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Engaging Community Partners to Enrich Preschoolers Learning Experiences with Dramatic Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Interdisciplinary teams of adults are needed to enhance the capacity of schools to provide the most appropriate educational experiences for young children who have or are at risk for developmental delays and disabilities (Division for Early Childhood, 2014). When educators, families, and community partners connect around shared goals, we begin to reimagine instructional opportunities and create more equitable access to educational resources for children and families. We share insights from community partners who participated in a collaborative dramatic inquiry study designed to enrich preschoolers' learning experiences and serve children and families.

Keywords: community partners, collaboration, dramatic inquiry, preschool, teacher induction, teaming

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood special educators orchestrate a multitude of learning experiences to promote the development of young children with or at risk for disabilities in partnership with families, other school professionals, and community educators (Division of Early Childhood [DEC], 2014). These teachers are expected to have expertise in all domain areas – assessment; creation of safe, positive, and proactive learning environments; family engagement; planning and instruction; interaction practices to promote children's development in the domains of language, cognition, motor development, and social-emotional learning; teaming and collaboration; and transition services for children into K-12 schooling (DEC, 2014). According to Gooze (2014), not only are teachers expected to have these multiple areas of expertise, but they are also expected to meet the diverse and complex learning and development needs of all children and to arrive with extensive knowledge, skills, and competencies at the beginning of their careers. Further, it is expected that their young learners make measurable gains at rates consistent with their experienced peers (Basile et al., 2023). This ever-expanding role of our early

childhood special education teachers is daunting and, Sandilos and colleagues (2018) suggest it may contribute to the reason that these educators continue to report feeling underprepared to face the multiple expectations of their role. As a result, they enter the field with passion and commitment to make a positive difference in the lives of children but are often disenchanted by the multitude of challenges and responsibilities, feeling underprepared to face these challenges and responsibilities alone with limited induction supports in place to be successful (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). Collectively, these stressors and others can lead to diminished well-being indicators of job burnout and psychological stress (Jeon et al., 2022). However, when teachers have opportunities to collaborate with other adults, they benefit from the valuable teaching experiences and content knowledge of others (Carroll & Foster, 2009) and may feel more supported in their work (Jeon et al., 2022). Additionally, their individual workloads may be reduced through opportunities to collaboratively co-plan or co-teach with others as part of the teaming process (Basile et al., 2023).

National organizations such as the DEC of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) recognize

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that it takes a team of adults with distributed expertise and shared responsibility to enhance the capacity of educators to provide the most appropriate educational experiences for young children with or at risk for developmental delays and disabilities (DEC, 2014). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, school systems and educators have responded quickly to changing social contexts in ways that are respectful and culturally sensitive to children and families with diverse characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences (Grant & Ray, 2018). School system leaders are recognizing the importance of drawing on community resources as part of the collective community. In this paper, we present an example of such a school-community collaboration. We applied the meaning of teaming and collaboration from the DEC recommended practices, namely, “those that promote and sustain collaborative adult partnerships, relationships, and ongoing interactions to ensure that programs and services achieve desired child and family outcomes and goals” (DEC, 2014, p. 15). As well, we draw on the framework from Epstein and colleagues (2018) who described community collaborations as those that identify and integrate community resources to enrich school programming. Further, we share how we have applied teaming and collaboration to our work as teacher educators in engaging with early childhood special education teachers and community partners as members of the interdisciplinary team to enrich preschoolers learning experiences with the arts. Specifically, this article shares how the interdisciplinary team provided children and families with opportunities to engage in learning together through dramatic inquiry.

We define community partners as those who contribute content expertise and community-based learning experiences to extend learning beyond the classroom for children and their families (DEC, 2014). Community partners who might support classroom content, for example, could be farmers who teach children about entomology (e.g., preschool insect unit), local museum educators who teach children about paleontology (e.g., preschool dinosaur unit), and police and fire personnel who teach children about safety (e.g., preschool community helpers unit).

A Community Partner’s Perspective on Teaming and Collaboration

By connecting educators, families, and community partners around shared goals for children’s learning, we can begin to reimagine how teachers plan for and the instructional opportunities they can facilitate to create more equitable access to educational

resources for children and families. Through collaborations, teams of educators, both school-and community-based, can enact authentic curriculum to meet the needs of children by leveraging their assets to achieve the goal of creating an inclusive, equitable learning community (Bosma et al., 2010). We view these collaborations as contributing to a smart education system where “multiple and substantial cross-sector partnerships between district, community, and the public and private sectors that work to achieve educational equity for all students” (Potochnik et al., 2016, p. 2). School-home-community collaborations have resulted in increased children’s success at school (i.e., improved test scores and attendance rates; Sheldon, 2003; 2007) and positive impacts on the community (i.e., more equitable practices; Kania & Kramer, 2011; 2015). Key components to developing successful school community collaborations among partners include sharing the goal creation, implementation, and evaluation of educational programming to include family and community voices (Valli et al., 2016).

