Article

Engendering Playful Purpose in Pre-Service Early Childhood Educator Preparation: Why Community-Engaged Courses Matter

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Abstract: Play is often called the work of children, but questions abound about how early childhood educators are prepared to support children's learning through play. In this study, we investigated undergraduate pre-service teachers' perception of community-engaged coursework in the early childhood and elementary educator preparation program of a U.S.-based Hispanic-Serving Institution and how such a course could support student training and capacity for planning playful lessons. We analyzed data collected by our institutional Center for Community Engagement to understand the impact of field-based engagement on student experiences. Findings indicate that despite initially mixed perceptions, students developed professionally and felt positively about engaging children in various play types in the classroom. Practical implications for teacher educators and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: playful learning; pre-service teacher education; undergraduate students; early childhood education; community-engaged learning

1. Introduction

Play is understood to be universal in the lives of children, regardless of culture [1], and important for their development [2,3]. There exists a robust literature on the science of learning, indicating that children learn best when play is constructed in ways that are meaningful, iterative, and joyful [4–7]. Importantly, from an educational standpoint, such playful opportunities afforded in early childhood education classrooms are consistently demonstrated to be significant to the development of academic skills (i.e., mathematics, literacy [8–10]), which are often the metric of school success in the United States (U.S.) context. In addition to these traditionally measured outcomes of school success, play is also understood to be critical for the development of young children's skills of executive function [11–13], including working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility [14]. Other research demonstrates a reciprocal nature between skills of executive function and academic skills, each enriching the other [15–18]. As well, the literature demonstrates a link between the development of executive function skills and the development of socioemotional skills [11,19]. Despite the literature supporting play as an imperative of learning for young children, there are several mechanisms by which play continues to be limited for children in U.S. schools.

1.1. Mechanism Limiting Play and Implications for In-Service Teachers

Specific to the U.S. context, there exists a controlling political climate regarding the use of scripted curricula and teaching that occurs in schools [20], relegating educators to a mandated set of teaching practices and the ensuing discourse characterizing them as failing to prepare students to be globally competitive citizens [21]. The implications of this focus on curriculum and instruction have co-occurred with policy reforms focused on testing

and accountability in early childhood [22,23] and, taken together, limit children's play in schools as it is (incorrectly) understood to be in direct opposition to learning [3]. When thinking of early childhood educators specifically, such (mis)conceptions of play often translate to teaching curricula to fidelity as a means to accelerate student learning [24,25]. However, such pedagogical enactments may in turn reduce opportunities for developmentally appropriate practices of play occurring in classrooms—specifically children learning through play [6,26]—which are experiences demonstrated in the literature as critical and imperative to learning.

Compounding these contextual elements and still fresh in the collective memory of the global community, the COVID-19 pandemic presented problematic issues for education writ large [27–29]. Specifically regarding play, the literature demonstrates how precautionary health measures put in place to stave off the spread of the COVID-19 virus, such as social distancing [30,31] and school closures [32,33], resulted in children's loss of play opportunities. Furthermore, structural changes from the historical and traditional understanding of school as an in-person, face-to-face experience to one that was remote had ramifications for children, families, teachers, and others with a vested interest in education [34,35]. In an effort to minimize the spread of the COVID-19 virus, policy initiatives such as distance learning resulted in a difficulty for in-service teachers to adapt to the "new normal" [36], with implications, for example, for classroom instructional time [37], and teacher [38,39] and child well-being [40,41]. With regard to play, Lourenço and colleagues [42] demonstrated that although recess still occurred once schools reopened, children's play and social, peer interactions were limited, with demonstrated implications for emotional development.

1.2. Implications for Pre-Service Teachers' Education and Practice

Similar and yet distinct limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic existed for pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers who were learning to be educators during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced limited learning opportunities of the type that typically qualify as routine. For example, higher education also transitioned from in-person to remote learning resulting in myriad challenges [43], including implications for student engagement and a pedagogical overreliance on lectures [44]. Equally problematic, there existed no opportunity for pre-service teachers to observe effective in-person teaching practices (e.g., teaching practicum, student teaching) under the direction of a cooperating, in-service teacher [45,46]. Therefore, pre-service teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic were online [45] and described as an "e-practicum" with an "e-mentor" [47]. In some cases, such drastically changed experiences resulted in the delayed graduation of pre-service teachers, especially those who trained to be early childhood educators (ECEs) [48,49]. While these measures of distancing were imperative for health [50], there were associated challenges [51]: Pre-service teachers felt lost and anxious, as they were denied the opportunity to witness and engage in playful experiences with, and lesson planning for, children.

