The Apprenticeship Model at The Playing Field: Evaluating Opportunities for Educator Preparation in Early Care and Education

Prepared by Emily Evans Fanaeian

April 2025

Project Background

In the field of Early Care and Education (ECE), the quality of instruction for educators is heavily influenced by the level of support provided to them, particularly in the early stages of their careers. One emerging model that seeks to improve the professional development of ECE educators is the apprenticeship model, which integrates hands-on experiences with structured learning. In the past, apprenticeship programs focused on the development of workers for skilled trades that are well-compensated and in high demand, such as electricians and plumbers. More recently, this model has been adapted and applied to human services sectors, including education and behavioral health. Despite the growing interest in apprenticeship programs for ECE, there is limited research on how employers—whether school systems, childcare centers, or community organizations—effectively support educators within this framework.[1]

This report explores the key differences between early childhood educators enrolled in an apprenticeship program and those pursuing an associate's degree through a local community college, particularly in relation to the level of support provided by their employers. It examines how mentorship, resources, training, and organizational culture vary across these two pathways and the impact they have on educators' development. By focusing on the variable assistance provided by employers in each context, this study aims to uncover how these factors influence the effectiveness of the training and the long-term success of early childhood educators, ultimately contributing to the improvement of early childhood education practices.

The Playing Field

The Playing Field is a unique non-profit childcare center located in Madison, Wisconsin whose central mission is to serve families by breaking down the barriers that low-income families face when accessing high-quality early care and education. Begun as the brainchild of Abbi Kruse, founder and executive director of The Playing Field (*TPF*), educators and administrators at the center are committed to ensuring equitable opportunities for all children, and creating an environment that supports both the educational growth of children and the professional development of educators.

Kruse's dream for her new childcare center was to respond to needs seen in the community during her previous tenure at Reach Dane (an organization overseeing Head Start and Early Head Start Programs in Madison, WI) as well as with her

[1] Totenhagen, C. J., Hawkins, S. A., Casper, D. M., Bosch, L. A., Hawkey, K. R., & Borden, L. M. (2016). Retaining early childhood education workers: A review of the empirical literature. *Journal of research in childhood education*, *30*(4), 585-599.

experiences working at or leading other early childhood programs and centers in the area. Rather than recreating the wheel by designing a ground-breaking program that might eventually become inaccessible to the families who needed it most, Kruse aimed to explore novel ideas that would ensure equitable access to high-quality and trauma-informed care and education.[2] This included prioritizing families experiencing financial difficulties or homelessness, a population whose children often lack access to stability offered by high-quality programs.[3] Further, Kruse made it central to her program's mission to serve children who were often at high risk of expulsion in traditional centers by centering the curriculum around trauma sensitive care and Conscious Discipline®, which focuses on building social and emotional skills to support positive behavior and reduce the likelihood of expulsion.[4]

Additionally, Kruse has sought to partner with both Head Start and Early Head Start, as well as private-pay clients, to integrate varied funding streams and ensure sustainability and broad accessibility for families across the socioeconomic spectrum.[5] This braided funding allows for a diverse enrollment model, where approximately one third of students are funded by Head Start/Early Head Start, one third of students receive financial assistance to help bridge the gap between childcare subsidies and the true cost of care, and one third of enrolled families pay the full cost tuition. Space for children from each prospective funding stream is set aside intentionally as a means to maintain diverse enrollment.

While each of these ideas are worthy of extended commentary and consideration, the focal point of this report centers around *The Playing Field's* commitment to ongoing staff development. Indeed, the mission statement on the *TPF* website minces no words about this organizational value: "taking care of children begins with taking care of teachers."[6] For Kruse and her colleagues, 'taking care of teachers' means not just ensuring low student ratios. It means more than offering their employees higher than average wages (for example, beginning apprentices earn at least $17/hour, which is

---

[2] Ginsberg, M. (2016, September 15). Fair play: A new center promises quality child care for all. *Isthmus*. Available: https://isthmus.com/news/cover-story/the-playing-field-promises-quality-child-care-for-all/

[3] Wright, T., Ochrach, C., Blaydes, M., & Fetter, A. (2021). Pursuing the promise of preschool: An exploratory investigation of the perceptions of parents experiencing homelessness. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *49*(6), 1021-1030.

