

Preparing early educators for the current context of social emotional learning: A content analysis of course descriptions

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Abstract

Despite the well-established need for teacher preparation in child guidance and social emotional learning, studies have found a lack of robust course offerings in these areas. Further, the United States context for children's social emotional development is changing due to the global pandemic, racial unrest, and increased gun violence. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has put forth updated teacher competencies to address the changing context as well as new research on early learning. However, little is known about how teacher education programs have implemented the updated guidelines around teacher competencies. For this journal article, we systematically examined 314 early childhood education programs of study from U.S. universities. We share a content analysis of 237 course descriptions from courses dedicated to children's social emotional learning. We found 26% of programs require no course on social emotional learning. We also identified the four most and three least represented competencies around social emotional learning. Our content analysis reveals that behaviorist theory is predominant in the design of courses and sociocultural influences are under-represented. We provide implications for regularly updating course descriptions to address the needs of children and families in the ever-changing context of education.

Article History

Received 03.05.2024

Accepted 23.06.2024

Keywords

Guidance; management; early childhood; teacher preparation; coursework

Introduction

Gaining social and emotional skills is a main goal of early childhood. However, teachers in the United States report being under-prepared to support children exhibiting difficult behaviors (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). School discipline practices continue to disproportionately punish children of Color and children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), and rates of childhood anxiety and depression are increasing (Lebrun-Harris, et al., 2022). Further, the context of children's social and emotional learning is changing due to a global pandemic, increased gun violence in U.S. schools, and growing racial unrest. To keep up with the changing context of education and research in the field of children's social emotional learning, the National Association for the Education of Young Children published updated teacher competency guidelines in 2020. These ongoing factors warrant an evaluation of what theories and skills preservice teachers are being taught in their undergraduate early childhood education programs. Our search of the literature on child guidance and management course offerings found only two national studies of U.S. education programs,

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and each of these were surveys of program directors about what topics are taught and how often (Buettner et al., 2016; Flower et al., 2017). These two studies identified a lack of robust course offerings in child guidance and management. We seek to fill a gap in the literature with a systematic examination of the programs of study of U.S. institutes of higher education that offer bachelor's degrees in early childhood education and a content analysis of 237 course descriptions from courses dedicated to children's social emotional learning. Our purpose is to better understand how state universities in the U.S. conceptualize child guidance and management and present that conceptualization to the public and pre-service teachers.

The Importance of Social Emotional Learning in the Early Years

One of the main goals of early childhood (birth to age eight) is the attainment of social and emotional skills associated with self-regulation, emotional knowledge, and prosocial interactions (Friedman et al., 2021). Children's strong social emotional skills are positively associated with social and academic success in school (Denham & Brown, 2010). These social and emotional skills are developed through interactions with others in social settings including early childhood classrooms (Rakap et al., 2018). Early childhood educators have been found to have profound influence on the social emotional learning (SEL) of young children through explicit teaching of social and emotional skills (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Schonert-Reichl, 2017), the enactment of formal social curricula (Brownell & Parks, 2022; Hunter & Hemmeter, 2009; Soroko, 2016), and informal day-to-day interactions (DeVries & Van, 2012). Teachers who receive training on developing positive child-teacher relationships, supporting children's SEL, and navigating children's disruptive behaviors have been found to establish stronger relationships with their students (Haslip, 2018) and lead classrooms with lower levels of peer-to-peer and child-teacher conflict (Morris et al., 2013). Indeed, the 2010 and 2020 editions of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)'s *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators* list "Understanding positive relationships and supportive interactions as the foundation of [educators'] work with young children" as key competency 4a.

Teacher Preparation to Support Social Emotional Learning

Despite the well-researched need for teacher preparation in child guidance and SEL, early childhood teacher education programs have been found to be inadequate in preparing teachers in these areas. In their survey of 175 university early childhood education program directors, Buettner et al. (2016) found the promotion of children's social and emotional development is often discussed in only one or several course sessions rather than having a full course dedicated to the topic. Similarly, in a survey of 72 undergraduate education program directors in one Southwest state, Flower et al. (2017) found only 62% of programs included "courses or experiences with a classroom or behavior management focus" (p.166). The lack of robust teacher preparation in the area of student SEL and guidance correlates with lack of skills and understanding among teachers. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), only 55.1% of early career public school teachers reported being well-prepared to handle a range of classroom management or discipline situations (p. 29, Appendix A).

