Building Resilience Early: An Early Childhood Special Education Practicum Model to Support Teacher Preparation

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“Teacher preparation programs must therefore provide candidates with social-emotional support and relationship-based strategies, so that early career teachers can effectively and successfully complete their training and carry these skills and strategies forward as protective factors as they begin their careers in the field of special education.”

ABSTRACT

Sufficient and meaningful clinical practice is a critical factor in special education teacher retention, yet it often occurs late in the credential programs and varies in quality. This article presents an early practicum model for early childhood special education (ECSE) candidates that introduces an earlier, structured fieldwork experience embedded within the coursework. The *Relationship-Based Skill Building Model* comprises six key components: reflective readings and assignments, professional development, on-site supervision and coaching, peer support and teaming, small- and large-group discussions, and individual feedback. The practicum model emphasizes relationship-based, culturally responsive strategies and builds on candidates' social-emotional competence, fostering peer relationships that may become protective factors contributing to retention in the field. The model, which can be generalized across content areas, offers a developmental approach to workforce preparation that aims not only to meet teacher competencies but also to promote long-term persistence and resilience in the field of special education.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood special education, fieldwork experience, relationship-based, teacher preparation

Since the pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of young children who are at-risk or have disabilities. The need for high-quality services for them is higher than ever before (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2021). However, schools are experiencing constant severe shortage of special education teachers, particularly in high-poverty, urban communities (Goldhaber & Theobald, 2023). In California, more than two-thirds of school districts saw increased special education teacher vacancies post-pandemic (Carver-Thomas et al., 2022). With the addition of the demand caused by a statewide initiative to serve 4-year-olds in public schools, California has a teacher shortage crisis, with an estimated 11,000 early childhood and early childhood special educators needing to be hired (Aguilera, 2022). This finding is consistent with the data from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education (2017), which frequently reports Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) teacher shortages. Such long-term shortages may result in less qualified individuals serving as teachers, which is detrimental to the quality of services being provided, and ultimately for student learning.

A contributing factor to the teacher shortage is high teacher turnover. Special educators leave their positions at approximately twice the rate of general education teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2021). One of the most frequently cited reasons for leaving the profession is burnout, which is often driven by teacher stress (Jeon et al., 2021; Park & Shin, 2020). Classroom and relationship management have also been identified as leading concerns among current teachers (Brunsting et al., 2022; California Teachers Association [CTA], 2022) and are additional sources of teacher stress (Hester et al., 2020).

Teacher preparation programs must therefore provide candidates with social-emotional support and relationship-based strategies, so that early career teachers can ef-

fectively and successfully complete their training and carry these skills and strategies forward as protective factors as they begin their careers in the field of special education. Protective factors are defined as conditions or resources that mitigate the burden of stress on teachers (Haydon et al., 2018). According to Haydon et al. (2018), special education teachers identified peer interactions as their primary source of protection against workplace stress. Consistent with these findings, other studies have also identified peers as a central component of teachers' support networks (Chang & Dresher, 2025).

In this article, we present a fieldwork practicum model for pre-service early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers that: 1) addresses the teaching competencies, 2) helps teachers develop and gain the social and emotional skills needed to weather the ups and downs of teaching young children, 3) identifies strategies for acquiring peer support and networking abilities needed to be more successful in working and persevering in the field of special education, particularly in low-resourced communities, and 4) addresses the educational needs of children with and without disabilities. We discuss the design and sequence of an early fieldwork practicum content and supervision model that meets those goals. The fieldwork practicum model uses a developmental and reflective approach that focuses on team building and asset-based pedagogy, building on strengths to support candidates while they are engaging and serving children and families in diverse, low-resourced communities.

Field Experience (Clinical Practice)

The field of special education is in a state of turmoil, with districts facing critical teacher shortages and high turnover rates. In response, school districts and teacher education programs have created alternative pathways, including internships, residency programs, and "Grow Your Own" programs (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Day et al., 2024; Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, 2022). Although alternative pathway efforts have helped increase the number of special education teachers entering the classrooms, they often fail to address a fundamental problem of the high rates of teacher burnout and attrition once these teachers begin their careers.

Some factors contributing to teacher burnout are systemic, such as limited administrative support (Brunsting et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2012), and lie beyond the scope of teacher preparation programs. However, preparation programs can strengthen protective factors that enhance teacher retention. One crucial approach is preparing future special education teachers for the realities of the field (Haydon et al., 2018) while providing clinical opportunities to develop essential interpersonal skills, which may protect them from the challenges of working with young children within complex school district systems.