Teacher Induction for Early Childhood Special Educators

As teacher educators, our work was inspired through the collaborative mentoring relationships we developed with pre-service early childhood special education (ECSE) educators, ones we have maintained as they became early career teachers. A personnel preparation grant, funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the ECSE Scholars program, afforded us opportunities to support ECSE educators’ preparation and induction in their early career years. Between 2013 and 2018, approximately 500 undergraduate ECSE educators graduated from our college, of these, 54 of these undergraduates had the opportunity to participate in the ECSE Scholars program. One priority of the ECSE Scholars program was to graduate well-qualified ECSE educators serving our state’s most vulnerable young children, those with or at risk for developmental delays and disabilities, including children from groups who our educational systems have underserved (e.g., students of color, those living in high economic need areas, those who are multilingual learners where English is not the primary language spoken at home). A second priority was to mentor the ECSE scholars in leadership and collaborative teaming experiences to empower them to initiate and participate in positive change efforts in educational contexts in our state. At the completion of the program, all 54 of ECSE scholars graduated with a dual degree in early childhood and early

childhood special education. Currently, most have earned advanced degrees and continue to serve young children with disabilities and their families, others are engaged in educational systems research or serve as educational leaders.

In alignment with the goals of the grant, the principal investigators created a collaborative design model to provide induction support to mentor ECSE scholars as early career educators. We refer to the ECSE scholars who we mentored in this paper as ECSE educators for the remainder of the manuscript. We mentored the ECSE educators in designing authentic community-based curriculum based on children’s needs and interests that incorporated early learning standards, individualized education program (IEP) goals, and the arts through dramatic inquiry. Then we used coaching supports to increase the ECSE educators’ use of key practices (e.g., active and dramatic instructional techniques, interdisciplinary learning, technology integration, multiple modes for student response, collaborative learning, and small group instruction) for engaging young children with or at risk for developmental delays and disabilities by creating more opportunities for active engagement in learning and peer social interactions. This approach leverages the skillsets of the many professionals in the preschool classroom including paraprofessionals, student interns, related service providers, and other educators as well, it offers families opportunities to take on active roles in the inquiry learning of their children, as members of a collaborative team. Moreover, these induction supports expanded into opportunities for collaborating with community partners to enrich the arts-based curriculum and, most importantly, engaging and inclusive learning experiences for young children and their families.

Our continued mentoring of the ECSE educators allowed us to devote time and resources to support scholars for up to five years of their early career teaching and provide them opportunities to develop skills to study their own practice and its effect on children’s learning, engage in professional learning, and take on leadership roles as they share their learning with others through professional conference presentations and publications.





Illustration of A Teaming and Collaboration Model with Dramatic Inquiry

In this model, university partners (i.e., teacher educators) collaborated with practicing ECSE educators to identify learning, social, and IEP goals for the children in their classrooms. Then they

engaged in the components of successful school-community partnerships with one-on-one professional development and coaching to implement an authentic, community-based, inquiry curriculum, using dramatic inquiry (Edmiston, 2014). In dramatic inquiry partners incorporate interests of students, as well as their educational, IEP, and social emotional goals. “Drama integrates play-based strategies that promote academic learning and social competence while catering to students’ strengths to further their skills for meaning making” (Farrand & Deeg, 2020, p. 129). Important for learning are meaningful connections between the curriculum and students’ lives (Dennis & O’Hair, 2010). Designing curriculum related to authentic problems in the community of interest to children offers relevant content for actively engaging children in idea generation, critical thinking, and collaborative learning as they utilize multiple modes for meaning making.

Table 1

Paleontology: Mantle of the Expert Frame



Expert Role	Paleontologist
Client 	Local museum
Commission 	Local museum has empty exhibit space in museum and needs help creating museum exhibits. Paleontologists, how can you share your knowledge about dinosaurs and create exhibits for the museum and community?
Potential Community Partner 	Local museum with an exhibit on dinosaurs or paleontology. Faculty with expertise on paleontology and/or dinosaurs at a local university.
Family Involvement 	Families can be invited to tour the students-in-role as paleontologists museum exhibits at the school.