Further, there are variations in the ways teacher preparation programs conceptualize courses on SEL and the social environment of early education settings, with some courses being framed as classroom or behavior management and others as child guidance (Thomas, 2019).

These variations reflect theoretical assumptions about the ways children learn social, emotional, and moral concepts and skills (DeVries & Zan, 2012; Gartrell, 1997). For decades, the National Association for the Education of Young Children has advocated for constructivist and sociocultural approaches to socio-moral and emotional education for young children in rejection of behaviorist approaches (Bredekamp, 1987; Carr & Boat, 2019; Gartrell, 1997). Constructivist and sociocultural approaches understand the learner as a co-creator of knowledge who learns through social interactions and is profoundly influenced by the cultural context (DeVries & Zan, 2012; Gartrell, 1997). In contrast, behaviorist approaches to child discipline conceptualize the learner as motivated by social and material rewards and learning from the direct teaching of concepts and skills (Duncan et al., 2000; Horner et al., 2009). More recently, there have been movements to integrate humanist and behaviorist approaches to teaching social skills, especially in regard to meeting the needs of developmentally- and ability-diverse classrooms (Carr & Boat, 2019; Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019).

The Sociocultural Context of Children's Social and Emotional Learning

While pre-service teachers report being under-prepared to support children's healthy SEL and navigate disruptive behaviors, the sociocultural context of children's social and emotional learning has become more difficult for children, families, and teachers to navigate. Children and families have experienced the stressors of a global pandemic (Barlett & Thompson, 2020), increased gun violence in schools (Delaney, 2017), and racial unrest (Chang et al., 2020). These sociocultural factors contribute to increased diagnoses of anxiety and depression among young children and their family members (Lebrun-Harris, et al., 2022).

Further, school discipline practices continue to contribute to unequal outcomes for young children of Color and those who have been identified as differently abled (US Department of Education, 2016). Beginning in preschool, Black boys and girls are suspended and expelled at a higher rate than white children and are more likely to be disciplined through law enforcement (Department of Education, 2016). Indigenous, Latinx, and multiracial boys as well as children with disabilities are disproportionately suspended in K-12 public schools (Department of Education, 2016). Recognizing the need for early education settings to better serve children with disabilities and racially minoritized children, Lim and Able-Boone (2005) recommend infusing teacher cultural responsiveness competencies in all teacher preparation courses. Likewise, NAEYC, the national accrediting body for early childhood higher education, recently updated its publications to recognize the impact of sociocultural factors on children's development and the responsibility of teacher education programs to support teachers in addressing unequal discipline outcomes for young children (NAEYC, 2020a, 2020b).

NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a professional membership and advocacy organization that has national and international impact on early childhood education. One essential function of NAEYC is to put forth position statements that address common concerns in the field. Three statements that have immense impact on early childhood teacher preparation in the United States are: Developmentally Appropriate Practice, Code of Ethical Conduct, and Professional Standards and Competencies. NAEYC put forth its initial position statement on developmentally appropriate practice in 1987 in response

to concern that inappropriate teaching practices and behavioral expectations for young children were prevalent in rapidly expanding preschool and kindergarten programs (NAEYC, n.d.). The early childhood education field has continued to expand with increased use of group care for infants and toddlers (Aboud & Prado, 2018) and the expansion of public preschool programs (Barnett & Friedman-Krauss, 2019). NAEYC has responded to these changes and the growing body of research on early childhood education by consistently updating statements on developmentally appropriate practice as well as developing other position statements including the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (PSCECE). The PSCECE are designed to serve as a core document for the field that can be used by states to develop their own standards and align professional and policy structures (NAEYC, 2010; 2020). NAEYC first published a set of professional competencies in 2010 and updated them to the current PSCECE in 2020.

The 2020 PSCECE recognize the impact of context on child development and learning, including the effects of structural inequities on young children and their families, and require that early childhood educators gain an understanding of these processes (NAEYC, 2020). Regarding child guidance and discipline practices, the 2020 competencies require that “[e]arly childhood educators reflect on their own values and potential biases” (NAEYC, 2020, p. 14) and

work [...] with colleagues and families to use positive and supportive guidance strategies for all children to help them navigate multiple home and school cultural codes, norms, and expectations and to prevent suspensions, expulsions, and other disciplinary measures that disproportionately affect young children of color. (p. 19)

In this study, we utilized the 2020 NAEYC PSCECE to identify the most up-to-date nationally recognized teacher competencies for child guidance and teaching of social and emotional skills.

