BUILDING TRAUMA-INFORMED LEADERSHIP: A FACULTY-GUIDED UNDERGRADUATE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article presents a faculty-guided undergraduate action research project that focuses on advancing trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning (SEL) in early childhood education. Rooted in a strong theoretical framework that encompasses Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, Erikson's Psychosocial Development, and the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) framework, the study addresses the urgent need for early educators to be equipped to support children experiencing trauma. Through a collaborative model that bridged university coursework and real-world engagement, an undergraduate student led a professional development initiative at a university-affiliated early learning center. The project employed a pre-survey and post-survey methodology to assess the effectiveness of the intervention among 19 early childhood professionals, including teachers, administrators, and support staff.

Findings indicated significant increases in educator confidence, trauma-related knowledge, and understanding of the importance of family engagement. Notably, the percentage of participants who felt "extremely comfortable" supporting learners struggling with self-regulation early learners rose markedly following the intervention, and the majority reported an enhanced understanding of ACEs and SEL strategies. The article reveals a significant shift in the participating early childhood professional regarding self-care and the need of family partnerships in behavioral support—two key elements of trauma-informed care.

The influence on early childhood educators is highlighted as well as the need for high-impact practices in undergraduate leadership development in education. The student investigator demonstrated competencies in research design, professional communication, problem-solving, and scholarly dissemination. Participation in regional and national conferences further expanded the student's academic and professional identity. These experiences underscored the value of embedding service learning, action research, and mentorship in early childhood teacher preparation programs.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the significance of sustained, reflective, and context-specific professional development for early childhood educators. It also reveals how faculty-student partnerships grounded in equity and community engagement can yield dual benefits: enhancing practice in early learning environments and equipping emerging leaders in the field. The authors conclude by emphasizing that trauma-informed education with a link to early childhood education, when aligned with collaborative inquiry, can transform both pedagogy and leadership pathways in early childhood education.

Keywords

Trauma-Informed Education, Early Childhood Education, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Faculty-Student Collaboration, Action Research, Professional Development, Leadership Development

Introduction

In recent years, the early childhood education (ECE) field has encountered a critical imperative: to respond effectively to the growing number of young children influenced by trauma and chronic stress. From poverty and food insecurity to vulnerability to violence and caregiver instability, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are increasingly prevalent and pose a serious threat to healthy development during the most formative years of life. Research from developmental psychology, neuroscience, and education has confirmed that unaddressed trauma can

profoundly influence children's behavior, emotional regulation, social competence, and academic readiness (Center on the Developing Child, 2021; Felitti et al., 1998). Research has identified the critical importance of integrating the implementation of trauma-informed methodologies that aid in fostering healing while also creating a culturally responsive educational space to support social-emotional development and consistent routines backed with compassionate interactions for all early learners.

Although societal issues and a national pandemic have underscored the pressing need for support, many early childhood teachers indicate they have received minimal training and therefore feeling unprepared to apply trauma-informed strategies effectively. Fragmented professional development, insufficient emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL), and high levels of educator stress further compound the challenge (Jennings, 2015; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). As schools and early learning centers increasingly serve as the first line of support for children with complex emotional and behavioral needs, it is essential to equip early childhood educators with the knowledge, tools, and relational competencies necessary to create inclusive, emotionally responsive classrooms. There is an ever-present need for targeted, evidence-based professional development that integrates ACEs research with SEL frameworks, concentrating on the well-being of both children and the adults who care for them.

This project was designed to fill a critical gap by engaging an undergraduate student, under faculty mentorship, in an action research initiative focused on the effects of trauma-informed professional development within an early learning center connected to an HBCU. Grounded in both developmental and ecological theory, the initiative sought to deepen early childhood professionals' knowledge of trauma, strengthen their ability to support the young child with challenging behaviors, and cultivate a supportive, caring environment for both families and staff. It also provided a rich possibility for undergraduate leadership development through applied research, professional dissemination, and community-based engagement.

