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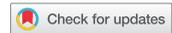
Successful student field placements in early intervention: guidance from EI program managers

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ABSTRACT

This study examined perceptions of early intervention (EI) program managers about EI student field placements, needs, and expectations for accepting students into placements and partnerships between their programs and institutions of higher education. Three focus groups were hosted by twelve program managers in one state to gather insights into their experiences collaborating with universities to host students for field placements. Analysis of focus group transcripts resulted in three primary themes related to successful placements and community-academic partnerships: (1) university-EI program relationships and bidirectional communication between EI program leaders and faculty, (2) shared understanding of university and student responsibilities, and (3) shared understanding of local EI program commitments and logistics. Each theme is discussed, including strategies for improving student placements, and implications for future collaboration, research, and practice are shared.

Little has been written about the preservice pipeline specifically for early intervention (EI) staff who will provide special instruction, the early childhood educational service under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Special instruction is one of seventeen services available to eligible families of infants and toddlers, age birth to 36 months, who have developmental delays and disabilities in the United States (US). According to Sec. 303.13(b)(14) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), special instruction includes four components:

> a) the design of learning environments and activities that promote the infant's or toddler's acquisition of skills in a variety of developmental areas, including cognitive processes and social interaction; b) curriculum planning, including the planned interaction of personnel, materials, and time and space, that leads to achieving the outcomes in the IFSP for the infant or toddler with a disability; c) providing families with information, skills, and support related to enhancing the skill development of the child; and d) working with the infant or toddler with a disability to enhance the child's development.

Those who provide special instructions and their associated qualifications are not specified in US federal regulations so decisions about qualifications occur at the state and local

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program levels. Similarly, the professional title of these service providers varies widely across the field (Childress et al., 2024). The title "Early Intervention (EI) Educator" has been suggested by the Division for Early Childhood (Division for Early Childhood, 2024) of the Council for Exceptional Children as a consistent title to refer to the providers of special instruction and will be used in this manuscript.

Challenges and the need for partnerships

While all states and territories in the US currently have Part C EI programs, the implementation of special instruction, the requirements for their providers, personnel preparation, and preservice pipelines, if available, vary by state (Childress et al., 2024; Division for Early Childhood, 2024; Parks et al., 2014). Despite these challenges, it is imperative that professionals who serve as EI Educators are highly qualified to support very young children and their families to ensure that they have the expertise needed to provide EI services (Bueno et al., 2010; Division for Early Childhood , 2024). This may be more likely when those who prepare, recruit, supervise, and train these personnel collaborate to build strong partnerships that address staff shortages, facilitate student/staff knowledge and skill development, and meet the needs of state and local EI programs (Barton et al., 2012; Bruder, 2021; Lees & Kennedy, 2017; McCorkle et al., 2022).

Staff shortages

Staff shortages in a variety of disciplines are common and persistent in the EI field in the US and other countries (Bruder, 2021; Hebbeler, 1994; Martin-Prudent et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2017; Yeager et al., 2023). According to the IDEA Infant and Toddlers Coordinators Association (2023) Tipping Points survey, coordinators of state-level Part C EI programs expressed that a "lack of providers to meet service needs" was their most stressful factor in their roles as leaders. This stressor has been the top factor reported by state coordinators since 2018. In the same survey, state coordinators were asked if they were experiencing staff shortages in qualified providers. Responses from forty-five coordinators revealed that shortages for providers of special instruction were the fourth most frequent shortage area (69% of the respondents), after speech-language pathologists (98%), physical therapists (87%), and occupational therapists (76%). When asked how they were addressing these shortages, state coordinators have consistently identified outreach and collaboration with community partners, including colleges and universities across Tipping Points surveys over the past 3 years.

To address similar needs as those historically documented in the Tipping Points survey (IDEA Infant and Toddlers Coordinators Association, 2023) and build collaboration among preservice faculty and in-service professional development providers, one south-eastern state in the US created the Early Intervention/Preservice Consortium. This Consortium includes staff from the state's comprehensive system of personnel development (CSPD) team and faculty from the five universities, with education programs preparing future EI Educators (called developmental service providers in this state). Members of the Consortium use an action plan to guide their work and meet regularly to share ideas and resources (such as syllabi and case studies), problem-solve, and build collaboration among institutions of higher

education and EI agencies in the state. During the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty expressed concerns with finding EI programs that could host student placements due to emergency health and safety provisions limiting home visiting. Further discussion revealed that identifying field placement options in EI had been challenging before the pandemic.

