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Identify, Apply, and Reflect

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# Identify, Apply, and Reflect

## Supporting Early Childhood Teacher Candidates Through Innovative Field Experiences

Christine Lux, Nanci L. Red Bird, and Allison B. Wilson

To effectively prepare and support the early childhood profession, certain elements must be attended to, including enhancing early childhood educators' knowledge base, developing their competencies, and improving higher education programs in addition to increased field experiences (NRC 2015). While these elements (among others) have been recognized as critical, work remains to ensure that they are sufficiently and consistently addressed to transform the workforce.

According to the NAEYC “Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators” position statement, “supervised, sustained, and sequenced field experiences” are a key component to effective early childhood teacher preparation (2020, 33). High-quality field experiences build strong foundational understandings of child development, family relationships, and community connections in early childhood education. These experiences offer many opportunities to apply that knowledge in authentic settings and situations. The integration of

pedagogical content knowledge with developmentally appropriate and equitable teaching practices in carefully chosen and sequenced field experiences helps early childhood teacher candidates hone their skills as they become professionals.

The national dialogue about the early childhood workforce, as captured in the National Research Council's 2015 *Transforming the Workforce* report, prompted early childhood faculty in Montana to consider how intentional teaching and learning occurs throughout their preparation programs. The *Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession* developed by the Power to the Profession taskforce ([powertotheprofession.org](http://powertotheprofession.org)) further sparked conversations among Montana's teacher educators. A central component of these conversations was the role of field experiences in helping students develop and sustain a habit of intentional practice. Faculty shared ideas about timing, intensity, and duration of field experiences in certificate, associate, and bachelor's degree programs to build students' teaching skills and confidence. By modeling our own reflective and intentional practice about teaching and learning, we hoped to inspire the next generation of educators.

In the following sections, an overview of Montana's teaching and learning framework is provided, followed by examples of intentional practice at Montana State University, the University of Montana, and the University of Montana Western. A snapshot of one teacher candidate's field experience with mentor teachers and with faculty is also shared. Together, the examples illustrate how early childhood teacher educators in Montana implement an adapted identify, apply, and reflect framework.

## Intentional Teaching and Learning in Montana: A Framework

Early childhood teacher education in Montana has a long history of collaborative efforts to prepare early childhood professionals, including the formation of the Montana Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium (MECHEC) in 1997. (See "A Brief History" on page 20.) One year later and with input from MECHEC, the "Montana Early Care and Education Knowledge Base" guide was published. It outlined what early childhood practitioners who work with young

**Field Experience.** Includes informal and formal opportunities for candidates to observe and practice in early childhood settings through observations, practice student teaching (with individual children and groups of children), and other clinical practice experiences such as home visiting. A planned sequence of these experiences supports candidates' development of understanding, competence, and dispositions in a specialized area of practice.

—NAEYC's Higher Education Accreditation Standards

children and families need to know, understand, and be able to do. The "Knowledge Base" was revised in 2008 and again in 2013. Early versions used a skills-based rating system for teachers to assess their skills and establish a professional development plan to improve their practice. Members of MECHEC were invited to revisit the "Knowledge Base" in 2018 to provide a more intentional look at early childhood teacher preparation.

Our work over the past four years to produce the "Montana Early Childhood Education Knowledge Base Workbook" has involved modeling intentional practice. MECHEC members met quarterly to collectively reflect on our practices and program designs first. We did this by considering the Intentional Teaching Framework, a competency-based approach to preparing early childhood professionals using a know, see, do, reflect, and improve cycle of learning and doing (Hamre et al. 2012; Joseph & Brennan 2013; Early EdU Alliance 2021). From this perspective, we agreed that students must first be exposed to theory and research related to pedagogical knowledge and skills, observe these in action, try them out in early childhood contexts, and then reflect on and improve their practice through the support of peer and faculty mentorship. At the same time, we wanted to modify the Intentional Teaching Framework using our own common language to capture a leveled approach to educator preparation, similar to NAEYC's position statement on professional standards and competencies.

