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Integrating Formal and Informal Subsystems: A Case Study of Promise City's Early Care and Education Model¹

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¹ Promise City is a pseudonym for a medium-sized city in a Midwest state in the United States.

Abstract: This case study explores effective practices within a district's early care and education model. Interviews were conducted with eight parents of high-performing students and seven district ECE partners from Promise City. The results of this case study lead to the development of a model that comprises best practices within the (a) informal ECE subsystem, (b) formal ECE subsystem, and (c) intersection of the informal and formal subsystems. The model incorporates the best practices identified by Ma et al's. (2016) meta-analysis, as well as unique best practices found within Promise City. The findings highlight the importance of both informal and formal learning environments and actively working to bridge these environments.

Keywords: early care and education; parent involvement; collective impact; tripartite system

Integrando subsistemas formales e informales: Un estudio de caso del modelo de atención y educación temprana de Promise City

Resumen: Este estudio de caso explora las prácticas efectivas dentro de un modelo de atención y educación tempranas de un distrito. Se realizaron entrevistas con ocho padres de estudiantes de alto rendimiento y siete socios de ECE del distrito de Promise City. Los resultados de este estudio de caso conducen al desarrollo de un modelo que comprende las mejores prácticas dentro del (a) subsistema de ECE informal, (b) subsistema de ECE formal, y (c) la intersección de los subsistemas informal y formal. El modelo incorpora las mejores prácticas descubiertas en el meta-análisis de Ma et al. (2016), así como las mejores prácticas únicas encontradas en Promise City. Estos hallazgos tienen implicaciones significativas para la política, la práctica y la investigación futura en el campo de la ECE.

Palabras-clave: atención y educación tempranas; participación de los padres; impacto colectivo; sistema tripartito

Integrando subsistemas formais e informais: Um estudo de caso do modelo de educação e cuidados na primeira infância de Promise City

Resumo: Este estudo de caso explora práticas efetivas dentro do modelo de cuidado e educação infantil de um distrito. Foram realizadas entrevistas com oito pais de alunos de alto desempenho e sete parceiros de ECE do distrito de Promise City. Os resultados deste estudo de caso levam ao desenvolvimento de um modelo que compreende as melhores práticas dentro do (a) subsistema de ECE informal, (b) subsistema de ECE formal, e (c) a interseção dos subsistemas informal e formal. O modelo incorpora as melhores práticas descobertas na meta-análise de Ma et al. (2016), bem como práticas únicas encontradas em Promise City. Esses achados têm implicações significativas para políticas, práticas e pesquisas futuras no campo da ECE.

Palavras-chave: cuidados e educação infantil; envolvimento dos pais; impacto coletivo; sistema tripartido

Integrating Formal and Informal Subsystems: A Case Study of Promise City's Early Care and Education Model

This case study explores effective practices within a high-poverty school district's early care and education model. Promise City is a mid-sized midwestern city in the United States with approximately 50,000 residents, half of whom are people of color. The median household income in Promise City is roughly two-thirds of the national median, while the poverty rate is nearly double the national rate. Academic achievement in Promise City has historically lagged behind national averages, with the most pronounced disparities in math proficiency scores across elementary, middle, and high school students. The number of children in poverty (5 years old or younger in Promise City) increased from 33% in 2013 to 38% in 2020.

Despite increasing and evolving challenges, the kindergarten readiness rate for children in Promise City Public Schools more than tripled from 16% in Fall 2013 to 50% in Fall 2020, even with the half-a-year effect of the pandemic. Our previous rigorous quasi-experimental study provided preliminary evidence suggesting that the Early Care and Education (ECE) system in Promise City yielded positive results (Gao et al., 2019).

In this study, we investigate the practices of the ECE system in integrating formal and informal subsystems. We aim to validate these insights using an empirical model tested in a meta-analysis by Ma et al. (2016) that merges two different frameworks of family involvement (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Ho & Willms, 1996) with the family-school-community partnership framework proposed by Epstein et al. (2009).

By examining these integrated frameworks within the context of our specific ECE system, we seek to identify the most effective practices for promoting early childhood development and family engagement across both formal and informal settings. Promise City is a case of success for the ECE system. The study was guided by the research question “What are the best ECE practices in the informal subsystem, in the formal system, and in the intersection of the informal and formal subsystem?”

Literature Review

Numerous studies have shown that children, especially those economically or culturally disadvantaged children who attend high-quality ECE programs tend to have better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes in childhood (e.g., Bakken et al., 2017; Barnett, 2011; Phillips et al., 2017) and achieve lifetime success in adulthood (Reynolds et al., 2007). Despite efforts to improve children’s outcomes, there is increasingly a consensus that ECE systems need substantial reform to make them more effective, efficient, and equitable. Typically, the traditional ECE system in the United States, which focuses on children between the ages of 0 and 5, faces increasing challenges in strengthening institutional capacity and enhancing family connections.

From a systems perspective, we argue that the traditional ECE model is unbalanced and unsustainable because the ECE system is in fact tripartite that needs to bridge formal and informal subsystems. Here, we conceptualize that ECE centers and partners form the formal ECE subsystem, while families and the community, in general form the informal ECE subsystem. Furthermore, there is an intersection between the informal and formal subsystems.

The Formal ECE Subsystem as a Split System

ECE systems are unique due to their distinct historical roots in early childcare and education services (Kaga et al., 2010; Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). Several international organizations recognize the ECE system as a “split system,” persistently posing challenges in education policy (Kaga et al., 2010; Urban et al., 2020). In the United States, a joint guidance document by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) explicitly stated, “Too often our health care and early learning systems operate in silos, missing key opportunities to maximize both the health and early learning outcomes of children” (HHS & ED, 2020, p. 3). The separations within the ECE system disrupt not only the horizontal coordination among ECE centers, ECE partners, communities, and parents, but also the vertical coordination among various levels of policymakers and administrators, which ultimately undermine the efforts of all participants (Urban et al., 2020). Rather than mutually reinforcing positive outcomes, programs within an ECE system can sometimes work at cross-purposes. An empirical study by Ma et al. (2015) assessed the compatibility among four ECE programs administered under federal, state, and county funding

streams, finding that three out of four ECE programs had counteracting interactions with other programs.