Field placements for future EI educators

To prepare EI educators for working with families of infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities, it is essential that these educators have opportunities during their university preparation to engage families, collaborate with other professionals, practice using what they learn in real-world contexts, and receive feedback about their intervention practices (McLeod et al., 2024; Szocik et al., 2024). A key component of high-quality preservice preparation is field placement, during which future EI Educators gain these experiences that prepare them for their career (Gardner & Bartkus, 2014; Macy et al., 2009). The importance of high-quality placements is highlighted in the *Initial Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Early Interventionists/Early Childhood Special Educators* (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC]/Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2020). Standard 8: Field and Clinical Experience specifically recommends that candidates

> progress through a series of planned and developmentally sequenced field experiences for the early childhood age ranges (birth to age 3, 3 through 5 years, 5 through 8 years), range of abilities, and in the variety of collaborative and inclusive early childhood settings that are appropriate to their license and roles. (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC]/Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2020, p. 2).

How and where these experiences are completed depend on university program guidance and state licensure requirements that can vary significantly across states (Chen & Michelson, 2015). Examples of other variables that affect field placements include the availability and variety of EI programs in a community, program staff capacity to mentor students, timeframes for onboarding students, number of hours required to complete field placements, flexibility of students to travel to programs to complete placement requirements, and timing of when field placements occur within the university curriculum.

Facilitating student field placements are typically the responsibility of the faculty and staff at universities preparing future EI educators. While they coordinate placements and connect students to placement sites, their work is incomplete without the commitment and collaboration of site supervisors and cooperating professionals in community programs. Lees and Kennedy (2017) emphasized partnerships between universities and field placement sites in the community as essential for field-based teacher education. Similarly, McLeod et al. (2024) suggested that collaboration is a key component of personnel preparation in EI and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), so university personnel must actively cultivate collaborative partnerships with EI program staff. This collaboration can be framed as a "community-academic partnership" (CAP), as described by Drahota et al. (2016), which includes at least one partner from both academia and the community organization. CAPs can be an effective way for universities to engage with community partners to improve

communication, build collaboration, and, in the context of field placements, help students connect their learning to the practices used when working with children and families.

Previous research

Efforts to address challenges with student preparation and build strong community-academic partnerships began in this state more than 10 years prior to this project. Members of the EI/Preservice Consortium conducted prior research that surveyed local EI program managers in the state, university faculty from graduate programs preparing students in EI and ECSE, and graduate students who recently completed their EI field placements. This research was designed to gather information about perceptions and challenges related to student preparation (Childress et al., 2013). Survey findings suggested that managers found students had insufficient knowledge and skills prior to placements, and likewise, students felt unprepared for placements in EI settings. In addition to concerns with student preparation, managers also reported challenges related to lack of time and staff to supervise students. University faculty reported challenges with not having enough EI placements and more specifically, having difficulties with scheduling placements, travel times, lack of uniform policies across agencies, and difficulties with managing summer EI placements (Childress et al., 2013). These preexisting challenges made it apparent that there was a continuing need to improve collaboration between EI programs and university faculty. These problems are not unique to this state and continue more than 10 years later, as described by McCorkle et al. (2022) in their descriptions of similar challenges faced by another EI CAP. Addressing the need for partnerships and the challenges still being faced is essential given the importance of quality field placements in EI and ECSE for building the capacity of future professionals (Dunst et al., 2019; La Paro et al., 2018; Macy et al., 2009).

Survey data and discussions among Consortium members prompted new efforts to learn from the perspectives and experiences of EI program managers with regard to field placements in a post-pandemic context. It was the hope that information gathered from these efforts can be used to strengthen EI CAPs while guiding improvements in field placement processes. The research questions that guided this work included:

(1) What do EI program managers perceive as important for successful EI field placements?
(2) What do EI program managers need from higher education faculty and students to feel comfortable accepting students for field placements?

Methods

This qualitative study employed focus groups with local EI program managers in one state to determine what makes a successful partnership between EI programs and universities for student field placements. Study procedures and protocols were reviewed and determined to be exempt by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Participants included twelve EI program managers. These program managers represented 30% of the total number of forty program managers in the state and came from each of the state's six EI regions. All program managers were female and were actively supervising a local EI program serving infants and toddlers with delays and disabilities and their families at the time of their participation in a focus group. Managers led programs in urban areas ($n = 4$), rural areas ($n = 4$), and mixed suburban-rural areas ($n = 4$). All programs provided EI services in natural environments including family homes and other community settings where children and families spend time. Programs varied in distances to the closest university that had an EI preparation program, with some urban and suburban-rural programs located within 1–2 miles of a university and longer distances (65–103 miles) separating rural programs from universities.