The revised "Knowledge Base Workbook" was presented at our annual MTAEYC conference in 2020 and 2021 and also shared nationally at the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators

## A Brief History

The Montana Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium (MECHEC) was founded in 1997 to advocate for, inform, and influence public policy related to preparing early childhood professionals. MECHEC has met quarterly since its inception and is facilitated by the Montana Early Childhood Project ([www.mtecp.org](http://www.mtecp.org)), which is an outreach project of Montana State University dedicated to improving the quality of programs and services for Montana's young children and their families.

MECHEC members include faculty from each tribal, community, and four-year institution of higher education across the state that offers early childhood coursework. Some MECHEC members also hold leadership roles on their campuses and serve on other state-level committees to ensure action and progress toward early childhood workforce development. Additionally, two members provide administrative support to their campus early learning programs and offer keen insights into the importance of quality field experience opportunities for teacher candidates. The current MECHEC roster includes 20 passionate early childhood professionals representing 10 different higher education programs, thus ensuring that key voices are represented and heard to strengthen the state's early childhood workforce.

conference in 2021. Across the state, different constituent and stakeholder groups—including Head Start programs, the childcare resource and referral network, and family- and center-based educators and administrators—have given input on the revision. Focus groups are planned throughout 2022 to further gather and incorporate feedback and perspectives.

The current edition of the “Montana Early Childhood Education Knowledge Base Workbook” is a reflective practice tool that describes a progression of knowledge and skills that includes opportunities for faculty, teacher candidates, and in-service teachers to reflect on and write about the ways they demonstrate each standard and competency on a continuum of development. In it, we selected our own action words

to describe the cycle of reflective practice more simply. We chose the words *identify*, *apply*, and *reflect* to represent this continuum.

**Identify:** Recognize, describe, name, establish, pinpoint or put one's finger on; this strategy combines “know” and “see,” both describing what an effective practice is and recognizing what it looks like in action in the classroom.

**Apply:** Put into service, make work or employ, rehearse, practice, utilize, commit; this strategy describes “do,” an essential step to trying out an identified practice.

**Reflect:** Consider, ponder, meditate, ruminate, hypothesize, theorize, or think over; this strategy combines “reflect” and “improve” to ensure higher-level analyses and thoughtful revisions to a professional's teaching and engagement.

Each participant in a preparation program has an essential role in this framework. They are part of an intentional approach to teaching and learning that

guides higher education faculty in academic program planning and delivery

supports teacher candidates in recognizing, using, and refining skills

offers collaborative opportunities for mentor teachers to learn from and with teacher candidates and faculty

enhances early childhood programs as field experience sites for professional practice

## Identify, Apply, and Reflect in Practice

In the following sections, we use one teacher candidate's experience moving through the adapted framework to highlight these steps in action.

### Identify

In the following vignette, a faculty member helps the teacher candidate they are mentoring to identify effective teaching strategies and encourages her to apply critical thinking to explain her teacher moves by reflecting on coursework. In this style of coaching,



the faculty member scaffolds and supports the teacher candidate's skills as an early childhood teacher using a deliberate identify, apply, and reflect approach.

Alisa is an undergraduate student about to graduate with a license to teach preschool through third grade in Montana. She is in the final year of her program. Currently, she is completing her capstone experience in the Head Start classroom where she has taught for the past six years. Alisa received the following feedback from Dr. Nanci Red Bird, a faculty member and field experience supervisor, over video conferencing:

"Alisa, thank you for the latest videos you sent of your teaching! I noticed you sent two videos: One of your face-to-face small-group time and one from your distance learners. I remember that you said the goal you wanted to focus on was following children's lead. You did a great job of setting up an activity for small-group time that allowed for the children to make choices about materials they were using to create their project. You introduced the project and materials and made sure they had plenty to choose from!

"I also noticed that although the children were sitting, you were standing. Thinking back to our class about positive child guidance, tell me about this choice. What might you do differently next time?"