Collective Impact through System Building

The formal ECE subsystem is not only a composite of different, incomplete, and often incompatible elements from different domains, but it is also highly complex internally (HHS & ED, 2020). It is urgent to adopt a systemic perspective that focuses not on a single element but on all elements and their subtle connections. Yet, as Kagan (2009) underscored, the “system” of ECE in the United States is more an analog to the K-12 education system than a true system. The formal ECE subsystem lacks many systemic qualities, such as overarching governance, funding, accountability mechanisms, and, more importantly, status as a requisite public good. This lack of systemic qualities has resulted in inequitably distributed, decentralized, and deregulated ECE services for children and their families, contributing to a high turnover of ECE practitioners.

To address these complex social issues, researchers have highlighted the “collective impact” approach by Kania and Kramer (2011, 2013, 2015) as a critical methodology for cross-sector community collaboratives (Gao et al, 2019, 2022; White House Council for Community Solutions, 2012; Zuckerman et al., 2020). The fundamental idea of collective impact is to develop in-depth consensus, intra-sector and inter-sector collaboration, and system learning among all stakeholders.

Furthermore, Kania, Kramer, and Senge (2018) propose a framework of six interdependent system change conditions across three phases: structural, semi-explicit, and transformative. Structural changes, encompassing policies, practices, and resource flows, impact not only formal systems but also community-based and family-led initiatives. Semi-explicit changes focus on relationships, connections, and power dynamics, while transformative changes target mental models. These latter two phases are crucial for both formal and informal settings, highlighting the need to integrate formal policies with informal interactions for a comprehensive educational impact. This framework provides ECE stakeholders with a tool to review their existing structures and reconceptualize their approach before navigating the complex terrain of ECE system change.

Informal Subsystem as Inherent but Neglected Part of ECE System

Parents play the most critical role in children’s early development. However, parents are often viewed as clients of the ECE system. From a systems perspective, we argue that parents and their activities should be conceptualized as an informal but integral subsystem of an ECE system. While the formal side of the ECE system provides stability and robustness, the informal side of the ECE system offers dynamics and sense-making. The informal ECE subsystem includes care and educational activities at home and in the community.

Epstein et al. (2009) identified six types of involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration. Researchers have accumulated evidence and knowledge about parenting practices in this area. For instance, parental practices such as early book reading, using complex language with children, and warm interactions could positively impact children’s developmental outcomes and school readiness (e.g., Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; Bradley, 2001; Demir-Lira et al., 2018; Hindman & Morrison, 2011). By contrast, parents’ use of physical discipline, such as harsh punishment and psychological control could lead to behavioral problems in children in the long run (Gershoff, 2002; Piquart, 2017). Based on a meta-analysis of 46 studies, Ma et al., (2016) found that behavioral involvement, home supervision, and home-school collaborations significantly positively affect children’s learning outcomes.

However, a gap exists between academic theories and real-life parental practices, highlighting the need for accessible knowledge, techniques, and resources to support parents in applying best

practices. Consistent evidence has shown that economically or culturally disadvantaged families encounter more challenges educating their children at home (Ansari & Markowitz, 2021; Blok et al., 2005; Day et al., 1998; Lansford et al., 2004; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Multiple studies revealed that vulnerable groups experienced more difficulties in the reciprocal process of home-school collaborations (Ansari & Markowitz, 2021; Fantuzzo et al., 2000) or community-based involvement (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000), and had culturally different understandings of successful parental involvement (Lopez, 2001; LaRocque, 2011; Van Laere et al., 2018).

Since the early 1990s, researchers and policy-makers have agreed that the ECE system needs to combine different service delivery formats and include additional parent-related components (Blok et al., 2005). Recognizing that the wellbeing of children is deeply intertwined with their parents' social capital, the two-generation approach is specifically designed to concurrently address the needs of both vulnerable children and their parents (Ma et al., 2016). However, in many cases, parent-related components were unsuccessful when system administrators "imposed" their visions of best practices upon parents (Van Laere et al., 2018). Recognizing parents as integral to the ECE system presents challenges for system developers, as this democratic approach necessitates greater institutional capacity and staff professionalism to effectively translate knowledge into practice tailored to parents' specific needs (Urban et al., 2012). Studies have shown that staff training could improve parent involvement (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). Ideally, the diversified needs of parents would stimulate ECE practitioners in the formal subsystem to form a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement so that the whole system could be sustained and strengthened.

Integrating the Formal and Informal ECE Subsystems

Integrating the formal and informal subsystems takes place in the overlapping sphere of influence of family, ECE programs, schools, and communities (Epstein, 2011). Carefully designed strategies and practices in this sphere need to reflect "the degree of shared interests and actions" of the elements in the informal and formal subsystems (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016, p. 204). In our tripartite conceptualization of the ECE system, integration requires both ECE practitioners and parents to reach out to each other to develop explicit strategies for bringing these two worlds together. However, both sides face barriers that must be addressed.

The barriers between formal and informal ECE subsystems are serious, yet less visible to policy-makers (Leseman, 2002; OECD, 2018). The first barrier to the integration of the ECE system is the complexity of the formal ECE subsystem. As Kagan (2009) has noted, the current ECE system is "a confusing hybrid of programs and services, lacking clarity and coherence for parents, policy-makers, and the public" (p. 5). While the formal ECE subsystem is more complicated and divided than in the 1990s, parents do not receive commensurate guidance to navigate them through the formal subsystem. As a result, ironically, the increase in ECE programs and services might be offset by the decline in parent involvement.

The next major barrier is the social and economic challenges that parents face within the informal ECE subsystem. The most vulnerable parent groups are challenged with raising children with limited time, energy, and resources. Therefore, more holistic approaches have been adopted in recent decades. For example, the two-generation approach provides families with practical support (home visits, parent-teacher conferences, workshops, etc.) and social and economic support (e.g., transportation, child care, interpreters, incentives, etc.). Multiple studies have reported that these services could produce positive outcomes such as reduced antisocial behavior in children and improved cognitive outcomes (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Gao et al., 2022).

The third barrier, closely associated with the first and second, is a dynamic tension between the formal and informal ECE subsystems. Most ECE systems are perceived as unbalanced because

they had almost exclusive concentrations on ECE centers and providers while underestimating parents' potential interests and capacities. Parents have been pushed aside in the decision-making process and reportedly felt like "being in school again" and "the teacher has the last say as such" (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002, p. 44). Van Laere et al. (2018) argued that the discourse of parent involvement was a "democratic deficit," whereby parents' voices, especially those of parents of economically or culturally disadvantaged parents, were rarely heard in determining the goals of involvement activities.