Procedures

All EI program managers in the state received information about the study during a call hosted by the state's Part C EI office and via e-mail after support for the study was received from the state Part C coordinator. Managers were asked to indicate their availability to join focus groups among several time/date choices. Two recruitment e-mails and additional e-mail reminders were sent to encourage responses from as many program managers as possible. Data were collected in February 2021 using web conferencing software to facilitate discussion at a distance due to the global pandemic. Each focus group included four program manager participants. Two or three research team members were present in each focus group, with one serving as the primary facilitator and the others providing notetaking and clarifying statements. The groups lasted an average of 1 h, 12 min, with a range of 68–78 min. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed using the features present within the web conferencing software. A student research assistant listened to the recordings and cleaned the transcriptions for accuracy.

Measure

The focus group protocol was developed by one member of the research team, and minor modifications were made based on feedback from the members of the Consortium, which included higher education faculty and state-level professional development staff. The questions pertained to partnerships between universities and local EI programs, qualities of high-quality field placements, and logistics for successful placements. Specifically, program managers were asked to describe: (1) what makes a high-quality EI partnership between their programs and universities; (2) what is most critical for a successful experience for the student and EI program staff; (3) what they need to feel comfortable accepting students for field placements; (4) what challenges they experience when taking students for placements; (5) what knowledge and skills are associated with field placement (i.e., what do students need to know prior to placement and what do they gain during placement); (6) what constitutes a successful field placement for the student and the placement supervisor; (7) what makes a student "hirable" at the end of the placement; and (8) anything else they wanted to share regarding student placements and partnerships with higher education.

Table 1. Qualitative analysis: primary themes and sub-themes.

Primary Theme	Sub-Themes
Logistics	Memoranda of understanding/agreement and agency requirements
	Time commitment/Timing of placements
	COVID and telehealth
University and local EI programs	Relationships (with/between universities, faculty and program managers)
	Cooperating EI professionals
Student preparation and success	Student attitudes/dispositions
	Student knowledge of EI
	Hiring potential of students
	University requirements
EI program level feedback	Financial issues
	Ideas for improving collaboration and student placements
	Incentives for program managers and cooperating professionals to support student placements
	Lack of developmental service providers to serve as cooperating professionals
	Placements from multiple disciplines (in addition to education)
	Student choice of EI/ECSE employment after placement

Note. The Logistics sub-theme related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the provision of virtual EI services is not addressed in this manuscript.

Data analysis

Four members of the research team, all members of the Consortium, conducted the data analysis. A multi-step, collaborative consensus process to determine themes was utilized (Cornish et al., 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Each member read one transcript and independently identified potential codes. The full group discussed and came to consensus on units of meaning and thematic codes. An initial codebook was developed, then two members worked together to code each transcript. Once each pair had coded all three transcripts, the larger group reconvened to discuss the coding process and findings. Based on these discussions, the codebook was refined and then members of the team reanalyzed each transcript utilizing the final codebook. This analysis resulted in four primary themes, with sub-themes noted for each primary theme (see Table 1). Analysis of these four primary themes and sub-themes resulted in three final themes related to collaborations and EI student field placements.

Trustworthiness

Multiple steps were taken throughout the design and implementation of this study to ensure trustworthiness of the data and findings (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Stahl & King, 2020). The research team consisted of four members of the Consortium to reduce bias given personal/professional relationships between some research team members and participants. Team members took notes during focus group discussions and each wrote a summary immediately after each focus group to capture thoughts. These summaries were reviewed during research team meetings and referenced during a collaborative coding process that minimized one person's interpretation when reaching group consensus. Data were also analyzed using investigator triangulation (Stahl & King, 2020), where each research team member examined focus group transcripts using the final codebook and shared their interpretations with the group for discussion. One research team member also provided a partial "outsider" view, as she did not work as an early interventionist and did not participate in data collection so was able to question

assumptions made by other team members to increase the dependability of findings (Stahl & King, 2020).

