet the needs of young learners. The article concludes with how this degree will impact the profession of teaching young children by preparing teachers who use innovation, developmentally appropriate practices and inclusiveness in the early childhood classrooms.

Introduction

The number of early childhood education classrooms is growing. This is especially true for Prekindergarten classrooms who seek to teach three- and four-year-old children in public and private settings. The number of preschool teachers is projected to grow fifteen percent by 2031 (Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2023). In addition, these programs are increasingly being viewed as foundational experiences for children who are being rigorously assessed on literacy and mathematical skills (Little & Gragson, 2023). The new emphasis on early childhood education has prompted universities to create more focused degree pathways that highlight instructional strategies specifically designed for the younger child (Texas Education Agency, 2023). At present, there are few models of higher education designed specifically for children in the younger years. Thus, the need exists for an examination of the issues that educators must consider as they begin to design these new early childhood education pathways. The following questions were used by one university as they began the process of creating this new degree pathway. Answers provided by the university are also included.

Setting

The university examined in this study is located in a rural setting in Northeast Texas. The university enrolls approximately 12,000 students each semester and includes a wide range of undergraduate, masters and doctoral students. The teacher preparation program within the university produces a high number of teachers who remain in the teaching field more than five years. This number is above the national average for teacher retention. Most graduate state that they plan to stay in the Northeast Texas area for the professional teaching career.

Early Childhood Program

The Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education is a new program designed for students interested in teaching in early childhood through grade 3 classrooms. The program targets undergraduate students who wish to learn how to provide developmentally appropriate instructional design and teaching practices in early childhood (age 3) through grade 3 settings. Graduates will have knowledge of child development, early childhood classroom environments, developmentally appropriate pedagogy, the use of student assessment and data for instructional decision-making, family involvement, language development support, and social emotional learning.

Program Questions

The following questions were used to design the new Early Childhood program. Over a period of four years the Early Childhood Education faculty worked collaboratively to create a program that would meet the need for more qualified early childhood teachers. Each question is accompanied by a detailed answer.

1. How does this program demonstrate rigorous and robust preparation of early childhood education?

The curriculum was developed by early childhood faculty members with additional specializations in special education, literacy, and mathematics. The program is categorized by four different focus areas:

- University core courses which serve as a foundation for all disciplines
- Courses in the early childhood education major with a focus on early literacy development
- Professional development courses, including the study of classroom organization and management learning theories, research-based teaching practices, teaching diverse learners, and clinical experiences specific to the early childhood classroom
- Related interdisciplinary support courses in areas such as health, math, and science.

2. What special emphases are included in this program?

Within the early childhood education major and professional development courses, special emphasis is placed on early childhood development, play, creating multimodal learning experiences, childhood learning domains, creating a developmentally appropriate classroom environment, emergent oral and written language acquisition, academic language, and thematic, inquiry, project-based learning approaches. The inclusion of this comprehensive curriculum of relevant topics, theory, and research to the early childhood learning setting is vitally important for preparing future teachers to address the various needs of young children.

3. How does this program meet a need for more teachers who are qualified to teach in the Prek through 3rd grade areas?

This proposed program would provide specialized training for prospective preschool teachers in understanding the social, emotional, cognitive, and motor development needs of young children in a school-based setting. As programs designed for young children (ages 3 years to 4 years) are expanded to serve at-risk populations, prospective teachers will need the early language and literacy training that is emphasized in this proposed program.

4. How will students be recruited to the new program?

The recruitment efforts will be based on three different tiers.

Tier 1 Information Based Recruitment. Tier 1 Recruitment strategies make use of general information dissemination strategies. Texas A&M-Commerce maintains a well-developed website. Within this website the Curriculum and Instruction department will expand their web pages to include the new Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education PK-3. Information concerning the degree, need for teachers with an EC3 focus and testing pass rates for the university and admission guidelines will be provided. In addition, the website will meet all industry standards for accessibility.

Tier 2 Group Recruitment. Moreover, Texas A&M- Commerce hosts a university-wide student recruitment event each semester called Mane Event. This event attracts over 300 prospective students. During the Mane Event, students visit with professors, learn about the program of study in education, and learn about student groups on campus.

Tier 3 Living Learning Community Recruitment and Retention. Studio 360 is a “Living Learning Community” that houses education majors in a living community within the residential hall at Texas A & M- Commerce. Studio 360 participants will connect closer with education professors and have professional training experiences unique to this group. This initiative will provide intensive mentorship in order to foster a sense of community that will improve the quality of the learning experience as well as remain students. The Studio 360 Living Learning Community target recruitment efforts will focus on high schools and community colleges with students from diverse backgrounds.

Tier 4 Campus-Wide Focused Recruitment for Students of Color. Texas A & M-Commerce is designated as a Hispanic serving institution. All recruitment and retention efforts are designed to carry out this designation. The Latino American Mentorship Program (LAMP)’s mission is to motivate Latinx students and provide a supportive learning community for mentors and mentees. The program strives for its members to not only graduate, but also further their careers by building connections and developing lifelong skills. LAMP has more than 60 mentors and mentees and serves more than 550 students per year with their programming. The following graph highlights the success of our Tier 3 recruitment efforts within the Department of Curriculum Instruction with students who represent varying ethnic identities.

