

The Way H-O-M-E: Service Learning to Address the Early Education Teacher Shortage

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Abstract

Community partnerships are essential for vitality in neighborhoods. A growing demand exists for training programs to attract and prepare a highly qualified workforce to serve young children and their families. Personnel across different stages of their career can help address our teacher shortages. Service learning is a useful strategy in communities that can be used to address the needs of humanity and community when it comes to the needs of and services for young children and their families. The purpose of this conceptual article is to propose strategies for ameliorating the teacher shortage. Service learning is embedded in the H-O-M-E model to create authentic opportunities for innovation that will be described in this article.

Key Words: teacher shortage, service learning, experiential education, early childhood education, community partnerships, collaboration

Introduction

The shortage of early childhood educators is a crisis for society in the United States. Community partnerships are essential collaborations in neighborhoods to provide needed services for children and their families, including the need for highly qualified early childhood personnel.

Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers eligible for services are increasing in number (Jeon et al., 2022; NAEYC, 2021), while qualified early childhood educators (to broadly include general, related specialties, and specialists like early interventionists and early childhood special educators) to serve children are decreasing in number (Onchwari, 2010; Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). Workforce shortages became alarmingly worse during the global COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF 2020; United Nations Children's Fund, 2020), and more than 80% of childcare centers reported a teacher shortage (NAEYC, 2021). Teacher shortages persist after the pandemic, and in some parts of the United States, it is worse after the pandemic (Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen & Springer, 2023). This data supports the growing demand for training programs to attract and prepare a workforce to serve young children (Dougherty, 2014).

Having enough highly qualified early childhood professionals impacts the overall national workforce as parents cannot work without childcare; with this in mind, both family caregivers and employers depend on the early childhood workforce (Heckman, 2011; Heilala et al., 2022). Teacher shortages are a national challenge (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; Holcomb-McCoy, 2023; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). Early childhood preservice professionals need training and technical assistance, as well as professional development once they are established in the workforce (Collier et al., 2015; Sutton, Lewis, & Beauchat, 2020). Service learning may offer an innovative solution.

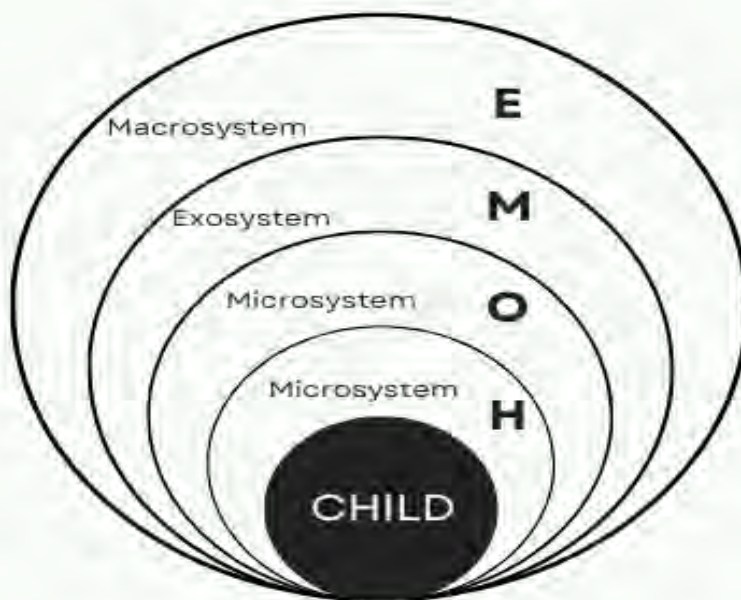
A helping activity, service learning is meant to address the needs of humanity and communities. As a type of experiential education, service learning involves authentic activities within a community to obtain a deeper level of understanding and skills (Caspé & Hernandez, 2021; Lake & Jones, 2012; Mapp et al., 2022), as well as a connection to the community in which teacher candidates will be working (Chiva-Bartoll & Fernandez-Rio, 2022). Hands-on activities in the real world are a way to strengthen the early childhood workforce and support individuals as they acculturate to a professional community and identity (Hands, 2014; Winterbottom & Lake, 2016). While service learning is similar to the concept of community service, it differs in the fact that students are asked to reflect on the experience and consider ways to better support the community throughout the experience as well as once it is completed (Karayan & Gathercoal, 2005). To create opportunities for professional acculturation, synchronous and asynchronous experiential learning activities are presented in Table 1 with preservice and in-service implications.