Reflexivity statement

All members of the research team strongly believe in high-quality EI supports and services for young children and their families. All believe in effective preparation for new professionals working in the field. All believe that relationships are key and that mutual beneficence is essential to partnerships between higher education and EI programs for a well-prepared EI workforce. All members work in preservice preparation of early interventionists and three of the four members currently work or previously worked for a CSPD in this state and another state. Three of the four members were also former EI service providers of special instruction, while the fourth member was a former ECSE teacher. Team members were aware that their prior experiences and current positions in higher education and on the state's CSPD team could affect participants' comfort answering questions, so open-ended questions were used in a semi-structured, conversational style to allow participants to answer in the way that best served them.

Results

This study examined perceptions of EI program managers about student field placements, needs, and expectations for accepting students into placements, and partnerships between their programs and institutions of higher education. Analysis of focus group transcripts resulted in three themes related to successful placements and partnerships: (1) university-EI program relationships and bidirectional communication between EI program managers and faculty, (2) shared understanding of university and student responsibilities, and (3) shared understanding of local EI program commitments and logistics.

University-EI program relationships and bidirectional communication

Program managers have strongly expressed the importance of having robust, ongoing relationships with universities. Within the context of these relationships, communication would flow both ways so that programs and universities would understand expectations for student placements, needs could be shared from both perspectives, and challenges could be addressed together. This sentiment is captured in this comment from EI Program Manager #1:

> . . .it's really good to have a familiar enough relationship that you can call them if something isn't exactly going well, and you have that relationship already in place to have that discussion . . . and that they have that relationship with you so they can call you and they can say, you know, Juanita's placement fell through, she really loves EI, is there any way you can fit her in.

Managers felt that it was important to have a contact person at the university who was a strong clinical supervisor, so they "know who their partners are." This partnership would help program managers understand the roles and expectations for student placements from the beginning, including, for example, what the university wants the student to experience and which service providers (e.g., EI educators, speech-language pathologists, occupational

therapists, and physical therapists) can act as cooperating EI professionals supervising students in their placements. Program Manager #9 described this connection as beneficial to both partners: "Having a back-and-forth dialogue is really important [as is] knowing somebody there that you can really talk about what the needs are on both sides." With this in mind, program managers also expressed interest in understanding what trends faculty notice regarding preservice education of future early interventionists and what is being taught in university courses. Managers indicated that knowing how many students need placement and when during the year placements are needed would be helpful, so they could prepare for hosting students. Additionally, program managers noted the importance of a positive relationship between the student and the cooperating EI professional at the local program. These relationships were described by managers as a foundation that supports students as they develop professionalism, curiosity, and an understanding of how EI programs work. These relationships are also important because program managers see student placements as a potential hiring pool for the future.

When asked specifically about what needs to be communicated, program managers emphasized the importance of consistent communication and clear expectations shared between universities, local programs, and students. Specifically related to communication and expectations from universities, managers wanted to know: (1) the length of the placement; (2) who can supervise the student at the program level and who supervises the student at the university level; 93) expectations for a successful placement (e.g., what the student will learn and do); (4) student roles and responsibilities; (5) how faculty observations of the student will work; and (6) placement documentation and evaluation. Managers also wanted the university faculty to understand program expectations for accepting students, such as (1) onboarding procedures and timelines; (2) scheduling of placement hours; (3) student access to files; and (4) knowledge of the university's field supervisor. Regarding communication with students, managers felt it was important to share information about the knowledge that students should have coming into the placement, flexibility needed to accommodate child and family schedules when observing visits, and requirements for professionalism when engaging families and other EI team members. Program managers emphasized that they wanted students to have high-quality placements with committed, skilled cooperating EI professionals and that collaborative relationships are essential to making this happen.

Shared understanding of university and student responsibilities

Similarly, program managers strongly expressed the need for a shared understanding of university and student responsibilities for preservice preparation. In addition to what was described previously, managers were interested in having context for the student placement. They wanted to know how the placement fit into the student's course of study and if the placement was a stand-alone experience or if it was tied to specific coursework or a class. Some managers expressed interest in not only sharing information about the placement but also having a shared understanding about the curriculum in which the placement is integrated.

