

RESEARCH PRIORITIES March 2022

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska is committed to ensuring its work is informed by and informs the evidence base in early childhood practice and policy. In partnership with university colleagues, state agencies, nonprofit organizations, early childhood professionals, and other diverse stakeholders in communities across the state, the Institute conducts collaborative and applied research to identify and promote early childhood practices and policies that support its mission—to transform the lives of young children by improving their learning and development.

The Institute’s research efforts are grounded in the following values:

- Equity
- Engagement with partners and/or stakeholders
- Rigorous methodology
- Using data to inform early childhood systems change

In alignment with these values, and with a focus on informing decision-making in Nebraska’s early childhood system and beyond, the Institute investigates factors that support quality early care and education for all children. Research is prioritized according to four areas of inquiry:

- Workforce Well-Being
- Equitable Evaluation in Systems Change
- Research-Practice Partnerships
- Data Utilization

Each of these research priorities is described below.

Workforce Well-Being

Across Nebraska, families rely on our state’s early childhood workforce to provide the types of warm, caring interactions that are the hallmark of quality early care and education. All too often, however, Nebraska’s early childhood professionals—like their colleagues across the country—are underpaid and undervalued for the work they do. The low wages and insufficient professional supports contribute to high turnover rates and high rates of depression among the early childhood workforce. If we are to recruit and retain the early childhood workforce we need, Nebraska and the nation must make changes in our early childhood systems to ensure

early child professionals are adequately prepared and equitably compensated and supported in their work.

To inform these changes, the Institute conducts research on policies and practices related to workforce quality, funding, and public engagement, with a particular focus on elevating the well-being of the early childhood workforce. Current efforts include:

- **Ecology of Early Childhood Professional Well-Being.** Studies are underway to examine the circumstances required to more adequately support the early childhood workforce, including early childhood teachers and leaders of early childhood programs. Factors being considered include financial security, mental health, physical health, compensation, and workplace supports. The Early Childhood Professional Well-Being Ecological Framework that has been developed to guide this research identifies contextual and individual elements that impact the well-being of the early childhood workforce (Gallagher, Roberts, & Rousseau, 2018).
- **COVID Provider Survey.** In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Institute designed and disseminated a series of surveys with early childhood providers to better understand the impacts of the pandemic and to inform state policy and practice. These surveys led to national collaborations intended to demonstrate how research of this kind can be leveraged for social change (Gallagher, Daro, & Huddleston-Casas, 2021). Efforts are underway to create survey modules to facilitate the regular use of workforce surveys going forward.

Equitable Evaluation in Systems Change

To ensure each child in Nebraska has access to quality early childhood education and other essential services, changes need to be made in statewide early childhood systems. In collaboration with partners across the state, the Institute conducts research to document structural changes that are needed and the processes by which those changes will take place. This involves tracking indicators and using established measures to assess impact, as well as using a relational approach to engage stakeholders throughout the process (Urban et al., 2021). Evaluation approaches and tools include developmental evaluation, principles-focused evaluation, and community action research.

Research efforts focus on identifying and promoting equitable evaluation methods to inform early childhood systems change. Current efforts include:

- **Evaluation Network Team.** The Institute collaborates with state agencies and other partners to support assessment, planning, and evaluation efforts for the Nebraska Preschool Development Grant Birth–Five initiative. In this context, we are researching the processes and structures that help us understand how systems change can be evaluated. Statewide evaluation stakeholders, defined as program and evaluation professionals for early childhood efforts, convene monthly to co-create values, principles, processes, and tools for equitable evaluation.

By addressing quality and equity simultaneously, we are researching how we evaluate and

learn from the evaluation process in early childhood systems. Among the topics raised by this dual focus on quality and equity are the following: establishing an equity action agenda, incorporating inquiry regarding changes in evaluative thinking, elements of systems change, part-whole relationships, static and dynamic processes, incorporation of multiple perspectives, and examination of system boundaries.

Research-Practice Partnerships

The Institute is committed to conducting applied research in collaboration with partners across Nebraska who have a vested interest in promoting equitable changes in early childhood systems at the community, regional, and state levels. Partnership-based research can take many forms and is often more broadly labeled as Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs). RPPs are participatory-based research approaches that involve research activity conducted alongside or with partners. The definition of RPPs has evolved from being recognized as a *long-term, mutualistic* collaboration focused on *problems of practice* (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013) to *long-term* collaborations that work toward *improvement and/or equitable transformation* through engagement in *research as the leading activity* (Farrell, Penuel, Coburn, Daniel, & Steup, 2021). Recognizing this evolution is important for the Institute, as equity is one of the underlying values of our research priorities, all of which pursue improvement and/or equitable transformation of early childhood systems.

With a focus on advancing partnership-based research to improve early childhood systems, current efforts include:

- **Establishing an internal research-practice partnership team.** The internal RPP team will build Institute knowledge and capacity to engage in RPPs internally and externally, using research as the leading activity in support of improving and transforming early childhood systems. The RPP team will position the Institute to become a recognized leader in advancing knowledge about partnership-based research that is focused on transforming early childhood systems in order to maximize the impact of our work.
- **Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale.** Aligned with the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan, the *Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale (ACSES)* project engaged research and program partners in a pilot study designed to contribute to the development of a promising measure of classroom equity. Going forward, we seek to establish the infrastructure to facilitate an RPP among the Institute, the Learning Community, and districts participating in the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan to guide a program of research focused on problems of practice.
- **Developing an instructional toolkit.** Working in partnership with the Professional Learning team and early childhood professionals, researchers are helping to develop and refine an instructional toolkit for use across early childhood programs.

Data Utilization

To help policymakers make informed decisions about how to equitably improve the state's early childhood systems, the Institute leads efforts to address research and evaluation questions using

integrated early childhood data. As a leader of the Nebraska Early Childhood Integrated Data

System (ECIDS) team and the Nebraska Early Childhood Data Coalition (ECDC), the Institute is in a strong position to partner with stakeholders to pursue critical research questions using administrative data systems. The Institute is also engaged in numerous activities involving the collection of data via surveys and other means, including direct observations, focus groups, and interviews. This data can be combined with administrative data to conduct applied research.

Going forward, the Institute seeks to link data sources of various types to create richer data sets for addressing questions of interest. Current research focuses on facilitating the use of integrated data to inform early childhood systems change, as follows:

Building capacity to use integrated data to inform systems change. Currently, Institute researchers are building capacity to use integrated data through efforts related to the Preschool Development Grant Birth–Five (PDG) and the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan. In service of these initiatives, data management, analytic, and reporting systems have been developed and are being utilized to inform research and evaluation questions.

Works Cited

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