[4] Malik, R. (2017, November 6). *New data reveal 250 preschoolers are suspended or expelled every day*. Center for American Progress. Available: https://www.americanprogress.org/article/new-data-reveal-250-preschoolers-suspended-expelled-every-day/

[5]Stockstill, C. and Potter, H. (November 18, 2024). Mixing Early Head Start and Private-Pay Tuition at a Wisconsin Early Childhood Program. *The Century Foundation.* Available: https://tcf.org/content/commentary/mixing-early-head-start-and-private-pay-tuition-at-a-wisconsin-early-childhood-program/

[6] *Mission Statement*. The Playing Field. (2024, October 31). https://playingfieldmadison.org/mission/

over 30% higher than the average starting pay for early childhood educators in the greater-Madison area). Beyond financial compensation and manageable class sizes, the approach taken by *TPF* also emphasizes continuous, high-quality staff development and a supportive work environment that empowers educators to grow, feel valued, and make a lasting impact on the children they educate.

In 2022, *TPF* applied for and received a *Dream Up!* Grant from Wisconsin's Department of Children and Families. The goal of this grant was to address concerns around staffing shortages in early care and education by offering paid internships, flexible schedules, and necessary instructional hours, including a paid practicum experience for individuals pursuing careers in ECE. Four apprentices were accepted to the pilot program, recruited from current and prospective employees who expressed interest in furthering their education with the support of their employer. As part of this grant, an evaluation of the project outcomes was required, with a focus on assessing the successes and strengths of the apprenticeship component. Since apprentices for *TPF* enrolled in coursework at a local institution (Madison College) for the formal instruction component of their program, an additional complementary set of participants taking courses in ECE at Madison College were also recruited to serve as a comparison group for the study.

Theoretical Framing

Guided by Bronfenbrenner's (2001) Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model,[7] a refined version of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, we examined the support and development of ECE educators within an apprenticeship program, looking at relationships and interactions between these individuals and their environments as key drivers of development. This framework allowed us to highlight the interplay of *proximal processes* (e.g., mentoring, coaching, collaborative learning), *individual characteristics* (e.g., previous employment, prior education, personal beliefs), *environmental contexts* (e.g., employers, organizational culture, course requirements), and *time*, to better understand the influence professional development may have had on an individual educator.

Methods

This qualitative study utilized an inductive approach to explore and contrast the experiences of individuals participating in *The Playing Field* center's apprentice staff development program (n=4) alongside the experiences of individuals enrolled

[7] Bronfenbrenner, U. (2001). The bioecological theory of human development. In J. J. Smelser & P. B. Baltes (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences* (Vol. *10*, pp. 6963–6970). Elsevier

separately in Madison College's Early Childhood Education Associate Degree program (n=3). An inductive approach to qualitative research, as described by Corbin et al. (2015),[8] involves generating theories or patterns through systematic data collection and analysis, where researchers allow themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than testing predefined hypotheses. This approach was appropriate for this small-scale study of program effectiveness because it allowed for a more nuanced exploration of participants' lived experiences and perspectives, enabling the researcher to identify emerging themes and patterns related to the program's impact, over time.

Recruitment and data collection occurred over a 14-month period, from November 2023 to January 2025, with online surveys administered at the beginning and interim stages of the study, followed by final semi-structured exit interviews with each participant. Participation of *TPF* Apprentices was facilitated by *TPF* administrators, who offered release time during the workday for completing surveys and participating in interviews. Recruitment of additional study participants from Madison College, to serve as a "control group" of individuals pursuing coursework and employment outside of *TPF* occurred through the use of posters on campus which advertised the study, as well as through an approved email solicitation by the degree's program administrator and several faculty members. Madison College participants were offered a stipend for their complete participation in the study.

Across the two groups (both *TPF* Apprentices and Madison College students), all seven participants were female between the ages of 18 and 44. Participants self-identified as four White women, two Asian women, and one Black woman. Three of the participants were parents of small children, two of these participants indicated that they were a single parent household. Five of the seven participants indicated that they were currently employed as ECE educators full-time; one additional participant indicated that she was employed part-time at a child care center and the remaining participant was actively seeking employment. Among the seven research participants, three had previously completed a four-year degree in fields complementary to ECE (such as Sociology, Social Work, or Psychology) and one additional participant had completed a two-year degree. Two participants indicated prior enrollment in college-level coursework, but without the completion of a four-year degree. Three of the participants indicated plans to transfer credits from their current program of study into a four-year degree program, reflecting their intent to continue advancing their education and career in the field.

