



The Impact of Cohort Learning: A Case Study of an ECEPTS Early Educator Apprenticeship

By Nohemy Catalan and Elli Simon

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research study was supported by Randi Wolfe, Ph.D., Executive Director at ECEPTS, Sandra Moore, Chief Program Officer at ECEPTS, Mary Jo Verbitsky, Instructor at California State University-East Bay, Pamm Shaw, Director of Strategic Funding and Partnerships at the YMCA of the East Bay, and members of the YMCA's Workforce Development Department: Roslynn Hyneman, Ed.D., Daryl Bright, Melanie Gibson, Brandi Hamilton, and Freddy Castillo. Special thanks to all of the apprentices who participated in the study. Their insights were invaluable to the authenticity and significance of the research findings.

INTRODUCTION

Registered Apprenticeships for the Early Care and Education (ECE) workforce have been increasingly utilized in recent years as a promising strategy to prepare new teachers and upskill incumbent workers. Given the crisis-level shortage of ECE teachers in the United States, Registered Apprenticeships have become an even more important construct through which to bolster and expand the ECE workforce. Apprenticeship is especially well-suited for early educators and caregivers because the structure allows participants to receive wages while earning professional credentials, making such programs more accessible to low-income workers who cannot afford to be unemployed while pursuing professional development and job training.

Nevertheless, ECE workers often face significant challenges to succeeding in Registered Apprenticeship programs, given the significant time commitment and demanding nature of simultaneously working and undertaking college coursework, while earning wages that are often below poverty level. Such challenges are even greater for the large number of ECE workers who are English Language Learners, first-generation college students, and from under-resourced families (Lutton, 2019). Thus, ECE Apprenticeships must embed participant supports that address the range of academic and professional development needs and challenges that might otherwise undermine apprentices' success. (Lutton, 2019).

Cohort learning is one such support that has been utilized to promote program retention in ECE apprenticeships. Cohort learning has been defined as a collaborative approach in which students or individuals advance together throughout the duration of a course or program (Close the Gap Foundation). The cohort model evolved from Vygotsky's social constructivism theory (1978), which hypothesizes that learning is improved when it happens in a social context (Brouwer et al., 2022; Flaherty, 2022). Research suggests that cohort learning helps to build community, provides social and academic support, and encourages collaboration among cohort members (Close the Gap Foundation).



Although research on cohort learning in higher education is limited, a host of potential benefits to utilizing this approach have been documented. For example, cohort learning appears to strengthen students' critical thinking and communication skills (Beachboard et.al, 2011; Brouwer et al., 2022; Flaherty, 2022; Hill & Woodward, 2013). Furthermore, self-determination theory hypothesizes that environments that support perceptions of social relatedness improve motivation, thereby positively influencing learning behavior (Beachboard et al., 2011; Flaherty, 2022). In contrast, students without a sense of belonging are more likely to drop out and experience isolation (Flaherty, 2022). Hence, an approach such as the cohort model, which promotes a feeling of connection amongst peers and belonging within a group, could support student retention while also increasing students' motivation to do well in their classes.

While the benefits to cohort learning seem significant and compelling, the cohort model has rarely been utilized in the context of Registered Apprenticeship programs. In an effort to expand the research base and provide apprenticeship advocates with concrete information about the utilization of cohorts, a case study was conducted to explore whether and how cohort learning impacts the academic experience and professional development of ECE apprentices.



■ BACKGROUND

The case study focused on the Early Educator Apprenticeship at the YMCA of the East Bay in Northern California. The program is the oldest and largest ECE Registered Apprenticeship in California, having engaged over 500 participants since 2015 (Office of the Administration for Children & Families). The cohort model has been a key component of the program since its inception. Programs offered through the YMCA include a state-registered pre-apprenticeship, three stackable apprenticeships for Head Start workers (Associate Teacher, Teacher/AA degree, Lead Teacher/BA degree), and a youth apprenticeship offered in collaboration with several high school districts.

Early Care & Education Pathways to Success (ECEPTS) sponsors the YMCA apprenticeships and serves as their intermediary. As a national ECE industry intermediary, ECEPTS provides training and technical assistance to communities and partnerships interested in designing, developing, implementing, and sustaining Registered Apprenticeship programs. As an apprenticeship sponsor, ECEPTS assumes responsibility for the administration and operation of nine state and/or federally registered programs. As of April 2024, ECEPTS had 487 active apprentices in its California network of 27 Registered Apprenticeship programs, engaging over 55 employers, 13 community colleges, and two universities (ECEPTS).