Method

To better understand how early childhood teacher education programs conceptualize and publicize courses designed to prepare teachers to support children’s SEL and facilitate the social environment of the classroom, we collected and analyzed programs of study and course descriptions from a national search of early childhood education programs. Informed by the 2020 NAEYC PSCECE and the 2010 NAEYC Standards for Initial & Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs, we conducted qualitative content analysis (Stemler, 2000) of 237 course descriptions. The following research question guided our study: *Which competencies and skills are included in course descriptions, and which are omitted?*

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of two stages and took place from September 2019 to May 2020. The first stage was identifying early childhood education licensure programs. We identified a list of universities with early childhood education programs across the United States using the NAEYC Early Childhood Higher Education Directory (NAEYC, 2019). We limited our search to public institutions of higher education that provide bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education that lead to licensure as such programs meet state guidelines and are representative of national and regional ideologies around early childhood education. We identified 314 higher education institutions that met the selection criteria.

The second stage of data collection was locating programs of study and collecting course descriptions from publicly available resources. We looked for methods courses that prepare teachers to address the social and emotional demands of early childhood educational spaces. Key words included: guidance, management, social, emotional, and behavior. If we did not find a course title that included one of these keywords, we scanned course titles and descriptions within the program of study to find relevant courses. Examples of qualifying course titles include Social/Emotional Learning and Development and Human Behavior and Relations in the Classroom. We identified 239 course titles that fit the selection criteria. Upon identifying relevant courses, we gathered 237 course descriptions from program web pages and course catalogues. We were unable to locate two course descriptions. Data were compiled into a central database and cross-checked for accuracy among researchers weekly.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis took place from September 2019 to December 2022. During that period, NAEYC published the 2020 Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (PSCECE), a revised version of the 2010 NAEYC Standards for Initial and Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs. The publication of the 2020 PSCECE led us to update our codebook (see Table 1.)

Table 1. Excerpt of codebook for content analysis of course descriptions

Code	Source of code	Relevant quote from NAEYC document	Clarifying definition	Example phrases from course descriptions
Relationships with Peers	2010 and 2020 NAEYC PSCECE	“children's close relationships with adults and peers” (NAEYC, 2010, p. 21) “build positive relationships with each child and between children” (NAEYC, 2020, p. 17)	Teacher support of student-to-student relationships including cooperation, friendship, and empathy	“conflict resolution” “pro-social”
Addressing Challenging Behaviors	2010 and 2020 NAEYC PSCECE	“addressing children's challenging behaviors” (NAEYC, 2010, p. 35) “anticipating individual children's difficult experiences and offering comfort and guidance during those experiences” (NAEYC, 2020, p. 19)	Teacher attending to difficult student behaviors after they have occurred.	“reactive” “behavior change techniques”
Emotional Understanding	2010 and 2020 NAEYC PSCECE	“emotional understanding” (NAEYC, 2010, pp. 12, 35) “emotional skills. . . to manage or regulate their expressions of emotion and, over time, to cope with frustration, develop resilience, learn to take on challenges, and manage impulses effectively” (NAEYC, 2020, p. 17)	Student skills around naming and understanding the emotions of self and others	“enhance children's social/emotional learning” “emotional literacy”

We found most codes were supported by both documents. However, we recognized a reduction in reliance on child development theory and an increased emphasis on creating physical and social environments. The most notable change from the 2010 to 2020 educator preparation documents was a recognition of the influence of culture and societal context,

including structural inequities, on child learning and development. In addition to deductive coding based on the 2020 PSCECE and NAEYC’s (2010) Standards and Competencies document, we engaged in inductive coding with new codes emerging from the data set (Elliot, 2018). Table 1 is an excerpt from our codebook illustrating how we generated codes and their definitions. We began by identifying relevant quotes from the NAEYC (2010, 2020) PSCECEs, then we co-wrote clarifying definitions for our study and listed examples we found as we coded course descriptions.

Findings

We begin our findings by sharing an overview of the presence of courses on SEL and Social Environments in 314 programs of study at U.S. public universities with bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education. We looked carefully at each program of study to identify courses that focus on children’s SEL or the social aspect of the early learning environment and sorted programs of study into those that required zero, one, or two qualifying courses. After summarizing findings around the inclusion of courses on SEL in programs of study, we present the findings of our content analysis of 237 course descriptions. We identified the four teacher competencies that are most often represented in course descriptions and the three that are least represented. We situate each of these seven competencies in the field of early childhood education and share examples of how they appear in course descriptions.