Table 1. Synchronous and Asynchronous Experiential Learning Activities for Preservice and In-Service Acculturation

<i>Professional Acculturation</i>		
<i>Experiential Learning</i>	Activities for Preservice Professional(s)	Activities for In-service Professional(s)
Synchronous	Podcast Fieldwork Job shadow Mentorship Unique field placements Self-directed placement identification	Coaching in vivo Mentoring in vivo Supervising in vivo
Asynchronous	Podcast Coursework Mentorship Unique field placements Self-directed placement identification	Coaching with telecollaboration Mentoring with telecollaboration Podcasting Supervising with telecollaboration

Service learning creates authentic opportunities for innovation in the early childhood field. When individuals apply learning in meaningful ways, they can develop deeper understanding and ways of knowing. The purpose of this conceptual article is to propose strategies for ameliorating the early childhood teacher shortage in the United States. We share a service learning approach that is embedded in a model that uses the acronym H-O-M-E to **h**arvest service learning solutions, **o**rchestrate partnerships, **m**ultiply participation, and **e**valuate. We have created this H-O-M-E model based on the ecological systems theory that takes into account the multiple factors that influence development and growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986). The ecological systems theory illustrates multiple factors that influence development. The ecological theory relates to the H-O-M-E to show how there are indirect and direct variables that influence workforce development, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979) With the H-O-M-E Model



H-O-M-E Model

The H-O-M-E model addresses national shortages of early childhood educators in the workforce with service learning aimed to develop collaborative community partnerships, hands-on experiences of considerable depth and breadth, and teaching and evaluating data-based empirical practices. The H-O-M-E model can be used to attract and prepare teachers with service learning. Table 2 shows the H-O-M-E considerations for enhancing the early childhood workforce by strengthening personnel preparation programs with experiential learning.

Table 2. The H-O-M-E Model for Enhancing Early Childhood Workforce by Strengthening Preparation Programs With Experiential Learning

The H-O-M-E Model	
H	Harvest solutions with community partners.
O	Orchestrate ongoing partnerships.
M	Multiply existing population with recruitment and retention.
E	Evaluate service learning for institution of higher education, neighborhoods, and community.

Four groups of focus for the H-O-M-E model for recruitment and personnel preparation are (a) high school students, (b) college students, (c) in-service professionals already in the workforce, and (d) retired professionals who have left the workforce. In the next section, we will discuss an approach for using experiential learning to strengthen the workforce pipeline with H-O-M-E strategies. We use H-O-M-E as the foundation for each of the four elements (i.e., harvest, orchestrate, multiply, and evaluate).

Harvest Solutions With Community Partners for Service Learning

To implement the H-O-M-E model, **H**arvest solutions to problems by assessing community needs and training preservice and in-service early childhood educators in an entrepreneurial and innovation mindset using problem-based learning. A needs assessment within the community can better help stakeholders understand what the community wants from professionals working with their children and better support the educational needs of the community. The needs assessment should include an approach that is context-focused, engages stakeholders, and analyzes data using a collaborative approach to determine the educational needs of the community (Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018).

The following participant categories should be considered when addressing personnel preparation for early childhood workforce recruitment and retention: (a) high school students, (b) college students, (c) in-service professionals already in the workforce, and (d) retired professionals who have left the workforce. With all four groups, develop service learning projects tailored to individual needs at the local level. Increase awareness, knowledge, and engagement among families and caregivers about the importance of high-quality innovative early childhood education by asking them about their perspectives on the issues, for example, what they think is important in early childhood teacher development.