By weaving together trauma-informed education, SEL, and equity-centered teacher preparation, this study presents a model for how institutions with early childhood teacher education programs can collaborate with professionals to address pressing real-world challenges. The findings highlight the transformative potential of faculty-student partnerships and action research in advancing trauma-responsive practice while also preparing the next generation of educators to lead with knowledge, empathy, and purpose.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Supporting the healthy development of young children—particularly those impacted by trauma—requires intentional, research-based approaches that attend to the interconnected influences of environment, experience, and emotional learning. In early childhood settings, educators play a crucial role in creating protective factors and responsive environments for children who may be experiencing the effects of ACEs. This examination draws on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, Erikson's Psychosocial Stages, foundational research on ACEs, and the framework of SEL to offer a comprehensive understanding of how early learning environments can promote resilience and well-being.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory in Early Childhood
Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory offers a comprehensive framework for examining how various layers of a child's environment interact to influence development. Bronfenbrenner's research model emphasizes that a child's growth is shaped not only by direct relationships but also by the broader context in which those relationships exist. The immediate level—which Bronfenbrenner calls the *microsystem* and which focuses on interactions with parents, caregivers, and educators—is foundational to emotional and social development. The next level—the *mesosystem*—reflects the connections among settings that help support developmental consistency, such as home and school. Beyond those two levels, the *exosystem* includes external influences that indirectly affect the child, like neighborhood conditions and local services. The most outer level—the *macrosystem*—reflects cultural norms, social policies, and systemic inequalities that shape access to resources and opportunities. Finally, the *chronosystem* depicts how developmental pathways are influenced by the timing of life events and broader historical changes.

This theory highlights the importance of nurturing, stable microsystems—such as early learning environments—as protective buffers against stressors in other domains. In this way, early childhood educators can assume the position of serving as anchors in a child's developmental system, specifically for those affected by trauma.

Attachment Theory and Emotional Safety

Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1988) beginning in the 1940s and further developed by Ainsworth in the 1960s and afterward, emphasizes that early relationships with primary caregivers are foundational to children's ability to regulate emotions, trust others, and explore the world with confidence. Children who experience

consistent, responsive caregiving are more likely to develop secure attachments, which serve as internalized models for future relationships and coping strategies. In contrast, insecure or disorganized attachments are often associated with trauma, unpredictability, and neglect—experiences frequently captured in ACEs research.

Early childhood educators can serve as secondary attachment figures by offering stable, responsive interactions, especially when children's home environments are disrupted. Research has indicated that secure attachments in early learning settings can buffer the negative effects of ACEs and promote self-regulation and resilience (Bartlett et al., 2016).

Erikson's Psychosocial Stages of Development

Erikson's (1963) psychosocial theory offers additional insight into how children develop a sense of self and agency. Two early stages are particularly relevant: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (ages 1–3) and Initiative vs. Guilt (ages 3–5). In these stages, children begin to assert independence, make choices, and develop a sense of competence. When adults support this exploration with patience and affirmation, children internalize feelings of autonomy and initiative. However, trauma and inconsistent caregiving may cause children to experience shame, guilt, or fear when attempting to act independently.

Educators can foster healthy resolution of these stages by providing emotionally safe spaces, encouraging decision-making, and responding with warmth to mistakes—all of which align with developmentally appropriate and SEL-based practices.

Adverse Childhood Experiences in the Early Years

The ACEs study (Felitti et al., 1998) identified the lasting impact of early trauma—including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction—on physical, behavioral, and emotional health. More recent research affirms that early exposure to toxic stress can impair brain development, especially in areas responsible for self-regulation and executive functioning (Center on the Developing Child, 2021). For young children, this can result in behavioral challenges, withdrawal, or delayed social skills.

Within early learning environments, trauma-responsive approaches or practices promote establishing consistent routines, which in turn provides a sense of emotional security, and nurturing strong, supportive relationships with children. When educators are trained to identify signs of trauma, they then can play a vital role in guiding children's developmental healing by offering stability and cultivating trust.

Social Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Education

Individuals who can develop skills such as emotional awareness, impulse control, empathy, and the ability to form and maintain healthy relationships are central to social-emotional learning. These abilities are especially vital during the early years, when young children are forming the core foundations that influence their future learning, behavior, and overall well-being (CASEL, 2020). Integrating SEL into preschool and early care programs has been shown to improve emotional resilience, reduce behavioral issues, and enhance school readiness (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Kahn, 2017).

For children exposed to trauma, SEL offers a pathway to healing. Through intentional modeling, role-playing, and emotional coaching, educators can help young children understand their feelings, navigate relationships, and develop healthy coping strategies. When paired with trauma-informed practices, SEL becomes a powerful tool for mitigating the developmental risks associated with ACEs.