Course Requirements in Programs of Study

Our survey of 314 early childhood education undergraduate programs found most programs required one course on SEL and/or the social environment of the early education setting, but 26% of programs required no such course. (See Table 2.)

Table 2. Program requirement of courses on SEL and Social Environments

Categories	<i>n</i>	%
Programs that require 0 courses	83	26.4
Programs that require 1 course	225	71.6
Programs that require 2 courses	6	1.9
Total number of programs: 314		

These findings provide updated data based on a large sampling of public university programs of study. We are encouraged to find that nearly 74% of programs require at least one course on SEL and/or the social learning environment, as this is a slightly higher percentage than was found in similar studies by Flower et al. (2017) and Buettner et al. (2016). However, we are concerned by the many programs that require no such course. In the following sections, we look more closely at the content of the courses as outlined in publicly available course descriptions.

Most Prevalent Competencies

The following skills were most often included in course descriptions: 1) Understanding and Using Theory, 2) Addressing Challenging Behaviors, 3) Promoting Peer Relationships, and 4) Promoting Supportive Teacher/Student Relationships (see Table 3). In the following

paragraphs, we define each of these skills and their importance, then describe the ways the skill was presented in course descriptions. Two skills, promoting peer relationships and promoting positive teacher/student relationships, had significant overlap, so we presented them together.

Table 3. Count and percentage of 4 most prevalent codes

Codes	<i>n</i>	%
Understanding and using theory	118	49.7
Addressing challenging behaviors	82	34.5
Promoting peer relationships	73	30.8
Promoting supportive teacher-student relationships	73	30.8

Understanding and Using Theory

The field of early childhood education places importance on applying developmental and learning theories to care and education as evidenced by NAEYC's long-standing emphasis on developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2020a). The latest versions of NAEYC's position statements on developmentally appropriate practice and teacher competencies demonstrate new attention to sociocultural theories of development and learning. Standard 1 of the PSCECE is titled *Child Development and Learning in Context* and asserts that competent early childhood educators make decisions that are both "grounded in an understanding of the developmental period of early childhood from birth through age 8" (NAEYC, 2020b, p. 11) and an "understand[ing] that children learn and develop within relationships and within multiple contexts, including families, cultures, languages, communities, and society" (p. 11).

Understanding and Using Theory was the most frequently used code in our codebook with nearly fifty percent of course descriptions including theoretical grounding. The theory was typically mentioned in general terms with phrases such as "based upon educational theory and current related philosophies," "integrates research from various disciplines," and "knowledge of different approaches." Specific theories mentioned in the PSCECE include: Family theory, motivational theories, and theories about types and stages of play. In addition to general statements about theoretical grounding and mention of a specific theory, we found statements that reflected two often contradictory over-arching theories: developmentally appropriate practice and behaviorist theory. The developmentally appropriate practice was mentioned explicitly in 21 course descriptions. Examples of phrases coded *Understanding and Using Theory* with explicit mention of developmentally appropriate practice include "an in-depth study of developmentally appropriate guidance theories" and "using principles of developmentally appropriate child guidance and classroom management." The phrase *behaviorist theory* was rarely used explicitly, but the application of behaviorist theory was stated or implied in 26 course descriptions with phrases including "techniques of applied behavior management," "basic principles of applied behavior analysis and modification," and "Perspectives of psychoanalysis, individual psychology, behaviorism, and cognitive psychology." Some course descriptions included both behaviorist theory and theories that take development and context into account. Examples include: "Using behaviorist and constructivist frameworks" and "A detailed investigation of behavioral and humanistic approaches."

Addressing Challenging Behaviors

Nearly 35% of course descriptions included statements we coded *Addressing Children's Challenging Behaviors*. We derived this code from the 2010 PSCECE which stated, "A flexible, research-based repertoire of teaching/learning approaches to promote young children's development. . . [includes] Addressing children's challenging behaviors" (NAEYC, 2010, p. 35). The 2020 PSCECE do not include the phrase *challenging behaviors*. However, approaches to positive child guidance are described under Standard 4: Developmentally, Culturally, and Linguistically Appropriate Teaching Practices, where the following can be found, "Providing social and emotional support and positive guidance" (NAEYC, 2020, p. 19). Subskills of this competency that directly relate to addressing children's challenging behaviors are (NAEYC, 2020b, p. 19):

