



Impact Report

Building Resilience Through Relationships in Early Childhood Educational Communities: Feasibility Study

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Background

This feasibility study is the first phase of a four-phase [research program](#) that will provide documentation of impact of the Hand in Hand training course for Early Childhood Educators.

This study was conducted as a Portfolio Project of [Frontiers of Innovation](#) (FOI), the R&D platform of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Our research team received ongoing training in the IDEAS Impact Framework, a community-engaged, quick-cycle iterative research model. As a portfolio project, we received year-long mentorship to design and conduct this first phase of our research program. Slide deck of project available [here](#).

This study was designed by Resilience Through Relationships in collaboration with Hand in Hand and funded by Hemera Foundation and BIJJAR Family Foundation.

Summary

11 Educators & 5 experienced Hand in Hand Trainers participated in a Feasibility Study of our 6-week training model (the Professionals Intensive for Early Childhood Educators). This course included video and written material in an online classroom and a one-hour weekly mentoring call with 2-3 other educators led by a Hand in Hand Certified Instructor. Participant weekly questionnaires and interviews (immediate post-class and 3 month follow-up) reflected high satisfaction with our program and educator anecdotes highlighted themes around improved educator efficacy, reduced educator stress, increased educator empathy, improved classroom climate and positive changes in specific child outcomes. Participants requested that we include more video interviews with a wide variety of educators in our classroom materials.

Our research team has begun adapting course materials based on participant feedback and will document educator and child outcomes in subsequent phases of the research. We have clear next steps including updating our theory of change, adapting the online classroom, and developing a comprehensive fundraising plan. We have successfully documented the feasibility and acceptability of our training program and are prepared to move into Phase 2 of our research program.

Team Members

Maya Coleman, PhD in Clinical Psychology, MA in Special Education, Resilience Through Relationships, Founder (Principal Investigator)

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Angela Sillars, PhD in Developmental Psychology, MA in Education, Society & Culture, Castleton University, Assistant Professor of Education (Developer, Lead Researcher, Practitioner)

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Judith Wides, MA in Expressive Arts Therapies, MEd in School and Counseling Psychology, National Child Research Center, School Counselor (Practitioner, Site Liaison, Community Member)

Patty Wipfler, Hand in Hand Parenting, Founder & Program Director (Developer, Practitioner)

Project

We conducted a feasibility study of Hand in Hand's six-week, experiential online Professionals Intensive course for early childhood educators. The course provides an online classroom with readings and videos and a weekly hour-long mentoring call led by a Hand in Hand Certified Instructor. The course content is focused on learning and practicing five emotionally-responsive listening tools, including one peer-support tool. We recruited and consented five experienced Hand in Hand Instructor Trainers to lead the weekly mentoring call groups and be in the study; one call group was conducted in Spanish and four were led in English. We enrolled 15 early childhood educators: seven classroom teachers from Head Start sites, six classroom teachers from a private inclusion preschool, one classroom teacher from an early childhood program, and one home daycare provider.

Research questions: How feasible are the research plan and program strategies? What recruitment strategies were most/least effective? What are drawbacks/benefits of

distance learning format? How do educators engage in and evaluate the program? To what extent do educators practice using the tools? What additional support and/or materials would be useful?

Participants responded to computer-based surveys (i.e., an initial demographic survey, weekly surveys, and a post-class survey) and participated in a 60-90 minute interview following completion of the 6-week class. Educators also participated in a 30-60 minute follow-up interview between three and six months post-completion. Of the 15 educators who consented to be in the study, 11 completed the course. Two participants dropped out of the study before the mentoring calls began, one due to a scheduling conflict and one due to their workload. Two participants attended one call and dropped out after that, one because of an unexpected family emergency and the other with no reason given.

All five of the Hand in Hand instructors led their mentoring calls and completed all of the surveys and interviews. Most educators had several years of teaching experience and professional development training; the Head Start educators serve vulnerable populations and the inclusion teachers work with children with special needs. Mentoring call leaders were all highly experienced certified Hand in Hand Instructor Trainers.