Participant data, gathered through surveys and interviews, were analyzed to identify emerging themes and patterns related to their experiences in the program. Figure 1

[8] Corbin, J., Strauss, A. L., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research*. London: Sage.

identifies study participants[9] representing the perspectives of both Madison College students and *TPF* Apprentices. Due to the small sample size, further disaggregation will not be provided to offer anonymity to participants.

Madison College Participants	**"Kayla"**	**Key demographic characteristics:** ● All female participants ● Between the ages of 18 and 44 ● Four White, two Asian, and one Black participant ● **3 of 7** were parents themselves; 2 of these were heads of single-parent households ● **5 of 7** currently worked in ECE full-time ● **4 of the 7** had either a two or four-year degree ● **2 of the 7** had previous enrollment in college-level coursework ● **3 of the 7** planned to transfer credits into a four-year degree program
	"Tori"	
	"Hana"	
***TPF* Apprentices**	**"Ruby"**	
	"Amber"	
	"Pearl"	
	"Coral"	

Figure 1: Study participants by site and key demographic characteristics.

With a small sample size, findings from this study are not fully representative of all degree programs or apprenticeship opportunities. Nonetheless, these findings provide valuable insights into the diversity and commonalities within ECE apprenticeship models, shedding light on how employers support their apprentices through both structured professional development and practical experience. One possible limitation of the study is its reliance on self-reported data, which, while appropriate for capturing participants' experiences and perspectives, may be subject to biases such as the tendency to present oneself in a favorable light or memory recall issues. Despite these limitations, this approach allows participants to share their subjective experiences, beliefs, and self-assessments in their own words, which is crucial for understanding their internal processes, motivations, and sense of personal growth. Since self-efficacy and personal beliefs are inherently individual, self-reports offer valuable, firsthand accounts that can illuminate how participants perceive their development and the effectiveness of the program.

Findings

At the time when initial data was collected, all participants were just beginning either the degree program at Madison College or just entering into the apprenticeship at *TPF*. Coursework required by the degree advertised on the Madison College Website[10] consists of 20 three-credit courses, recommended to be taken over the course of four

[9] All names provided in this report are pseudonyms, to protect the identity of participants.
[10] https://madisoncollege.edu/academics/programs/early-childhood-education#curriculum

semesters. These courses, which could be taken in-person, fully online, or in a hybrid setting, included topics such as “Infant and Toddler Development,” “Early Language and Literacy,” and “Family and Community Relations.” For Madison College students, an additional three-credit practicum (field experience) was required each semester, for a total of four practicums. During practicums, Madison College students were required to have a site-based mentor (such as an experienced co-worker) and were also assigned a practicum supervisor hired by the college to come and observe them periodically onsite. Practicum placements could be proposed by the student (e.g., their current place of employment), or arranged with the recommendations of practicum supervisors.

For *TPF* Apprentices, coursework was offered exclusively online, although initially with some in-person on-site support from a staff member at Madison College hired using grant funding to offer tutoring/support to apprentices. Since this was Madison College’s first attempt to work with a cohort of apprentices (from *TPF* and at least two additional sites), information about which courses would be required, their proposed sequence, expectations about assignments, and the timings of these offerings was not publicly available beyond information shared with apprentices and *TPF* administration.[11]

Based on a review of course documents, coursework for Apprentices was reduced from 20 three-credit courses to 8 three-credit courses. None of the six General Education requirements from the Associate’s Degree program (e.g., “Written Communication,” “Introduction to Diversity Studies,” etc.) were included in the approved plan of study for apprentices. Three additional three-credit courses in ECE were eliminated from the apprentices’ course sequence: “ECE: STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics),” “ECE: Family & Community Relations,” and “ECE: Children with Different Abilities.” Lastly, the revised requirements also called for just one required practicum course (“Introductory Practicum and Preschool Practicum - Credit for Prior Learning Portfolio”) rather than the four practicum experiences found in the associate’s degree. While supervised field experiences outside of their center were not officially a component of the apprenticeship program, *TPF* administrators were reported to observe and debrief/reflect organically with *TPF* Apprentices on an ongoing basis.

Participants from both Madison College and the *TPF* Apprentices initially reported mostly high degrees of satisfaction with their coursework on survey questions related to support from instructors and administrators, or practicum supervisors. One notable outlier to these responses was from one *TPF* Apprentices who expressed concerns over support offered from Madison College for fieldwork requirements. No additional comments were provided to add context about this rating, however, since *TPF* Apprentices did not have to participate in the same practicums as Madison College students, this may have been an attempt by that participant to point this out to the

[11] M. Hebner, personal communication, March 14, 2025.

researchers. In Figure 2, participant responses to selected survey questions related to program satisfaction are provided, separated by program (Madison College = yellow; *TPF* = green), and by response (SD-Strongly Disagree; D-Disagree; A-Agree; SA-Strongly Agree).