- "Learning the calming strategies that work best for individual children"
- "Anticipating children's difficult experiences"
- "Seeking help from colleagues, as needed"
- "Directing and redirecting behavior"
- "Scaffolding peer conflict resolution"

Based on these subskills, one might summarize the approach to addressing children's challenging behaviors depicted in the 2020 PSCECE as individualized, relationship-based, and scaffolded. However, this approach was not often represented in course descriptions. Most course descriptions mentioned challenging behaviors in general terms such as "handling challenging student behaviors" and "respond to difficult persistent behaviors." Of the 82 phrases we coded *Addressing Challenging Behaviors*, 31 contained at least one of the following phrases related to behaviorist approaches to child discipline: *functional behavior analysis/assessment*, *positive behavior support*, *applied behavior assessment*, *modifying behavior*, and *behavior intervention*.

Promoting Positive School Relationships

Both the 2010 and 2020 editions of the PSCECE recognize "caring, supportive relationships and interactions as the foundation for work with young children" in key competency 4a (2020, p. 10). Both editions also include competencies around supporting children's relationships with peers in recognition that positive peer relationships support healthy social and emotional development. Educator competencies that promote positive relationships with peers include, "creating a caring community of learners" (NAEYC, 2020b, p. 17) and "scaffolding peer conflict resolution" (NAEYC, 2020, p. 19). Thus, our code book included two distinct codes for promoting positive school relationships: *Promoting Peer Relationships* and *Promoting Supportive Teacher/Student Relationships*. When coding, we found that often course descriptions discussed classroom relationships in general terms such as "positive social environment" and "a caring and respectful classroom community" instead of making a distinction between teacher/child and peer relationships. When such general terms were used, we coded them using both codes. Thus, there was much, but not complete, overlap between the two codes resulting in the same frequency count, 73 out of 237, for each code.

Promoting Supportive Teacher/Student Relationships. Research indicates close teacher/student relationships in early education are associated with social emotional skill development and student academic success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Marks et al., 2023; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2019). Further, Black and Latino boys have been found to be less likely to have close relationships with teachers (Goldberg & Iruka, 2023). Despite its importance, only three course descriptions directly addressed the teacher/student relationships in particular. These three course descriptions used the following phrases: “emphasis on adult-child interaction,” “build rapport with children and their families,” and “emphasis on [...] teacher-student relationships.”

Promoting Student Relationships with Peers. Positive peer relationships and the ability to work collaboratively with peers can increase students’ enjoyment of school and their learning (Gowing, 2019; Wentzel, 2017). When children have peer friendships at school, they have more opportunities to practice social skills (Riley et al., 2007). Phrases that were specific to peer relationships, as opposed to teacher/child relationships included “social interactions,” “socially appropriate behavior,” and “collaborative learning.” Peer conflict resolution came up as a distinct skill to support peer relationships in the PSCECE and in course descriptions. Peer conflicts are a natural context for learning social and emotional skills as well as creative problem solving (Chen et al., 2021; DeVries & Zan, 2012). Further, in their literature review on reducing school gun violence, Price and Khubchandani (2019) recommend an increased focus on peer conflict resolution in schools. Teachers can scaffold children’s successful negotiation of conflict in a manner that supports prosocial skill development (DeVries & Zan, 2012; Vestal & Jones, 2004), and research demonstrates teacher training on peer conflict resolution leads to increased social skills in children (Blunk et al., 2017; Vestal & Jones, 2004). When looking specifically for the teacher competency of scaffolding peer conflict resolution, we found that 15 course descriptions included supporting peer conflict resolution with statements like “promote conflict resolution” and “developing [...] social-problem competencies in young children.”

Least Prevalent Competencies

Noting which topics and competencies are least prevalent in course descriptions can be just as revealing as pointing out which are most prevalent. In this section, we present the three least prevalent competencies. The following skills were present in less than 5% of course descriptions: 1) *Supporting Children’s Emotional Knowledge*, 2) *Promoting Children’s Sense of Security*, and 3) *Considering Bias and Its Impact on Guidance and Discipline*. (See Table 4.) In the following paragraphs, we describe the importance of each skill and the nature of their representation in course descriptions.