The primary researcher for this study worked at the YMCA of the East Bay for four years as a Success Coordinator, supporting individual apprentices and overall program development and expansion of various YMCA apprenticeship programs. In 2022, she became a Registered Apprenticeship Programs Director with ECEPTS, supporting community-based partnerships in the ECEPTS network to design, develop, and implement new programs. This professional background inspired her desire to study the impact of the cohort learning model, informed her perspective, and made her uniquely qualified to undertake this project. Her extensive experience and familiarity with the U.S. Department of Labor Apprenticeship System and how Registered Apprenticeships can be designed and implemented to meet participants' needs provided foundational context that significantly contributed to and strengthened this research.

METHODOLOGY

The research methods for this study included an online survey and a focus group. The survey was developed using Qualtrics and consisted of 34 questions that gathered socio-demographic information about the participants, and inquired about topics related to the cohort experience. The survey was designed to collect quantitative and qualitative data using closed and open-ended, Likert scale, and multiple-choice questions. A semi-structured focus group was conducted to collect additional qualitative data on how apprentices perceived the cohort model and the impact that it had on their learning and program participation. The research protocol for this study was approved in May 2023 by the Institutional Review Board at California State University-East Bay.

LIMITATIONS

While it is hoped that conclusions drawn from this study can apply to other apprenticeships and cohorted learning programs, there are limitations to keep in mind.

- The number of apprentices who participated in the online survey was small, and some participants did not answer every question. Some questions received only 20 responses, and most received less than 25 responses. With such a small sample size, the results may be less reliable, so broad generalizations about the results cannot be made.
- A sample of convenience was implemented. Given her prior experience working with the YMCA, the primary researcher knew many of the apprentices who participated in the case study. As such, it is possible that such familiarity influenced their responses in some way.
- The site of the case study may not be comparable to other sites. The YMCA has more years of experience implementing apprenticeships and more active apprentices and program completers than most ECE employers or programs. Thus, the study's results may be difficult to generalize to newer Registered Apprenticeship programs or ECE employers lacking comparable infrastructure, resources, and first-hand experience.
- Conclusions were drawn from participants' responses that were based on their own experiences and opinions, which may not be generalizable to other apprentices.



FINDINGS

Survey

A total of 130 apprentices at the YMCA of the East Bay received an invitation to participate in an online survey in September 2023. The invitation was distributed through email, an in-person meeting, and posted flyers. The survey was open for three weeks and a total of 26 apprentices submitted responses (20% response rate). Table 1 illustrates the socio-demographic characteristics of the survey respondents.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants

| Chracteristic | n | % |
|------------------------------------|----|----|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 25 | 96 |
| Male | 1 | 4 |
| Age range | | |
| 18-28 | 10 | 38 |
| 29-39 | 12 | 46 |
| 40-50 | 4 | 15 |
| Race/Ethnicity | | |
| Black or African American | 9 | 35 |
| Asian | 4 | 15 |
| White | 3 | 12 |
| Indian or Alaska Native | 1 | 4 |
| Other | 1 | 4 |
| Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish | 7 | 27 |
| Bilingual or multilingual | 13 | 50 |
| Foreign-born | 11 | 42 |
| Parent of children under 18 | 21 | 81 |
| Highest educational level | | |
| Less than a high school diploma | 7 | 27 |
| High school/some college | 14 | 54 |
| Post-secondary/graduate degree | 4 | 15 |



When participants were asked to reflect on their cohort learning experiences and its impact, responses were overwhelmingly positive. All participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “My cohort fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance” (see Chart 1). When asked whether their cohort members motivate them to continue their education, 90% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed (see Chart 2). Likewise, 90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I believe the cohort model is critical to my academic success” (see Chart 3). No respondents strongly disagreed with any of these statements.