Preservice – High School

Harvesting community solutions can have implications for high school students. High school students in a variety of classes (e.g., debate, civics, human development, etc.) can create service learning projects to better understand and brainstorm solutions to childcare and education issues our neighborhoods face. Participatory action learning can support development, as well as strive for solutions to community issues (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Examples of service learning that might be appropriate for high school students include meeting with local lawmakers about ways to address the teacher shortage, hosting a community debate on topics related to

teacher training and support, and volunteering in a local childcare center to understand the role of early childhood educators.

Preservice – College

Identifying solutions to challenges in the community, such as the early childhood teacher shortage, can support the learning of college students preparing to become early childhood teachers. Service learning projects can be infused into personnel preparation programs to inspire college students to develop a growth mindset (Dweck, 2013; Gates, 2015) and search for solutions to problems facing the community. College students can serve a role in innovation and transformation of workforce through hands-on activities. For example, college students can help to harvest solutions by helping to conduct surveys and focus groups in the community, host a world café, serve on advisory boards, share what they are learning to in-service professionals and the community, provide input into community-based think tanks and town halls, and more. Participatory action learning can support development as well as strive for solutions to community issues (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Learning about the profession they may want to be part of someday can help preservice candidates develop understanding. For example, being immersed in the professional environment with people who have chosen this career may help preservice educators develop tacit knowledge that they could not otherwise learn from reading a book.

Preservice participants benefit from hands-on experiences (Sutton, Lewis, & Beauchat, 2020). Experiential learning that takes place in a synchronous, or live fashion, for preservice professionals may include participating in: podcasts, fieldwork, job shadowing, mentorship, unique field placements, and self-directed placement identification. Experiential learning that takes place in asynchronous, or not at the same time for all participants, for preservice professionals may include: podcasts, online coursework, mentorship, unique field placements, and self-directed placement identification.

In-Service Teachers

Gathering ideas from the community for solutions is critical. Brainstorming with community can have implications for in-service professionals who are already in the early childhood workforce. Current in-service professionals can use service learning to continue growth and contribute to creating solutions to challenges faced in the communities in which they live and work. Some types of service learning may include, but are not limited to, serving with committees, communities of practice, think tanks,

or various boards to share their expertise. They listen to ideas from the community, as well as sharing their own. In-service teachers can play a role in actively recruiting high school, community college, and university students, especially students who have not yet declared a major. It may be difficult for in-service teachers to make the time to go off site for recruitment, but with the support of their administrators, in-service teachers can welcome preservice teachers into their classrooms and serve as a mentor and cooperating professionals to preservice people doing fieldwork/practica or student teaching. In-service teachers can explore professional questions that are rooted in their day-to-day experiences. Participatory action research can create opportunities for current in-service professionals to help create solutions for challenges including workforce shortages (Duijs et al., 2021; Zuber-Skerritt, 2018).

In-service participants also benefit from hands-on experiences. Experiential learning that takes place in a synchronous, or live fashion, for in-service professionals may include: coaching in vivo, mentoring in vivo, and supervising in vivo. Experiential learning that takes place in asynchronous, or not at the same time for all participants, for in-service professionals may include: coaching with telecollaboration, mentoring with telecollaboration, podcasting, and supervising with telecollaboration.

Retired Professionals

Retired professionals who have left the workforce can also support service learning. Similar to the in-service professionals, retired professionals can be an asset to the community given their expertise and experience. Participatory action research is a way for professionals who are retired to help contribute to solutions to community issues (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018) by offering insights from their own experiences in the field, suggesting ways to attract and retain future teachers. They could also help conduct surveys and focus groups of families and community members. Their contribution to supporting the community can be a significant benefit to transforming lives. The way H-O-M-E model begins with the importance of *Harvesting* ideas within our neighborhoods and communities.

Orchestrate Ongoing Partnerships for Service Learning

Collaboration across entities can be a challenge but is needed to continue to grow community prosperity (Anderson, 2016). To implement the H-O-M-E model, orchestrate partnerships with community-based organizations for service learning. Asset mapping can be used to build community and provide pathways for engagement and service learning (Beck et al., 2022). An asset map shows the direct and indirect links among all the components

in a system which can offer supports and resources. It can be a map drawn on paper or an electronic map created to show hot spots that serve as potentially resource-rich areas. Build knowledge, awareness, and engagement with community members and agencies to provide sustainable and replicable activities and solutions for high quality early childhood education and care for children (Collier et al., 2015). A variety of placement options and locations can come from diverse organizations to include the education, health, philanthropy, faith-based, and social service sectors.