Especially for placements occurring early in a student's program, managers emphasized that students needed foundational knowledge of EI prior to placement. They felt providing this foundation was the responsibility of the university, rather than the responsibility of the

EI program staff during placement. For instance, several program managers emphasized the need to improve students' knowledge of early childhood development, as captured by Program Manager #4:

> . . .just having that knowledge of child development I think is a huge piece and I feel that's lacking in a lot of the students that we take on. I think that would be a key piece that needs a little bit more time spent at the collegiate level in terms of getting students ready for when they do these placements.

Program Manager #1 extended the discussion about child development as a curricular need to emphasize using this knowledge to teach caregivers:

> They need to know about the child development but they need to know how to teach the adult and how to enter into that in a respectful way so that you acknowledge the gifts and the skills that the parents have and have that balance between humility and knowing that you don't know everything, but [you have] confidence in what you do know.

In this state, the early childhood coaching approach (Rush & Sheldon, 2020) has been adopted as the primary method for supporting caregivers during EI visits. This approach emphasizes adult learning and family-centered support, focusing on how EI service providers engage caregivers and children during daily routines and activities. Providers use coaching strategies such as observation, modeling, reflection, and feedback to support caregivers as they practice using intervention strategies with children during visits to promote development. Providers also plan with caregivers on how to facilitate child development between visits to extend and generalize learning. Program Manager #1 described improvements in students' understanding of coaching: "I think that they're much more prepared for coaching than they used to be. It's really wonderful to see what the universities are doing." Program Manager #9, however, suggested that there was still a need to build students' knowledge and understanding of their roles as coaches, rather than classroom teachers:

> . . .the skill set we would need is the knowledge and the skills around coaching. You're giving over that control and so being able to understand how to work in a partnership with a family and that, although you may have some expertise, acknowledging that the parent's the expert on the child and meeting them where they are, regardless of what you think they should be doing . . . I think that that's something that they need to understand that this isn't a classroom . . . you are teaching a family but you're coaching.

Without this foundational knowledge, program managers found that hosting student placements was more difficult as they had to spend more time orienting students to the work of EI rather than providing an application-based experience.

Program managers discussed students' abilities to apply what they were learning in the context of the placement and the attitudes and dispositions needed. For instance, managers felt it was important that students have opportunities to apply their knowledge from coursework to EI service delivery, which was why having foundational knowledge was so important. Managers also noted that field placements are most successful when students have a desire to learn and internal motivation that drives them to complete the activities of the placement. Program Manager #12 connected these attitudes to the students' future employment when she said:

> I think they need to take it seriously and understand that, you know, while they're interning with us, you know, potentially if they're looking at coming back and getting a job, I mean they need to act as if they are professionals in the field while with us.

Managers shared how challenging placements were when students did not demonstrate these attributes (e.g., a student fell asleep during a visit, students wanting to rush to complete their hours at the end of the semester, students needing so much training that time was limited for observation of EI activities) and noted that students who were knowledgeable and professional tended to be more hirable in the future.

Shared understanding of local EI program commitments and logistics

It was clear in the focus group discussions that program managers value student placements and work hard to facilitate impactful experiences. Managers acknowledged the time commitment required for them and their staff to mentor students, which could include advanced planning on the part of the cooperating EI professional, an onboarding process, and ongoing supervision. Program Manager #1 felt that this was important for universities and program agencies to acknowledge:

> Something to think about: the amount of time that it requires to be a really good … field supervisor [or] cooperating teacher on our end. … I think it's important to acknowledge the amount of time it takes on the part of the supervisor."

Managers also discussed a lack of clarity about who can serve as a cooperating EI professional, needing more information about the requirements for the field placement. Some program managers mentioned a lack of EI Educators on staff (due to program structure or personnel shortages) who can serve as cooperating EI professionals, which further complicated matters. When considering who will support the student, managers wanted to ensure a good match between the student and the staff person so that the experience was positive for both.

An important theme from discussions with EI program managers centered around the need for university faculty and students to understand what must occur at the program level before a field placement. Some programs require memoranda of understanding or agreement to be established with the university prior to field placement, which can present a challenge when trying to expedite field placements, as noted by Program Manager #9:

> And on our side we have to have, you know, that whole memorandum of agreement. We have to have a contract with the school, so that has to be renewed and we have to do background screenings before they can ever come in, and we do drug screenings as well, so that puts up a little bit of a barrier.