5. What is the program of study provided for the early childhood degree?

The EC-3 degree program consists of General Education courses, Interdisciplinary Core courses, Professional Development courses, Specialized courses, and Field-Based courses. The courses align with the domains and standards in the Early Childhood: PK-3 Texas Educator Certification Examination Framework. All of the specialized courses within the degree reflect at least one of the domains within the framework. The domains are as follows: Child Development, The Instructional Setting, Educating All Learners, Data-Driven Practice and Formal/Informal Assessment, Learning Across the Curriculum and Analysis and Response. Therefore, coursework has been added to the program to prepare preservice teachers for this exam. Early childhood coursework included in this program is listed below.

- English Language Learners: Theory and Practice
- Child Development: Early Years
- Language acquisition and Development in Early Childhood Education
- Learning Environments
- Early Childhood STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics)
- Foundation in Early Childhood Education
- Play and Creativity in Early Childhood Education
- Family and Community Partnerships in Early Childhood Education
- Assessment in Early Childhood Education

Additionally, the Professional Development courses that support the Science of Teaching Reading (STR) Certification Exam framework are a major part of the proposed ECE-3 teacher preparation program. The STR Teacher Certification Examination Framework and the Early Childhood Certification Examination Framework represent coequal exam expectations in that they prepare teacher candidates to educate students in grades PK-3. Also, since the majority of teacher candidates usually take the English as a Second Language (ESL) Certification Exam, coursework regarding how to support Emergent Bilinguals has been added to the program as well. Competencies addressing the teaching of Emergent Bilinguals are found on both the English as a Second Language Certification Exam and the Science of Teaching Reading Certification Exam.

6. What are the objectives of the early childhood program?

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of child development and developmentally appropriate early learning processes, curriculum, and program models.
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of the role of family in supporting students’ cognitive, language, and social development.
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of how to manage and develop childhood behavior and their ability to self-monitor and self-regulate, as well as knowledge of how to build young children’s social skills and emotional resilience.

- Students will demonstrate knowledge of how to create a developmentally appropriate and active learning environment that encourages multimodal learning and supports the education of the whole child.
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of how to create differentiated and culturally responsive learning experiences to culturally and linguistically diverse students.
- Students will plan and implement evidenced-based and student-centered learning experiences across the content areas and will demonstrate knowledge of integrating various disciplines and technologies within instruction.
- Students will analyze and interpret qualitative and quantitative assessment data and use that information to plan instruction.

7. How will preservice teachers represented by underrepresented groups be supported?

Underrepresented groups such as first-generation college students, ethnic minority students and students with disabilities will receive individual mentoring through the College of Education, the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, individual professors, and the Office of Disabilities (if needed). In addition, the year-long internship and residency provides more individualized support for students as they begin their face-to-face involvement with the public schools. The Latino American Mentorship Program (LAMP)'s mission is to motivate Latinx students and provide a supportive learning community for mentors and mentees. The program strives for its members to not only graduate, but also further their careers by building connections and developing lifelong skills. LAMP has more than 60 mentors and mentees and serves more than 550 students per year with their programming. The following graph highlights the success of our Tier 3 recruitment efforts within the Department of Curriculum Instruction with students who represent varying ethnic identities.

8. How will this program prepare teachers to stay in the field five years or more?

Students in this program will experience rigorous coursework designed specifically for the early childhood student. Course descriptions are described below. In addition, an extensive field-based component for pre service teachers is included in the program that includes observation and classroom teaching. This part of the program will involve over 100 days in a public school setting the focuses on young children Prek-3rd grade. The time spent in the classroom has proven beneficial in past years.

9. How will this program provide innovation in educator preparation?

This program is aligned with five strategic innovations. First, the BS in Early Childhood Education will provide students with experiential learning experiences through existing partnerships with local school districts. Additionally, the coursework will consist of hands-on learning experiences with materials commonly found in early childhood classrooms, creating engaging and relevant learning experiences through impactful pedagogies. The second strategy is to create inclusive communities. The coursework is designed to prepare students to work with diverse children and their families by centering diverse perspectives and allowing our students to engage in safe and civil conversations about inclusivity and positive learning environments. A third strategic priority and goal is to elevate research. The faculty in the BS in ECE program conduct and publish research in the field of early childhood education as well as attend and present at international, national, state, and regional early childhood conferences. Thus, faculty will bring up-to-date knowledge and current trends of the field into the classrooms with the students. Fourthly, the program is focused on aligning initiatives to support our unique rural-urban identity. This fact positions our university to become the leader in Early Childhood Education in Northeast Texas with an outreach that spans a wide geographic range. This distinction will provide many opportunities for community outreach and professional development, thereby, achieving the strategic goal of becoming a "center or hub" of learning in Northeast Texas. Finally, the university aims to transform operations by making strategic and data-informed decisions. The inclusion of a BS in ECE degree is a strategic addition to our current offerings given a growth in market demand for skilled early childhood educators, responding to an unmet need for training such educators at the university level in our geographical region.

10. How do you believe that this program will transform early childhood education classrooms at the local level?

Children whose teachers graduate from this program will experience innovative classrooms based on inclusive communities, developmentally appropriate instructional strategies designed for the younger age groups, and collaborative partnerships with parents and administrators. The integration of these elements will provide a solid foundation for classroom design instruction, thereby, ensuring greater student success.

Summary

In summary, the material provided in this question-answer document seeks to answer fundamental question regarding the development of an early childhood degree pathway at a major degree seeking university. It is hoped that the degree will transform lives as it prepares students for employment in the rapidly growing field of early childhood education. It is also hoped that this will provide a roadmap for others who seek to design new pathways of study for early childhood educators.

References

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