Timeline

Our research team designed the feasibility over the course of 6 months, April 2019-October 2019. Our intervention phase and post-class interviews ran on-time between October and December 2019. Completion of our 3-month post-class follow-up interviews were originally scheduled for April 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted these interviews in April, May and June of 2020, which extended the length of our project by three months. We were hesitant to place additional burdens on participants by asking them to schedule a follow-up interview, however, participants who completed the follow-up interviews reported that they appreciated speaking with us about how the training had influenced them over the intervening months. Some participants also reported welcoming the incentives offered for participation.

Evaluation

All procedures were approved by the University of California, Riverside IRB. Participants completed weekly surveys delivered by email. The first week included a comprehensive Demographics Form adapted from the FOI measurement database. The first week and all subsequent weeks included a Weekly Survey to gather in-depth quantitative and qualitative feedback about the program components (i.e., weekly videos, readings, and live mentoring phone calls). Following the last class, participants filled out the Weekly Survey as well as the Final Feedback Form.

Exit interviews were scheduled and conducted with 10 educators and 5 instructors. The three-month follow-up interview was delayed due to COVID-19. Six educators completed a follow-up interview between three and six months after the 6-week course. Instructors were not asked to complete follow-up interviews. Participants were compensated \$10 for each weekly survey, \$25 for the initial exit interview, and \$30 for the follow-up interview. Compensation was automatically sent after survey completion.

Our evaluation process was highly successful. We had a high response rate for the weekly surveys and the exit interviews. We had hoped to interview all participants at the three-month follow-up, but given the impact of COVID-19, the lower response rate was expected (55% completed this interview). We adjusted our timeline for scheduling interviews. The systems utilized for survey delivery (Qualtrics), compensation (Rewards Genius), scheduling (Calendly), conducting and recording audio interviews (Zoom), automatic transcriptions (Trint), and data analysis (Qualtrics and Dedoose) worked efficiently. We recruited and supervised a group of research assistants at the University of California, Riverside to provide specific support: conducting interviews in Spanish, translating interviews, and checking all transcripts.

Ultimately, participants' knowledge about this community-engaged research study, namely that we were interested in learning both from their expertise and their feedback on the course, seemed to provide high levels of motivation to provide comprehensive, insightful, and concrete feedback beginning with the first Weekly Survey and ending with the interviews. We made one adjustment to the evaluation plan; we gave participants more time to complete the three-month follow-up interview due to COVID-19 related disruptions.

Members of the research team volunteered their time to complete this feasibility study. A key learning has been that to move forward beyond the feasibility study, we need to secure funding to compensate the research team members for their work.

Recruitment

Members of the research team had existing relationships with two early childhood educational communities involved in the study. We had a liaison at each site who distributed our recruitment materials directly to their staff and were available to answer any questions. The research team met with each site liaison during the time we were recruiting participants to answer any questions and troubleshoot recruitment.

We limited educator recruitment to organizations where we had an established relationship with a contact person. Many educators reported joining the study because they had a positive experience with the research team members in a training context, or because they trusted their on-site contact person to connect them with valuable training opportunities.

Educators reported that they would have liked more detailed written information about the format of the course and the purpose of the research. For our early pilot study we plan to broaden our recruitment to include additional sites and additional introductory trainings, and hope to partner with Hand in Hand's marketing team to improve our recruitment strategies and materials. We intend to focus on diverse, underserved communities in future projects.

Initial engagement by educators in the mentoring call was crucial; no one who missed the first call group went on to participate in the program: one reported being too busy, and one person experienced scheduling difficulties with the mentoring call. One person who attended the first class dropped out after that class due to lack of time. Participants gave feedback that our expectation that participants would access written materials before the first call was not feasible. It is clear that participants' first engagement with the course needs to be the mentoring call; we are adapting the course based on this feedback.

Participant Demographics

We consented 20 participants (5 instructors and 15 educators) into the study. Of the 15 educators who consented, 12 completed the demographics form and 11 completed the program and evaluation. Educators were ages 25-63 years, all worked full time (majority had income from \$30,000-\$75,000). They had from four to 15+ years of experience in early childhood education. Eight were married; eight were parents and two were not, while six were currently living with children. There were nine white and three Latina/Hispanic participants. There were nine educators who spoke English at home and two educators who spoke Spanish at home. There was one additional

educator who spoke “Spanish and sometimes English” at home. Two educators reported having some college experience, seven had completed a Bachelor’s, and three had completed Master’s.