Programs, such as the one described by this participant, also described onboarding requirements; the complexity of those requirements varied with locality. Some programs were able to accept students following a phone call with the student; other programs had requirements that mirrored the new hiring process, including interviews, background checks, orientation meetings, and so on. Program Manager #6 described this process as multifaceted:

> Before we even commit to them … I have them go through HR [Human Resources]. They submit their resume to me. I talk with them ahead of time, explain to them what our program is like, what the expectation would be and then they go through the whole drug screen, background checks - everything.

Programs wanted faculty to be familiar with these requirements so students have advance notice and can plan accordingly, rather than thinking they can call a program and begin their placement with short notice.

Other system logistics described by managers addressed financial issues. Some program leaders mentioned incentivizing who will serve as cooperating EI professionals to encourage more staff to host students. There was also discussion about compensation and hiring students after placement. Program managers suggested that they were eager to hire students who had completed EI field placements. Program Manager #11 noted that, regardless of which university program students completed, they bring unique knowledge and experience from having completed a placement, when she said, "Honestly someone who's had a good placement in early intervention is a much better hire – no matter [what] program they were in. It's a much better hire because they understand it." Program managers also noted that compensation rates vary across EI programs, which can complicate the preservice pipeline. Similarly, early childhood inclusive/special educators who could work in EI may choose to work in school settings or in EI programs in urban settings where they will likely make more money than they would in rural programs. Program managers wanted to support the preservice pipeline and make EI an attractive option for graduating students; they felt that ongoing collaboration between programs and universities with more shared understanding and stronger communication was key to making this happen.

Discussion

To determine what is needed for successful student placements in EI programs and successful community-academic partnerships that facilitate these placements, focus group research was conducted with twelve EI program managers in one state. Managers representing programs from across the state shared insights into the field placement process, including what students need to know before placement, what faculty and universities need to understand about local programs, what makes a successful placement, and how placements are viewed in the context of the preservice pipeline. These insights will be discussed based on the research questions guiding this work with consideration for how to improve EI student field placements. Table 2 offers strategies program managers and university faculty and staff can use to establish or improve placements based on these findings.

Research question 1: what do EI program managers perceive as important for successful EI field placements?

EI program managers value strong relationships and bidirectional communication as the foundation on which a successful student placement is built. Successful placements are guided by established contacts so that program managers and faculty know who to reach out to with questions and to address challenges. Within this relationship, expectations should be well defined, including what the student is expected to experience, who can supervise the student, and what the student should gain from the placement. A shared understanding of the length of

Table 2. Strategies for EI program-university collaboration to support successful student field placements.

Theme	Strategies
University-EI program relationships and bidirectional communication	Adopt a partnership perspective that shares responsibility for successful student placements between EI programs and universities. Make building strong relationships and rapport ongoing priorities. Establish specific contacts and share contact information between the EI program and the university faculty and/or supervisor. Maintain bidirectional communication between the EI program staff and university faculty and staff throughout the year. View student field placements in the context of a pipeline for hiring future EI special instructors.
Shared understanding of university and student responsibilities	Define expectations for the field placement, including what the student is expected to experience, who can supervise the student, and what the student should gain from the placement. Agree on student placement logistics such as placement length, observations, connection to coursework, documentation and evaluation requirements. Establish a shared understanding of what foundational knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to EI and early childhood development students need prior to field placement.
Shared understanding of local EI program commitments and logistics	Identify program requirements for student onboarding and help students plan accordingly. Recognize the significant time commitment for EI programs and supervisors involved with hosting and coordinating a student field placement. Establish and maintain Memoranda of Agreement or Understanding between EI programs and universities.

the placement, how student observations by faculty will work, how the placement is related to coursework, and what documentation must be completed, including student evaluation, is essential for a strong working partnership between sending universities and receiving EI programs. This aligns with recommendations from Drahota et al. (2016), who noted the importance of trusting and respectful relationships built on frequent communication and mutually beneficial collaboration when cultivating CAPs.

Program managers want faculty to have a shared understanding of the local-level logistics involved with hosting placements. Logistics vary across programs, including procedures for student onboarding and what agreements, if any, must be in place before placement. Universities also have different requirements, so managing placements among different universities and EI programs can be inherently challenging, but with strong partnerships grounded in ongoing communication, it may be possible for these challenges not to limit placement opportunities.

Research question 2: what do EI program managers need from higher education faculty and students to feel comfortable accepting students for field placements?