Unbalanced systems that underestimate parents' interests and capacities struggle to meaningfully engage parents. Multiple studies suggest schools and early childhood programs have fallen short of effectively involving parents, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged. A large-scale study by Ansari and Markowitz (2021) found that Head Start parents' involvement decreased significantly across multiple areas between 1997 and 2009, despite their stated mission of engaging parents. Hindman et al. (2012) found that center-level factors like outreach efforts showed no association with higher parent involvement in Head Start. Rather, home-based and community-based involvement predicted later school-based involvement, indicating parent engagement must start where parents are most comfortable. When programs fail to prioritize outreach that meets parents "where they are," involvement tends to decline.

Overall, within the past decade more formal elements have been introduced to the ECE system which resulted in a decline in parent engagement, which in turn, justified and stimulated further development within the formal ECE subsystem. The imbalance between formal and informal subsystems makes the ECE system less effective, efficient, and equitable. Prioritizing parent empowerment over mere involvement could be a key strategy to reverse this self-reinforcing mechanism.

Conceptualization

The above literature review revealed the lack of a framework that captures the best practices of the tripartite ECE system. Promise City's apparent success provided an opportunity to develop such a framework. We intended to extend the knowledge by conducting a case study in an ECE system where children's K readiness rate has tripled over eight years (Yin, 2003). Based on the literature, it is reasonable to conceptualize that the ECE system includes informal and formal subsystems and the interaction between the two subsystems.

Method

Sampling

This study was conducted in a local context where the kindergarten readiness rate has more than tripled over eight years. The sample consisted of parents of high-achieving children defined as having a standardized residual score of 1.0 or higher, as measured by the Measure of Academic Progress test when children entered kindergarten. With assistance from the school district, the researchers were able to interview parents of eight kindergartners. Due to the small sample size, we do not provide descriptive statistics for the eight kindergartners along gender, race, free and reduced-price lunch status, and special education status. Suffice it to say that this was a group of kindergartners who were more economically disadvantaged than the district's profile, but achieved well beyond expectations. To supplement the data from parents, additional interview data were collected from the perspectives of seven core ECE partner organizations. These partners include:

- Public School District (PubSch) (local public school district providing ECE services, among others)

- Shared Services Consortium (SharedServ) (an organization that provides services to strengthen and sustain childcare centers and homes through professional development, accounting services, etc.)
- County-based Educational Service Agency (EduServ) (a county-based public education agency that provides a large amount of ECE services, among others)
- ECE Advocate and Connector (Advocate) (a small non-profit organization that partners, advocates, researches, and coaches to improve early childhood development, working with both ECE and non-ECE organizations)
- Multi-county Nongovernmental Social Services Agency (SocialServ) (addressing social, basic, and ECE needs)
- ECE Neighborhood Coalition (N'hood Coalition) (a coalition of childcare homes providing ECE services)
- Coordinating Organization in ECE² (CoordOrg) (a backbone connector in ECE)

Instrumentation

We developed two interview protocols for parents and administrators of core ECE partner organizations, respectively. The parent protocol explored ECE practices at home, the roles of ECE partners and the community in promoting parent involvement, and parents' interactions with the formal ECE subsystem. The administrator protocol covered organizational practices in general, practices specific to ECE program development and improvement, the two-generation approach, family leadership development, and institutional capacity building.

To ensure comprehensive data collection, the parent interview protocol incorporated questions based on several well-established frameworks: a) Dimensions of Parental Involvement (Ho & Willms, 1996), addressing aspects of parental engagement; b) Types of Parental Involvement (Epstein, 2011; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994), exploring various forms of parental participation; c) Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten class of 1998/99, focusing on parent-child activities; and d) Framework for Providers to Involve Parents and Children (Ma et al., 2016), examining support from the formal ECE subsystem.

The administrator interview protocol also drew upon the Framework for Providers to Involve Parents and Children (Ma et al., 2016), allowing for data triangulation between parent and administrator perspectives.

Data Collection

Individual interviews were conducted virtually with parents. Interviews ($N=8$) ranged between 1 and 1.15 hours. An incentive was provided to each parent interviewed. For interviews with core ECE partner organizations ($N=7$), each interview lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours.

Data Analysis

Two researchers independently coded the data using conceptual frameworks provided by Ma et al. (2016), Grolnick & Slowiaczek (1994), Ho & Willms (1996) and Epstein et al. (2009). After developing themes independently, they engaged in a discussion to compare their findings. Both a priori and post hoc approaches have been utilized for data analysis. For those questions based on a conceptual framework, a priori codes based on the elements of the framework were used, and the analysis process was primarily deductive. However, even if the codes were a priori, we would always add "other" as a code to the a priori codes based on the conceptual framework so that additional

² These pseudonyms reflect the organization's function in the ECE system.

data could be captured and new knowledge could be generated. For those questions that did not have a conceptual framework, a post hoc approach was employed, and codes were inductively generated as researchers analyzed the data repeatedly until reaching a level of saturation. When the level of saturation was reached, the relevant data were coded again using the final set of inductively generated codes.

Findings

Best Practices in the Informal Subsystem: Findings from Interviews with Parents

Parents' Attention to Five Aspects of Children's Development

Understanding the priorities that parents place on different aspects of children's development is key to shaping effective ECE practices. We asked parents to rate the importance of five developmental aspects (see Table 1), using a scale where "1" represented the most important and "5" the least important. These ratings were then averaged to calculate the rankings for each aspect. The rankings reveal that parents prioritize "social-emotional" (average ranking 2.1) and "behavioral" (2.3) development most highly. These were followed by "intellectual" (3.0) and "personal" (3.3) development. "Physical" development received the lowest priority, with an average ranking of 4.3. These rankings clearly indicate that social-emotional, behavioral, and intellectual developments are considered the most important aspects by the parents surveyed.

Table 1

Parents' Prioritization of Developmental Dimensions

Dimension of Development	Average Rank	Examples of Parent Quotes
Social Emotional	2.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ She likes to hug, and we make sure she feels loved and cared for. ▪ A big part of it was him socializing with other kids in an appropriate manner. I paid attention to reports from teachers on his social interactions, and if there was a problem, I tried working on that at home. ▪ Interaction with close family like cousins. ▪ With his different playgroups, we've become friends with his friend's parents, and relationships were developed. • We engage him in educational aspects and through documentaries and through real life situations and through politics.
Behavioral	2.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitored behaviors at home. • Paid very close attention to what his teachers said his behavior was. • Used an old behavior chart at school (being kind, listening, etc.) where he would get stickers for good behaviors.
Intellectual	3.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Father plays more of the role of explaining and making sure she grasps concepts. ▪ I would start randomly ask addition and subtraction and started giving praise and rewards for correct answers. ▪ Lots of explaining of concepts through one-on-one interactions with parents. ▪ We modeled learning by furthering our education.