Eight educators reported their families have adequate food without assistance, one reported her family is frequently without an adequate amount of food. ACE Q Scores showed that one educator had an ACE score of 7, the other educators had low scores ($M= 1.40$, $SD = 2.22$; ranged 0-7). Three participants reported experiencing stress during the course, such as a job loss in the family and having children with severe illnesses.

The Head Start teachers work with families who are underserved. The Inclusion School has children with high medical, psychosocial needs and some families who require full tuition coverage; overall though the inclusion school does serve a privileged population. In the future we are committed to serving high needs communities.

This group of educators are consistent with the group we intended to study for the feasibility study. We intentionally recruited from two schools, one with a research team member on site and one with a point-person on site. We did this to increase recruitment and provide information about partnering with schools.

Surprises During Recruitment:

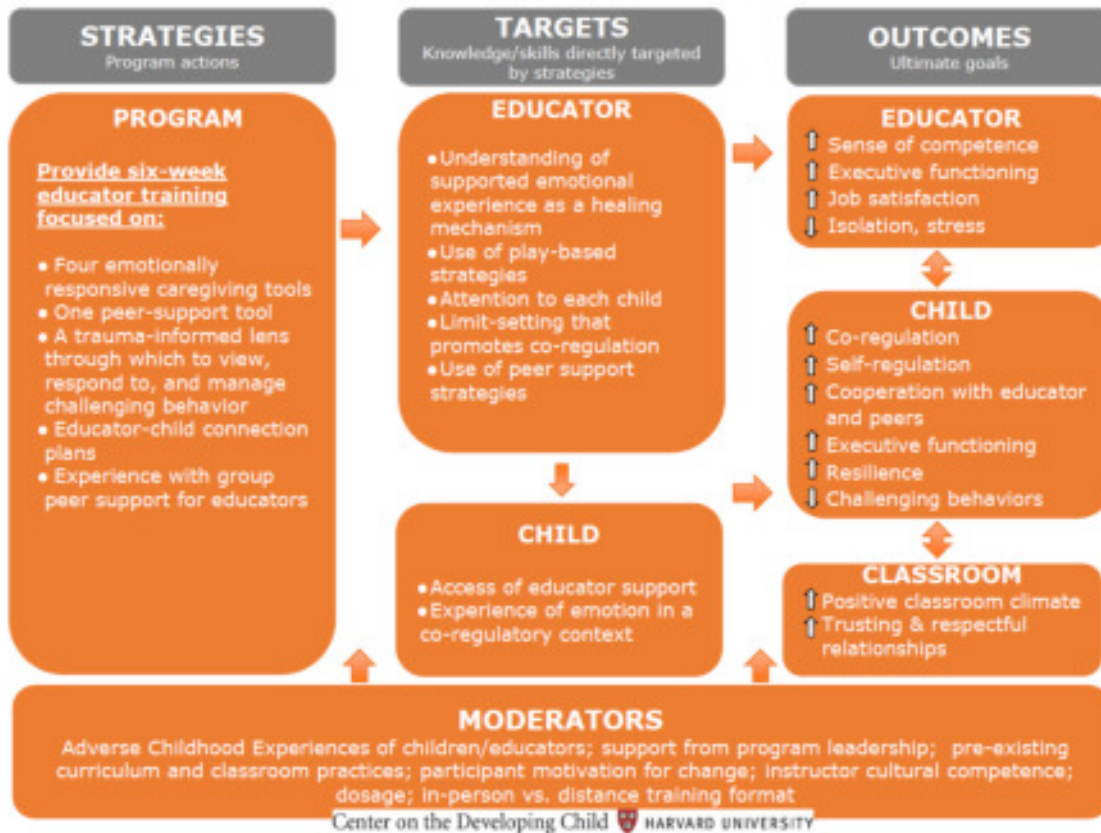
1) We planned to have English speaking instructors and mentoring calls. We quickly adapted, adding an additional mentoring call with a Spanish-speaking Instructor, gathering all Hand in Hand Spanish materials and creating a bilingual classroom with materials in Spanish.