Table 4. Count and percentage of 3 least prevalent codes

Codes	<i>n</i>	%
Supporting children’s emotional knowledge	11	4.6
Promoting children’s sense of security	4	1.7
Considering bias and its impact on guidance and discipline	1	0.4

Supporting Children's Emotion Knowledge

Distinct from emotion regulation, emotion knowledge is the ability to accurately interpret the emotions of self and others and recognize situations that may elicit strong emotions (Denham et al., 2012). Emotion knowledge is associated with academic achievement (Nix et al., 2013; Ursache et al., 2020) and social competence (Gal-Szabo et al., 2019, Trentacosta & Fine, 2010). One way children attain emotion knowledge at school is through focused interactions with teachers often guided by social/emotional curricula (Garner et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2013). The 2010 NAEYC Standards for Initial and Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs list “emotional understanding” as one of the skills early educators must promote through a “well-planned, intentionally implemented, culturally relevant curriculum” (p. 12). While the 2020 PSCECE do not include the phrase emotional understanding, it does refer to *emotional skills* (NAEYC, 2020, p. 17).

We coded eight phrases in eight distinct course descriptions *Supporting Children's Emotional Knowledge*. Five of these phrases were written in general terms such as, “enhance children's social/emotional learning” and “addressing the social/emotional competence of typically and atypically developing children.” Three phrases specifically addressed emotion knowledge: “emotional understanding,” “emotional literacy,” and “emotional intelligence.”

Promoting Children's Sense of Security

The 2020 PSCECE list, “Promoting children's physical and psychological health, safety, and sense of security” (NAEYC, 2020, p. 13) as an educator competency under standard 1.d. When children feel psychologically and physically safe, they can engage in higher order thinking and learning (Maslow, 1970). Psychological safety includes feeling assured that one's emotions, ideas, and actions will be validated (Wanless, 2016) and a sense of being well-known and accepted, “free from social identity or stereotype threats that exacerbate stress and undermine performance” (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). When children feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to exercise agency and take intellectual risks (Wanless, 2016).

In the current context of education in the United States, physical and psychological safety at school is of urgent importance. Along with the real threat of illness for children and their families, the COVID-19 global pandemic led to many potentially frightening changes for young children, such as masking and social distancing measures (Bartlett & Thompson, 2020). Likewise, even young children must contend with school intruder drills, safety lockdowns, and the real threat of school shootings (Delaney, 2017).

In light of the importance of psychological and physical safety and the current context of education, teachers' skill at promoting children's sense of security is especially important. Despite this, we found only four of the 237 course descriptions we analyzed explicitly addressed promoting children's sense of security. These four phrases were: “create safe environments,” “child stress reduction,” “building caring and trusting classroom communities,” and “fostering the sense of belonging.”

Considering Bias and Its Impact on Guidance and Discipline

Abundant research demonstrates the nefarious consequences of structural inequities (Annamma & Handy, 2019; Noguera, 2003) and teacher bias (Boonstra, 2021; Bryan, 2017; Gilliam et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2022) on student discipline outcomes for minoritized students. The 2020 PSCECE mandate that “[e]arly childhood educators reflect on their own values and potential biases” (NAEYC, 2020b, p. 14) and “prevent suspensions, expulsions, and other disciplinary measures that disproportionately affect young children of color” (p. 19). However, only one course description in the data set of 237 addressed the issue of teacher bias and its effect on child discipline. We found the following statement in the course description for a course titled *Human Relations*, “Focuses on . . .the dehumanizing impact of biases and negative stereotypes; and the human relations approach to teaching.”

While only one course description explicitly addressed the problem of teacher bias in child discipline, many course descriptions addressed meeting the needs of diverse students in general terms. Our codebook included two distinct codes regarding serving minoritized children and families. The 2010 guide to the standards includes a section on Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity in which NAEYC defines diversity in terms of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity and developmental diversity (NAEYC, 2010). From this, we developed the codes: *Meeting the needs of children who are* 1) *Culturally Diverse* and 2) *Developmentally Diverse*. We coded 42 phrases *Meeting the Needs of Children who are Culturally Diverse* and 60 phrases *Developmentally Diverse*. There is significant overlap between these two codes; we coded phrases that address diversity in a general manner using both codes. Phrases coded as pertaining to both cultural and developmental diversity often represented the notion of inclusive classrooms or inclusion of all children. Examples include: “Prepares teachers to work in multicultural general and special education settings with children of all ages from various backgrounds,” “teacher candidates will understand the many dimensions of student diversity,” and “understanding the developmental, cultural, and group dynamics underlying children’s actions.” While these phrases address the needs of diverse students in general, they are unlikely to translate to the specific skill of examining one’s own bias and its potential effects on child guidance and discipline practices.