1.3. Community-Engaged Learning and Coursework

In response to such structural challenges, some undergraduate early childhood and elementary teacher preparation programs [52,53] have become active advocates for developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) [54] to be a part of initial teacher training. To do so, such programs offer courses aimed at integrating play into pre-service teachers' pedagogical practices through coursework. One less-explored opportunity to bolster pre-service teachers' engagement with play is through the implementation of community-based experiences, often called service learning. In the context of this study, then, it is important to describe community engagement, its merits, and potential pre-service teacher benefits which may come to pass when collaborating with institutional partners, as well as community partners.

A core focus of the institution at which the current study was situated is positively impacting the surrounding community. Such community engagement takes on many forms. One institutionally promoted example is the inclusion of universal pedagogical tools that link academic coursework content and standards, as articulated in the syllabus,

to community engagement opportunities. Given this understanding, Author 3, as a member of the institution's Center for Community Engagement (CCE), collaborated on the research opportunity conceptualized by Authors 1 and 2. Specifically, we sought to support pre-service ECEs in developing play-based pedagogical practices through this partnership.

The CCE serves as a hub of connections between the University and community organizations through which community partners can request engagement and students can volunteer. When connecting students and faculty with local, national, and global organizations, the CCE utilizes a collective impact framework [55] to support efforts toward reciprocal knowledge and resource exchanges. These situated actions support the integration of research, teaching, and service in alignment with institutional commitments to community and research impacts.

Through established community relationships, students are afforded opportunities to engage in face-to-face community interactions–in this case, at schools and childcare centers–to enhance their learning beyond the classroom. Working together, we embedded field-based experiences into a course on play that undergraduate students take before admission into the early childhood through sixth-grade educator preparation program (EC-6 EPP). The center's long-term partnerships with local schools and childcare agencies provided avenues for students to engage in community-based learning opportunities, which encouraged students to reintegrate into in-person programming, gain insight into community needs, and understand the pandemic's impact on early childhood learning. Of utmost importance to this study was the local and community context in which it was situated: a closed loop wherein students were raised in the community, educated in its local public schools, attend the University, and then returned to local public schools as teachers. This system affords an interconnectedness and opportunity to make great change to regional pedagogical teacher outcomes.

1.4. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, this work was guided by a pragmatic ontological lens [56]. We responded to the challenges of our specific context to support pre-service teachers in gaining an understanding of the varying play types (i.e., teacher-directed, teacher-guided, free), each successively more self-controlled and self-directed by children [57,58]. Given that the course examined as a part of this study is required for all students in the EC-6 EPP, and that the University is situated in the described closed loop, the interdependent educational ecosystem, we believed it critical that students engage with the community early and often to (1) understand the current landscape of educational theory, (2) develop an asset-based lens toward playful pedagogies as a part of pre-service teachers' developing educational philosophies, and (3) learn to be responsive to the community context.

Whereas there is literature describing the importance of play in early childhood and elementary classrooms [4,5], and there exist studies documenting how such playful learning can occur in preschools and out-of-school contexts [59], a gap exists in understanding how playful learning can occur in early childhood classrooms post-COVID-19 when considering the documented increases in teaching curricula with fidelity, mandated testing, and accountability. This study adds to the body of literature by seeking to understand pre-service teachers' perceptions of play with the aim of supporting their epistemological stance toward playful learning through community-engaged learning experiences. To do so, we asked the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: How do ECE pre-service teachers perceive their engagement in an institutionally novel community-engaged course?
- RQ2: How do ECE pre-service teachers characterize their growth as educators, as well as their ability to create playful lesson plans, after completing a community-engaged course?
- RQ3: What are the ECE pre-service teachers' sense of vocational skill training after completing a course based in community-engaged work?

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a concurrent mixed-methods design [56] to analyze secondary data of early childhood and elementary pre-service teachers' perceptions of community-engaged coursework, play in the classroom, and their growth as future educators.