Dimension of Development	Average Rank	Examples of Parent Quotes
Personal	3.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ She is more free range with parent supervision. ▪ Identified what he enjoyed doing at school and tried to bring some of those things home. ▪ Dad helped him with writing numbers, and he came at it from a different angle and provided a different insight. ▪ Lots of one-on-one learning with older siblings. Both mom and dad would have personal interaction where he would have questions. • More hands-on personal involvement.
Physical	4.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paid attention to areas like gym class because he is competitive. I would bring some gym activities home. • Likes swimming, kayaking. • Soccer and T ball, martial arts, tap dancing. • T ball and passes to the YMCA. • We kick the soccer ball, she has a Frisbee and a baseball bat and ball.

Parents' Engagement in ECE Activities at Home

Data in Table 2 show two prominent patterns. First, all or most parents were highly involved in their child's ECE in various ways. All parents were involved in "reading books," "telling stories," "helping with art," and "building things." Most respondents reported "singing songs," "involvement with chores," "playing games," and "talking about nature". Some parents also reported "playing a sport." Second, they also spent a substantial amount of time in their children's ECE. For example, as far as reading books is concerned, most read every day from five minutes to 1.5 hours with a median of 30 minutes. Therefore, these parents devoted a substantial amount of time to various ECE activities at home.

Table 2
ECE-Related Activities with the Child at Home

Activities	No. of Parents "Yes"	Amount of time
Reading Books	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most read every day from 5 min to 1.5 hr with 30 min median • Several estimated 1 – 2 hr a week
Telling Stories	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few daily • Most occasionally up to 1 hr a week
Singing Songs	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ranging from 30 min to 4 hr a day
Helping with Art	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Times varied from 1 hr per day to 1 – 4 hrs. per week
Involvement with Chores	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No times provided
Playing Games	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several responses ranging from 1 hr per day to 1 hr. per week
Talking About Nature	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Times ranged from 10 min a day to 15-20 min a couple times a week
Building Something	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two indicated approximately two hr per week
Playing a Sport	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No times provided

Activities	No. of Parents "Yes"	Amount of time
Other	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gardening, planting, playing with earth worms • As a waitress, when I get tips, I let the boys count the money with me • Hide and seek • Minecraft with his older brothers • Drawing pictures on the sidewalk in chalk

Four parents reported using some tools and manipulatives for ECE activities at home. They mentioned the following: "flashcards," "Legos and manipulatives," "worked with puzzles and alphabet, 3D shapes, building blocks," and "tracing alphabet books with shapes and colors." Support to parents regarding tools and manipulative appeared to be necessary.

Parents' Engagement in ECE Activities at the Daycare, Pre-School, School or Other Venues

All parents involve their children in out-of-home ECE activities, in collaboration with multiple partners (Table 3). Similarly, all parents mentioned formalized childcare and education programs, with four giving specific childcare and center names. Other activities included "play group" and some community events. Parents were often supported by multiple ECE partners. For example, Parent Eight's child was involved in ECE activities via a religious organization, where they were introduced early to letters, sounds, writing, sensory play, socialization, creative storytelling, and role-playing. Their corresponding partners were N'hood Coalition and SocialServ.

Table 3

ECE-Related Care, Learning or Activities at the Daycare, Pre-School, School or Other Venues

Parent	Out-of-Home ECE Activities	ECE Partners Involved
P1	She went to (childcare center name) pre-school with a lot of activities like sports, swimming, art, day trip to education-related activities.	EduServ, SocialServ, SharedServ
P2	Yes, we did play groups with (childcare center name) and weekly play groups up until their first year of pre-school...1-2 playgroups per week.	PubSch, EduServ, SharedServ
P3	Some community events which involved agencies like police, fire departments; Attended a lot of literacy nights which explored cultures as a part of learning and the promotion of reading.	N'hood Coalition, SharedServ
P4	Full time daycare Monday through Friday. Did research and talked to friends and family to get recommendations on a well-rounded day care center.	SharedServ, EduServ
P5	He went to (childcare center name) and that was all day. We suspected that he had a speech problem and that's where he got a speech therapist.	Advocate, SocialServ, SharedServ
P6	Involved in (childcare center name).	SharedServ, EduServ
P7	Yes daycare. Daycare provider taught her a lot like colors, shapes, and numbers. They would have lessons each day and go outside for walks.	SharedServ, EduServ
P8	Involved in ECE activities via a religious organization; Early introduction to letters, sounds, writing, lots of sensory play, socialization, creative story-telling, role playing, being outside.	EduServ, CoordOrg

Note: P1 = Parent One, P2 = Parent Two, etc.

Parents' Choice of Out-of-Home ECE Activities

The data in Table 4 indicate that parents chose ECE activities via various venues. They include “own research,” “referral by or connection with family and friends,” “special services,” and “received notifications.” It appears that informal referrals from family and friends is by far the most important route. Receiving some special services is another connection with the out-of-home ECE system. Receiving materials is another venue. All these have implications for facilitating families’ engagement with the out-of-home ECE system. The parent interviewees were involved in out-of-home ECE activities through (a) participation in various facilitated activities, (b) volunteering, and (c) monitoring or observing their child in a particular setting.

Table 4

How Parents Connect with ECE Opportunities Outside of Home

Parent Outreach Methods	Parent Quotes			
Own research	I did some research and talked to friends and family to get recommendations on a well-rounded day care center			
Referral by or connection with family and friend	Introduced through a friend whose child went there	It was close by and my sister’s kids went there and it was recommended	A family member	I did some research and talked to friends and family to get recs on a well-rounded daycare center
Special services	Because of his developmental delays, there was a calendar provided and I identified specific playgroups my therapist would be involved in like motor group, swimming and music	We were drawn toward things that were active or that would help with creativity. Also, where other adults would facilitate activities but where we could participate	Also had some religious education which was important to us. The Chapel and music in addition to the learning. I liked the way they communicated with us and seemed invested in the kid	
Received notifications	I received notifications through emails and handouts and phone calls facilitated through the daycare	We were sent literature about the program and the daycare provider gave us info. Which is why we got involved		

When connecting in-home and out-of-home ECE practices, parents created balance by (a) directly connecting home learning to school learning and experiences, (b) conferring with teachers and using teacher input as a guide and reference point, and (c) relying on personal insight and previous knowledge/experience as a parent. The findings on how parents got involved in out-of-home ECE activities and how parents connected in-home and out-of-home activities offer insights into strengthening the existing practices and exploring other ways by ECE partners.