Research has consistently identified meaningful clinical practice, or student teaching, as one of the most critical factors for retention in special education (Billingsley & Bellini, 2019; Brownell et al., 2019; O'Brien et al., 2024; Szocik et al., 2024). The length of clinical practice significantly impacts retention rates. Connelly and Graham (2009) found that approximately 80% of special educators with more than 10 weeks of student teaching remained in the field one year later, compared to 63% of those with fewer than 10 weeks of experience. These findings align with broader research indicating that special education teachers with less experience are more likely to leave the profession (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

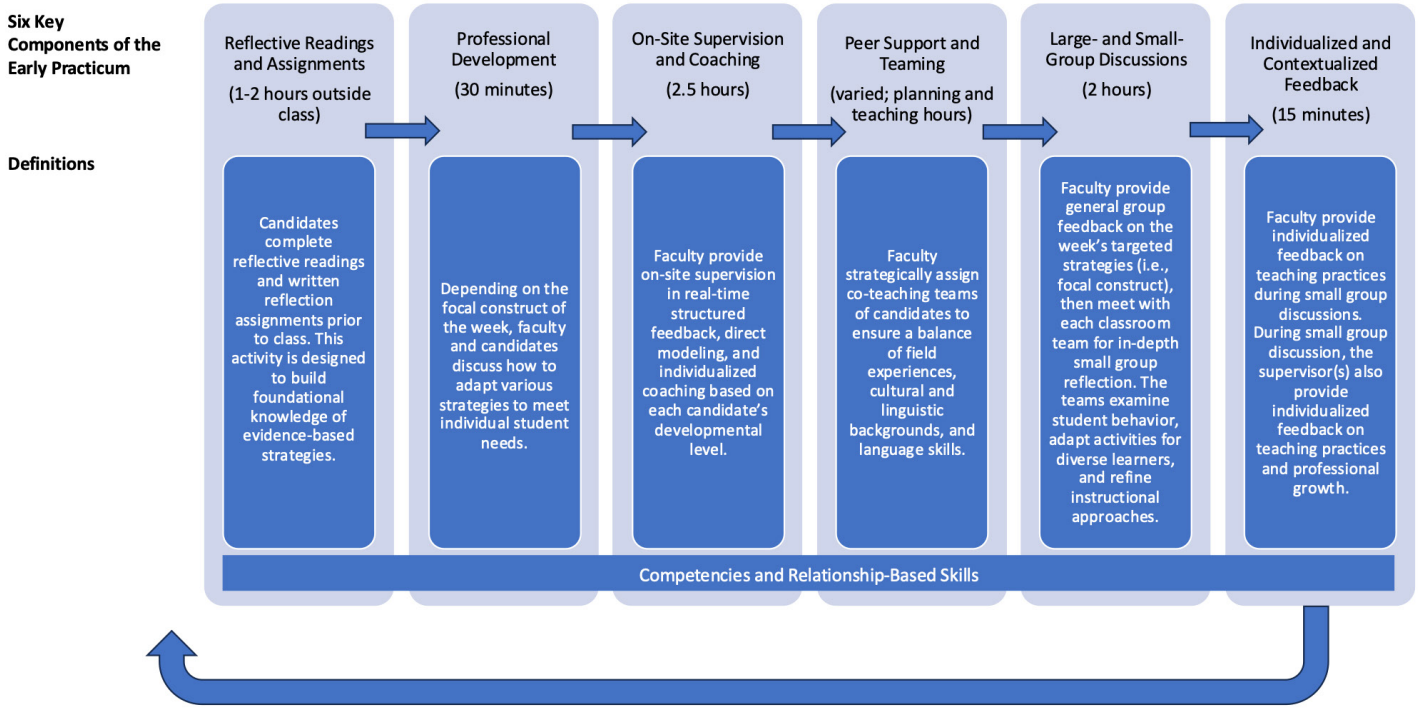
The quality of clinical experience is as important as quantity. Strong support and mentorship during student teaching serve as protective factors for teacher retention (Chang & Drescher, 2023; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Shaheen et al., 2024). However, the quality and quantity of support can vary significantly depending on supervisors, mentor teachers, school administrators, and district resources (Billingsley et al., 2009; Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

While final student teaching remains crucial for teacher preparation programs (O'Brien et al., 2024; Szocik et al., 2024), early clinical experiences throughout the program are equally critical. Most programs typically include some embedded clinical assignments, but these often fail to expose candidates to the full scope of lead teacher responsibilities, such as classroom management, lesson planning, assessment, and collaboration with multiple support/service providers. This gap in preparation becomes particularly problematic in under-resourced communities, where under-preparedness as an additional stressor can impact teachers' sense of belonging and efficacy, and ultimately affect retention rates.