Discussion

Our survey of 314 state university programs of study found nearly 26% of programs in early childhood education require no course in children’s social emotional learning or the social context of the classroom. Our content analysis of 237 course descriptions found: behaviorist theory and behaviorist approaches to addressing challenging behaviors are prevalent in course descriptions, classroom relationships are emphasized in general terms, children’s emotional knowledge and sense of security are under-represented, and teacher bias is rarely addressed. Here we discuss these findings as they relate to each other.

Prevalence of Behaviorist Theory in Course Descriptions

Behaviorist theory was often evident in course descriptions. The 2022 PSECE emphasizes sociocultural influences on children’s development and learning, including the harmful effects of racialized oppression at the system level. Behaviorist theory tends to ignore cultural influences and focus instead on clear communication of behavioral expectations and systems of rewards and punishments (Thomas, 2019; Horner et al., 2009). A major critique of behaviorist approaches to learning in early childhood is that such approaches emphasize

heteronomous rather than autonomous morality and teacher control rather than child agency (DeVries & Zan, 2012). Behaviorist approaches to child discipline practices have been found to be especially harmful to children of Color due to disregard of sociocultural influences on teachers' perceptions of and responses to problematic social behaviors (Thomas, 2019), over-punishment of children of Color (Bal & Trainor, 2016; Reno et al., 2017), and the sorting nature of reward and punishment systems (Brownell & Parks, 2022). It is important to note many in the field of early childhood special education assert the utility of behaviorist theory (Duncan et al., 2000; Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019), contending children's behavior may sometimes be "so detrimental to [themselves] and to the other children that additional measures [such as schedules of reinforcement] must be used to achieve quick results and restore a sense of psychological safety in the classroom community" (Duncan et al., 2000, p. 195). It is common to adopt intervention using Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) to work with children with Autism. However, such behaviorist-based practices have recently been challenged in their effectiveness in comparison to developmental and naturalistic developmental behavioral intervention [NDBI] approaches (Sandbank et al., 2020). Grisham-Brown et al. (2017) advocate for a blended practice that utilizes developmentally appropriate approaches as well as behaviorist strategies so that teaching and discipline practices are individualized and engaging. As we consider the merits of incorporating behaviorist approaches in early childhood special education, we would like to point out that not only have children of Color been found to be disproportionately negatively impacted by behaviorist approaches, but they have also been over- and mis-represented in special education (Zhang et al., 2014).

Lack of Sociocultural Theory in Course Descriptions

The field of early childhood education in the United States was founded on social constructivist theory and, after decades of research, has more recently embraced sociocultural theories of child development and learning (NAEYC, 2020a). Sociocultural theory recognizes the profound influence of culture on development and asserts learning occurs through interactions with individuals and cultural artifacts in a cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978). With more in-depth inclusion of sociocultural theory in its resources on developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2020a) and teacher competencies (NAEYC, 2020b), NAEYC has also recognized the harmful impact of systemic inequities and individual biases on child learning and development. Theoretical grounding in sociocultural theory was not robustly represented across course descriptions.

In both social constructivist theory and sociocultural theory, healthy relationships are understood as foundational to student learning. While we found classroom relationships were often mentioned in course descriptions, they were typically represented in general terms such as "positive social environment." These general terms did not fully recognize "caring, supportive relationships and interactions as the foundation for work with young children" (NAEYC, 2020, p. 10). Teacher-child relationships and peer conflict resolution, in particular, were not often found in course descriptions. Strategies for supporting teacher/child and peer relationships are not always intuitive, and teacher candidates do not often have direct experience with such strategies from their own schooling (Carnoy & Tarlau, 2019). Relatedly, supporting children's emotion knowledge was not well-represented in course descriptions. Emotion knowledge and ability to express emotions effectively is known to support teacher-child relationships (Denham, 2023), peer friendships (Petrides et al., 2006), and academic interactions (Alzahrani et al., 2019).