Survey Questions	SD	D	A	SA
Q16: "I feel there is sufficient support for me to do my best work in my classes from the instructors and administrators at Madison College."			1 of 3	2 of 3
			1 of 4	3 of 4
Q17: "I feel there is sufficient support for me to do my best work in my classes from the mentor teachers and administrators at my practicum site."			2 of 3	1 of 3
			2 of 4	2 of 4
Q18a: "I am satisfied with the level of experience and expertise of my instructors at Madison College."			1 of 3	2 of 3
			1 of 4	3 of 4
Q18b: "Madison College offers sufficient support for practicum/fieldwork requirements."			1 of 3	2 of 3
	1 of 4		1 of 4	2 of 4
Q18c: "I believe I am receiving practical knowledge from my courses that I can apply directly to my teaching."			1 of 3	2 of 3
			1 of 4	3 of 4

Figure 2: Survey responses separated by program and rating level.

Following these initial impressions, both sets of participants were given the opportunity to share opinions about their coursework and instructors during their final interviews.

Perspectives from Madison College Participants

Overall, Madison College students spoke highly of the quality of their classes. Students noted that their instructors were transparent regarding communication and brought a lot of their own personal experiences into the classroom. Participants also shared examples about what they found most helpful as well as the applicability of what they learned.

> *"I really like the Intro to Diversity class. I feel like that was really, really nice, cause it kind of lets you see all aspects of people….I was able to use some of that to, like, teach in the classroom too. You know, bringing in new dolls and new posters and that kind of stuff, too, that just kind of gives kids more of a broader vision of the world around them."* (Tori, Madison College participant)

> *"To be honest, the Infant Development class that I'm taking right now [has been the most helpful], learning about the kiddos brains and how important it is to understand, how so much happens in the first beginning years and how they're learning. I'm learning a lot about that!* (Hana, Madison College participant)

Madison College students also spoke highly of their instructors' qualifications and approachability. Specifically, Madison College students shared quite a bit about the level of hands-on support they received from their practicum supervisors. For instance, Madison College faculty gave a lot of input about the site selection for their placements:

> *"My practicum advisor, she wants me to branch out a little bit just cause she thinks I'm a little bit more advanced than some of the other students, just cause I've been in childcare for so long. I was able to do one placement [at my job], but the next one I'll do at a different center."* (Tori, Madison College participant)

> *"I had to do my practicum and I wanted to use my job as my practicum site but my [practicum supervisor] was like, 'oh no!' She looked at reviews and saw they had been in trouble with the state a couple of times. I was like, 'oh my God. Is it that bad?' Yeah, so I couldn't even use [my job] as the practicum site."* (Hana, Madison College participant)

A different participant shared how emotional she felt about receiving support from a practicum supervisor at the end of a challenging field experience placement:

> *"Friday was the last day in this placement. And literally, we just hugged each other and I cried and she cried and I felt like, "wow, that's exactly what I needed after the experience that I had so far in this field here." And I couldn't ask for a better place to be, a better teacher, to have as a mentor teacher. She was the best."* (Kayla, Madison College participant)

The perspectives shared by Madison College participants indicate general satisfaction with their program of study. Participants praised the quality and applicability of their coursework, as well as the support provided by their instructors and practicum supervisors. Overall, students appear to have felt well-prepared and supported throughout their learning experiences during their coursework.

There was, however, more variation in their fieldwork experiences, where two of the three participants noted problematic issues at the centers where they were employed or obtaining hands-on experience. Tori's experiences at her center differed from that of Hana or Kayla in that she was employed there before deciding to begin the ECE Associate's Degree program at Madison College. Her employer not only offered her the

flexibility of scheduling she needed to take her course, but also helped her research and secure funding from a TEACH scholarship to help subsidize the cost of her studies.[12] Tori also reported an excellent working relationship with her center's Associate Director, who joined her in the classroom she was assigned for her practicum hours.

> *"During my practicum hours, she was in the room with me, and whenever my [supervisor] came, she was in there too. We kind of worked together. I mean, I was obviously learning from her and everything but there were things that she was learning from me too. And so I think that's really, really cool that we were able to kind of create that bond."* (Tori, Madison College participant)

Hana (mentioned above who was not able to do her placement at her place of employment), said she had heard of but not applied for scholarships. When asked, she could not identify or describe an individual at her place of employment who could serve as a mentor to her. She told about differences between her place of employment and her practicum site and how when she made suggestions to try to improve things at her job that she was shut down.