2.1. Participants

Secondary data from 61 undergraduate ECE pre-service teachers enrolled in a course entitled *Play and Learning in the Early Years* across two semesters were analyzed for this community-engaged and coursework-embedded study. Of the course participants, 95% were Hispanic, and 95% identified as female.

2.2. Context

The study took place at a comprehensive public research university that is a leading Hispanic-Serving Institution in the southwest U.S., where over 84% of students identify as Hispanic and the majority are first-generation. Whereas the University's mission is to increase access to excellent higher education, the College of Education specifically aims to develop collaborative relationships in the region that enhance both education practice and theory. Supporting the College of Education's aim to build community partnerships, this study supported student development into the teaching profession within the closed-loop ecological system in which the University is situated by involving them in community-engaged coursework to apply their classroom learning.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected across three timepoints (T1, T2, T3) each semester by course professors (Authors 1 and 2) and CCE staff (Author 3). At T1, the first day of class, Author 3 collected data by implementing Mentimeter (https://www.mentimeter.com/), an online engagement and polling platform. Students were asked to respond to a poll regarding (1) their feelings about participating in community engagement opportunities with the anticipation of one-word or single-phrase responses, (2) how they defined community-engaged learning, and (3) what they viewed as the benefits of engaging with the community as was prescribed by the course requirements (i.e., observation, reflection/journal entries, collaboration with partnering agencies or school district). This effort resulted in two primary artifact types that were used in answering RQ1: raw data behind word clouds of feelings at the class level that were displayed as students contributed to the list, plus individual responses to the subsequent, direct questions.

Over the course of five weeks during the semester (T2), students (1) completed five observational reflection/journal entries about the playful learning that they witnessed (or did not) in response to specific prompts (see Appendix A), (2) identified and thereafter redesigned one less-than-playful activity (e.g., teacher-provided worksheet on one-to-one correspondence) observed in the field by altering the activity in such a way as to revise the original, observed lesson into an activity/activities which would better promote more playful learning of the same content, and (3) thereafter shared the redesigned, more playful lesson with peers as group presentations. The less-than-playful activities often included lessons during which teachers used worksheets as students' primary learning engagement or had students working independently on curricular goals that might more appropriately be learned through playful group activities. The pre-service teacher presentations were typically shared with a visual slide show and occasionally printed activities that were distributed to classmates and collected as artifacts for this study. Additionally, observation notes taken by the professors during presentations were included in the data corpus. These data were used in answering RQ2.

At the end of the semester (T3), students (1) produced a culminating *Play Philosophy Product* that included evidence of their evolution of perceptions of play, and (2) completed a post-course survey (see Appendix B; Likert-type scale survey and short-answer prompts designed specifically for this course) to document the impact of course content and

community-engaged course experiences on their perceptions of play in classrooms. These data were used in answering RQ3.

2.4. Data Analysis

To understand students' anticipation, experience, and outcomes of the course, we engaged in qualitative and quantitative analyses simultaneously [56]. Authors 1 and 2 collaborated on all coding and analysis efforts, with Author 3 supporting the triangulation as verification of findings to support trustworthiness. To answer RQ1, we implemented values and descriptive coding methods [60] to inductively analyze artifacts gathered at T1 (i.e., individual and class-level polling data collected prior to student observation and engagement with collaborating agencies). By identifying common values and developing descriptors for each, we identified key themes of students' anticipation of the experience. We created a data display of the themes that were identified regarding participants' feelings and described the values participants expressed about their anticipation of the experience narratively.

To answer RQ2, we open-coded journal entries, lesson plans, and artifacts generated during group presentations (i.e., slides, presentation materials, observation notes) gathered during T2, including student-produced *Play Philosophy Products* gathered at T3 to understand their growth as educators and their capacity to design playful lessons. The process of open coding allowed themes to be identified from student work that informed their characterization of, and capacity in, these skills, which was captured in narrative form.

To answer RQ3, we calculated descriptive statistics of student responses to their vocational skill training (Domain 3) of the post-course survey (see Appendix B) to understand quantitative trends in student outcomes. These quantitative data were then triangulated with qualitative data which were identified from open-ended survey questions and quotes from students' *Play Philosophy Products*. We then triangulated across all analyses to (dis)confirm findings [56] about students' outcomes related to vocational skill training and narrated findings.