Preservice – High School

Orchestrating school and community partnerships can have implications for high school students. High school students can participate in experiential education with community partners through service learning. Their involvement in the community can give them a chance to determine if becoming a professional in the education field is a good fit for them. In high school, they are learning about many different career options. Guidance counselors and high school teachers can support high school students in their exploration of career options in their neighborhoods and communities by partnering with business and organization leaders, including those facilitating early education.

Preservice – College

Being an ambassador in the community through service learning can be a role for college students from the university. For example, young children need qualified professionals to address their social–emotional development (Lohmann et al., 2022). A partnership between the local community and the institution of higher education (e.g., university, community college, trade school, etc.) could be helpful. This might involve a collaboration where faculty from the college provide workshops to the local community (e.g., at the YMCA, parent co-op, library, etc.) hosting college students who will in turn use the tools from the training in their direct services provided to children and families to address children’s development (Sutton et al., 2020).

In-Service Teachers

Orchestrating community partnerships can have implications for in-service professionals already in the workforce. Parental and professional collaboration (Barnes et al., 2016) is a partnership that holds strength to ties in the community since parents and family members live and often work in the local community. Engaging families with teachers could also help with job satisfaction (Mapp et al., 2022) which in turn might boost retention of teachers. Rewarding partnerships between teachers and parents/families are mutually beneficial relationships that could lead to positive outcomes.

Building sustainable partnerships could be a long-term goal for in-service professionals. Service learning around partnerships can be useful to in-service professionals and could potentially help with retaining teachers in the profession. Current teachers who receive service learning visits may be encouraged in their work.

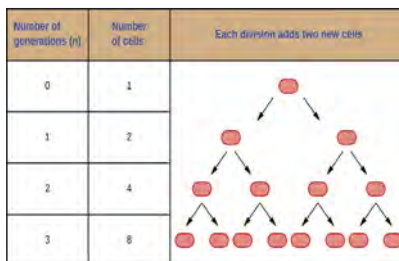
Retired Professionals

Orchestrating community partnerships can have implications for retired professionals who have left the workforce. Volunteering in the local community can be a way for professionals who have retired to continue to be an ambassador for education. Their role in service learning through community partnerships is crucial to the vitality of a community. Retired persons could organize service learning with activities like the following: (a) connecting early care centers and volunteers, (b) mentoring and/or coaching practicing teachers, and (c) spending time making phone calls to help high schools and/or early care centers connect to community partners. The way H-O-M-E model conveys the importance of *Orchestrating* partnerships within our neighborhoods and communities.

Multiply Existing Population With Recruitment and Retention Initiatives and Innovations

To implement the H-O-M-E model, multiply workforce in numbers by implementing service learning opportunities. Institutions of higher education (e.g., colleges) can seek funding for personnel preparation using the H-O-M-E model. Developing training and professional development curricula that includes service learning for early childhood professionals will lead to career credentials including innovation and entrepreneurship concepts, techniques, and methods. Curricula can be shared using a train-the-trainer model and replicated in communities seeking to recruit and retain teachers. Figure 2 illustrates how recruitment and retention can have a multiplier effect in communities when a network of stakeholders collaborate to create innovative initiatives to address workforce challenges.

Figure 2. Multiplier Effect



Preservice – High School

Multiplying the population of the early childhood workforce can have implications for high school students. Reaching out and creating a strong outreach program to high school students is a way to recruit the next generation of our education workforce. High school teachers can design curriculum to introduce the education profession to high school students through case studies and hands-on learning in the community (Gunn et al, 2015; Ice et al., 2015). High schoolers who have completed the service learning program could talk with younger students/classes to encourage them to sign up for the same experience. Some high schools also provide hands-on service opportunities through having a childcare center for teenage parents on site in which future teachers can gain practice teaching young children while their parents attend classes; this model has positive impacts for both the teenage parents and the future teachers (Shain, 2024; Williams & Sadler, 2001).