Early Practicum Model

Our early practicum model enhances our existing teacher preparation program by providing candidates with early, hands-on experience working with young children with and without disabilities in a supportive, culturally and linguistically diverse, inclusive community enrichment program. This early practicum experience is more than a "coursework-based practicum", and it is not the final student teaching. It is an additional semester of collaborative fieldwork in an authentic community setting, strategically placed after foundational coursework in special education and classroom management. The practicum ensures that candidates are well-supported and have the essential knowledge and experience

FIGURE 1: Relationship-Based Skill Building Model



of collaborating with peers before entering classrooms in school districts.

The practicum is paired with a methods course covering key topics such as setting up an inclusive classroom, establishing classroom routines, developing curriculum, and embedding social and academic communication opportunities within daily activities. Research supports the importance of these elements for promoting positive engagement and long-term academic and social success for all children in inclusive settings (Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2014; McLeskey et al., 2017).

Implementing fieldwork practicum early in the program allows candidates to develop an authentic understanding of teaching responsibilities in settings that reflect the demographics of students whose needs they are likely to serve during their teaching careers. The model supports children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities surrounding the university where the teacher preparation program is located, providing both essential practicum experience for ECSE candidates and access to high-quality early childhood education for families from historically underserved communities.

Six Key Components of the Early Practicum

The practicum is built upon six critical components designed to support ECSE candidates in low-resourced settings. These components are implemented weekly over a 16-week semester in a cyclical process that allows candidates to reflect on the newly introduced strategies, ask questions, and engage in guided practice. Each cycle (week) includes structured opportunities for reflection and feedback, reinforcing learning and development. Together, these elements serve as the pillars of a comprehensive support system focused on inclusion and candidate success. Figure 1. *Relationship-Based Skill Building Model* illustrates the interdependence of the components and their complementary nature.

Two vignettes depicting teacher preparation program candidates with different profiles are presented below, each offering detailed illustrations of each component in the model using early literacy as a focal construct, which is addressed during one week of the semester. Throughout the semester, additional focal constructs (e.g., classroom management, early math) are also introduced. Across all constructs, the same core processes of reflective practice, collaboration and teaming, coaching, discussion, and feedback are consistently applied. Since these processes are evidence-based and not content-specific, the model is designed to be generalized and adapted across different teacher preparation programs, contexts, and delivery formats. These practices form the foundation of teacher preparation and early intervention and are applicable in both national and international contexts (Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2014, 2020; McLeskey et al., 2017).

Vignette 1: Carmen

Carmen is a 24-year-old Latina who recently completed her un-

dergraduate degree, working two part-time jobs to pay her expenses while she studied. Her mother is a teacher, and Carmen loves children, so she decided to enter the early childhood special education program to become a teacher. Carmen has no experience working with children, though, and on her first meeting of the early fieldwork practicum, she looks around at her older, more experienced classmates and freezes up with anxiety. Many of her classmates have been teacher assistants in a range of early childhood settings. Carmen is so nervous she can barely speak. How will she ever know what to do when she is expected to teach?

Vignette 2: Mariko

Mariko is 32 years old and has worked as a teacher assistant in an inclusive preschool for eight years. She commented during the seminar that she had become impatient with "always being the second opinion" in conversations about teaching strategies in her classroom, and after years of frustration, decided to obtain her teaching credential. Her experience and enthusiasm for teaching are evident in both her written work and her participation in seminars. Other students seem slightly intimidated by her expertise, but Mariko writes in her reflections that she, too, feels insecure about her abilities and second-guesses herself every time she speaks in the seminar.

Reflective Readings and Assignments

During their early fieldwork, candidates complete reflective readings and written reflection assignments prior to class. This activity is designed to build foundational knowledge of evidence-based strategies. Reflection prompts include questions about applying these strategies in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts. For example, during a week focused on early literacy strategies, the readings guide candidates to evaluate both the structural features of classrooms (e.g., developmentally appropriate, high-interest books, writing materials) and instructional features (e.g., engaging children in conversation, modeling vocabulary, explicit language instruction). Candidates then reflect on strategies they can implement in their practicum classrooms and how they can adapt them for dual language learners.

Vignette 1: Carmen

In her reflection, Carmen writes about her concerns regarding her abilities and knowledge of the strategies. Specifically, she is worried about selecting the developmentally appropriate books and the "right" vocabulary to teach and engage her diverse, multilingual students. Since she lacks experience in early childhood education, Carmen is unsure what would be appropriate for the students in her class. It is somehow easier to describe her feelings in writing rather than face-to-face with her instructors.

Vignette 2: Mariko

In her reflection, Mariko writes that she has numerous ideas for classroom activities, but her other group members don't seem to accept her suggestions. The other small-group members are friends, and Mariko is having a hard time breaking into the group. In her reflection, she writes that she has decided to step back and participate less in planning with her group.