> *"I noticed how they do things differently and I think it actually works better than how they do things at [my job]. So for example, [at placement] they give the kids chances to use their motor skills as far as serving themselves, whereas [at my job] they don't allow the kids to serve themselves. Even though the kids are four and five year olds, they're serving the kids. I have pointed that out…like, 'why don't you use multiple containers and put them out so they can self serve'…and they say 'well, the kids make a mess' and things like that. So I try not to put my two cents in over there at [my job] because it seemed like the things that I tried to recommend or whatnot, they look at me like "oh, because she's in school, she know this…"* (Hana, Madison College participant)

Kayla, was initially placed in an infant and toddler room for her first Field Experience, where she not only reported experiencing some racial discrimination, but also saw the mentor educator assigned to her in her placement doing the exact opposite of what she was learning in her classes:

> *"In my practicum place[ment], I worked with a teacher that don't (sic) have this knowledge and it was exactly the opposite of the positive guidelines. He told me I was "too motherly." Maybe I am…but for 12-18 months there is no "too motherly," in my opinion. I couldn't change it and I won't change it.. I feel like that's what [the babies] need. They need warmth….they just need someone to be there, to hold them, to be kind to them…really, I didn't connect with the*

[12] https://wisconsinearlychildhood.org/programs/t-e-a-c-h/

> *teacher there. I left there with heavy feelings about my future in this field."* (Kayla, Madison College participant)

With the support of her practicum supervisor, Kayla made it through the placement and went on to describe having more supportive experiences in a different center for her future placements. At the time of our final interview, she was preparing for job interviews at several centers recommended by her supervisor and hopeful that she would find a job which would allow her to be paid and to complete her field experiences in-house.

Perspectives from *TPF* Apprentices

One significant difference between the experiences of Madison College participants and *TPF* Apprentices was how they viewed coursework in relation to their employment. Specifically, the *TPF* Apprentices tended to largely see courses as part of what was expected of them as employees rather than an additional thing they were doing in addition to (or outside of) their work. This belief was reinforced by *TPF* administrators, who attempted to consistently offer apprentices approximately 10 hours of release time each week during their scheduled work hours (initially on-site but later at home) to study and complete their coursework. *TPF* Apprentices were grateful for the support but also quick to point out the challenges of this job-embedded approach to learning.

> *"Working while going to school has both been a challenge but also given me real world scenarios to apply to the work I am doing in the classroom." (*Pearl, *TPF* Apprentice)

> *"Doing an apprenticeship as a teacher there is hard, due to low staff and ratio sometimes."* (Coral, *TPF* Apprentice)

Unlike their Madison College counterparts, the experiences of *TPF* Apprentices with course content and instructors were different, with fewer mentions of instructor experience or quality. Since all courses for *TPF* Apprentices were delivered online, asynchronously, they may not have opportunities to feel as connected with instructors. Instead of quality, efficiency and organization were referenced positively:

> *"What helped is I know what to expect, like it's always like every Friday this is due and every Sunday this is due. [The instructor] was very consistent, very accessible, and very much stuck to the syllabus. (*Pearl, *TPF* Apprentice)

Frustrations surfaced, however, when at least some of the *TPF* Apprentices began to feel that the goal for courses became more about task-completion than deep learning.

> *We had a class where the workload was just so many tasks to do. And it wasn't that the work was hard. It was just like answering the same question 15 different times in 15 slightly different ways. And figuring out what, what we were supposed to be answering was really hard. What we heard is that we were doing too much. Which was…odd to hear that 'you're trying too hard' when we care about the work that we put in and the quality of the work that we're doing because we care about this field and the profession. So the feedback was that, 'you're trying too hard.' 'You're spending too much time on it.' 'Don't think too hard about it.' This kind of left a sour taste in my mouth. Honestly it felt like the goal then is not to produce high quality educators. It's to push as many educators through the program as possible*." *(*Ruby*, TPF* Apprentice)

(It should be noted that Ruby's concern, as quoted above, was with Madison College staff and instructors, not her employer). Other apprentices echoed these concerns and indicated that they raised these concerns with *TPF* administrators, who responded by trying to allow for additional release time around big assignments. In addition, at least one instructor at Madison College allowed the apprentices who requested extra time to complete course assignments by giving them an Incomplete.