2) During recruitment educators expressed a preference for a 60 minute weekly mentoring call rather than the planned 90 minutes, we quickly decreased the call to 60 minutes which increased enrollment.

3) We spent large amounts of time with site liaisons to support and maximize enrollment.

Theory of Change

Building Resilience Through Relationships in Early Childhood Educational Communities Feasibility Study



Our theory of change (TOC) specific to this feasibility study posits that educator participation in a 6-week course with videos, readings and a weekly mentoring call provides educators with trauma-informed listening skills. These skills build stronger connections with children, coworkers and parents. The theoretical framework explains how emotions work so challenging behaviors become an opportunity for strengthening relationships. We evaluated the feasibility and acceptability of each of the components of our training program for educators.

Our theory of change was strongly supported at the level of strategies and all components were feasible and acceptable. Some adjustments to materials format and content were clearly indicated, and all strategies were seen as key components of our intervention. Feedback provided initial indications that our theory of change is also supported at the level of targets and outcomes, and is in alignment with FOI's core design principles which guide us to reduce sources of stress, strengthen core life skills, and support responsive relationships. Revisions to our theory of change were not indicated by the feedback we received in this feasibility study. However, with our commitment to continuous improvement, we will be refining our theory of change with

our research committee. We look forward to revising our course materials and gathering feedback in an early pilot study.

Feasibility and Acceptability of Training Program

We gathered extensive data, 67 weekly surveys from educator and instructor participants, final feedback forms, and two rounds of interviews. We gathered quantitative and qualitative data on all aspects of the program regarding both online and telephone platforms. Participants reported that the 6-week long class format, the 60-minute weekly mentoring call, and the Hand in Hand tools were all acceptable and feasible. Educators reported that the videos and readings were useful; they also provided clear guidance for revisions necessary for the program to be more relevant to the classroom setting. Instructors also reported that more classroom-specific examples and materials were necessary for the educators.

We gathered information about educators' use of a trauma-informed lens to understand how past experiences may influence their own, children's, and colleagues' behavior. We introduced the idea of educator-child connection plans. Educators expressed enthusiasm and wanted additional information and structure to develop and use these plans.

We gathered weekly surveys and an exit interview from each instructor to track the fidelity of program delivery, including instructors' sense of connection with their call group. For example, all instructors spent ~60% of the call offering peer support using listening exchanges. Educators reported feeling supported and well-mentored by instructors. Educators also suggested many ways to improve the materials so educators would have a better understanding of how to use the tools in their programs. This would help educators and instructors use the mentoring call more effectively, as it would allow deeper conversations to unfold regarding how to best use the tools in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs.

We gathered promising preliminary data on how educators learned and used the tools. Participants reported immediate use of the Hand in Hand tools beginning in Week 1. The mentoring call was critical to increase peer support and increase understanding that emotional expression is healing.

Qualitative feedback from interviews revealed that educators used the listening tools in the classroom and experienced benefits that led them to want to learn more and share the tools with families.

In the next phase of research we hope to measure initial outcomes related to changes in educators themselves, changes in classroom climate, and shifts in the relationship between educators and identified children in the classroom.

We conducted this feasibility study focusing on our strategies in our theory of change. We did not evaluate outcomes. However, participants provided information about outcomes in the weekly surveys, and in the interviews we conducted immediately post-course and in 3-6 month follow-up interviews. Teachers described feeling increased social support, reduced isolation, and increased compassion for self and others from engaging in the listening partnerships.

Educators reported being between 'somewhat more' and 'much more' confident when responding to emotional moments, separations, and understanding the "why" of children's behavior. This is consistent with educators' reporting that they were most likely to use the Staylistening tool which involves listening and emotional anchoring during children's emotional moments.

We did not explicitly gather information about program moderators in this feasibility study. However, participants gave us information that pointed towards the positive impact of having other members of one's classroom or educational community participating in the course at the same time. In the next phase of our research we would be interested in looking at this further, as well as other possible moderators related to the socioeconomic variables of educators' programs and amount of experience of the educators themselves. Other moderators we plan to look at include adverse childhood experiences of children, families, and educators, support from program leadership, pre-existing curriculum and classroom practices, educator motivation for change, instructor cultural competence, dosage of program, in-person versus virtual training format, and support from parent participation.