Chart 1: My cohort fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance

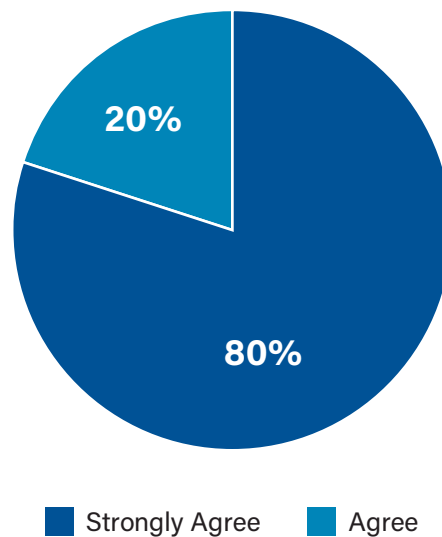


Chart 2: I am motivated by cohort members to continue my education

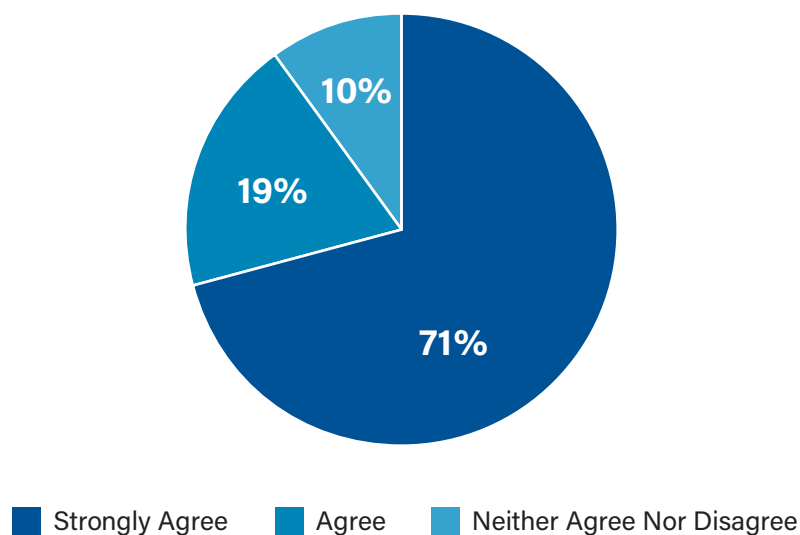
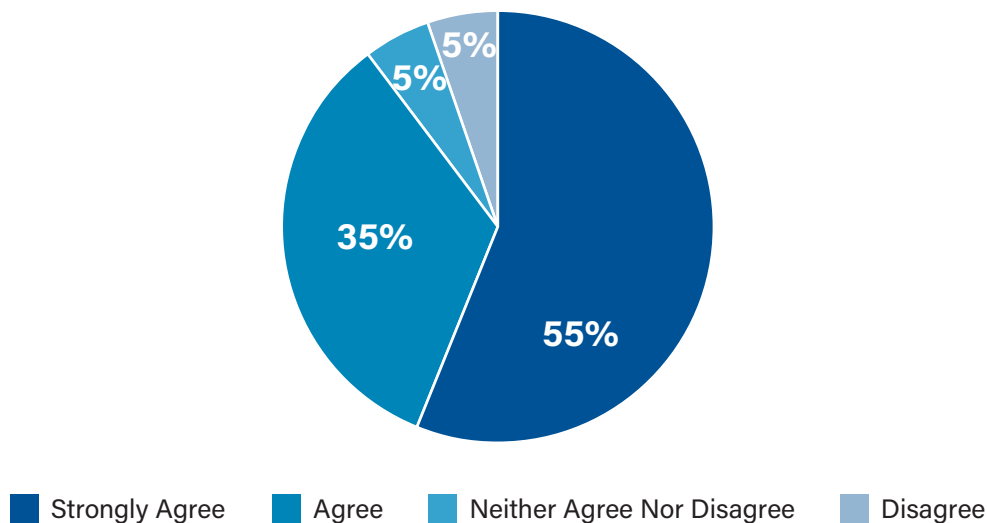


Chart 3: I believe the cohort model is critical to my academic success



The survey also asked apprentices about how the cohort experience benefitted them. When participants were asked “What element(s) of the cohort model have benefited you?” the most popular answers were group study/tutoring sessions, teamwork, and knowledge sharing (see Chart 4). Additionally, participants were asked to complete the sentence “The cohort experience has helped me to develop. . .” The most popular response was communication skills, but other options that came in close behind included teamwork skills, professional development goals, and a close connection with peers (see Chart 5).