Exploring Theoretical Synthesis: Insights and Real-World Applications

Integrating Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, Attachment Theory, Erikson's psychosocial stages, the ACEs framework, and SEL competencies provides a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate foundation for early childhood educators. Practitioners are encouraged to:

- view children's behavior through an ecological and trauma-informed lens;
- build strong, attachment-sensitive relationships with children and families;
- embed SEL into daily routines to support emotional growth and regulation; and
- promote autonomy and initiative through play, exploration, and affirming guidance.

This approach enables early learning settings to serve as stabilizing systems that foster resilience and emotional well-being, particularly for children facing adversity. Ultimately, such a framework supports the creation of classrooms where all children can thrive—emotionally, socially, and academically.

Methodology

This project was situated at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU)-affiliated early childhood learning center, where a diverse team of early childhood professionals participated in a research-based effort to improve trauma-informed practices and SEL integration. The participants involved in the action research project consisted of 13 early childhood educators, two administrative leaders with early childhood education backgrounds (including the center's director), and two individuals in support roles—one specializing in behavioral intervention and the other focused on family engagement. These early childhood educators represented a spectrum of experience, from those just entering the profession to veterans with more than 15 years in the classroom within the early childhood education sector, offering a wide range of insights into trauma-responsive education. Each participant engaged in the project voluntarily, contributing to a larger professional learning effort designed to strengthen emotional and behavioral support for young children affected by ACEs.

This initiative employed an action research methodology, a model well-suited for educational settings where practitioners and researchers collaboratively identify problems, implement interventions, and assess their impact in real time (Mertler, 2014). Action research supports cyclical inquiry, reflective practice, and local change, making it ideal for projects aimed at improving trauma-informed care in early learning environments. Additionally, the project incorporated service-learning principles by situating the undergraduate student researcher in a leadership role that bridged academic inquiry with community engagement (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The student researcher collaborated with faculty and site leaders to identify the critical issue of insufficient trauma-informed support in ECE and to design and implement a professional development intervention tailored to this context.

The intervention included a recorded professional development session titled "Mindful Practices to Promote Positive Outcomes of ACEs Toward Resiliency with SEL," along with a supporting digital toolkit. Pre- and post-training surveys were used to assess changes in participants' knowledge of trauma, confidence in working with learners struggling with self-regulation and commitment to trauma-informed practices. The survey instrument was developed using constructs informed by trauma-responsive pedagogy (Jennings, 2015; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016) and best practices in SEL integration (CASEL, 2020). A total of 19 professionals completed the pre-survey, and 21 completed the post-survey. Two pre-survey responses were excluded due to incomplete data.

The undergraduate researcher led all aspects of data collection and analysis under the guidance of a faculty mentor, with special attention to ethical considerations, confidentiality, and practical application. Throughout her final academic year, the student served as the project leader, applying insights from developmental theory, trauma literature, and coursework in early childhood education to all stages of the research. The undergraduate research student independently managed key aspects of the project, including reviewing relevant literature, creating survey instruments, developing the training session, and coordinating with participants. The student adopted an approach that reflects Bandura's (1986) theory, which highlights the significance of personal agency and self-efficacy in shaping learning and leadership—the principles that guided both the educator-focused initiative and their own growth as an emerging leader in the field of early childhood education.

The faculty mentor with a background in early childhood education played a vital role in upholding the project's academic rigor by offering guidance on the research framework, assisting with data analysis, and creating opportunities for the student to participate in professional conferences to deepen scholarly involvement. As noted in research on high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008), such mentorship experiences are crucial in supporting undergraduate research skill development and promoting academic identity. This shared leadership model empowered the student to move beyond a course-embedded project and engage in applied, equity-driven inquiry with lasting implications for early childhood practice. The collaborative research experience also aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, emphasizing that lasting educational improvement emerges through the dynamic interplay between individuals, institutional roles, and broader systemic influences working collectively to drive transformation.