3. Findings

3.1. Students' Perceptions of Community-Engaged Coursework

To answer RQ1, qualitative analyses were used to examine students' perceptions of community-engaged coursework before entering the field. Despite freeform answer responses, students across sections reported similar, yet mixed, feelings about the course before entering the field. The 30 words or phrases used generally aligned with six feelings: excited, nervous, comfortable, inquisitive, mixed feelings, and negative. Figure 1 displays the data using those six categories. Importantly, we found that "excited" and "nervous" were most frequently reported as the underlying emotions, and only one individual reported a negative anticipatory feeling one time.

Individually, students also shared a variety of definitions of community-engaged learning. Values codes illuminated student responses within three general characteristics defining community engagement as: (1) real-world experience to extend course-based learning, (2) hands-on learning opportunities, and (3) volunteerism (see Table 1). For example, one student noted that community engagement is "go[ing] beyond books and theories and implement[ing] what we are learning in a classroom," which supported the emergent values code of real-world experience. Another student described community engagement as "dipping your toes and getting more hands-on experiences in your future role/career", which led to findings around hands-on learning. Whereas these themes are closely related, the way in which students described those characteristics differed between a more theoretical sense of extending their learning from the abstraction of course readings to a more concrete level of understanding of the value of hands-on experiences. Finally, students frequently noted this as an opportunity to "volunteer somewhere related to your course", thus resulting in the theme of volunteerism.
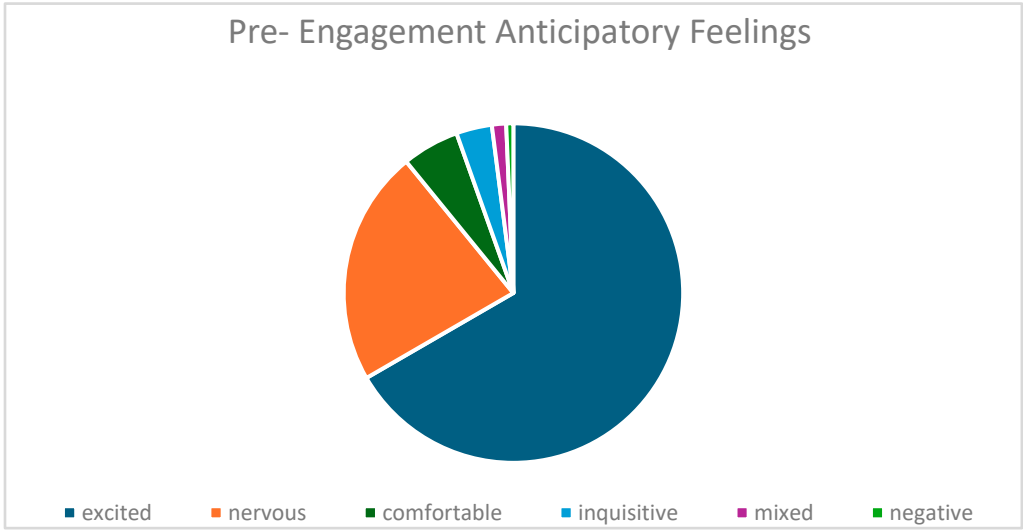
Figure 1. Display of students' pre-engagement anticipatory feelings. *Note*: Students were asked to respond, using one work, to the question, "How are you feeling about participating in community engagement opportunities?".

Table 1. Sample coding of Mentimeter responses.

Survey Question (Define Community Engagement): What Is Community Engagement in Courses (Service Learning)?

Values Code	Example	Inclusion Criteria	Non-Example	Exclusion Criteria
Volunteering	Community engagement is learning through our community and experiences in the community while helping the community as well	Describes helping or giving back	Gaining experience within a specific field to understand the grand scheme of it	Focus on personal learning or growth over spirit of volunteerism
Real life	Putting in practice what you've learned in class; go beyond books and theories and implement what we are learning in the classroom	Emphasizing translating learned knowledge to applied settings	Going to schools and helping tutor the students after school	Does not mention application of coursework knowledge
Hands-on	Dipping your toes and getting more hands-on experiences in your future role/career	Explicitly uses language "hands-on"	Creating connections; outside of class observations	Does not mention "hands-on" or conveys hands-off