Seminars

Seminars serve as a bridge between theory and practice. Although candidates enter the practicum with prerequisite coursework completed, they often lack experience in applying evidence-based strategies. Practicum supervisors leading the seminars provide candidates with contextualized practice opportunities that reinforce these strategies, introduce new techniques, foster collaboration, and support the integration of knowledge into practice.

For example, in a seminar on early literacy, candidates practice and receive feedback on their implementation of vocabulary strategies (e.g., providing child-friendly definitions) and language modeling techniques (e.g., responsiveness, recasts, expansions, and extensions, etc.). Faculty and students discuss how to adapt these strategies to meet individual student needs, such as tailoring language models for a student who is minimally verbal versus a student who is using complex sentences.

Vignette 1: Carmen

At first, Carmen is overwhelmed by the information provided in the seminar. Everybody else seems to be nodding with understanding. The instructors are careful to illustrate each concept with an example, though, and gradually the ideas start to make sense to Carmen. Other students ask questions that help clarify what the instructors mean, and they also ask about whether specific storybooks would be appropriate for the students they are working with. Towards the end of class, Carmen seems to be more at ease and asks a question about choosing vocabulary words, and she feels confident when she understands the instructor's response. The instructor also reassured Carmen that if she has more questions about vocabulary selection and wants to review the storybooks she has in mind, the instructor can go over them with her.

Vignette 2: Mariko

Mariko really enjoys the seminar and takes every opportunity to contribute her opinions and ideas. Her instructor sometimes says, "Let's give someone else a chance, Mariko", which makes her embarrassed. She reminds herself that she has decided to participate less often, but it is still hard for her to hold back on contributing her ideas.

On-Site Supervision and Coaching

A distinguishing feature of this practicum is the ongoing and consistent supervision by university faculty. This happens during the weekly 2.5 hours that the candidates are with their students in the classroom. Research emphasizes that evidence-based strategies are most effective when combined with targeted feedback and implementation fidelity (Coogle et al., 2022; Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Taylor et al., 2022).

On-site supervision includes real-time structured feedback, direct modeling, and individualized coaching based on each candidate's developmental level (Chang et al., 2017; Shire & Chang, 2022). Structured feedback is provided by the supervisors immediately after the classroom observation. The supervisors provide their comments and suggestions on a feedback form designed specifically for the early fieldwork. The feedback form contains items specific to teacher preparation standards and includes an additional space for faculty comments, which note each candidate's growth and ongoing needs. The form's dual focus on standards and individual candidates' growth ensures consistency of feedback across different supervisors and allows for individualization. For example, candidates are evaluated based on how they demonstrate knowledge of young children's cultural and linguistic background, socioeconomic status, prior experiences, interests, social-emotional learning needs, and developmental learning needs. This evaluation is based on how candidates integrate knowledge into instructional planning, instructional and intervention activities, and the strategies they use to promote children's access, learning, and participation in a variety of environments. Candidates are also assessed on their effective use of co-teaching and collaborative consultation models that are strengths-based, family-centered, and culturally and linguistically responsive.

Direct modeling may be provided as in-the-moment support. For example, if a candidate is struggling to redirect a child's behavior, the supervisor may step in and demonstrate a helpful technique, such as "first_____, then_____." The extent of support provided by a supervisor to a particular candidate varies depending on the candidate's skills, experience, and learning rate. While direct modeling is seen as one of the more intensive supports provided by supervisors, individualized coaching usually eventually replaces it and gives the candidates an opportunity to implement an instructional approach following the supervisor's prompt. For example, the university supervisor may prompt a candidate to expand on a child's communication in the moment or demonstrate a teaching strategy during a lesson. While these contextualized personalized support approaches (direct modeling, coaching) vary in their intensity, each of them allows for immediate adjustments to teaching practices and demonstration of effective implementation in authentic classroom contexts (Coogle et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2022). Further, carefully scaffolded gradual release of support (from direct modeling to coaching with prompting) also fosters candidates' skill development and professional confidence.

Vignette 1: Carmen

Carmen's instructor brings up the worries that she expressed in her reflection and reassures her that the purpose of the fieldwork is to help her learn how to teach. No one expects her to be perfect right away, and all teachers will have different teaching styles. Additionally, the early fieldwork experience is designed to be supportive, and if Carmen feels that she could have done better in a particular lesson, she can modify and retry it the following week. Moreover, the instructor will also be in the classroom with Carmen and the students. If needed, the instructor will provide a verbal reminder to Carmen. Carmen asks questions about the class assignments and leaves the meeting relieved, feeling comfortable expressing her feelings.