Chart 4: What element(s) of the cohort model have benefited you? (Select all that apply)

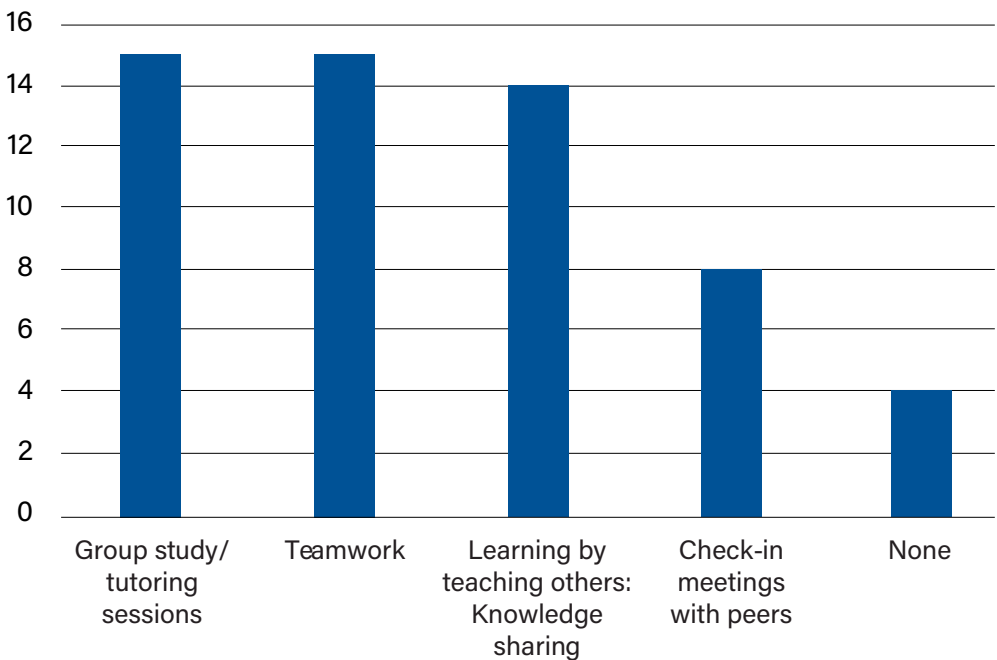
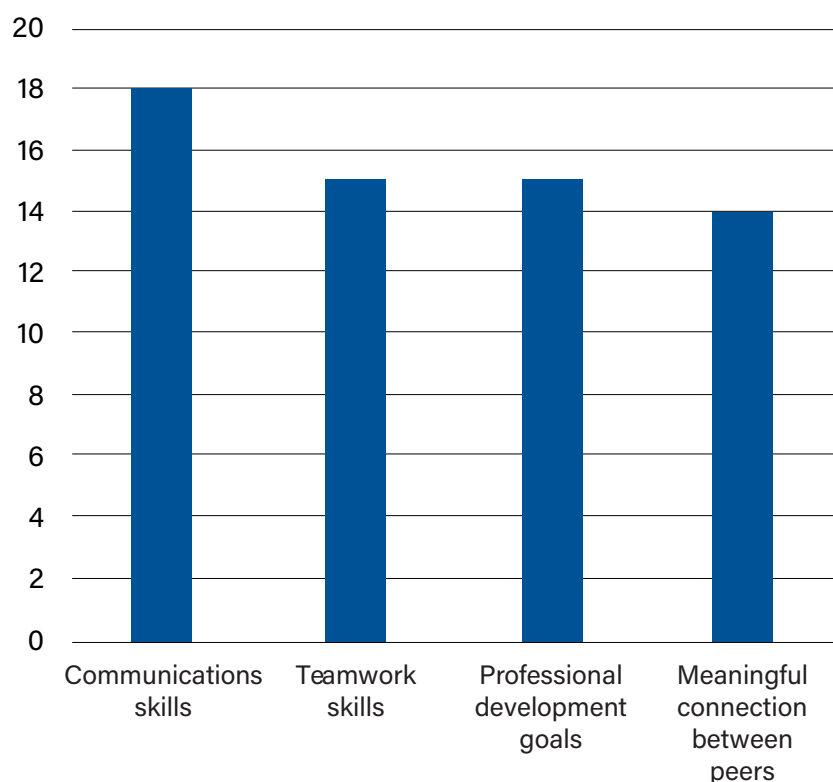


Chart 5: The cohort experience has helped me to develop . . . (Select all that apply)



Focus Group

In order to get further insight into the impact of the cohort experience on ECE apprentices, a focus group was conducted with five apprentices from the YMCA of the East Bay. All focus group participants had at least two years of experience in the program, which ensured that they had in-depth familiarity with the cohort model and were therefore in a position to be able to assess its impact.