Program and Materials Development

We received detailed feedback from educators about changes to the program materials to better address the needs of early childhood educators. We need to reduce the quantity of materials for the class. The materials helped most educators build understanding and apply learning to everyday experiences in ECE starting at Week 1 through Week 6. The videos were rated lower than the other elements of the class, and each component has room for improvement. Only the videos received one rating of 2--slightly helpful; everything else was rated 3 and above--moderately to extremely helpful.

Future iterations will utilize metrics in the online classroom to collect accurate data on what educators read and viewed and a way for them to report their rating directly after viewing/reading.

We are in the process of making changes to materials and are looking for funding to complete that work so that we can engage in the next cycle of evaluation through an early pilot study.

Support From Frontiers of Innovation at the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

In 2019, we were accepted as a portfolio project of [Frontiers of Innovation](#) (FOI). FOI is the R&D platform at the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University designed to accelerate the development and adoption of science-based innovations that achieve breakthrough impact at scale.

As a portfolio project, we attended a 3-day training on the [IDEAS Impact Framework](#). It was originally developed by the Center on the Developing Child (HCDC) in partnership with the University of Oregon Center for Translational Science, and the University of Washington College of Education. The framework posits “In order to achieve breakthrough outcomes that can be scaled for population-level impact, we need a structured but flexible approach that facilitates program development, implementation, testing, evaluation, and fast-cycle iteration. The IDEAS Impact Framework provides that approach, drawing on existing research and development tools and applying them in new ways to set a higher bar for program development and evaluation” ([HCDC](#)).

We designed our feasibility study using the IDEAS Impact Framework with the support of our FOI project mentor, Evan Roth-Howe. We consulted with Evan and the FOI team monthly. We also connected with faculty in the Measurement and Evaluation (M&E)

team through their webinars and consultations. We consulted with them a number of times when the team was based at the University of Washington, and again after the team moved in-house to FOI. We received extensive help developing surveys and selecting evaluation measures from the shared FOI database. We consulted with this team about data evaluation and interpretation and fast cycle iteration. We found it very helpful to have regular scheduled meetings with our program mentor, and consultations with the M&E team were invaluable. Reviewing the data with program managers at the Data Analysis/Interpretation meeting helped us consolidate the initial findings from our feasibility study and prepare for in-depth analysis of qualitative interviews and incorporation of our learning into the next iteration. We hope to continue collaboration with this team to develop measures for an early pilot study.

Our research team has also begun connecting more with other FOI programs through FOI's [learning community](#). We remain eager to make connections and welcome opportunities to learn about and connect with the other programs in the vibrant FOI community.

Summary of Lessons Learned

Clear learnings and benefits from the Professionals Intensive Course for Educators:

- Educators applied their learnings from Week 1 onward.
- The online class and mentoring call helped educators feel supported, reduced isolation, increased compassion and facilitated learning about the listening tools.
- Educators reported growth using the listening tools with children in their programs.

Improvements needed:

- Length of class and call were useful; other formats might increase access (e.g. one- or two-day workshop models).
- Reduce the total amount of materials and develop videos and readings focused on ECE.
- Include cultural diversity in the curriculum.

Guiding principles for course revision for ECE communities:

- Utilize examples of the listening tools in ECE settings.
- Scaffold educators' learning for ECE contexts.
- Develop additional materials and provide mentorship related to Connection Plans.
- Reduce overall volume of readings and videos.
- Make key points clear via check lists and other easy references.
- Address how listening tools can be used in diverse developmental and cultural contexts.
- Secure financial support for administrative components of the research plan.
- Provide ways for teachers to share the theory and practice with families.

Teamwork:

Our research team is an all-virtual, all-volunteer team. We spent a significant amount of time conducting this feasibility study. Funding is required for some portion of the research team's time to revise the course, develop materials, and design and complete an early pilot study.

Next Steps

We are currently incorporating feedback about the course structure (length, videos, readings and mentoring calls) from the feasibility study. We will update the TOC, design the early pilot study, and develop a fundraising plan to secure funding for an early pilot study involving a wider variety and larger number of early childhood educational contexts.