Still, utilizing dramatic inquiry and identifying community problems of shared interest to children and developing learning experiences for children to develop critical thinking skills and content knowledge to generate potential solutions can challenge even the most seasoned and effective educators. Thus, we looked to community partners to access local expertise, additional resources, and content knowledge for enriching preschoolers' learning experiences and created authentic opportunities for families to participate in these experiences. Dramatic inquiry utilizes the mantle of the expert approach (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), which begins by identifying an authentic local problem for learning (e.g., insects eating farmers' crops, a new museum exhibit needed) then commissions children to take on roles of experts for creating solutions (i.e., scientists, entomologists, paleontologists). The mantle of the expert approach promotes student collaboration, engagement, and uses the social imagination of play to create new opportunities to participate. See Table 1 for an example of how to design a mantle of the expert frame for a paleontology unit that involves a community partner and families.

The mantle of the expert approach (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) within dramatic inquiry incorporates multiple modes of meaning making. Designing active and dramatic experiences for young children that promotes multiple modes, such as movement, singing, visual arts, and writing, provides students with a variety of tools that they can choose from when collaborating with others to make meaning. Students and teachers can use the different modes to share what they are thinking and actively participate in the manner that they choose. The multiple modes ensure that all ways of demonstrating knowledge are valued and all learners are seen as experts (Farrand et al, 2019). See Table 2 for information about two active and dramatic strategies and specific examples of each connected to a paleontology unit for preschoolers (Farrand & Jaworski, 2018). Dramatic inquiry also provides an opportunity to incorporate interdisciplinary learning of a variety of content areas, such as science, language arts, and math, as students and their teachers collaborate in real and fictional spaces in the classroom. University partners, teacher educators, supported classroom teachers and community partners with thinking creatively and utilizing active and dramatic activities to align with the interests of young children, as well as academic, social, and IEP goals.

Table 2

Drama Strategies

Strategy	Description	Paleontology Example with Preschoolers
	<p>Students-in-role as a character are invited to use their body to show how they think the character would move. Students can add sound effects. This activity can be modified picture cards of characters and movements to identify a specific character and how they think the character would move.</p>	<p>Students can be provided picture cards or a large cube with images of different dinosaurs. Students can be invited to select a dinosaur by rolling a cube or touching a picture card and then modeling how they as the dinosaur move. Then, all students are invited to move around the room like the dinosaur.</p>
	<p>A daily log can be used to record daily activities that students-in-role as an expert have completed and goals for the upcoming day. This is a great way to connect to prior knowledge and set specific goals for a lesson or activity. You can incorporate content area goals into this time with reading and writing.</p>	<p>The classroom teacher can use large chart paper or a Smart Board to record accomplishments of students-in-role as paleontologists and introduce new goals for the day. Students can be invited to participate and share their ideas by reading, writing words and letters, moving their body to share an idea, singing and sound effects, and drawing on the log.</p>

Within the context of this partnership, the university partners provided mentorship for the early career ESCE educators from conceptualizing topics, identifying and facilitating relationships with a

community partner, dramatic inquiry professional development, aligning activities and strategies with student goals, and daily virtual coaching. Dramatic inquiry was chosen because it focuses on collaborative learning experiences that incorporate different modalities for meaning making. The ESCE educators taught in inclusive education spaces that consisted of children with a range of abilities. Dramatic inquiry provided a framework for ESCE educators to incorporate the interests and needs of the children with academic and social goals. With dramatic inquiry, ESCE educators provided activities that encouraged children to collaborate with their peers and share their meaning making in a variety of ways, such as through movement, song, writing, drawing, and talking, to name a few.

Below we will outline the collaboration and mentoring. First, the university partners collaborated with the ECSE educators to identify a local problem of interest to their students. Community partners offered content expertise, as well as additional resources for teachers to extend current curricular resources and opportunities for families to extend classroom learning outside of the classroom and into the wider social worlds of children. Community partners were also available to meet with ESCE educators in person and virtually check in with the classes to join the fictional space and support the dramatic frame for learning, while also answering questions about content. University partners aligned the content and resources from the community partners to design active and dramatic activities that could be incorporated within the mantle of the expert frame. The university partners met with ESCE educators to align the dramatic inquiry activities with IEP, academic, and social emotional goals to ensure they met the needs of children in their classrooms. Next, university partners provided one-on-one professional development modeling dramatic inquiry teaching strategies, identifying ways to promote different modalities for children to use to communicate, grouping options, and ways to incorporate support staff, such as paraprofessionals, with the dramatic inquiry teaching and learning activities. Lastly, university partners provided daily virtual coaching based on goals identified by the ESCE educators, to reinforce best practices and provided additional support, such as modeling and suggestions for modifying upcoming activities.