Vignette 2: Mariko

During Mariko's meeting with her instructor, she breaks down in tears and confides that she is very unhappy working with her group, and feels very unsuccessful. After hearing Mariko out, her instructor suggests to Mariko that she possesses qualities of a leader – her knowledge and enthusiasm about teaching, her desire to learn more and share her knowledge, and her commitment to child learning. But part of a leader's task is to develop those same qualities in others. The instructor suggests that she pose more questions to the other group members and then add to their responses with her own comments, developing leadership skills in the other group members. Mariko agrees to give that strategy a try.

Peer Support and Teaming

The practicum fosters a collaborative learning community. Candidates co-teach in teams of 4-5 with an adult-stu-

dent ratio of 1:3 across 2-3 classrooms per semester. This ratio is intentionally designed so that candidates feel supported. University supervisors strategically assign teams to ensure a balance of experiences (e.g., years working with young children with and without disabilities as a general education instructional assistant vs. speech and language assistant), cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and language skills, including bilingual competency and biliteracy.

Each team of candidates co-develops and implements weekly lessons, rotating roles (e.g., lead teacher, small group facilitators) to ensure all candidates gain experience in multiple co-teaching and instructional models. The lead teacher typically leads the opening and closing large group activities and calls out the transitions throughout the day, while the other co-teachers facilitate small group activities and provide one-on-one support when needed. Flexibility is built in to accommodate absences and promote shared responsibility.

Vignette 1: Carmen

Carmen is placed in a group with three more experienced teachers. They soon take her under their wings and give her opportunities to observe and engage with the children informally. The group plans lessons together, so Carmen knows what she is expected to do. At the start of the semester, the group decided that each member could take the lead in the lesson for the first couple of weeks, and Carmen would co-lead activities. This way, she will be able to familiarize herself with the classroom routine, become more comfortable interacting with students, and have plenty of models from her three peers before taking on the responsibility of being the lead teacher. Carmen finds herself looking forward to the small-group meetings. Often, the group gets lunch together after class and discusses the lesson further, closely examining what went well and what needs to be addressed in the subsequent lessons. They also revisit the supervisor's feedback and brainstorm ways to implement it. Sometimes, the group chooses to begin co-planning the next lesson.

Vignette 2: Mariko

The other teachers in her group nominate Mariko to lead the class for the first session. At first, she is flattered, but then she realizes that everyone is nervous about being observed while teaching! She decides to take this opportunity to be a leader, though, and asks the others for ideas as they plan the lessons together. When they have finished, everyone seems satisfied. While Mariko will be the lead teacher, the others understand their roles in supporting her and the children. The group starts to plan next week's lessons, when another teacher will lead. Mariko holds herself back from being "bossy," and on a couple of occasions, other teachers look to her for suggestions. Afterwards, they all go for coffee together.

Large- and Small-Group Discussions

The university supervisors provide general group feedback on the week's targeted strategies, then meet with each classroom team for in-depth small group reflection. These discussions focus on analyzing classroom experiences, addressing challenges, monitoring student progress, and sharing success and strategies. While the supervisors are checking in with one team, the other team(s) are effectively taking the time to co-plan their next week's lesson. Common issues are often discussed within the larger group.

The teams examine student behavior, adapt activities for diverse learners, and refine instructional approaches. Emphasis is placed on collaboration to support all students, ensuring that each lesson plan reflects a collective effort informed by shared observations and input.

Vignette 1: Carmen

During the first week with children, Carmen supported another teacher during storybook reading to a small group of three-year-olds. One of the children got up and left the group, and a second one followed. Carmen was unsure whether she was supposed to follow the children and bring them back. The lead teacher said nothing, so Carmen decided to let the students join another group. After class, the team brainstorms about how the situation could have been handled, and together they come up with several ideas for next time. One of the group members describes the situation in the large group meeting, and Carmen volunteers to describe her experience and the solutions they came up with. The instructors commended the small group's problem-solving and collaboration.

Vignette 2: Mariko

For her first lesson, Mariko made up a game to teach the vocabulary from a book she planned to read to the group. The children stayed attentive, but they were very quiet, and some refused to speak when prompted. Mariko was upset because she knew that the success of her lesson depended upon the interaction between the teacher and the children. Afterwards, during the debriefing, she described the lesson and expressed her con-

FIGURE 2: Introduction and Practice of a Focal Construct (Early Literacy Strategies) Across Six Practicum Components