Parents' Utilization of Resources by ECE Partners and Community

As parents worked with and supported the ECE of their children, identifying if and how parents themselves were supported became important information to gather for this evaluation. The interview data identified how and where parents and guardians received support. First, parents received support along various dimension, a finding that points to the importance of having an ECE system that would reach out to parents in multiple ways. Second, among the eight parents, seven parents received support with “learning at home;” half of the parents reported receiving support with (a) “parenting,” (b) “communications” regarding their children, (c) “volunteering,” and (d) “decision making” on ECE matters; three parents received help in “collaborating with the community.” The finding points to the importance of providing support for “learning at home” and paying attention to other types of support. Third, variation within the distribution of parents points to the need to support parents differently. Parents of children receiving free or reduced-price lunches do not mention “decision-making” and “community collaboration.” This indicates a potential need to engage economically disadvantaged parents in ECE-related decisions and community collaboration. In contrast, parents of children receiving special education services were represented more often, highlighting the necessity for additional support for these families.

This observation might indicate a greater need for supportive measures for parents whose children require special educational services. Table 5 shows a detailed breakdown of parent responses to this quest.

Table 5

Breakdown of Support Sources/Help in Various Activities for Parents and Guardians

Activities	No. of Parents	Sample Quotations - Parent Answer “Yes”	Service and Provider
Learning at Home	n=7	P2- He has a speech therapist that gives me good ideas of how to work on improving his speech and things like games I can do at home to help with learning and social skills	Speech Therapist by Advocate and SocialServ
		P4- Books that would arrive at home. County representative would help benchmark age	County services by Advocate, SocialServ
		P5- Yes, (name of childcare center) helped identify the need for a speech therapist and helped bring it to our home	Childcare center by Advocate and PubSch
Parenting	n=4	P2- Yes, there’s a lot of good resources in my area around parenting education including WIC with parent education classes. Also, Early Childhood Connections had great parenting topics and materials	WIC by Advocate and SharedServ, Early Childhood Connections by EduServ

Activities	No. of Parents	Sample Quotations - Parent Answer "Yes"	Service and Provider
		P8- ECC would leave literature and things to take home and do throughout the week. Also, our church would send home suggestions on how to tie in church teachings	Childhood Connections by EduServ, Church by CoordOrg
		P5- (The name of a center) had effective communications with us that supported our ECE support with our son	A childcare center by SharedServ
Volunteering	<i>n</i> =4	P2- Communicated with other parents who were frustrated and received on-line information from school	School by PubSch
		P7- Yes, pre-school and church group invited us to participate	Pre-school by PubSch, Church by CoordOrg
Decision-Making	<i>n</i> =4	P5- We relied on (the name of a center) as the professionals and the input that they offered, and we applied it	A childcare center by SharedServ
		P7- I wasn't going to send my child back to Public Schools and they impressed upon me all of the good things that she has learned and the benefits of her staying. That information enabled me to make a decision to keep her in public schools	School by PubSch
Collaborating with the Community	<i>n</i> =3	P2- Great job at that and have a lot of different programs within public schools system	School by PubSch
		P5- Yes, utilization of recommended resources like a speech therapist	Speech Therapist by Advocate, SocialServ

Note: P1 = Parent One, P2 = Parent Two, etc.

Parents' Interaction with the Formal ECE Subsystem at Large

To assess of parents' interactions with the formal ECE subsystem at large, the research team used the framework developed by Ma et al. (2016), which consists of (a) the two-generation approach, (b) developing family leaders, and (c) developing institutional capacity. Parents' responses are displayed in Table 6.

As to the two-generation approach, two parents reported they experienced the two-generation approach, and both experienced it through Early Childhood Connections programs. As to developing family leaders, three parents reported that they gained knowledge to navigate the ECE system, primarily through receiving materials to help them navigate the ECE system. A number of parents reported that they had experience developing stronger and deeper family networks. They reported that, through ECE experiences, they had good relationships with many parents and their children's peers and exchanged ideas.

Table 6

Parents' Experience in Interacting with the ECE System

Dimension	No. of Parents	Sample Quotes - Parent Answer "Yes"	Service and Providers
Did you participate in any ECE program that worked with both you and the child?	<i>n</i> =2	P2- Early Childhood Connections and playgroups and STEAM meetings, and childcare where there were different	Early Childhood Connections, Playgroups,

Dimension	No. of Parents	Sample Quotes - Parent Answer "Yes"	Service and Providers
		educational topics at each meeting and parents would all talk, and they would provide a good education, and they would provide a dinner for families. It was a good experience	STEAM meetings, and Childcare; the above were conducted by EduServ
Did you receive any service or education to have you gain knowledge to navigate the ECE system?	<i>n</i> =3	P2- Early On and Early Childhood Connections did a good job at providing resources on parenting and resources in general for families in need. They had a list of different places to get certain needs addressed so they did a very good job at that	Early Childhood Connections, a program by EduServ
Did you have any experience in developing stronger and deeper family networks?	<i>n</i> =3	P2- I'd say yes to that as well. I connected with a lot of parents between Early On and ECC. A lot of other families would use both and I felt really comfortable with them. We would exchange ideas and I'm still friends with some of them today P8- Our church and EC is the biggest. We are still friends with many parents from the play groups, including my husband who hit it off with some people	Early On, Early Childhood Connections, Playgroup; all above programs were conducted by EduServ
Did you feel ECE providers, partners and system in general have the capacity to engage parents/guardians?	<i>n</i> =6	P1- I had a good experience when she was at (name of a childcare center). I liked their program. It's mostly on the parent side. It's open for the parents to get involved and it depends on the parents P2 - Absolutely. The family coach at Early Childhood Connections was the reason that both of my kids had t2 years of pre-school through a program with daycare scholarships. They educated me on the benefits of 2 years of pre-school instead of one, and that made a difference in my decision to get my kids in. they have the ability to help even more families	Childcare Center supported by SharedServ; Family Coach, Early Childhood Connections, two programs conducted by EduServ; A preschool program by PubSch
Did you feel that the number of participating families and communities increases to forge improved partnerships in the community's ECE system?	<i>n</i> =4	P1- I think so, it's a case to case basis and a lot has to do with the parents. No matter what the school does to open up communications, parents may not get involved with the opportunities P3- Yes, everyone was happy to see us when families dropped off their kids. There was definitely encouragement there	Early Childhood Connections by EduServ