Survey Question (BENEFITS): What are the benefits of engaging in the community

Descriptive code	Example	Inclusion criteria	Non-example	Exclusion criteria
Career	Building all kinds of skills that will be needed as a future teacher	Relates experience to their career path	Learning how to work with others; learning new things	Benefits about general skills/not related to career
Connect	Learning experiences and making connections for future jobs or help	Relational emphasis; could relate to job prospects	Experience and personal growth	Focuses on the self over connecting with others
Gain experience	Gain experience that can be helpful in the future as you learn from what you observed and noticed what can work and what doesn't	Focus on the experiences they will have in the community	Job opportunities; learning new things	Focus on development neutral to the specific experience
Confidence	You get the confidence needed to stand up in front of a classroom; Experiences and have more confidence in ourselves	Notes confidence gained	Getting experiences from different people and learning what works best for you as an educator	Focuses on learning or relationships over development of confidence/self esteem

Note: Values codes identified through analysis shown in bold and italics for emphasis.

Regarding benefits of engaging in the community, we found themes of (1) career, (2) community connection, (3) gaining experience, and (4) developing confidence. Many students focused on the benefits to their careers, anticipating they would gain experience that could elevate their careers. Some students also focused on learning about, giving back to, and finding space as an educator in, their community. For example, one student noted they anticipated the engagement would help them "gain a better understanding with both our professions and community". Many others, however, focused simply on "getting experience", "making connections", "creating relationships", and having more confidence as teachers.

3.2. Students' Capacity to Plan for Play

To understand students' characterization of their professional growth and ability to plan for playful learning engagements in their future classrooms as a result of the community-engaged course, students' observation reflection/journal entries and culminating *Play Philosophy Products* were qualitatively analyzed. For the sake of parsimony, we report on one student group's overall impression as evidenced in their *Play Philosophy Product*. Ana (all names are pseudonyms) commented positively:

> I look back to the [course opening activity], and my definition of play was so basic and so general. I feel like my definition of play has changed dramatically because I learned all the different aspects and different components that can go into play. It's a basic for kids as they start to develop who they are as people, as they build social skills. It opened my eyes to the many components of play; whether by themselves or open play where they involve other kids. My perspective of play as an educator now... I can see how important it is and how much they need it. And [teachers] do, too.

From this example, we can surmise Ana's growth in how she defines play as a social skill, her understanding of the multitudinous functions of play, and its necessity in her future classroom.

A second student, Analise, noted:

> At the beginning of the semester, I didn't know how important [play] was. Throughout the semester, I learned so much. I learned from the experiences of observing children, the [time in] daycare [facilities] and getting to play with the kids. It's really different to read something from a book and actually living it.

Analise's example illuminates the themes of real-world experience and hands-on learning that were identified in the findings from RQ1. She explicitly saw connections between the course and her experiences in the field.