These collaborations also engage the community partners in identifying mutual interests around shared goals which are communally beneficial for all (i.e., the museum had a goal of providing educational experiences for community members, teachers had a goal of promoting learning for

children, families had a goal to access educational opportunities for their children; Gross et al., 2015). With teaming and collaboration, families, educators, and community partners come together and shared resources for the learning of all children.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATORS

In this section, an ECSE Scholar (fifth author), who was a preschool teacher, and a community educator (fourth author) from a local museum share their experiences. They specifically discuss how they worked as collaborators with families, ECSE educators, community partners, and university partners to authentically meet the needs of children and their families. Our team of collaborators provided specific examples of how they utilized a teaming and collaboration approach to inform authentic opportunities to promote collaborative adult partnerships for enriching children's learning experiences with dramatic inquiry.

Collaborative Experiences of a Former ECSE Scholar and Educator

I believed that the more I involved family and community members in instruction, the more successful my students would be in the classroom. I was in my fourth year of teaching special education preschool in Phoenix, Arizona. The preschool was in a growing community with six preschool teachers (three of whom were previous ECSE Scholars), and 140 preschool-aged children, 3-5 years old, with a wide range of cognitive, social, adaptive, and physical abilities. An essential component of teaming and collaboration is communication. I did my best to provide a wide range of options for open communication between school, families, and the daycare providers who cared for my students during the day when not at school. I communicated with families by sending emails, sending home daily communication booklets with my students, and posting regular updates and classroom announcements on the classroom website. Additionally, we used the app, Remind (n.d.), that let me send information via text message such as monthly activity calendars and newsletters with important events and updates. These varied communications ensured students were being supported through the collaboration as best as they can in the classroom as well as at home.

When I taught dramatic inquiry units, it was important that students had a variety of ways to show their knowledge during our circle time. Circle

time was a whole group activity that occurred every day in my preschool class. We reviewed a variety of curricular (e.g., calendar, letter of the week), social (e.g., greeting peers) and IEP goals (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics). Over eighty percent of my students had a communication delay, so it was especially important for them to have access to pairing non-verbal and verbal ways (i.e., multiple modes) of sharing their thoughts and ideas so they felt comfortable participating. Each day prior to the start of class, I met with my paraprofessional to go over the day's lesson. We reviewed the activities and key objectives planned, and I made sure to ask her opinion on any additional ideas or different ways of implementing a lesson. During circle time, the paraprofessional and I worked with students in small groups and assisted students in partner sharing to promote peer interactions and engagement in the learning activities. During our daily meetings, I modeled for the paraprofessional ways to facilitate different strategies, so she felt confident and prepared when working with students. At the end of the day when students went home, we met again to discuss the daily lesson. We met to reflect on areas that could be improved as well as components of the lesson that went well.

Each month, our classroom focused on a different theme such as dinosaurs, insects, ocean, and transportation. During these units, I focused on how I could make real life connections for students. One way that this was achieved was by having monthly family field trips or events that relate to our theme. For example, for our dramatic inquiry unit on oceans, we utilized a mantle of the expert approach and created a fictional client of a local publishing company. Students were asked by the client to create a book sharing what they learned about ocean animals that could be shared with young children. Students took on an expert role of an author and collaborated with their peers to solve the problem for the local publishing company (client). At the end of the unit students-in-role as authors published a classroom book to share the information they learned about sea animals. Family members came to the classroom so students could host an "author's read aloud" corner. I sat with students in front of the classroom as they each read a page of their book to the audience of students, families, and other educators. To extend students' learning, collaborate with community partners, and offer opportunities for families, my preschool team collaborated with the local aquarium to coordinate a family field trip on a Saturday morning. Families were provided a discounted rate to make the field trip more feasible for their student to have that community learning experience. The collaboration

with a community partner played a key role in students making authentic connections to the content they learned in the classroom.

I collaborated with the university team through in-person meetings, online video calls, daily emails, as well as professional learning to assist me with implementing the dramatic inquiry unit and monitoring my students' outcomes of peer interactions (language, behavior, and social goals) and engagement (language, behavior, cognitive goals). In these meetings, we discussed how students engaged, the strengths of the lesson, and refinements in lesson facilitation I could apply to the next lessons. We also reviewed graphs of student outcome data. Team members also met to discuss how to best support each student in the activities based on their different learning preferences. This collaboration played a crucial role in ensuring I felt fully prepared in my role of teaching the dramatic inquiry lessons and that all my students were interested, engaged, and benefited from the units.