In her notes on what she has learned in her classes so far and incorporating feedback from Dr. Red Bird, Alisa remarks on the following:

"In my Positive Guidance class, I learned that it is important for teachers to stay at children's level to balance the power dynamic. In observations I have done, I saw teachers sitting on the carpet or at the table talking to children in small groups. In the video I see my mentor teacher sitting with children at a table, and I am walking around the room."

At this point of the Intentional Teaching and Learning Framework, Alisa is identifying and describing her teaching strategies. She has acquired knowledge of the strategies through her university course, but she is also learning from her mentor teacher through her field experience.

Observation, identification, and knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice are critical in ensuring faculty and mentor teachers facilitate candidates' progress toward program goals and outcomes. Rather than evaluating Alisa by making punitive comments, Dr. Red Bird used open-ended questions and "I noticed" comments to identify teaching strategies in action and to prompt Alisa to remember content from her classes. This is an example of identifying a practice for modification and making a connection to knowledge gained through coursework.

Another way that teacher candidates learn to identify effective teaching strategies is in a side-by-side learning model with mentor teachers. For example, at Montana State University, early childhood teacher candidates are welcomed into two early learning programs on campus as part of their field experiences during their freshman or sophomore year. Candidates are expected to observe and identify effective strategies through their courses on early childhood development and an introduction course to early childhood education. Simultaneously, mentor teachers provide clear and focused feedback by identifying and modeling developmentally appropriate practice.

An example of this occurred during a family-style lunch in a preschool classroom. The mentor and teacher candidate sat at corner seats of the table, and the mentor teacher modeled passing and serving techniques. The mentor teacher explained, "I take a portion using the 1/4-cup measure for a 3- to 5-year-old, so the children can see what a child-size serving of pasta looks like." The mentor teacher demonstrated how to use the serving utensil and also gave an explanation about what she was doing. By describing her teacher moves, the mentor helped the teacher candidate identify and understand how to encourage healthy eating habits with young children.

Across all of our campuses, when on-site experiences are not available, teacher candidates select from a library of recorded learning experiences. Faculty share recorded circle time and other play-based activities for candidates to review and analyze during coursework. Mentor teachers still maintain the important role of modeling and demonstrating for teacher candidates—but in a virtual format. Nagro (2020) asserted that teacher candidates benefit from analyzing video recordings of others before reflecting on their own teaching. After they practice identifying and describing targeted teaching strategies (in person or via video), teacher candidates are ready to plan and implement their own lessons applying what they have learned.

## Apply

As Alisa continues to reflect on her practices throughout the semester, she makes note of changes she would like to make and how to go about making them:

“In the last observation videos I sent, I really focused on how I prepared the environment for student choice by providing them with different types of materials and creating an open-ended activity. For this next video observation, I’m going to ask my teaching partner to actively supervise the whole class so I can stay with the students at the table activity instead of getting up and down. I want to take time to talk with them about the choices they are making.”

At this point of the Intentional Teaching and Learning Framework, Alisa makes a plan to apply what she has learned from her coursework while also integrating the feedback she has received from her mentor teacher.

A critical component of teacher education is application of knowledge in carefully chosen and sequenced field experiences. This depends on faculty and mentor teachers using strategies that prompt and encourage this application, whether in person or virtually. For example, at the University of Montana Western, we place a considerable emphasis on experiential learning and also recognize the need for online education for our teacher candidates, who either live in rural areas

without on-site access to a college campus, work full time without the ability to attend classes during the day, or both. Within our distance early childhood program, high-quality opportunities for application are at the heart of our work. We build strong relationships and partnerships between our university and field sites, as “the potential of this work to meaningfully transform the preparation of teachers is crucial” (Burroughs et al. 2020, 122).

To promote the application of course content, we purposefully embed field or clinical hours in early learning programs and schools and with skilled mentors. We balance experiences across age levels (birth–3 years, 3–5 years, and 5–8 years) and with increasing complexity of when and how candidates employ their developing knowledge and practices.