Another difference between Madison College participants and *TPF* Apprentices can be seen in the role of a tutor hired by *TPF* (using grant funds) who had availability for on-site support of coursework. At the beginning of the apprenticeship program, a Madison College staff member visited the center on-site weekly to tutor/teach content and allowed *TPF* Apprentices to complete some of their assignments with her (for example, discussion board postings in the online course) instead of with the instructor of record for their classes. While this initially was well received, it also became confusing for *TPF* Apprentices to coordinate what they learned with the tutor and what they were still responsible to complete with their instructor.

> *I think when we started the apprenticeship, it kind of worked out where [the tutor] was communicating [with our instructor] to be like, 'What can I have them do? For example, we'd have discussions and I'll count it and just let you know how they do.' But it just didn't work out the next time we tried doing it with the other teacher. It got too messy, so I was like, how about we just stick with what the professor was going to do? And get back to our own individual responsibility as students? Yeah, it just got very unorganized. (*Coral*, TPF* Apprentice)

Although non-apprentice students were also enrolled in the same courses, *TPF* Apprentices described the benefits of going through classes with their co-workers. Taking the class as a cohort allowed them to extend the conversations outside of the online discussion boards, and add authentic interactions back into their experience.

> *"Working with other students in the same classes who work at the same center allows us all to process what we are learning through the work experiences we have in ways that are more tangible. We have a shared understanding and the ability to learn from each other on a day to day basis because of this program."* (Ruby, *TPF* Apprentice)

> *"This is gonna sound bad but I don't typically engage with people [in online discussions] more than I have to just because it's extra time... In (some) classes I have taken, they have been like, okay, "post and then respond to people for points.' It becomes artificial and it feels like I'm doing it to get points and not because I'm actually interested in engaging with a dialogue. I think a lot of the time, why I default to responding to [other apprentices] is because it's usually something we've talked about throughout the week, too, like if we are talking about our homework. They usually post a question or something that we actually talked about. I actually have feedback for that." (*Amber, *TPF* Apprentice)

> *"In some classes, you have a lot of opportunities to speak to each other in a meaningful way. In some cases not; like a discussion post can be kind of like exactly speaking to a wall a little bit. I did get to experience some group projects, which I was a little bit anxious about because [I was worried about] how are we gonna coordinate things? Are we gonna have to zoom? But we didn't even have to zoom - they were just emailing back and forth and the work got done."* (Pearl, *TPF* Apprentice*)*

In addition to the course content offered by Madison College, *TPF* Apprentices were given access to a lot of ongoing staff development offered by their administration. One area of intense staff development at *The Playing Field*, is their focus on Conscious Discipline, which emphasizes emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and creating a safe, connected learning environment. All new staff participate in a ten-session e-Course, which includes group video viewing, reflection and journaling, followed by a session to share insights. Led by *TPF* Program Director Michelle Henner, this e-Course has been found to not only enhance classroom skills, but also strengthens relationships among staff, with consistently positive feedback from participants. Following the e-Course, participants also are invited to attend a multi-day training on-site or even apply for a week-long conference of other Conscious Discipline practitioners. Several *TPF* Apprentices mentioned this as a focal area during their interviews, even though it was outside the scope of Madison College course content.

> *"I got a lot of really constructive feedback during our e-Course as well. I had a lot of opportunities to workshop problems and be like, I don't know, you're telling me this is supposed to work, but it's not working. And then they're like, 'well, this is because you're doing it this way.' I had not been exposed to any centers*

> *before who prioritized staff development in the way that The Playing Field does. I was definitely not expecting to come here and get any formal education beyond the apprenticeship program." (Amber, TPF Apprentice)*

While during the course of data collection for this study *TPF* Apprentices did not have formal practicum support in the form of supervisors from Madison College, they did feel like they had access to frequent informal mentoring from their administrators.

> *"There's so much support from [administration]; they're in and out of the classroom all the time. They've tried their best to give us heads up about what's gonna happen and they're pretty transparent about it." (Coral, TPF* Apprentice)

> *"[Our administrator] is very hands-on. Like she is in each classroom, probably at least once a day, even if it's just for a few minutes to touch base. But you know, she's saying hi to the kids and changing a diaper or whatever. She's very present. I feel like feedback doesn't come a ton, unless there's something to be given feedback about. It's just done in a very personable way. So it feels more like a conversation not that someone's in the classroom with a clipboard writing down notes about what you're doing. It's more like, 'I will be in here and I'll model for you what something else could look like.' And if it's something that really needs to be discussed, there will be a discussion about it later. But as a very gentle conversation rather than 'let's talk about your job performance.'" (Ruby, TPF* Apprentice)

Overall, *TPF* Apprentices also had very different employment experiences than the Madison College students. While working at The Playing Field, all *TPF* Apprentices noted that the administration was very supportive of them both as individuals and as employees. They shared instances when they were offered extra flexibility for release time - realizing that it was a two-way street of flexibility.