The focus group was held virtually through Zoom. The group was made up of 100% females and people of color. Three participants were bilingual or multilingual and two were not born in the United States. Overall, the group had an average of three years of experience in the YMCA apprenticeship program. All participants had been promoted to a higher position at least once since starting their Apprenticeship.

The participants were asked several questions about their cohort experience. When asked to share what the word “cohort” means to them, responses included “having a support system to know that you’re not going through this path alone” and “a group of community members [with] the same goal that will support each other so none of us will fail, and everybody succeeds.”

Some participants reported that the cohort motivated them to stay in the program and/or in the ECE field. "Seeing people that had similarities in [their] personal lives [I would] think, oh they have kids like I do and...well, if they can do it so can I." This participant confirmed that 21 out of 22 people graduated from her apprenticeship program, and the person who dropped out was encouraged by the cohort to continue, but was unable to do so because of personal reasons.

Another participant reported that her academic performance and grades improved significantly due to being part of a cohort. She said she had previously tried taking college courses on her own, but was put on academic probation twice because she could not figure out how to manage everything. After joining the cohort, she said having that support from the group or, at times, even one person within the group made a big difference and her grades improved as a result.

Participants reported that an additional benefit of the cohort was feeling more confident and motivated to advocate for themselves and each other. For instance, two cohort members felt that they were not doing well in a course because they were English Language Learners, and the teacher was not using accessible language. They spoke to the instructor about this and then supported each other to persist through the challenge, and ended up passing the course.

Overall, participants said sharing knowledge and information with peers supported their ability to access supportive services and navigate complicated systems of higher education. For new and/or first-generation college students, routine tasks such as college enrollment, selecting and registering for classes, and seeking support around accessibility issues can feel daunting. The cohort eased these challenges because participants could share information and experiences, answer questions and alleviate concerns, and sometimes complete tasks together to make things simpler and less intimidating.

When asked about whether holding courses online or in-person impacted the cohort experience, focus group participants seemed to agree that online courses are more convenient (which is important for populations that work during the week and have families to care for), but that in-person courses allow apprentices to build deeper connections with each other. They seemed to value the benefits of both options, and said that they could still feel support from the cohort when they took courses online, although it was more meaningful to be in person.

One challenge participants identified in the cohort model was the stress caused if participants had to move into a different cohort as they advanced through the program. They reported one strategy that eased this challenge was to make the transition with at least one peer from their original group. This provided a degree of consistency and helped to minimize the disruption.

In order to improve the cohort experience, participants offered several suggestions. Whether online or in-person, participants recommended cultivating more connection among cohort members through social interactions and/or creating cohorts in more languages. They also recommended more intentional processes for recruitment and hiring apprentices to ensure that all apprentices share similar professional goals and levels of commitment to complete the program.



■ DISCUSSION

Analysis

Results from both the online survey and focus group responses reflect almost entirely positive experiences with the cohort model embedded in the YMCA's Early Educator Apprenticeship. The most common feedback on how to improve the cohort experience was to offer additional outlets for connection and support amongst peers (i.e., they mainly wanted more opportunities to benefit from the cohort experience). Although the sample size of the online survey was smaller than desired, trends in the participants' answers were strong and clear. Input from the focus group further confirmed the survey results.

Overall, the results of the case study suggest that the cohort model provided important benefits:

- **The cohort model provided critical social support.** All survey respondents agreed that the cohort fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance. Focus group participants reiterated that they felt supported by their peers and felt a strong connection with them.