Project Implementation

Throughout the duration of the project, the undergraduate research student faced several leadership challenges that required thorough problem-solving and adaptability. One significant challenge was the absence of a pre-existing framework for ACEs or SEL training at the early learning center, which necessitated the creation of original, research-informed content. Another challenge was the coordination of schedules, as early childhood staff often juggle multiple responsibilities that limit flexibility for professional development opportunities. The pre-survey responses further highlighted considerable variation in participants' prior exposure to trauma-informed approaches, indicating a clear need for professional development that accommodates different levels of knowledge and experience.

In response to these obstacles, the undergraduate student researcher adopted a collaborative, problem-solving mindset. The researcher maintained consistent communication with the site's administrative team through scheduled Microsoft Teams meetings and organized email updates. The professional development session was thoughtfully crafted to reflect the varied needs of the staff, integrating visual media, relatable classroom examples,

and explicit ties to national teaching standards. To make participation more flexible and minimize scheduling conflicts, the session was pre-recorded and distributed for asynchronous viewing, enabling early childhood education staff members to access the training at their convenience.

The project provided a platform for the research student to demonstrate a range of advanced leadership competencies. What was evident was the research student's ability to demonstrate strong communication skills through professional interactions with university leaders and early childhood staff, as well as their ability to clearly and engagingly present complex research topics. The undergraduate researcher effectively applied key teamwork and collaboration abilities throughout the project, partnering with a multidisciplinary group working on health-related research to define objectives, create shared strategies, and assess the overall impact of their efforts.

During the execution of the project, the student researcher experienced both logistical hurdles and instructional complexities, and she needed to engage in thoughtful problem-solving to create a responsive, data-driven training that directly targeted ECE staff needs and areas of limited understanding. The researcher's ability to analyze information was reflected in the careful design and interpretation of pre- and post-training surveys, which helped ensure the training's content was both meaningful and effective. The researcher also demonstrated technological proficiency using digital presentation tools, survey platforms, and resource development. Ultimately, the project reflected the student researcher's growth in educational leadership, advocacy, and reflective practice—core competencies essential for advancing equity and quality in early childhood education.

Findings and Leadership Development

By the conclusion of the grant, the results of the leadership project were measured through pre- and post-session surveys administered by ECE stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and support staff. Responses from the initial survey uncovered significant differences in participants' understanding of ACEs, with noticeable inconsistencies in their prior training and confidence levels when working with children exhibiting behavioral challenges. According to the data collected, nearly two-thirds (64%) of the participants expressed moderate to high levels of concern when supporting learners struggling with self-regulation learners, while about roughly one-third (32%) of the participants reported having minimal or no familiarity with ACEs. Additional findings concluded that 37% of respondents indicated they had never received formal training on trauma-informed approaches, underscoring the urgent need for specialized professional development in this area, especially in the realm of early childhood education. Although these deficits were evident, most participants (79%) affirmed that early childhood educational learning settings play a vital role in providing safe and supportive environments for children. The data also revealed that most respondents recognized the significant influence their professional responsibilities have on shaping young children's development.

Following the intervention—a recorded professional development session titled "Mindful Practices to Promote Positive Outcomes of ACEs Toward Resiliency with SEL"—participants completed a post-session survey to evaluate the impact of the training. The data showed marked growth across several key areas. Confidence in working with learners struggling with self-regulation learners rose dramatically, with 100% of respondents reporting feeling either somewhat or significantly comfortable, compared to the initial 64% who had expressed concern. Knowledge acquisition was also significant: 81% of respondents stated that their understanding of ACEs had increased "a great deal" because of the session.

One of the most notable shifts was in participants' recognition of the importance of family engagement. While the pre-session responses were mixed on this topic, post-session data indicated that 95% of respondents now believed families should always be consulted regarding behavioral concerns—a critical element in trauma-informed care. Additionally, the number of participants who reported being "extremely likely" to practice self-awareness for their well-being increased from 52% to 76%.

Collectively, the findings from this leadership initiative showed that well-designed professional development grounded in theory can meaningfully strengthen early childhood educators' understanding, confidence, and ability to apply trauma-informed strategies. The findings concluded that by weaving together proven instructional methods, core SEL competencies, and developmental theory, the training effectively responded to the professional learning needs of staff in an early learning setting. The project achieved its intended outcomes by boosting educator readiness, deepening trauma-responsive practices, and supporting whole-child development in early care environments.