For example, in a first-year course on positive child guidance, teacher candidates spend 45 hours either working or volunteering in an early childhood program typically serving children ages 3 to 5. Strategies for fostering positive interactions, such as “I notice” statements, consistent classroom routines, or environmental design for small-group interactions, are integrated throughout the time candidates spend in these settings. Candidates work with their mentors during conferences before and after an observation to set an action plan for future work. The mentor and candidate engage in a coaching experience, sharing what has been observed and identifying strengths and areas for growth. In addition, the mentor often shares additional or alternative strategies to consider, and the candidate has an opportunity to ask questions to gain additional understandings. The action plan captures these interactions while documenting the goals the candidate has for themselves. This happens in cooperation with the course instructor and is usually tied to an assignment. The coursework and field experiences are intentionally embedded from the first year until graduation, so teacher candidates are scaffolded in implementing what they learn in their courses to the field with increased knowledge and skilled practice.

Similar to their role in identifying effective practices, mentor teachers are in a unique position to see candidates engage in daily application as opposed to a few times in a semester, offering immediate and follow-up feedback. Mentor teachers can observe and guide teacher candidates in action without taking over

their teaching. They can do this by using prompts or cues like “Okay, try this strategy next,” “When the child comes back over, say ‘You used your walking feet all the way over here,’ ” or “Remember what you tried yesterday at small group? Try that again, and let me know how it goes today.” Their observations and interactions provide opportunities for informed discourse with teacher candidates, supporting ongoing and focused reflection about their teaching and learning.

## Reflect

Alisa joins Dr. Red Bird the following week to discuss progress and changes she has implemented in her teaching. Dr. Red Bird reminds Alisa that the last time they met, she noticed Alisa was standing above children while they were working, checking on them, and then moving to other areas of the room for supplies and classroom oversight. She was not engaging intentionally in dialogue with her small group; rather, she was supervising and bringing materials. She asks Alisa what she is considering from this feedback.

“I really thought a lot about the question you asked me in our latest session: ‘What might you do differently next time?’ In watching the video again and visiting with my mentor teacher, it became very clear to me that I want to model a calm, relaxed classroom environment for the children,” Alisa responds.

“There is always so much to do, and it is easy to get moving in too many directions,” Alisa continues. “This has an impact on the children and how they regulate themselves, in addition to not allowing me to fully engage in what they are learning. It’s bigger than just planning out my next lesson and making sure that I am sitting down at small group. I’m going to change the climate in the room throughout our day and have already started talking to my teaching partner and mentor teacher about it too.”

Working within the Intentional Teaching and Learning Framework, Alisa is reflecting on her knowledge and experience as well as her conversations with mentors regarding her teaching pedagogy and philosophy.

## Becoming a Reflective Early Childhood Educator

Whether serving as a faculty member, mentor teacher, or teacher candidate, your role is an important one. What do you do to identify, apply, and reflect on your practice?

### Faculty/Course Instructors

How do I identify and apply intentional practice throughout my work with early childhood teacher candidates?

In what ways do I embed reflective practice in coursework for my students?

How do I utilize intentional and reflective practice in my own teaching, research, and service?

### Mentor and Supervising Teachers

How do I support teacher candidates to identify and describe effective practices during field experiences?

In what ways do I scaffold teacher candidates’ application of developmentally appropriate practice?

How do I promote teacher candidates’ reflection within and across classroom routines and activities in both formative and summative ways?

### Teacher Candidates

How do I identify what I know, want to know, and need to know across coursework and field experiences?

How do I apply content I have learned in my coursework to the field?

What strategies can I use to engage in regular reflective practice?

In response to the faculty mentor's initial question of "What might you do differently next time?", Alisa started contemplating the larger implications of her decision to walk around the room throughout the children's work time. In taking time to think about her mentor's question, to rewatch her teaching video, and to visit with her mentor teacher and her teaching partner, Alisa reflected on the impact of this seemingly small decision.

Alisa's reflection also included the integration of the other elements of the framework. She identified what she truly wanted for the class, she dialogued with her peers and mentors to further develop her thinking, and she made a plan for how to apply her new understandings in the classroom. Reflection is a multi-faceted and unique process for every individual. In this case, an open-ended prompt encouraged Alisa to deeply reflect on her practice, leading to a new teaching goal.