3.3. Student Outcomes from Engaging in Community-Engaged Coursework

To answer RQ3, the four survey items regarding their vocational skill training (Domain 3) of the post-course survey (see Appendix B) were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine mean scores. The items included prompted student responses on ideas such as, "Performing work in the community helped me clarify which major I will pursue" and "The community work in this course assisted me in defining which profession I want to enter". Student endorsement of their own vocational skill training as a result of the community-engaged course was rated, on average, positively and consistently between 1 (strongly agree) and 2 (agree) on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 indicated strongly agree and 5 indicated strongly disagree (see Figure 2).
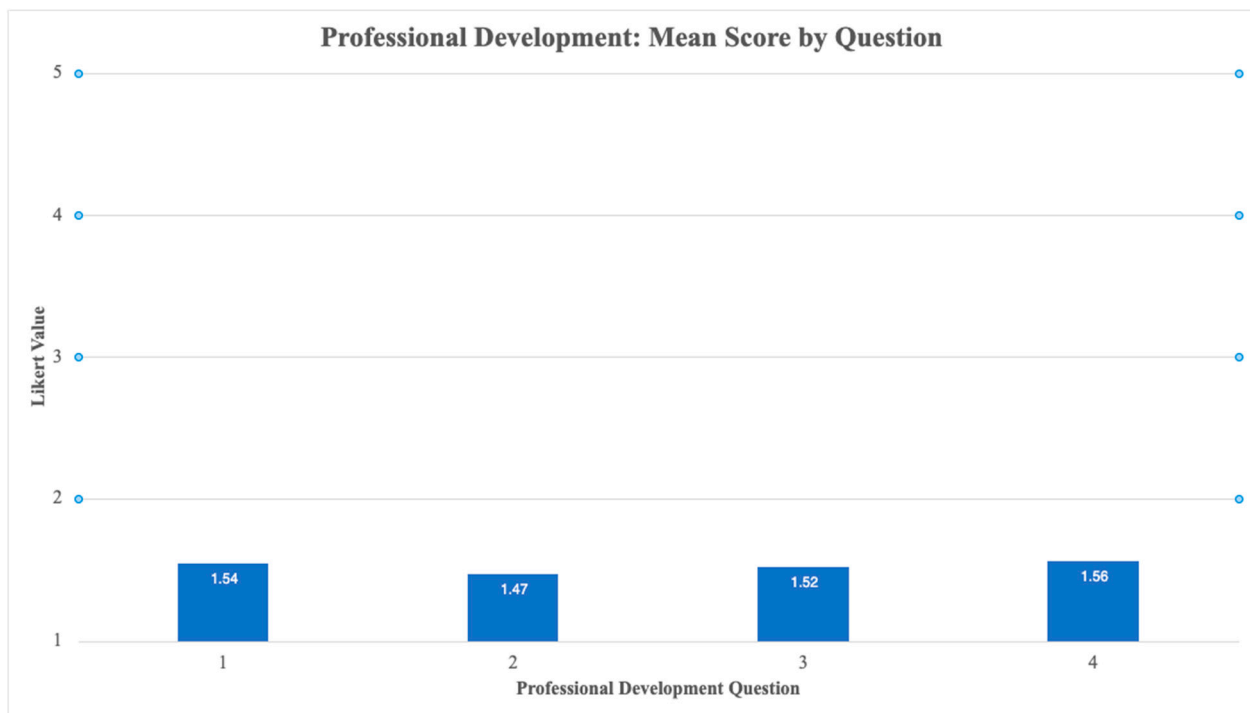
Figure 2. Pre-service teachers' responses to questions of vocational skill training. *Note*: Likert scoring between 1 and 5, where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree. Question 1: Doing work in the community helped me to define my personal strengths and weaknesses. Question 2: Performing work in the community helped me clarify which major I will pursue. Question 3: The community work in this course assisted me in defining which profession I want to enter. Question 4: The work I accomplished in this course has made me more marketable in my chosen profession when I graduate.

One additional qualitative prompt (i.e., "Please share an anecdote or story in connection with your experience and the population you served"; see Appendix B) provided students space to freely describe their experiences and skills gained. Responses indicated support for our quantitative findings. One student shared, "I feel like overall I got to experience what it takes to be a teacher and be there for students and their needs, it helped me firmly secure my decision in being a future educator". More specifically, another noted, "During my service learning experience at the [childcare facility] I realized that working with kids we have to maintain that positive loving attitude throughout our career". This realization indicates the student not only grew in technical skills but also gained an understanding of the caregiving aspect of early childhood education, a topic that was not directly instructed in the course of this study. Student responses, we believe, indicated a variety of outcomes related to their vocational skill training that will beneficially serve them as they enter the community to teach in schools.

4. Discussion

The present study sought to examine (1) how pre-service teachers perceived an institutionally novel community-engaged course, (2) how they thereafter characterized their growth as educators and their ability to create playful lesson plans after completing a community-engaged course, and (3) what outcomes in ECE pre-service teachers' sense of vocational skill training occurred when enrolled and engaged in a course steeped in community-engaged work. Analysis of the post-course data collected from 61 students revealed that, despite initial insecurity or anxiousness about the community-engaged coursework, students overwhelmingly felt positively about the experience and concluded

that the community-engaged coursework served multiple purposes that further prepared them for the role of educator to young children.