This high-impact leadership project played a dual role by simultaneously enhancing the professional skills of early childhood educators while also supporting the undergraduate student researcher's own development as a leader. The project provided the opportunity for active engagement in research, service, and collaborative work. The research student exhibited notable intellectual growth and increasing confidence in their leadership abilities. Based on the faculty member's viewpoint, the undergraduate researcher consistently demonstrated a strong dedication to academic exploration and a growing capacity to lead with purpose and impact. What began as a course-embedded leadership initiative quickly evolved into a year-long, faculty-mentored engagement that extended well beyond the classroom boundaries.

Throughout the academic year, the student sought opportunities to expand her intellectual and professional horizons. She attended multiple education and leadership conferences, many of which were not required by her undergraduate curriculum, to further explore the intersection of trauma, resilience, and social-emotional learning in early childhood settings. These experiences exposed the student to national conversations in the field, broadened her understanding of research-based best practices, and inspired her to connect theory with action in meaningful ways.

In addition to her independent learning, the student worked in close partnership with the Birth through Kindergarten faculty at her institution. Through this collaborative effort, the undergraduate researcher played a vital role in crafting an extension scholarly activity by submitting a group proposal focused on leadership and trauma-responsive approaches in early childhood education. The proposal's acceptance by a well-regarded national conference highlights the important achievement in the undergraduate researcher's academic journey. Their hands-on participation with ECE faculty in both preparing and delivering the presentation reflected their increasing self-assurance, professionalism, and ability to contribute meaningfully to scholarly conversations among peers.

The undergraduate student researcher's dedication to scholarly work continued to grow as they submitted an abstract supported by their early childhood instructor during the capstone course of their final semester of school to a research symposium hosted by a Historically Black College and University. The submission, which outlined the purpose and impact of the leadership project, was accepted, leading to an invitation to present the work in a poster session. Once again, this opportunity validated the skills of the undergraduate student researcher in sharing research findings, interacting with an academic audience, and proudly representing her initiative, discipline, and institution.

Collectively, these experiences illustrate the undergraduate student researcher's continuous development as a leader and scholar. Over time, the student researcher evolved from a learner into a scholar-practitioner, demonstrating the ability to apply research, foster collaboration, and advocate for impactful change within the ECE field. From the faculty's perspective, she emerged as a reflective and capable leader with the potential to continue advancing equity and excellence in early learning environments.

Discussion

The findings from this faculty-supported, undergraduate-led action research initiative have provided compelling evidence that targeted professional development in trauma-informed practices significantly enhances early childhood educators' knowledge, confidence, and capacity for reflective instruction. These outcomes affirm the value of intentional training in equipping educators to better respond to the complex emotional and behavioral needs of young learners. The results underscore that when educators engage in structured, research-informed training focused on ACEs and SEL, they are better positioned to support both the behavioral needs of children and their emotional well-being.

From a developmental standpoint, the data has affirmed Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which situates children's development within nested systems of influence. The research has denoted that within the microsystem, educators play a pivotal role in shaping children's experiences. This research project identified that participants' responses have the potential to either mitigate or intensify the impact of trauma. The post-survey data revealed a notable improvement in participants' understanding of their influence in building resilience among young learners. This shift reflects a growing commitment to systemic support in early education and reinforces the ecological perspective, which stresses the vital role of consistent, nurturing relationships in shaping a child's developmental experiences.

The research aligned with Erikson's framework of psychosocial development has focused on the critical role of supportive surroundings in early childhood, especially as young children begin to assert independence, develop a sense of purpose, and shape their emerging identities. Educators trained in trauma-informed strategies are more likely to scaffold children's emotional regulation and social competence, which are foundational to achieving positive developmental outcomes. The notable post-intervention gains in confidence and family engagement in this study suggested that when teachers feel empowered, they are better able to meet children where they are—emotionally, socially, and cognitively.

The findings also validated Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, particularly the principle of self-efficacy. Educators' increased belief in their ability to manage learners struggling with self-regulation behaviors and foster positive relationships reflects the type of professional growth that leads to sustained behavioral change. The identified program outcomes within the action research project aligns with existing research showing that hands-on training in trauma-informed approaches strengthens both educators' practical competencies and their sense of agency and meaning in their professional responsibilities (CASEL, 2020; Jennings, 2015).