Dimension	No. of Parents	Sample Quotes - Parent Answer "Yes"	Service and Providers
Did you feel that ECE providers and community leaders have respectful and effective relationships with families and your child?	<i>n</i> =6	P1- Yes, very accommodating P5- On the level of engagement that we had it was cordial P8- Yes I was always respected	(Not Specified)
Did you feel the culture, practices, and programs in ECE providers, partners and ECE system in general reflected a genuine partner with families?	<i>n</i> =6	P2- Yes it's genuine, they have ECC and have different family coaches from different family backgrounds to serve different needs within the county...to break down any wall P5- Yes, (name of a preschool program by Public Schools) and (name of a childcare center supported by SharedServ) definitely include you into your child's education. You're never out of the loop P8- Over all yes. It's sad because I think we got access to these amazing resources because my husband was temporarily unemployed which qualified us for a low-income bracket. This is temporary, and we will be out of this bracket soon. Too bad everyone cannot know about and benefit from these great resources	A preschool program by PubSch, a childcare center supported by SharedServ

Note: P1 = Parent One, P2 = Parent Two, etc.

As to the institutional capacities, parents reported that the ECE programs and organizations they were involved with had the capacity to engage parents effectively. Six out of eight parents felt that ECE providers, partners, and the system, in general, were capable of engaging parents. Specifically, these parents noted that ECE providers and community leaders maintained respectful and effective relationships with families and children, often describing their experiences as accommodating, cordial, and respected. Six parents observed that the culture, practices, and programs at ECE providers and partners genuinely reflected a partnership with families, commonly highlighting their ability to meet diverse needs. Additionally, four parents reported an increase in the number of participating families and communities, which they believed helped to strengthen partnerships within the community's ECE system.

Summary of Parent Interviews

The interviews with eight parents whose children performed much beyond expectations illustrate a picture of best practices by parents. First, parents paid attention to all five dimensions, with the three most important being "social-emotional," "behavioral," and "intellectual." Second, these parents emphasized ECE both at home and outside of the home. At home, the parents were highly involved in their child's ECE in various ways and devoted a substantial amount of time to their children's informal ECE. As to ECE out of home, all parents mentioned their children's participation in formalized child care and education. Third, parents received support for their involvement along various dimensions, which points to the importance of having a formal ECE subsystem supporting parents in various ways. All but one parent received support with "learning at

home.” Fourth, there was also variation among the different groups of parents. For example, parents whose children received free or reduced-price lunch reported more support in “decision making” and “collaborate with the community.” Fifth, parents felt that the ECE providers, partners, and the formal subsystem had the capacity to engage them. They also experienced family leadership development and to a lesser extent, the two-generation approach.

Best Practices in the Formal Subsystem: Findings from Interviews with Core ECE Partners

In the previous sections, we explored the informal subsystem, focusing on parents’ perspectives and experiences in reaching out and interacting with ECE partners. Parents were more likely to be aware of the service providers they interacted with directly, but not fully comprehended the collaborative efforts occurring behind the scenes. The complex network of collaboration among ECE partners is crucial for effective service delivery, often operating behind the scenes and unseen by the families who benefit. Here, we pivot to the perspectives and experiences of the core ECE partners. The insights from these core ECE partners illuminate the best practices employed by the partners and the broader ECE system.

Key Partners’ Distributed and Interconnected Organizational Practices

An aggregation of organizational best practices approaches indicates five areas encapsulating the ECE work through core partners represented by those interviewed. Those areas included (a) services to children, (b) services to parents or guardians, (c) services to families, (d) relationships to other partners in the ECE system, and (e) other ECE-related support. Table 7 illustrates how the seven core ECE partners were engaged in these five themes of work.

Table 7

Organizational Practice by Core ECE Partners

Organization/Practices	CoordOr	PubSch	SharedSer	SocialSer	EduServ	Advocate	N’hood Coalition
Services to children		X		X	X	X	X
Services to parents		X	X	X	X	X	X
Services to families	X			X	X		X
Relationship to other partners in ECE system	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Other	X				X		

The data displayed in Table 7 lead to a few critical observations. First, when core partners in the ECE system reflected upon organizational practices, five strands of work emerged: (a) services to children, (b) services to parents/guardians, (c) services to families, (d) relation to other partners in ECE system, and (e) other. In other words, the work of these seven partners was not limited to providing services to children but also included parents/guardians, family, and others. It appears that when we conceive and build an ECE system, we must go beyond the notion of services to children and have a larger perspective, as illustrated collectively by these seven partners. Second, among the above five streams of work, “relation to other partners in the ECE system” is the only stream of work that applies to all partners. Naturally, partners would focus on their main functions in the ECE system. For example, many partners were in the service arena and reported relevant services to children, parents/guardians, and family. Table 7 also suggests all partners reported work

on “relationship to other partners in ECE system.” In a successful ECE system, organizations work with each other.

In summary, the data suggest that for a successful ECE system, the partners had their strands of work based on their unique function in the ECE system. Collectively, their work included five strands, not just providing services to children. They all worked on “relationship to other partners in ECE,” and this strand of the work tied partners together in the ECE system. The place-based initiative implied working with a set of core partners with all five functions, including service to children, parents, and families, with “relationship to other partners” as a joint function for all.

Two-Generation Approach

All seven partners in the successful ECE system engaged in the two-generation approach, although the emphasis could be slightly different (Table 7). Some partners placed more emphasis on children, some placed more emphasis on parents, and others placed more emphasis on the whole family.

While serving children, core partners provided a wide range of services to parents and to whole families on health, employment, finance, leadership development, basic needs, and others. This finding for the field implies that as an ECE system, most partners should move beyond serving children to include serving parents and the whole family. The issues for children, parents, and the whole family are most likely related. Thus, it makes sense to address them simultaneously.

Developing Family Leaders

Our analysis of the interview data suggests that core ECE partners were engaged in developing family leaders. Results in Table 8 indicate that partners focused on different aspects related to developing family leaders, reflecting their roles in the ECE system. All partners engaged in “Organizing, mobilizing, and empowering vulnerable families to work on equitable early learning outcomes” (6 out of 7), followed by “Enhancing knowledge, skills and abilities of families to help them effectively navigate social services, educational and employment systems” and “The establishment of stronger and deeper family networks in a community” (both at 4 out of 7), and “Leadership role played by parents (guardians) in shaping social services and educational systems” (3 out of 7). The data support the importance of developing family leaders for a successful ECE system.