Component	Examples	Relationship-Based Opportunities
Reflective Readings and Assignments	**Reading/ Activities:** Chandler et al. (2008); Stone et al. (2018) **Reflection prompts:** What type of early literacy strategies have you implemented in your classroom to support dual language learners? What adaptations have you made?	Candidates reflect on how early literacy strategies can support individual student needs, encouraging consideration of relationships with children and families. Reflections often include how to build responsive, culturally sensitive interactions that promote literacy development.
Seminars	Mini-Lecture Topics: • Strategies to promote early literacy • Creating literacy-rich environment (structural and instructional elements) • Adapting strategies for dual language learners Candidates learn from readings, lecture, and peer discussion, then practice strategies (e.g., vocabulary modeling) during class.	Opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and shared application of strategies with classmates. Candidates collaborate to practice strategies together before classroom implementation.
On-site Supervision and Coaching	Candidates are expected to apply early literacy strategies (e.g., print referencing, child-friendly definitions, developmentally appropriate language) throughout the day. Strategies are integrated into all instructional activities, including storybook reading.	University Supervisors provide individualized coaching during instruction (e.g., real-time verbal feedback, modeling). Support is differentiated based on candidate need and development.
Peer Support and Teaming	Candidates collaborate to co-plan lessons and assign roles (lead/support). All team members use early literacy strategies across activities. Roles are flexible to respond to classroom dynamics and peer support needs.	Candidates co-teach and adjust roles as needed. Lesson planning and implementation are shared responsibilities, fostering peer support and distributed leadership.
Large- and Small-Group Discussions	Candidates reflect on: • Effectiveness of early literacy strategies used • Support for dual language learners • Planned adaptations for next week Supervisors facilitate collaborative problem-solving and provide suggestions for additional supports for students.	All team members contribute to discussions about what worked and what didn't. Co-teachers plan adjustments together and better support student engagement and learning. Supervisors help guide action steps for the following week.
Individualized and Contextualized Feedback	Supervisor and candidate discuss: • Use of strategies (e.g., print referencing, language expansion) • Observed strengths and areas of growth Reflections are documented in weekly journals and used to guide future planning.	Supervisors give targeted, personalized feedback. Candidates reflect on their growth and plan changes collaboratively or independently. Journals provide a platform for ongoing dialogue and self-assessment.

cerns about its success. Another teacher from her group said that the lesson went as planned, but suggested that next time, Mariko reverse the order of her activities: read the story first, define the new vocabulary quickly while reading the book, and then play the game as a vocabulary review. That way, the children, who might be reserved on their first day in class, might be more engaged with the vocabulary game. Mariko agreed and felt grateful to her classmate, who made her suggestion so positively.

Individualized and Contextualized Feedback

During small group discussion, the supervisor(s) also provide individualized feedback on teaching practices and professional growth. For example, supervisors may highlight a candidate's use of child-friendly definitions during

storybook reading and suggest ways to engage a quieter student more effectively using evidence-based strategies.

Candidates also complete weekly dialogic reflection journals, which supervisors review and respond to with targeted suggestions. For example, if a candidate expresses that they are having difficulties implementing a specific strategy with a particular student, the supervisor may recommend using a prompt hierarchy or peer models and encourage retrying the strategy the following week. See Figure 2 *Introduction and Practice of a Focal Construct (Early Literacy) Across Six Practicum Components*.

Vignette 1: Carmen

Carmen's first lesson as the lead teacher required her to implement an interactive storybook reading model, focusing on introducing and explaining four new vocabulary words. Her group helped her plan every step, and she had a couple of weeks where she observed her peers and co-led the activities. Despite that, Carmen was still really nervous because her instructor was observing her. During the lesson, the children were engaged with the story and responded when she asked them to chorally repeat the new vocabulary. Afterwards, her group members and her instructor gave her positive feedback about her work. Her instructor had a couple of suggestions about how to strengthen her management of the group and her responses to the children's participation. Carmen felt exhilarated when the class was over!

Vignette 2: Mariko

Mariko and her instructor discussed her vocabulary lesson and the changes that her peers suggested, and agreed that they improved the lesson. Mariko said that the next time she is the lead teacher, she will try the new format. Her instructor also suggested that Mariko build in more "wait time" between her comment or question and the children's response, and Mariko agreed that more wait time and an "expectant look" would probably result in more interaction.

Mariko's instructor commented that she seems to have relaxed into a more collaborative role with her peers, and Mariko replied that she is much more comfortable in the group since she started to see her own role as helping to develop her peers' participation as well as her own.

Putting It All Together

The six components of the *Relationship-Based Skill Building Model* function as an interconnected system supporting candidates' development through strategically sequenced learning experiences. The structured progression moves from direct instruction during seminars to guided practice via supervision and coaching, followed by peer collaboration and teaming, and culminates in multiple forms of feedback that include group, individual, and reflective practices. This systematic approach ensures candidates develop both practical skills and professional confidence and competency. The integrated approach particularly benefits candidates preparing to work in under-resourced communities, where strong foundational skills and adaptability are essential.