Importantly, this study highlighted that family engagement was a significant area of growth. Prior research has emphasized the importance of including families in trauma-informed approaches (Alisic, 2012), yet many educators lack the strategies or confidence to do so. Post-intervention data showing a near-universal commitment to

involving families in behavioral support planning suggested that targeted professional development can foster more holistic, culturally responsive care.

Beyond the professional outcomes for educators, this project also illustrated the reciprocal power of student-faculty partnerships in advancing both scholarship and practice. The undergraduate student demonstrated substantial growth in leadership, research fluency, and academic identity—echoing Kuh's (2008) research on high-impact practices and Eyler and Giles's (1999) advocacy for service-learning to deepen civic and intellectual engagement. By participating in all stages of the research—from design and data collection to dissemination and reflection—the student bridged the often-theoretical landscape of teacher preparation with the real-world demands of early childhood education.

In sum, this project has served as a model of how trauma-informed pedagogy, applied research, and mentorship can intersect to foster meaningful change at both the practitioner and institutional levels. The data have reinforced the broader argument that educator preparedness is not solely about instructional technique but also about emotional intelligence, relational capacity, and systems thinking—each of which can be cultivated through intentional, research-aligned professional development and leadership training.

Implications and Recommendations

Rooted in the outcomes of this faculty-guided action research project, several critical implications have emerged for advancing practice, pedagogy, and policy in early childhood education. The integration of trauma-informed care and social-emotional learning through sustained, context-responsive professional development not only empowers educators to meet the complex needs of young children affected by adversity but also creates nurturing environments that support long-term developmental success. This project has affirmed the power of action research as a transformative tool—bridging theory and practice, fostering reflective inquiry, and directly informing institutional change.

Implications for Early Childhood Practice
This study has reinforced a growing body of literature emphasizing that trauma-informed professional development must be continuous, collaborative, and grounded in both evidence and educator experience (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). This action research process revealed the importance of embedding reflective practice, modeling self-regulation, and explicitly addressing the relational dynamics of early childhood classrooms. When professional development is implemented through cycles of inquiry, feedback, and adaptation—as this project modeled—it becomes more impactful and aligned with the real-time challenges educators face.

Echoing the insights of Jennings (2015), the results of this research project have highlighted that nurturing early childhood educators' emotional well-being is essential—not optional—for fostering quality learning environments. Educational faculty should design experiences promoting self-awareness and incorporating mindfulness strategies. The initiative placed educator wellness at the heart of efforts to build resilient early childhood classrooms. Action research in this context enabled practitioners to see themselves as both caregivers and change agents—capable of modeling the emotional regulation they aim to foster in children.

Through its iterative design and feedback loop, the project illuminated shifts in educators' perceptions of family partnerships. In line with Alisic (2012), the research revealed that professional development tied to real-world engagement encourages educators to view families as co-regulators and co-educators. Action research served as a mechanism for re-centering culturally responsive, two-way communication as a vital component of trauma-informed practice.

Implications for Teacher Education Programs
This project has exemplified how action research not only addresses urgent community needs but also enhances the development of pre-service teachers. Echoing Eyler and Giles (1999), it confirmed that when students engage in structured service-learning with real stakes and reflection, they gain a richer understanding of systemic inequities, school-community dynamics, and the interplay between pedagogy and advocacy. Early childhood education programs should embed these experiences intentionally within core coursework and field placements.

The student's leadership trajectory in this project demonstrated how action research creates authentic opportunities for undergraduates to lead in research, professional learning, and dissemination. These experiences—aligned with InTASC standards (2011)—cultivate professional dispositions essential for future educators, such as critical thinking, collaborative decision-making, and a research-informed mindset. Institutions should structure coursework and capstone projects to include faculty-supported leadership experiences tied to local impact.

This project underscored the value of structured mentorship in translating research into practice and shaping professional identity. Supported by Kuh's (2008) research on student engagement, faculty-student partnerships offer reciprocal benefits: Students gain scholarly identity and real-world application skills, while faculty contribute to community improvement and the development of future practitioners. Teacher education

programs should formalize such partnerships through funded initiatives, research assistantships, and capstone models tied to early childhood field contexts.

Implications for Future Research

This action research project demonstrated the immediate impact of trauma-informed professional development and student-faculty collaboration in an early learning context. The results also underscored critical areas that require ongoing exploration within the field of early childhood education. Faculty should continue to gain deeper insight into how trauma-informed approaches are put into practice, maintained over time, and tailored to fit the needs of varied early learning environments, which is essential for shaping systems that are both inclusive and responsive to the diverse experiences of children and families.