These analyzed data and the ensuing demonstrated findings serve as a call to action for colleges or schools of education, not only in the U.S. context, but also for those in the global context who may also be wrestling with the changed educational landscape post-COVID-19 [61]. What has also become glaringly apparent post-COVID-19 is the understanding that the pandemic changed not only pre-service teachers' ability to engage in in-person experiences, making virtual or distance learning a reality when working with children, but also that colleges or schools of education, and students enrolled in such institutions, have continued to grapple with remote learning [62,63]. While there are benefits, there are also demonstrated detriments as voiced by students [64]. Despite the fact that COVID-19 is now more endemic than pandemic, remote learning for pre-service teachers may be one change brought about that may remain given the reduction in associated cost of online teaching [65,66] and the demonstrated benefits of online learning (e.g., ease of course attendance, meeting a more diverse group of colleagues) [67]. Yet, these decisions may come at a cost for pre-service teachers, those who are the newest teachers entering the workforce.

Additionally, the previously discussed conceptions of testing and accountability, regrettably, are not likely to change, perhaps even continuing to intensify in the U.S. and globally. This focus may have potential implications for children [68–70], as well as for in-service and pre-service teachers [71,72]. If the circulating narrative regarding a young child's education is founded on outcome scoring of academic domains (i.e., literacy, mathematics), and is communicated to teachers vis-a-vis mandated and prescribed curriculum despite the research demonstrating play as an important component in learning, then teachers are left at an impasse–one that offers them little control or agency to make change [22].

Problematically, we highlight how play, without careful educational and theoretical instruction at the pre-service teacher level, may create instances of biased injustices for children of color when compared to White children. The literature demonstrates that play in early childhood education classrooms may (un)intentionally reinforce racism vis-a-vis stereotypes of Black children as "bad guys" [73] (p. 323), and simultaneously reinforce entitlement among White children. Outside of school, as well, the literature demonstrates that outdoor play varies for Hispanic children; when compared to White children, Hispanic children may experience cultural differences in play, perhaps needing safer places to play [74]. The literature also speaks to the need to generally democratize early experiences for children of color [75], disrupting embedded notions of racism in educational practices and policy for young children. The correction to these problematic issues begins with the education of pre-service teachers.

We believe that there are under-explored, positive, and long-term benefits to more-widely instituting a community-engaged, hands-on component to the experiences in which pre-service teachers participate before the more traditional and expected student teaching, practicum, and/or residency models currently instituted at the culmination of a candidate's education and training. The findings of this study serve to support future research of community-engaged coursework with pre-service teachers. Below we detail recommended practice and policy changes which may help to strengthen the findings of the current study:

- Collaboration between Colleges or Schools of Education and institutionally-supported avenues of community engagement, such as the CCE at the institution of this study,
- Expand Community-Engaged coursework for pre-service teachers before student teaching experiences (e.g., practicum, residency),
- Prioritize pre-service student engagement with culturally relevant- and responsive-pedagogies unique to the context of the location,
- Prioritize culturally relevant play experiences which are unique to pre-service students but also to the districts, communities, families, and children of the classrooms served,

- Allow opportunities for pre-service teachers to reflect (e.g., journal entries, classroom discourse as iterative processes of refining both philosophies and assignments) throughout these community-engaged experiences in an effort to continuously reshape and reframe learning and teaching for both pre-service teachers and for the children with whom they work, and
- Future research ought to implement randomized controlled trials of play-based curriculum versus school-as-usual curriculum to see effects of play-based engagement for both child outcomes and teacher well-being, efficacy, agency, and retention

Limitations and Implications

This study was conducted within a unique context from which findings may not be generalizable but rather transferrable. Whereas Hispanic-Serving Institutions must meet a minimum threshold of 25% of the student body self-reporting as Hispanic [76,77], the student body at the institution where the current study was undertaken is well over 80%; the sample of students involved in this research at 95%. Many of our students were bilingual, bicultural, and binational. These characteristics may have increased the value pre-service students placed in engaging in the community [78].

Despite these limitations, this study meaningfully adds to the literature on means to promote play. Inspiring and informing pre-service teachers' conceptions and actions of play through community-engaged coursework and service learning demonstrated students' self-reported benefits with regard to their personal vocational skill training as ECEs in a variety of ways. Importantly, beyond the aspect of community engagement, this study points to how such experiences support students developing in their careers in situ while applying theoretical knowledge about the benefits of play within systems of school accountability.