This component of reflective practice is threaded throughout coursework and field experiences. For example, at the University of Montana, early childhood teacher candidates typically complete their preservice coursework during the final two years of their four-year degree program. Reflective practice is guided by two primary tools: NAEYC professional standards and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Both resources emphasize the need for early childhood professionals to identify and reflect upon opportunities to apply fundamental competencies that are anchored in high-quality practices and content knowledge (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre 2007; NAEYC 2020).

The NAEYC "Professional Standards and Competencies" position statement (2020) is read, analyzed, and reflected upon by teacher candidates through weekly reflective journaling and goal setting. (See "Excerpt from University of Montana Student Journal" on this page.) Based on opportunities to apply course content in tandem with field experiences, candidates select a NAEYC competency and write about a situation in which they demonstrated or observed that competency in action. They then create a goal to focus on during field experiences for the following week. The cycle of evidence-based reflection continues each week across semesters.

Additionally, teacher candidates use the CLASS tool to reflect on their implementation of high-quality instructional interactions. This is done by first recording a segment of their own teaching, watching it, then writing what they observed in relation to the CLASS dimensions and indicators. Then, candidates bring their reflections and recorded video segments to a weekly practicum seminar to discuss with their classmates and faculty. The seminar is a platform for everyone to engage in collaborative peer reflection.

Field experience supervisors also use the CLASS tool during one-hour observations three times throughout the same semester. Following the observation, the supervisor and the candidate meet to discuss it, share feedback, and set goals around quality instructional interactions in the classroom. These summative mentoring meetings provide another form of data-based reflective checkpoints throughout the semester, alongside the weekly collaborative peer reflections during the seminar.

## Excerpt from University of Montana Student Journal

### Standard 3: Child Observation, Documentation, and Assessment

3a: Understand that assessments (formal and informal, formative and summative) are conducted to make informed choices about instruction and for planning in early learning settings.

Preplanning and engaging children in developmentally appropriate self-assessment and goal setting is really something I am trying to work on with students. I don't do it all the time, but I want them to work on these skills along with self-assessment skills. For example, I'll ask "what's your plan for building with blocks today?" or "How will you show what you know about the pet store in your journal later today?" Working on demonstrating and teaching self-assessment strategies is a goal for me, so that my students can start to monitor their engagement, learning, and fulfillment of their own goals.



## Conclusion

Through intentionally planned and meaningful field experiences, early childhood faculty, mentor teachers, and teacher candidates identify, apply, and reflect on what it means to be an effective early childhood educator. Alisa's story is just one example of how the framework's three components support reflective practice. By developing and sustaining a habit of reflective and intentional practice, faculty, mentor teachers, and teacher candidates

**identify** what works in early childhood teacher education, which can lead to a highly qualified, competent, and confident workforce that positively impacts and supports young children, families, and communities

**apply** adaptations and an evidence-driven approach to enhance early childhood teacher preparation

**reflect** on each participant's role and work to enable the continued growth of the early childhood profession

## About the Authors

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References for this article can be found online at [NAEYC.org/yc/spring2022](https://naeyc.org/yc/spring2022).



This article aligns with the NAEYC Professional Competencies and Standards:

Standard	Key Competencies and Supporting Explanations
Standard 1 Child Development and Learning in Context	1d: Use this multidimensional knowledge—that is, knowledge about the developmental period of early childhood, about individual children, and about development and learning in cultural contexts—to make evidence-based decisions that support each child.
Standard 5 Knowledge, Application, and Integration of Academic Content in the Early Childhood Curriculum	5c: Modify teaching practices by applying, expanding, integrating, and updating their content knowledge in the disciplines, their knowledge of curriculum content resources, and their pedagogical content knowledge.
Standard 6 Professionalism as an Early Childhood Educator	6d: Engage in continuous, collaborative learning to inform practice. 6e: Develop and sustain the habit of reflective and intentional practice in their daily work with young children and as members of the early childhood profession.

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