> *The Playing Field is a great advocate for children with adverse experiences, and as a result is extremely supportive of teachers facing adverse experiences of life situations that could interrupt the work day. However, sometimes it seems that the admin team would greatly benefit from having one more person on their team to balance the extreme workload…there is simply not enough time or resources between them to solve problems quickly or efficiently.* (Amber, *TPF* Apprentice)

> *"I didn't think I would ever take the opportunity to [tell administration], 'Hey, I don't actually need all those hours [to study] this week," but I really did. I think that also builds trust both ways, right?. The administration is seeing that she's not, just running with this. 'It's free time, but she's giving back when she can and*

then we can give when we can.' I think that it adds trust to both sides." (Pearl, *TPF* Apprentice)

Comparing Experiences of TPF Apprentices and Madison College Students

It is clear from the narrative data shared that a lot of differences exist between these two groups of participants. Madison College students had access to more support from dedicated practicum supervisors and were required to take more coursework, which gave them access to more practical and theoretical knowledge from their instructors. Support from the employers of Madison College students varied, both in terms of tangible support (such as paying for classes and their wages) as well as flexibility and mentoring or modeling of best-practices in ECE. Madison College students had the flexibility to select in-person, online and hybrid formats for their classes. While there was mention of forming trusting relationships with instructors and/or supervisors, none of these participants mentioned sustained interaction or collaboration with other classmates.

On the other hand, *TPF* Apprentices received tangible support from their employer that was both financial (paid time to complete coursework and the promise of higher wages as the program progressed) and in the form of access to a paid tutor. The requirements for their program of study were significantly reduced, and all practicum requirements for fieldwork could be completed in-house. *TPF* Apprentices moved through the program together as a cohort, able to bounce ideas off of each other and complete assignments together. Most coursework was completed in an online, asynchronous format. Onsite mentoring and support from their employer was readily available.

One further point of comparison between the Madison College students and the *TPF* Apprentices is a set of five questions that participants were asked on the initial survey and again during their exit interviews. Participants were asked to rate their confidence for each of the statements, with 1 being low and 10 being a high level of confidence. Responses to all five questions were then averaged to create an initial and final confidence level for each participant. Given the small sample size of each group, the results do not show a statically significant change in confidence level (calculated t-statistics are smaller than t-values at the 0.05 significance level).

Despite this, several participants in the *TPF* Apprenticeship group showed positive changes in confidence, with some experiencing a noticeable boost, like Ruby, whose confidence increased from 90 to 98. This suggests that the apprenticeship model, which combines on-the-job training with structured learning, may help foster growth in self-assurance, even if this growth isn't statistically significant in this sample size. The hands-on nature of the apprenticeship may offer real-world experiences that enhance confidence. In summary, while the changes in confidence levels were not statistically

significant, the individual stories and growth reported by participants offer valuable insights into the potential impact of the educational models, suggesting positive outcomes that may become more evident with a larger sample size or over a longer period. Results can be found in Figure 3, below, with initial and final raw numerical responses from the survey indicated on the chart as “Initial:Final.”

TPF Apprentices	Ruby	Coral	Amber	Pearl
I feel confident that I can support the health and safety of the children in my care.	9:10	9:9	9:8	9:9
I feel confident that I can support the health and safety of the children in my care.	9:10	7:9	7:7	9:9
I feel confident that I can support the educational development of the children in my care.	9:10	7:9	9:9	9:10
I feel confident that I can support the social and emotional development of children in my care.	9:10	9:9	9:9	9:9
I feel confident that I can successfully engage with families.	9:8 or 9	5:8	5:7	9:9
Change in Confidence Level	90→98%	74→88%	78→80%	90→92%

Madison College Participants	Tori	Hana	Kayla
I feel confident that I can support the health and safety of the children in my care.	9:8	7:8	7:8
I feel confident that I can support the health and safety of the children in my care.	9:10	7:10	5:9
I feel confident that I can support the educational development of the children in my care.	9:8	7:10	5:8
I feel confident that I can support the social and emotional development of children in my care.	9:9	7:10	7:9
I feel confident that I can successfully engage with families.	9:10	7:8	5:9
Change in Confidence Level	90→90%	70→92%	58→86%

Figure 3: Initial and final participant responses to Q34, separated by program.