Finally, from a sociocultural standpoint, teacher preparation courses should reflect the needs of the current cultural and sociopolitical context. Our findings suggest course descriptions rarely reflect the unique challenges of SEL in today's context. As described above, the current context of education is affected by increased gun violence in schools, the Covid 19 pandemic, political unrest, and the disproportionate application of harsh discipline practices according to race and ability. A call to action published in the *Journal of Teacher Education* (Carter Andrews et al., 2018) identifies three gap areas in teacher preparation programs when considering the current context of education. The first two gap areas are directly related to our findings: 1) supporting student physical and psychological safety and 2) preparing teachers to discuss difficult topics including systemic oppression (Carter Andrews et al., 2018). Relatedly, in their review of the literature on reducing gun violence in schools, Price and Khubchandani (2019) recommend schools expand social educational interventions such as peer conflict resolution, peer mediation, and reduction of bullying. We understand students' sense of security, supported social interventions, and teachers' ability to counter systemic oppression to be intimately linked. Teachers cannot effectively carry out a social curriculum that supports all students' SEL if they do not possess a deep understanding of systemic oppression and their own relationships to oppressive systems (Thomas, 2019; Bryan, 2017; Mentor & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). We also recognize the work will take significant change as teacher education has been found to be race evasive in terms of curriculum and pedagogy (Chang-Bacon, 2022; Jupp et al., 2019), and the current sociopolitical context includes social and legislative pressures to limit discussions of systemic oppression in schools (Gabriel & Goldstein, 2021) and universities (Myskow, 2022).

Limitations

Data for this study were limited to publicly available programs of study and course descriptions. By their nature, course descriptions only provide a general overview of the content of a course. They are often created by university curriculum teams, state departments of education, or individual instructors for use in course catalogs. Course descriptions are the public means by which courses are described to students, faculty who teach the course, those making decisions about transfer credits, and other stakeholders. While it is not uncommon for instructors to adapt the content of a course based on their own expertise and current research (Fuentes et al., 2021), instructors are understood to be beholden to course descriptions. Course descriptions are often used as a data source for understanding trends in course content across many programs (see Aasheim et al., 2015; Jones & Warhuus, 2018; Strekalova-Hughes & Ismail, 2019).

Implications

Course descriptions inform the public and the education community of the rationale for courses, key content, and skills to be learned by students who take the course. We recommend teacher preparation programs make their programs of study and course descriptions accessible to the public to better communicate the aims of the field. We recommend teacher preparation curriculum designers and state departments of education regularly undertake a re-examination of course descriptions and objectives in accordance with new teacher competency guidelines, the latest research, and sociocultural factors affecting children and families.

Based on our content analysis, we have several implications regarding course content for child guidance, management, and discipline courses. First, we encourage instructors to support an adequate understanding of behaviorist, social constructivist, and sociocultural theories of learning so teacher candidates are prepared to evaluate social curricula and make theory-driven decisions in their child guidance practices. We recommend explicit teaching about the nature of classroom relationships and particular strategies to support healthy teacher/student and peer relationships. Grounded in NAEYC competencies and early childhood research, we assert emotion knowledge, i.e., children's ability to name their own emotions and the emotions of others, is essential content. Due to increasing rates of childhood anxiety and increased school gun violence, we recommend teaching preservice teachers strategies to promote children's psychological and physical safety. Finally, we recommend courses on children's SEL and school discipline practices, naming systemic oppression and implicit bias as factors that lead to disproportionate discipline outcomes and providing strategies to mitigate those forces.

Conclusion

The context of early childhood education is changing. Young children and their families have experienced a global pandemic (Barlett & Thompson, 2020), are more likely to be diagnosed with anxiety and depression (Lebrun-Harris, et al., 2022), and are more likely to be affected by gun violence in schools (Delaney, 2017). The United States has experienced another racial reckoning (Chang, 2020), and school discipline disparities according to race and ability persist (United States Department of Education, 2016). National teacher competency guidelines have been updated to reflect this changing context and the latest research. The PSCECE (NAEYC, 2020) mandate greater emphasis on the ways socio-political contexts affect child development and learning, including the effects of structural inequities on young children and their families. The 2020 PSCECE also assert the need for early educators to examine their own bias in order to improve social emotional health and learning for minoritized children. Our study finds programs of study and course descriptions for courses on SEL, positive guidance strategies, and the social context of early education settings need to be updated. We hope our study might offer helpful implications for updating course descriptions for courses that support teacher competency in SEL and the social context of early education spaces.

Declarations

Acknowledgments: Not applicable.

Authors' contributions: Both authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the research, analysis, and manuscript. R.T. conceived the study and took the lead in writing the manuscript. D.L. performed the data collection and processing, drafted the method section, and aided in the literature review and data analysis.

Competing interests: The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: The Internal Review Board determined that this study was not human subjects research.

Publisher's note: Culture, Education, and Future remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliation.

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