Table 8

ECE Partners’ Efforts in Developing Family Leaders

Organization/Practices	CoordOrg	PubSch	SharedServ	SocialServ	EduServ	Advocate	N’hood Coalition
Enhancing knowledge, skills, and abilities of families to help them effectively navigate social services, educational and employment systems			X		X	X	X
Organizing, mobilizing, and empowering vulnerable families to	X	X		X	X	X	X

work on equitable early learning outcomes						
Leadership role played by parents (guardians) in shaping social services and educational systems		X		X	X	
The establishment of stronger and deeper family networks in a community	X			X		X
Other	X	X	X			

Building Institutional Capacity

The core ECE partners were consciously building their institutional capacity to improve the ECE system (see Table 9). Our analysis of the interview data with core ECE partners identified key dimensions that represent common themes in partner organizations’ practices. Most of the partners reported engaging in practices along the three dimensions of institutional capacity building: (a) “ECE partner organizations gain more capacity to engage parents” (5 out of 7), (b) “Authentic partnerships among families, schools, and communities are institutionalized in an organization’s culture, practices, and programs” (5 out of 7), and (c) “School and community leaders have respectful and effective relationships with families and children (4 out of 7). To a lesser extent, two out of seven organizations also reported the practice along the dimension of “The number of participating families and communities increases to forge improved partnerships” (2 out of 7). It appears that these partners paid attention to building institutional capacity to engage parents and had an authentic and respectful relationship with families and children, among others. The findings highlight the importance of building institutional capacity by core ECE partners along these crucial dimensions.

Table 9
Building Institutional Capacity by Core ECE Partners

Organization/Practices	CoordOrg	PubSch	SharedServ	SocialServ	EduServ	Advocate	N’hood Coalition
ECE partner organizations gain more capacity to engage parents	X	X	X	X	X		
The number of participating families and communities increases to forge improved partnerships			X		X		
School and community leaders have respectful and effective		X		X	X		X

relationships with families and children					
Authentic partnerships among families, schools, and communities are institutionalized in an organization's culture, practices, and programs	X	X	X	X	X
Other	X				

Summary for Interviews with Core ECE Partners

The patterns from interviews suggest the following best ECE practices by the partners. First, these ECE partners provided services to not only children but also parents and families. In other words, a successful ECE system did not focus on serving children in isolation; rather, the two-generation approach was a characteristic of the ECE system. Core partners were creative in taking the two-generation approach, with some focusing more on children, some more on parents, and still some more on families. Second, in addition to services to children, parents, and families, as discussed above, all these core ECE partners also worked on the “relationships to other partners in the ECE system.” As the interviews revealed, none of these seven organizations worked in isolation. It is notable that all core partners emphasized the importance of building connections within the ECE network. Logically, this common practice of fostering collaborative relationships across the system-level partnership appears foundational to the success of ECE in this community. Third, core ECE partners developed family leaders focusing on equity beyond providing services to parents. Six out of seven partners worked on “Organizing, mobilizing, and empowering vulnerable families to work on equitable early learning outcomes.” Fourth, core ECE partners were conscious of building their organizations’ capacity to engage parents and being culturally appropriate to serve children, parents, and families better.

Summary and Discussion

Best ECE Practices in Promise City: A Narrow View Using the Dimensions Supported by the Meta-Analysis

Ma et al. (2016) conducted one of the most comprehensive meta-analyses on the relationship between parental involvement and child achievement. Table 10 demonstrates the consistency between data from parent and core partner interviews and the findings of the meta-analysis. It is important to note that Table 10 was constructed using (a) dimensions of parental involvement, (b) mechanisms to engage parents, and (c) frameworks for core ECE partner engagement with parents and children, and therefore offers a focused perspective of best ECE practices supported by the existing literature. Table 10 summarizes the best practices along these three dimensions and their sub-dimensions based on the interview data from parents and core partners. For example, under (a) dimension of parental involvement, there was a sub-dimension of “home discussion and home supervision.” In the right column, we displayed the summary on how interview data supported the sub-dimension of “home discussion and home supervision”.

Table 10*Consistency Between Findings in the Meta-Analysis and Interview Data in Promise City*

Dimensions from Meta-analysis	Supporting Evidence from Promise City Interviews
Dimensions of Parental Involvement (Ho & Willms, 1996)	
Home discussion and home supervision	All parents were engaged in various ECE activities at home, with a substantial amount of time commitment. Core partners supported parents' ECE activities at home, including supporting at-home learning and parenting.
Connection between home and out-of-home	Parents created the connection by (a) directly connecting at-home learning to out-of-home learning and experiences, (b) conferring with teachers and using teacher input as a guide and reference point, and (c) relying on personal insight and previous knowledge/experience as a parent.
Out-of-home participation (volunteering)	Parents were involved in out-of-home ECE activities through (a) participation in various facilitated activities, (b) volunteering, and (c) by monitoring or observing their child in a particular setting.
Types of Parental Involvement (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994)	
Behavioral involvement	Parents ranked behavioral involvement at 2.3, together with social-emotional in the first tier.
Personal involvement	Parents ranked personal involvement at 3.3, together with intellectual involvement in the second tier.
Intellectual involvement	Parents ranked intellectual involvement at 3.0, together with personal involvement in the second tier.
Framework for Core ECE Partner to Involve Parents and Children (Ma et al., 2016)	
Addressing the need of both vulnerable children and parents at the same time	6 of the core partners reported taking various approaches of the two-generation approach; 2 of the parents reported that they experienced the two-generation approach in the ECE system.
Parents (guardians) are educated with more profound knowledge and skills to navigate social services and educational systems	4 core partners reported that they educated and facilitated parents to navigate; 3 of the parents reported the experience of being educated and facilitated.
Parents (guardians) play a leadership role in shaping social services and educational systems and educational systems	3 core partners reported the parents play a leadership role; all parents reported their leadership roles in the informal subsystem, but not in the formal subsystem.
ECE partners gain more capacity to engage parents (guardians)	5 core partners reported building more capacity to engage parents, while 6 of parents experienced the formal ECE subsystem's efforts in engaging them.