Future research should explore whether the positive shifts in educator knowledge, confidence, and trauma-informed strategies persist over time. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess whether professional development in ACEs and SEL continues to influence classroom practices across academic years and staff turnover. Importantly, research should also evaluate the downstream effects on young children's developmental outcomes—such as improvements in self-regulation, reduced challenging behaviors, stronger peer interactions, and gains in school readiness skills. Such findings can support the institutionalization of trauma-informed approaches within early childhood programs and licensing standards.

This project's success in a university-affiliated early learning center has introduced important questions about how trauma-informed professional development models translate to other early childhood environments. Future studies should investigate implementation in Head Start programs, public pre-K classrooms, home-based care settings, and early intervention programs. Exploring differences across geographic, cultural, and linguistic contexts will help determine how adaptable and scalable these models are, particularly for programs serving historically underserved or rural populations. Special attention should be given to fidelity of implementation and culturally responsive adaptations.

Given the significant leadership development observed in the undergraduate participants, further research is warranted on how early exposure to action research and faculty mentorship influences pre-service teacher growth. The results from the data have noted that future research could explore how participation in such initiatives influences emerging undergraduate researchers' sense of professional identity, their ability to handle challenging situations in early childhood settings, and their readiness to take on roles involving advocacy and critical inquiry. The research has supported that these areas of investigation are particularly important for higher education institutions aiming to build teacher preparation programs rooted in equity and to cultivate leadership pathways for students pursuing careers in early childhood education.

Trauma does not occur in a vacuum, and neither do the responses educators bring to the classroom. Future research must explore how race, socioeconomic status, language, and disability intersect with trauma-informed practice in early childhood settings. Studies that foreground the experiences of children and families from marginalized communities—particularly those disproportionately impacted by exclusionary discipline or systemic inequity—can help refine trauma-informed approaches to be more just, culturally sustaining, and anti-biased. Mixed-methods and community-engaged research will be essential in elevating these perspectives.

Finally, researchers must examine the broader systems that enable or hinder sustained trauma-informed practices in early childhood education. This includes studying how funding streams, staff-to-child ratios, educator wellness policies, and cross-sector partnerships (e.g., mental health, social services, family support) contribute to the effective adoption of trauma-informed models. Policy-focused research can inform advocacy efforts that prioritize the well-being of children and educators, promoting equity-driven structural changes in early learning environments.

Conclusion

Overall, this leadership initiative guided by faculty mentorship has proven that this action research project has illustrated the powerful impact of professional development rooted in both developmental and ecological theory. The experience focused on trauma-informed practices, and the initiative strengthened early childhood educators' ability to address the emotional and behavioral challenges faced by young children. By weaving together concepts from SEL, research on ACEs, and culturally responsive approaches, this project elevated the undergraduate student researcher's confidence and understanding while positioning early childhood professionals to gain knowledge as to how to create and maintain settings as safe, nurturing spaces that support healing, resilience, and equity.

Equally important, the project exemplified the transformative power of faculty-student collaboration within the context of undergraduate teacher preparation. By participating in hands-on research, sharing her work in professional settings, and engaging in community-based learning, the undergraduate researcher evolved from a participant in the learning process to a leader in the ECE field. The student researcher exhibited strong skills in critical thinking, advocacy, and collaborative leadership that reached beyond traditional academic boundaries. The

mentoring faculty noted that the undergraduate researcher's development highlights the value of embedding mentorship, leadership development, and experiential learning opportunities within ECE programs.

Ultimately, this project has highlighted the importance of higher education institutions with early childhood teacher preparation programs investing in sustainable, theory-informed, trauma-responsive practices. It also has affirmed that action research—when guided by reflective faculty mentorship and rooted in authentic community engagement—can serve as both a professional learning strategy and a catalyst for systems-level change. Due to societal issues—as well as a national pandemic—early childhood education faces growing concerns around mental health and persistent systemic inequities. Early childhood professionals implementing high-impact practices and research will support collaborative efforts like this and offer meaningful potential to drive both instructional improvement and broader efforts toward equity and transformative change in early childhood education.

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