More importantly, beyond professional skill development, the structured and supportive learning environment fosters a community of practice. Candidates build their professional network with peers, or co-teachers, through shared experiences of program challenges, collective celebration of successes, and collaborative program-solving of their joint professional growth journeys in this early practicum experience. Additionally, grouping the candidates into small groups of four to five beginning teachers working within one classroom has its own distinct benefits. Within such grouping, the power hierarchies and one-person dominance that are often observed in co-teaching dyads of teachers (Drewes et al., 2021; Moodie & Kim, 2025) are rarely encountered. Candidates co-teaching in small groups are likely to support and help one another. Furthermore, having multiple adults in the classroom is well-aligned with the current-day public school practices, where teams of educators and service providers (i.e., co-teachers, instructional assistants, behavior support providers, and speech and language pathologists) work together. Co-planning and co-teaching in a small group, rather than a co-teaching dyad, prepares candidates for leadership and teamwork in public school settings.

Through shared experiences, candidates build confidence in their teaching abilities while creating enduring professional relationships. A multitude of opportunities for collaborating with peers is intentionally built into the practicum, allowing candidates to learn from one another while leveraging individual strengths and assets. More opportunities to network and form peer relationships heighten the likelihood that peer relationships will serve as protective factors in future teaching. The candidates often develop robust support networks and forge bonds that extend well beyond the program's duration. The weekly interactions, shared challenges, and collective achievements create a foundation of trust and mutual support that serves as a resource throughout their careers. This combination of professional skill development and community building creates a foundation for potential long-term

success in the field. Graduates emerge not only with practical teaching skills but also with a supportive network of colleagues who understand their experiences working in low-resourced communities and can provide ongoing support throughout their careers. They are also honing their skills to work collaboratively as a team, which is a needed skill in the field. This comprehensive approach acknowledges that success as a special education teacher requires professional competencies, communication and collaboration, and robust support networks. The integration of systematic professional development with intentional community building prepares teachers who are not only skilled practitioners but also connected professionals. These connections enable them to support each other through the challenges and celebrations during the program and through their careers, creating a resilient professional community that strengthens the field of special education.

Vignette 1 (Carmen)

Carmen's final class evaluation included the following comment: I really want to thank my teammates who helped me a lot and supported me when I needed them. If it wasn't for their support, I wouldn't have been able to make it this far without their help. This shows that it takes a team to support the needs of children.

I have little to no experience working in an early childhood classroom, so the class as a whole has been extremely helpful for me. Prior to this course, I had never formally created a lesson plan. Being taught how to write a lesson plan, what vocabulary words to choose to teach, and what comments and questions to make during storybook reading has all been very helpful. The activities in class helped push us all to become more familiar with things such as goal writing and picking lessons to go with specific standards.

Vignette 2 (Mariko)

Mariko wrote in her final evaluation:

Through this course, I have learned that collaboration is essential. I have learned about communication through collaboration. With the support of (my instructor) I have learned how to talk to my colleagues and ask questions. Working together allows everyone to brainstorm ideas, problem-solve, get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses, and, more importantly, become responsible for completing the assignments together. I am very thankful to be placed in a group where we all valued each other's opinions, supported one another, and created new friendships.

Challenges in Implementation of the Model in Institutions of Higher Education

The successful development of any new academic initiative depends on a strong foundation of shared vision, sustained commitment, and careful planning. Prior to implementation, it is essential to establish a small core group of faculty members who are aligned in purpose and dedicated to carrying the project through all phases of development. Conducting a comprehensive needs assessment and preliminary research at this stage allows faculty to clearly understand the scope, demands, and potential impact of the project before making a long-term commitment.

Although integrating a practicum course into a teacher preparation program curriculum presents logistical and structural challenges, it is critical to communicate to institutional administrators the necessity and value of this coursework. The proposed model strengthens the program by providing meaningful, standards-aligned clinical experiences while simultaneously addressing a critical need in the surrounding community. It also addresses the ongoing need for high-quality teachers, and importantly, the development of the skills needed for retention in the field. The program serves as a community enrichment initiative for children with and without disabilities, as well as their families, in a culturally diverse context, while also fulfilling state-mandated requirements for program candidates.

Each teacher education program operates within its own set of requirements and constraints, so the supports and obstacles each encounters will vary accordingly. Faculty must therefore determine how the key concepts in this article will be implemented within their specific cultural and educational contexts (e.g., small universities, historically black colleges and universities). When approached intentionally, such efforts can be both valuable and transformative, enhancing program quality, supporting responsiveness to institutional and community needs, and fostering innovative, cross-faculty collaboration that advances teacher education.