In addition to strong, ongoing relationships and communication, program managers also expressed the need for the success of student field placements to be viewed as a shared responsibility. Lees and Kennedy (2017) also noted the importance of shared responsibility, along with mutual beneficence, when partners collaborate in field-based, early childhood teacher education programs. Managers noted that this responsibility is shared primarily

among university faculty and program managers, but students and cooperating professionals also share responsibility for the knowledge and dispositions they bring to the placement.

Shared responsibility in EI field placements could include curriculum, as program managers wanted to know more about the context of field placements and how they connect to coursework. They requested that students have foundational knowledge about EI, child development, and coaching practices before being placed so that time during the field experiences can focus on helping the student apply what is being learned in class. Hanline (2010) also noted the importance of students being knowledgeable prior to placement and having opportunities to implement learned best practices. Fortunately, the university programs participating in the Consortium address these topics mentioned by program managers in their coursework. Some programs currently have dedicated courses on child development and EI, while others have these topics, especially coaching, embedded in at least one course. This was not always the case in all preservice programs in the state, so some feedback from program managers may be associated with the previous curriculum.

Program managers also emphasized the importance of students having a clear understanding of the expectations for placement. These expectations could be drawn from associated coursework, requirements for certification or licensure, and from dialog between CAP members (Lees & Kennedy, 2017). Drahota et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of a clear mission for partnership and clearly defined roles; this could extend beyond the roles of faculty and program managers to include a shared understanding of expectations for students before and during placements. Similarly, an understanding of requirements that are unique to EI field placements, and different from requirements for school-based placements, is also important for faculty and university staff who coordinate placements. Students will likely spend their time differently during EI field placements, as compared to placements in a preschool setting. For instance, students are often expected to travel between home visits, engage in caregiver coaching (rather than direct child-focused teaching) during visits, observe, and participate in visits with families in different environments and with different service providers, and complete documentation following EI activities that is unique to the EI settings.

Managers shared the need for students to come to placements, with growing mind-sets, including curiosity and a willingness to learn, and some understanding of the flexibility and professionalism that is required of EI service providers. This knowledge and these dispositions may make it easier for program managers to connect students with cooperating professionals with the goal of establishing a good relational fit (Ornstein & Moses, 2010). These dispositions can be addressed in class so students are prepared when they begin engaging with professionals and families during placements.

Additionally, program managers explained that some had agency requirements for formal agreements before student placements could begin. Some programs also had extensive onboarding requirements. Both types of requirements necessitate preparation time, for universities and for EI programs, so a shared understanding and established, ongoing collaboration is essential. Program managers needed faculty to understand what was required in their programs and to communicate with students about the steps involved before the student can begin working with the cooperating EI professional. Better coordination between universities, faculty, and students could improve the experience for all

involved and increase the possibilities of not only successful placements but also improve the potential preservice pipeline for hiring students as future EI educators.

While the themes noted in this research may be specific to one state's experience, it is worth noting the overlap between these themes and DEC's recommended leadership practices (Division for Early Childhood, 2014). For instance, DEC Leadership Practice L6 directs leaders to "establish partnership across levels (state to local) and with their counterparts in other systems and agencies to create coordinated and inclusive systems of services and supports" (Division for Early Childhood, 2014, p. 6). The program managers in these focus groups emphasized their interests in collaboration and partnership with higher education faculty because they are both committed to quality preparation of students who will eventually provide those services and supports. Important components of such partnerships in the context of effective EI leadership entail shared responsibility, established relationships, effective communication, and placing a high value on professional learning (Bruns et al., 2017). DEC Leadership Practice L1 emphasizes the importance of leaders creating "a culture and a climate in which practitioners feel a sense of belonging and want to support the organization's mission and goals" (Division for Early Childhood, 2014, p. 6). When faculty and program managers collaborate for successful field experiences, students have increased exposure to the real world of EI and opportunities to experience this positive climate and sense of belonging, which may influence students' evolving professional identities and decisions to pursue a career in the EI field (Mak et al., 2022; Moseley et al., 2021; Walder et al., 2022).

Similarly, the importance of partnerships between faculty and EI program managers aligns well with the *EI/ECSE Initial Preparation Standards* (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC]/Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2020). Standard 8: Field and Clinical Experience suggests that students progress through field experiences in settings that correspond to the license they will receive. In this state, students will be licensed to provide EI/ECSE for children ages 0–5. To ensure that students are equally well trained in both EI and ECSE, they must have coursework and high-quality placements that help them connect what they are learning with actual implementation of services in the field. Collaborative partnerships between universities and programs help faculty stay connected to the strengths and needs of programs, real-world issues with service delivery, and knowledge and skills EI educators need to be successful after graduation.