Preservice – College

Multiplying the population of the early childhood workforce can have implications for college students. Service learning for college students is a way to recruit and/or retain our education workforce. Preservice programs need to support empirically based instructional technologies like service learning. Quality programs are charged with a two-fold mission: (1) teach students to provide empirically based practices, and (2) collect data on their own effectiveness with training personnel to be effective early childhood teachers (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; Holcomb-McCoy, 2023; Oyen & Schweinle, 2020).

Training programs should be innovative places where students are learning cutting edge, research-based practices. The identities of early childhood professionals start when they are preservice teachers as they become acculturated to the profession (Anderson-Lain, 2017). College professors can design curriculum to introduce the education profession to college students through case studies and hands-on learning in the community (Rakap et al., 2017). Support for college students through service learning can be achieved in many ways which could include: mentorships, supervision in fieldwork, help with transportation to service learning placement/field work, scholarships for service learning, stipends, and more.

In-Service Teachers

Multiplying the population of the early childhood workforce can have implications for in-service professionals already in the workforce. Creating a strong outreach program for in-service professionals is a way to retain

our education workforce by ensuring adequate staffing, including available substitutes, as well as providing extra assistants and/or mentors. Building leadership capacity with service learning will help to strengthen retention, as well as recruitment to leadership positions for in-service professionals (Casper & Hernandez, 2021; Talan et al., 2014; Zeng et al., 2021). In-service professionals can also engage in collaborative inquiry to support initiatives and innovation in workforce development (Schnellert & Butler, 2014; Sheridan & Wheeler, 2017).

Retired Professionals

Retired professionals who have left the workforce, are former teachers, and/or are people from other sectors (e.g., health, social services, government, nonprofits, for-profits, etc.) can have implications for multiplying the population of the early childhood workforce. Reaching out to professionals who have retired is a way to strengthen our education workforce. Many people who have retired are looking for temporary (part-time) and/or permanent (full-time) work in their retirement years. For example, they may want to become a substitute teacher, volunteer in the schools, mentor families/children (e.g., “grandparent program”) or teachers, and serve their community in ways that appeal to them and share their expertise with others in their neighborhood. For example, in a village in Reggio Emilia, Italy there is a group of grandmothers that enjoy gardening and bring fresh flowers to their local school every week. The Nonne (grandmothers in Italian) also help the teachers in the outdoor classroom with the children’s garden and nature-based curriculum. The way H-O-M-E model shows the importance of *Multiplying* our workforce within our neighborhoods and communities.

Evaluate Service Learning

To continue to implement the H-O-M-E model, **evaluate** how well community and neighborhood needs are being met by the H-O-M-E model. Coordinate and evaluate early childhood education training and technical assistance to ensure high quality education for young children with and without disabilities. Measurement of service learning efforts is also needed for evaluation with an eye toward continuous improvement (Ehrlich et al., 2019; Shore et al., 2021).

Preservice – High School

Evaluation of service learning activities can involve high school students. Ongoing program evaluation can monitor effectiveness. High school students can participate in evaluation by responding to satisfaction surveys and focus group interviews to evaluate their service learning experiences. They could also help conduct community surveys (Ice et al., 2015).

Preservice – College

Evaluation of service learning activities can also involve college students. Institutions of higher education (e.g., community colleges) typically have an evaluation system built into their personnel preparation program(s). Decisions made based on the interpretations made from analysis of the data will be important for ongoing continuous improvement of their service learning efforts (Sheridan et al., 2009).

In-Service Teachers

Evaluation of service learning activities can involve in-service professionals already in the workforce. If professionals are hosting college and/or high school students, they can evaluate the students and their service learning participation. In-service professionals can also examine their own preparation for the workforce, including how to handle stress (Jeon et al., 2022; Onchwari, 2010) and balance work demands with resources (Heilala et al., 2022). Evaluation efforts should be followed up with an action plan to address goal development.