We acknowledge that the development and ongoing coordination of such a program requires a significant investment of faculty time, some of which may be voluntary. Responsibilities include curriculum design, facility coordination, administrative planning, designation of faculty teaching time, outreach and enrollment, communication with families, and collaboration among multiple faculty members. Recognizing and planning for these demands is essential to ensuring a program's sustainability and success.

CONCLUSION

The growing shortage of early childhood special education teachers, particularly in low-resourced communities, calls for preparation models that support both entry into and persistence in the field. The early practicum model described in this article embeds relationship-based, community-engaged clinical experiences early in preparation to strengthen instructional competence, social-emotional skills, and protective factors for the candidates. While implementation requires sustained faculty commitment, the model offers an individualized, contextualized and differentiated support to teachers in training a flexible and impactful approach for enhancing program quality, addressing community needs, and fostering collaborative innovation. Early, supportive practicum experiences such as this represent a promising strategy for building a more resilient early childhood special education workforce.

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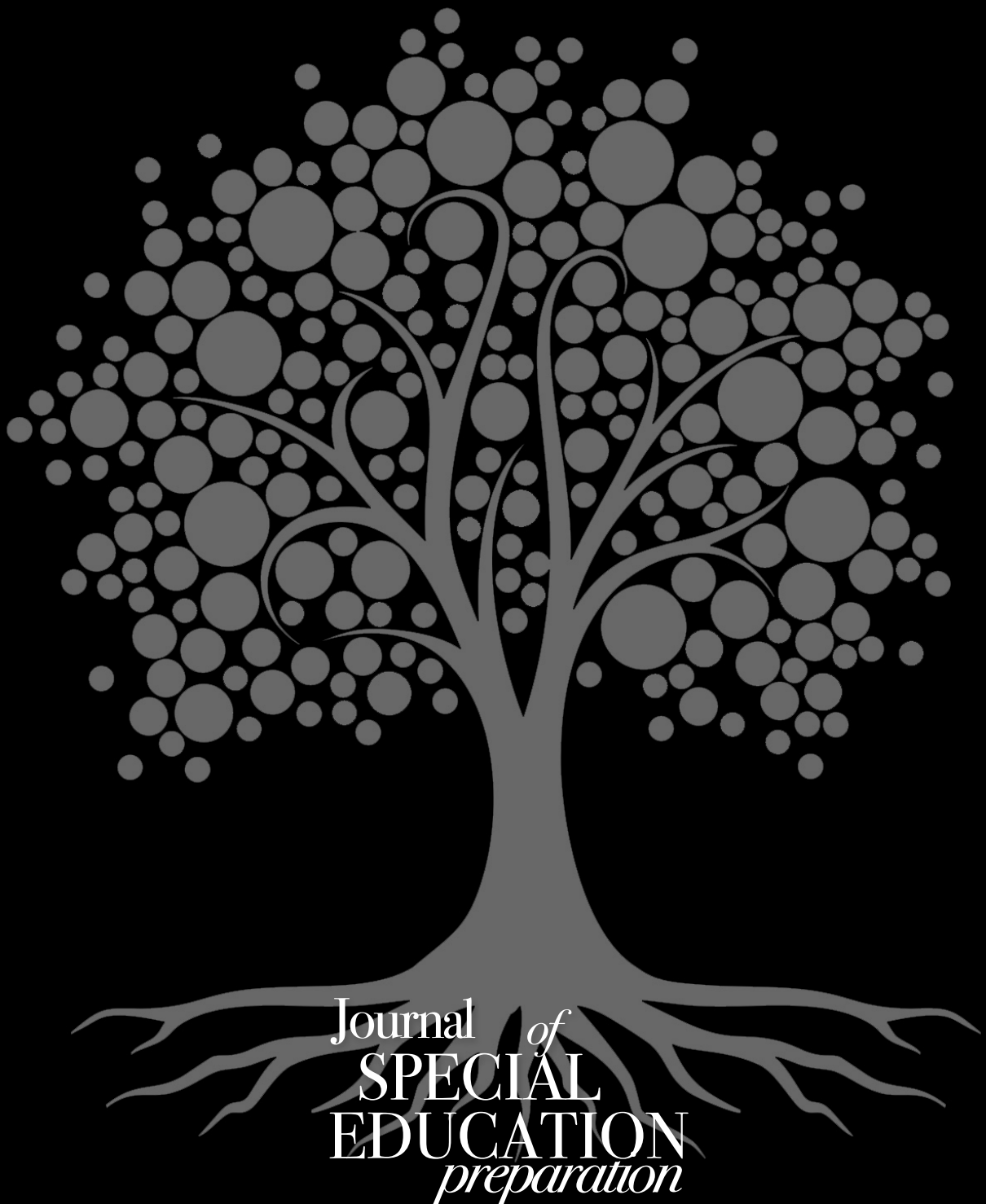

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