Limitations

While all EI program managers were invited to participate in the focus groups, only 12 out of 40 managers chose to participate. This is a limitation associated with self-selection and could reiterate the need to establish relationships with all managers across the state's EI system. Additional feedback was provided from several program managers who attended a conference session at the state's EI/ECSE conference after the focus groups met; their feedback was very similar to the information gathered from the focus groups. Detailed demographic information was not collected from participants, which may limit the ability for other states to determine the generalizability of these findings. It would have been helpful to triangulate the data collected by holding focus groups or surveying current or former students, as well as university faculty and staff who coordinate student field

placements. Faculty at the participating universities is in the process of updating their EI/ECSE programs with the release of the EI/ECSE Initial Preparation Standards (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC]/Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2020) so future research could also examine any connection between integration of these standards into coursework, improvements in communication and relationships with EI programs, and the quality of EI placements on student outcomes.

Implications for future collaboration

Using findings from these focus groups, faculty from the EI Preservice Consortium has begun to respond to the needs expressed by program managers and improve student placement experiences. For instance, one university strengthened partnerships with nearby EI program managers by inviting them to join the faculty as adjunct instructors teaching EI coursework. Faculty at another university changed the placement process so that a centralized office within the university would coordinate all EI placements while also confirming with EI programs who their primary contact people would be. Faculty has met with local EI program managers at regional meetings to build relationships and are updating the Memoranda of Understanding and Agreement. Faculty has also continued the conversations started in these focus groups by inviting additional input from program managers and sharing feedback received in state and national conference sessions. In order to sustain collaboration between universities and EI programs, these efforts are examples of initial steps that will require the ongoing, bidirectional communication that appears to be very important to successful student placements.

Implications for research and practice

Future research can expand upon this study by examining the longer term impact of partnerships between universities and EI programs in this state to see how improvements made in response to focus group input affect the availability and quality of EI field placements going forward. Because working as an EI educator is only one of the unique roles that students in early childhood special education and inclusive early childhood preservice programs might hold (McLeod et al., 2024), future research could expand this discussion to include program managers from preschool and other community programs. This study focused on field placements for future EI educators, but the EI field also includes professionals from a variety of backgrounds. The EI/Preservice Consortium members have expanded their membership to include faculty who prepare physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists, so it could be beneficial to explore relationships between the faculty and local EI programs, what their students need for successful placement, and how similar or different their experiences may be to those of EI/ECSE preparation programs. Similarly, the next step to build on the information gathered from EI program managers in this state would be to replicate these focus groups with managers in other states to determine if the themes described in this research are consistent.

While it is not certain that findings from this study are generalizable to other states, the suggestions provided by the program managers could inform proactive efforts by other EI programs and universities seeking to build successful partnerships. When viewed through

the lens of cultivating EI CAPs, this survey acknowledged the importance of the efforts required of EI program managers and their staff to host students. The act of asking these questions may have conveyed to program managers that university faculty wants to understand their side of the partnership better, which is a sign of mutual respect that is essential to building CAPs. Responses from program managers also referred to important elements of CAPs, such as the need for ongoing communication, a shared understanding of placement expectations, and the cultivation of relationships (Drahota et al., 2016; Patel & Mohanty, 2023). Shared decision-making is also important to the success of CAPs, so findings from this survey could inform faculty efforts to engage managers in collaborative conversations about how to streamline the field placement process.

In their comments on recommendations to improve partnerships and placement options, EI program managers consistently expressed interest in developing partnerships with universities. Comments on recommendations for strengthening these partnerships focused on logistics that make it easier for EI programs to accept students, such as advanced notice and clear expectations. Managers also expressed interest in building relationships through regular, ongoing communication, which may help both partners gain an understanding of how to collaborate and plan together. They seemed to want to invite university faculty to join them in their work, which if successful, could also help faculty stay abreast of the needs in the field and inform their teaching and student support. This is an example of mutual benefit and shared decision-making that would be essential to developing strong EI CAPs. With persistent shortages across disciplines in the EI field (IDEA Infant and Toddlers Coordinators Association, 2023), it is likely that establishing stronger relationships and a shared understanding of field placement responsibilities, expectations, and logistics among EI programs and universities training future service providers can positively influence students' motivations to pursue work in this important field.

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