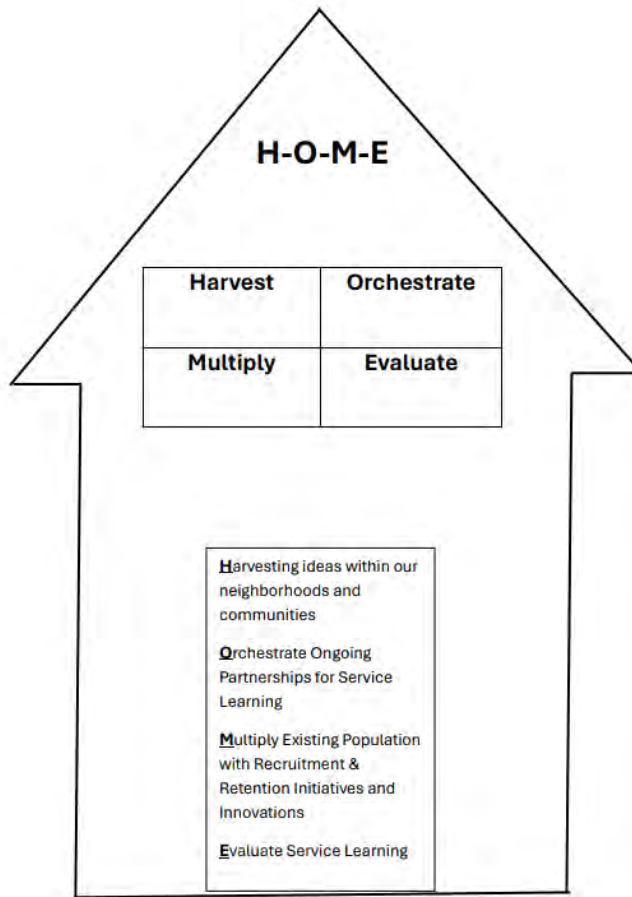
Retired Professionals

Evaluation of service learning activities can involve retired professionals who have left the workforce. A variety of roles could be established for participants who would like to be involved with evaluating the effectiveness of service learning. Evaluation roles may include but are not limited to helping to collect data, interpretation of data and analysis, supporting the development of meaningful goals derived from evaluation, and monitoring the progress of service learning initiatives to strengthen the workforce. The way H-O-M-E model shares the importance of *Evaluating* service learning within our neighborhoods and communities. Figure 3 depicts all four pieces coming together.

Summary

Children, families, neighborhoods, and communities deserve an educated and well-trained early childhood workforce (Bakken et al., 2017; Caspe & Hernandez, 2021; Macy, 2023; Mapp et al., 2022). There is a demand for training programs to attract and prepare a workforce to serve young children (Badgett, 2016; Elango et al., 2015). Highly qualified early childhood personnel are needed to serve young children and their families in inclusive environments (Mui et al., 2015; Wood, 2015).

Figure 3. H-O-M-E Model



The ecological systems theory is the foundation for the H-O-M-E model showing various considerations that influence growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986). Service learning is embedded in the H-O-M-E model to create authentic opportunities for innovation. We shared a service learning approach called H-O-M-E (as shown in Figure 2) to represent how we can: **h**arvest service learning solutions, **o**rchestrate partnerships, **m**ultiply participation, and **e**valuate.

H-O-M-E is foundational for creating community-based relationships. Hands-on field experiences should be available that showcase a wide range of early childhood practices. Data-based programs make replication and improvement possible. Figure 3 shows the way H-O-M-E model. High-quality early education and care can have long-term benefits for children (Gilliam, 2009). Engaging parents during early years can promote positive child

well-being, development, health, and education. Preservice and in-service programs that embody collaborative, data-based, service learning experiences can help early childhood professionals find their way home to a rewarding career (Gilliam, 2009; Laser et al., 2024; Sutton et al., 2020).