Collaborative Experiences of a Community Partner and Former Museum Education Assistant

At the museum we searched continuously for ways to help facilitate learning with children, families, and teachers within and beyond the walls of the museum. As a museum education assistant, I was responsible for developing and implementing educational programming on natural history for an audience of a wide range of ages and interests. The reach of informal education settings can be very limited. We may only have a child in a program once in their lifetime for an hour and the average self-guided visit to the museum is only about two hours long. Creating meaningful and lasting connections to content related to the natural sciences can be challenging within those short periods of time and with such limited opportunities for direct interactions.

Developing resources for teachers and families has always seemed like a logical place to start. Finding ways to use classrooms and homes as outlets to explore important themes provides additional opportunities for students to build on their interests and knowledge. With my background expertise in paleontology and dinosaurs along with my experience running programs for younger children, I felt like I could contribute engaging and scientifically accurate ideas for classroom lessons and at home activities. Many of these ideas were incorporated into the authentic curriculum that was developed through a partnership with a local university partner that provided content support for the dramatic




inquiry-based curriculum and at home activities for families to extend the learning outside of the classroom. A special effort was made to also help make information more accessible for teachers and families, so they could deliver the content with increased confidence and accuracy with their early childhood students/children.

The museum was also eager to encourage schools and families to visit our facility in person to extend the collaboration outside of the classroom and into the community spaces that we offer. A variety of videos (See Table 3) were filmed to help provide educators and families with ways to access the inquiry curriculum and support continued teaming and collaboration opportunities with the museum. Families were provided with suggestions of galleries to visit and ways to engage their children that tied to the key themes in the inquiry unit, as well as information about how to access the museum in their community. Teachers were encouraged to authentically connect field trips with the inquiry unit and to preview the museum for free as an educator to inform authentic teaching and learning opportunities that met the unique needs of their students. A video was also created to engage directly with the students to encourage them to participate in the inquiry as paleontologists and to create an exhibit that could be displayed at the museum to share their learning with their parents, teachers, and the community.

My contribution to this collaboration mostly revolved around my expertise on the subject matter and access to museum resources. Part of the reason the museum had not already developed classroom curriculum was our lack of expertise in formal education. We needed help figuring out what kind of activities were realistic for a classroom setting, what type of resources teachers had access to, and how to best tie the content to current teaching practices, state standards, and to incorporate specific accommodations for young children who have or are at risk for developmental delays and disabilities. The collaboration with a university partner provided the framework for the entire project. It was tremendously valuable to pitch ideas, receive feedback and then have these ideas transformed into formatted lessons that teachers could use. Without the contributions of university, I do not think I could have produced accessible lesson plans with dramatic inquiry that teachers would have felt comfortable using.

Table 3

Paleontology Dramatic Inquiry Resource Videos

Video Title	Video Summary and Link
<p>Paleontology Commission Video</p> 	<p>A fictional video commission inviting students-in-role as paleontologists to collaborate and create museum exhibits on paleontology and dinosaurs. This video can be used to introduce a unit on paleontology and provide students with an authentic purpose for learning.</p> <p>https://youtu.be/P_-QUti7PA4</p>
<p>Dinosaurs 101</p> 	<p>A short informational video that shares how paleontologists' study and identify information about animals and dinosaurs that lived a long time ago.</p> <p>https://youtu.be/7RrWdH-guXc</p>
<p>Museum</p> 	<p>A video designed for families and teachers about the Community Partner, Arizona Museum of Natural Museum. This video explains when they are open, how to get there, and ways that families and educators can extend learning outside of the classroom.</p> <p>https://youtu.be/krHXV/kbNNO8</p>

NEXT STEPS: SYSTEMS FOR UNIVERSITY, SCHOOL DISTRICT, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

In the current work, the university teacher educators served as the conduit for bringing together the various partners in these illustrations. We continue to collectively work towards a sustainable system for supporting teachers in their work to improve developmental outcomes for young children with and at risk for disabilities (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). As part of this effort, we are designing sustainable systems for educators (Farrand & Deeg, 2020; Farrand et al., 2019), collectively, to create authentic curriculum with dramatic inquiry which leverages community partners who have deep content expertise and may also offer community learning experiences for families. Through these collaborations amongst universities, school districts, families, and community organizations, we exemplify the mission for CEC's Division of Visual and Performing Arts (2021) by advancing experiences with the arts and the Teaming and Collaboration

Recommended Practices by DEC (2014) for promoting whole child outcomes and the teachers who serve them. Benefits of these collaborations hold promise for educators (Basile et al., 2023), young children, and families alike. Sustained collaborations that share responsibility for children's learning, build adult relationships that show value for distributed expertise, and include ongoing interactions that enrich the learning experiences of young children with or at risk for developmental delays and disabilities.

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