5. Conclusions

As an act of defiance against mandated systems and the adultification of young children, and especially those characterized as "at risk" [79] because of, for example, race, ethnicity, language, and/or culture [80], this study demonstrated how a community-engaged course, and one co-led by research faculty and CCE staff members, promoted pre-service teachers' understanding and implementation of play as an opportunity for renewal and restoration. As well, the study demonstrated the ways in which pre-service teachers understood their personal, agentive assessment of, and potential for, continued growth. This work is timely and important given the demonstrated literature regarding the importance of play [5] and the promotion of Developmentally Appropriate Practice [54]. This study serves as a sturdy plank in the argument that empowering teachers matters for not only child outcomes in academic and socioemotional domains of development [81–85], but also for the well-being of teachers [86]. Moreover, the study frames the importance of preparing teachers to work with children of Hispanic heritage, culture, language, and family. Given the literature points to an increasing Hispanic demographic in the U.S. context, including the number of Hispanic children under the age of 5 in the U.S. [87], future studies may more purposefully focus on the important and culturally sustaining work occurring between Hispanic teachers and Hispanic children and families [88], incorporating playful learning as a means for positive outcomes.

Appendix A

Observation Journal Prompts

Journal #1: Observe the children working and playing in your classroom site. How do they play? What are they doing? What are they not doing? How does this observation make you think about your future as an early childhood education teacher?

Journal #2: Observe the teacher(s) in your classroom site. What role do they take up? How do they affect play? What do you take away from this observation as you think about yourself as a future early childhood education teacher?

Journal #3: How are toys a part of play in this classroom? How does the teacher interact with the children and their toys? Do they? What effect does this observation have on your future as an early childhood education teacher?

Journal #4: How are the arts implemented for learning in this classroom? Is there freedom to explore? What role does the teacher play in this exploration? Are children allowed to be creative? Messy? What is your comfort level with the arts? How does this observation help you think about why art matters for children?

Journal #5: What is your takeaway on play in ECE spaces? What are the benefits and what are the challenges? What will you do as a future early childhood education teacher? What will you take on with regard to play?

Appendix B

Post-Course Survey Questions

Scoring: Likert scale 1–5, where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree

* indicates a reverse scored item

Domain I: Community Engagement and Course Connections

The community participation aspect of this course helped me to see how the subject matter I learned can be used in everyday life.

Mean: 1.28

The community work I did through this course helped me to better understand the lectures and the readings in this course.

Mean: 1.30

I feel I would have learned more from this course if more time was spent in the classroom instead of doing community work.*

Mean: 3.02

The idea of combining work in this community with university coursework should be practiced in more classes at this university.

Mean: 1.48

I felt personal responsibility for the quantity and quality of knowledge that I obtained in this course through this experience.

Mean: 1.70

I can explain to others what service learning is.

Mean: 1.43

I can explain how service learning is different from volunteerism.

Mean: 1.62

Domain II: Student Perceptions of Community and Engagement

The community participation aspect of this course showed me how I can become more involved in my community.

Mean: 1.59

I feel that the community work I did as a result of this course benefited the community.

Mean: 1.67

I probably won't volunteer or participate in the community after this course.*

Mean: 3.70

The community work involved in this course helped me to become more aware of the needs in my community.

Mean: 1.35

Domain III: Student Self-reflection of Growth, Professional

Doing work in the community helped me to define my personal strengths and weaknesses.

Mean: 1.54

Performing work in the community helped me clarify which major I will pursue.

Mean: 1.46

The community work in this course assisted me in defining which profession I want to enter.

Mean: 1.47

The work I accomplished in this course has made me more marketable in my chosen profession when I graduate.

Mean: 1.62

Short answer question: Please share an anecdote or story in connection with your experience and the population you served.

Domain IV: Student Self-reflection of Growth, Personal

I think that in general, people can make a positive impact in their community.

Mean: 1.41

I developed a good relationship with the instructor of this course because of the community work we performed.

Mean: 1.67

I was comfortable working with groups of people who have backgrounds and life experiences that are different from my own.

Mean: 1.38

The community work involved in this course made me aware of some of my own biases and prejudices.

Mean: 1.85

The work I performed in this course helped me learn how to manage my time more effectively.

Mean: 1.59

Participating in the community helped me enhance my leadership skills.

Mean: 1.57

The work I performed in the community enhanced my ability to communicate my ideas in a real-world context.

Mean: 1.59

I can make a difference in my community.

Mean: 1.48

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