For vitality and prosperity, community partnerships in neighborhoods are essential. Training programs must recruit and prepare a highly qualified workforce to serve young children and their families. To help address our teacher shortages, we illustrated how people of different stages of their career can serve communities. We presented a service learning strategy in communities that can be used to address the needs of humanity and community when it comes to the needs of and services for young children and their families. The purpose of this conceptual article was to propose strategies for ameliorating the teacher shortage. Embedded in the H-O-M-E model was the use of service learning to create authentic opportunities for innovation to occur and promote prosperity within communities.

Next Steps

The H-O-M-E model involves multiple layers of an education system. Variability may exist at different levels of the system (Macy, 2023). Adopting, implementing, and doing research on the H-O-M-E model would be recommended to address the educator shortage.

Community Adoption of H-O-M-E

Each community is unique. When a community adopts the H-O-M-E model they can create an action plan which has timelines and indicates who is responsible for each part of the plan. A strategy that could be helpful would be to map community-based resources already in place to help determine where there are gaps within the current system. Existing databases could be useful to make decisions (Macy, 2023; Nguyen, 2021). For example, census data could help in understanding community characteristics. Community-based early childhood resources are critical to attracting and retaining a workforce (Lake & Jones, 2012; Nguyen & Springer, 2023). There are important early childhood education initiatives across a state education system, but early childhood educators may be isolated, siloed, and disconnected from stakeholders and peer educators in surrounding communities that would need to be considered when adopting this model in a community.

Additionally, it would be important to connect and create a network of communities and early childhood educators across a state to share best practices and expertise that strengthen community-based resources (Sher-

idan et al., 2009; Talan et al., 2014). Outreach can increase awareness with partner organizations, stakeholders, and community-based early childhood educators with a regional focus as part of the adoption of H-O-M-E model.

Build bridges to localized islands of early childcare. Early childhood providers serve children and families from within and around a community yet can be siloed and isolated (Holcomb-McCoy, 2023; Macy, 2023; Shore et al., 2021). A lack of communication limits coordination and impact as a critical community asset enabling the workforce (Macy, 2023). With the H-O-M-E model, communities and employers will benefit from stronger local and regional partnerships sustaining community-based early childcare for their workforce.

Implement H-O-M-E

A needs assessment could be used to understand how best to implement the H-O-M-E model. Part of the implementation process could focus on stakeholders who need to be part of the implementation process (Macy, 2023). To adopt H-O-M-E, people from diverse disciplines and training can come together. People with and without a stake in the model should be part of the adoption and implementation activities; for example, parents would have a stake in the H-O-M-E model because they have children who could participate.

An essential component in implementing the model would be to develop a content hub for curriculum and professional development to nourish, support, and retain early childhood educators in these communities through problem-based learning; courses leading to career credentials, creative thinking, and entrepreneurship; and evaluation and technical assistance for serving children at risk or with delay or disability. Growth and retention of early childcare providers and employees are expected outcomes. In-person and online, the H-O-M-E model will grow, develop, nourish, and retain community-based early childhood educators, reducing turnover and instability. Improved skills and capabilities of community-based early childhood educators will serve children and families more effectively.

Build an Evidence Base for H-O-M-E

One of the next steps for H-O-M-E is to conduct research on the approach the community adopts and implements. Nearby university partners could help lead the research done to evaluate the effectiveness of the model. Comparative studies could be done to examine how the model functions in diverse settings like urban, suburban, and rural areas. Different types of research methods could be used to learn more about the H-O-M-E model.

For example, program evaluation is a research methodology that could be useful for determining outcomes of the H-O-M-E model, as well as surveys and focus groups of participants.

Shared best practices through outreach can be analyzed (Heilala et al., 2022; Macy, 2023; Winterbottom & Lake, 2016; Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Early childhood educators are invested in their children and families, often seeing themselves as service providers not small businesses, yet they are both. A network of stakeholders and early childhood educator peers could share best practices around service learning, learn together, and provide support and networking for substitutes, questions, and shared needs of their children, families, and community (Gilliam, 2009; Macy, 2023).

Children deserve highly qualified educators. Families deserve effective schools and educators. Communities deserve an early childhood workforce to serve people. There is no place like H-O-M-E where early childhood professionals have experiential learning opportunities to grow their careers.

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