Note: The interviews with parents included the following five dimensions (with average ranks in parentheses): Social emotional (2.1), behavioral (2.3), intellectual (3.0), personal (3.3), and physical (4.3). The average is based on a rank order of 1 to 5, with "1" being the first choice.

Best ECE Practices in Promise City: A Broad View Using the Dimensions Supported by Meta-Analysis and Promise City’s Own Findings

To construct a comprehensive view of ECE best practices in Promise City, we identified a “continuum” that spans from informal to formal approaches, incorporating both meta-analysis dimensions and Promise City-specific findings. This continuum, illustrated in Table 11, emphasizes that the ECE system is not composed of separate parts, but exists as an interconnected whole.

Table 11
Best Practices by Parents and ECE Partners in a Successful ECE System in Promise City

ECE System					
Best Practices by Parents (Informal Subsystem)		Best Practices in the Intersection of Informal and Formal Subsystems	Best Practices by ECE Partners (Formal Subsystem)		
ECE at home		Out-of-home ECE	Integrating the formal and informal subsystems from both sides	Program development & Improvement	Institutional capacity & system building
Various at-home ECE activities with a substantial amount of time commitment Emphasizing reading Emphasizing social-emotional, personal and intellectual development Parents as teachers using manipulative and other sources Seizing opportunities and meeting challenges		Parents receiving out-of-home ECE information via multiple sources, particularly from family and friends All children participating in out-of-home ECE in the formal subsystem Parents monitoring out of home ECE by (a) participation, (b) volunteering, and (c) observing Parents receiving support for their involvement along various dimensions (at-home learning, parenting, etc.) Feeling engaged by the formal subsystem Utilizing needed support	Disseminating and acting upon the information to facilitate entry into the formal ECE subsystem Providing and utilizing support to families, (esp. “learning at home”) Two generation approach Enhancing parents’ ability to navigate the formal subsystem Stronger and deeper family networks in a community Respectful and effective relationships with families and children Authentic partnerships among families, ECE partners, and the community	Partners collectively developing programs and services covering (a) the continuum of age range, and (b) various needs of the children, parents, and families Partners individually having simultaneous differential foci on children, parents, and families based on partners’ missions Designing and delivering programs and services with equity in mind Programs and services being effective, efficient and equitable	Develop institutional capacity to better serve children, parents, and families including equity, cultural relevant, and genuine and respectful relationship with clients Developing relationships with partners in the formal ECE subsystem Being agile and flexible given the changing environment Being a learning organization: Continuing to reflect upon and learn from the practices

At the far left end of Table 11, we have best ECE practices at home, representing the core of the informal subsystem. This transitions into best practices of out-of-home ECE, where parents begin to engage with external resources. At the far right end, the core ECE partners engage in building institutional capacity and the ECE system, and then move onto developing and improving ECE programs serving families and children. The informal subsystem and the formal subsystem meet in the middle where various best practices in the intersection of the informal and formal subsystems are displayed.

This continuum in Table 11 captures the organic nature of Promise City's ECE system, demonstrating how the informal and formal subsystems not only have best practices on their own, but also have best practices in moving toward each other and intersecting in the middle. It emphasizes that effective ECE is not simply about isolated practices in either realm, but about creating a seamless flow of support for children and families, where each element naturally leads to and interlocks with the others.

Table 11 thus presents a nuanced view of Promise City's ECE system, illustrating how best practices evolve and interlink across the informal-formal spectrum. This approach underscores the importance of recognizing and fostering connections between home-based learning, community engagement, and formal ECE institutions to create a cohesive and effective ECE system.

Limitations

This study had its limitations. One limitation was our inability to collect data from the practitioners of the programs the children experienced. This was due to challenges created by Covid-19 and the turnover at these programs, especially when we had to go back several years to gather data on earlier experiences. Another limitation was the retrospective nature of the study. For example, we were unable to document and analyze the children's experiences in the informal and formal subsystems through observations. Data from these sources, as well as other unavailable data, might have yielded further insights.

Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy Making

We investigated a successful ECE system in Promise City, which encompasses best practices in (a) the informal subsystem, (b) the formal subsystem, and (c) the integration of the informal and formal subsystems. Together, these practices contribute to a successful ECE system. It took years for ECE programs, ECE partners, and families and communities to synchronize their efforts and continuously improve the system. The findings from this case have implications for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in the field of ECE.

For researchers, this study proposes a tripartite conceptualization of the ECE system, encompassing a continuum from the informal subsystem to the formal subsystem, with a crucial emphasis on their integration. This new framework provides a comprehensive perspective for researchers to understand the entire system and its components as interconnected rather than discrete entities.

For practitioners, while much attention has been given to either home-based practices or formal institutional approaches, our findings highlight the critical importance of the intermediate areas. These areas serve as crucial nexus points where home learning intersects with formal education, communities engage with institutions, and programs adapt to address evolving needs of parents and children. As we summarized in Table 11, this means recognizing the value of both informal and formal learning environments and actively working to bridge these environments. It involves developing programs that facilitate smooth transitions between home and formal ECE

settings, and fostering partnerships between families, communities, and ECE institutions. By focusing on these connecting elements, practitioners can help create a more cohesive, effective ECE system that truly supports children's development from home to formal education settings. This approach acknowledges the continuum of learning experiences and emphasizes the importance of seamless transitions and integrated support systems in early childhood education.

For policymakers, ECE policy has largely focused on developing the formal subsystem through accountability systems like state-level Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (Pianta et al., 2016). However, experience suggests that holding ECE programs and practitioners solely accountable for children's development often leads to rapid but superficial changes. As the formal subsystem grows increasingly complex, the informal subsystem risks being neglected. To achieve a truly effective, efficient, and equitable ECE system, policymakers must prioritize efforts to enhance parent leadership, strengthen parent networks, and foster authentic partnerships among parents, ECE providers, and partners.

Finally, this study offers a vision of what is possible in the field. Despite the challenges Promise City faced with high child poverty levels, the kindergarten readiness rate in Promise City has more than tripled over eight years and essentially reached the national average. In a previously published article (Gao et al., 2022), we investigated how programs by the core ECE organizations are coordinated and aligned to continue improve children's outcomes as they move along the chronological continuum from 0 to age 5. In this article, we expanded the perspective from coordinating and aligning programs conducted by the core ECE organizations to integrate the informal and formal subsystems. Despite the issues highlighted in the literature review, the findings on best practices can serve as a heuristic, presenting an achievable vision for the field.

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