Recommendations

To support Early Childhood Education programs in implementing an apprenticeship model, several recommendations can help address the challenges identified by participants, administrators, and other stakeholders. First, it is crucial to clarify roles and boundaries, by ensuring clear communication and well-defined responsibilities for instructors, program administrators, and participants. Locally, this can be achieved by designating a higher education liaison specifically for the apprenticeship program, who would handle advising and not instructional duties. Providing personalized support through dedicated advising rather than overburdening instructors will also ensure apprentices receive the guidance they need. Clear communication between ECE programs and higher education partners is essential, with proactive planning and regular check-ins to address logistical needs and avoid last-minute surprises. Additionally, participants also felt it was important that administrators fully understand the level of commitment required for successful participation in online courses. One effective approach could be encouraging administrators to take an online course themselves to better grasp the time, discipline, and digital skills involved.

In terms of recruitment, understanding the challenges of balancing work, study, and family obligations is key, so flexible scheduling options, such as designated study days, should be implemented. Additionally, addressing financial barriers by offering wage support or stipends for apprentices during coursework will help alleviate concerns about lost income, encouraging greater participation. It is important for programs considering apprenticeship models to be aware of the additional costs of these financial supports (such as offering paid time to complete coursework) but also to be transparent to potential apprentices about the added value that these financial incentives offer. To overcome recruitment challenges, both higher education partners and apprenticeship programs should offer clear and transparent expectations up front. Further, apprenticeship programs might wish to consider expanding apprenticeship opportunities to other sites, where apprentices can gain diverse and collaborative experiences. Regular feedback collection from all stakeholders will allow for continuous improvement of the program, ensuring its long-term success.

While implementing an apprenticeship model can be resource-intensive, early anecdotal evidence suggests it may significantly improve retention—an especially critical outcome in the ECE field, where recruiting and retaining qualified staff remains an ongoing challenge. Low wages, limited career pathways, and high burnout rates contribute to frequent turnover, making it difficult for programs to maintain continuity and quality of care. However, all *TPF* Apprentices interviewed reported plans to remain with the organization and expressed interest in pursuing advancement opportunities within it.

This sense of loyalty and long-term investment contrasts with feedback from two out of three Madison College students who were not participating in the apprenticeship model; they described feeling frustrated with their current employers and hoped to find better opportunities at different organizations. These findings suggest that apprenticeship programs may not only enhance skill development but also cultivate a stronger sense of belonging and professional growth.

To build on these promising early findings, ongoing research and data collection are essential to fully understand the impact of apprenticeship models in ECE educator preparation. A larger sample size and more longitudinal studies will help assess not only short-term changes in apprentice confidence and competence following additional support and course completion, but also the long-term effects on the children and families they serve. Tracking outcomes such as staff retention, classroom quality, and child development indicators over time will provide critical insights into the effectiveness of this approach. Continued evaluation will ensure the model evolves to meet the needs of both educators and the broader ECE community, ultimately strengthening the workforce and improving outcomes for young children.

Appendix A: Course Requirements* at Madison College

Course Requirements for Associates Degree in Early Childhood Education	Course Requirements for Apprentices in ECE
First Semester • ECE: Foundations of Early Child Education • ECE: Infant and Toddler Development • ECE: Social Studies, Art and Music • ECE:Health Safety and Nutrition • ECE: Field Experience 1 **Second Semester** • ECE: Early Language and Literacy • ECE: Child Development • ECE: Guiding Children's Behavior • ECE: Field Experience 2 • Written Communication **Third Semester** • ECE: STEM (Science, Technology, and Math) • ECE: Field Experience 3 • ECE: Family and Community Relations • Mathematical Reasoning • Introduction to Diversity Studies **Fourth Semester** • ECE: Children with Different Abilities • ECE: Field Experience 4 • Oral/Interpersonal Communications • Contemporary American Society • Psychology of Human Relations	• ECE: Foundations of Early Child Education • ECE: Health Safety and Nutrition ECE: Early Language and Literacy • ECE: Infant and Toddler Development • ECE: Child Development • ECE: Guiding Children's Behavior • ECE: Social Studies, Art and Music • ECE: Introductory Practicum and Preschool Practicum

*All courses listed are three-credit courses.