- **The cohort model led to increased program completion.** While the average rate of apprenticeship program completion nationwide is below 35% (Department of Labor), in this study, 21 out of 22 members of the cohort successfully completed the program. Ninety percent of survey respondents agreed that cohort members motivated them to continue their education. Furthermore, focus group participants recalled leaning on other cohort members' support at times when they felt they were not capable of completing the program. Cohort members often used each other's encouragement and saw each other as an example for what they could achieve themselves, which served as a strong motivator to complete the program.
- **The cohort model promoted greater academic achievement amongst apprentices.** Ninety percent of survey respondents agreed that the cohort model was critical to their academic success. Through group study, teamwork, and knowledge sharing, the cohort contributed to all apprentices earning grades of B or higher. A focus group participant who had attempted to complete college courses on her own before starting the apprenticeship confirmed that the cohort enabled her to significantly improve her grades.
- **The cohort model increased participant engagement.** Focus group participants recalled how the cohort equipped them with the communication skills and confidence needed to reach out to instructors and other support systems in order to participate fully in the program. They explained that without that peer support, they would have stayed quiet or dropped out when they needed help.
- **The cohort model equipped them with skills and resources that could benefit them for years to come.** Seventy-five percent of survey respondents reported that the cohort experience helped them to develop teamwork skills, communication skills, and professional development goals – all of which could help them in career opportunities beyond the apprenticeship program. Focus group participants suggested that the friendships they built through the cohort were strong and long-lasting. If those connections endure after completion of the apprenticeship, the support they gain from each other could continue to reap benefits long into the future.



Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is needed to more fully understand the impact of cohort learning in Registered Apprenticeship programs. Suggested topics for future research include:

- How do apprentices in other demographic groups, other ECE settings, or other industries experience the impact of cohort learning on their academic experience and professional development?
- How do the academic performance, retention rates, and program completion rates in Registered Apprenticeship programs that integrate cohort learning compare to those that do not?
- Do apprentices' perspectives on the impact of the cohort model change after completing the program (e.g., three months, six months, and/or one year later)?
- Do the support and benefits that apprentices gain from the cohort experience persist as their professional lives continue to evolve?

Concluding Thoughts

The findings from this research underscore the value of the cohort model and support utilization of cohorted learning in ECE Registered Apprenticeship programs. Participants in the study affirmed that they found their cohort to be a safe community and a supportive network that aided, motivated and inspired them to achieve their academic and professional goals.


If further research draws similar conclusions about the positive impacts of cohort learning, then incorporating the cohort model could strengthen apprenticeships in other industries as well, especially when targeting populations like those represented in the ECE workforce (e.g., women of color, low-income workers, immigrants, first generation college students, English Language Learners). In the effort to create equitable, accessible educational pathways that meet the needs of non-traditional students and workers from historically-marginalized communities, cohort learning could prove to be a vital strategy that fosters an array of significant impacts, including building critical social support, increasing program completion rates, improving academic achievement, enhancing participant engagement, and gaining skills and resources that could provide long-term professional benefits.

REFERENCES

- Beachboard, M. R., Beachboard, J. C., Li, W., & Adkison, S. R. (2011). Cohorts and Relatedness: Self-Determination Theory as an Explanation of How Learning Communities Affect Educational Outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*, 52(8), 853–874. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-011-9221-8>
- Brouwer, de Matos Fernandes, C. A., Steglich, C. E. G., Jansen, E. P. W. A., Hofman, W. H. A., & Flache, A. (2022). The development of peer networks and academic performance in learning communities in higher education. *Learning and Instruction*, 80, Article 101603. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2022.101603>
- Burchinal, M., Whitaker, A. A., & Jenkins, J. M. (2022). The promise and purpose of early care and education. *Child Development Perspectives*, 16(3), 134–140. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12463>
- Close the Gap Foundation. (n.d.). *Cohort-Based Learning*. <https://www.closethegapfoundation.org/glossary/cohort-based-learning#:~:text=Cohort%20Based%20learning%20is%20a,students%20to%20complete%20given%20milestones>
- Department of Labor. (n.d.). *Overview of United States Apprenticeship*. <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OPA/files/20211103-apprenticeship-equity.pdf>
- ECEPTS Early Care and Education Pathways to Success. (n.d.). <https://ecepts.org/>
- Flaherty, H. B. (2022). Using Collaborative Group Learning Principles to Foster Community in Online Classrooms. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 42(1), 31–44. <https://doi-org.proxylib.csueastbay.edu/10.1080/08841233.2021.2013390>
- Hill, W., & Woodward, L.S. (2013). Examining the Impact Learning Communities Have on College of Education Students on an Urban Campus. *Journal of College Student Development* 54(6), 643–648. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2013.0085>
- Hur, E. H., Ardeleanu, K., Satchell, T. W., & Jeon, L. (2023). Why are they leaving? Understanding Associations between early childhood program policies and teacher turnover rates. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 52(2), 417–440. <https://doi-org.proxylib.csueastbay.edu/10.1007/s10566-022-09693-x>
- Lutton. (2019). Applying Knowledge to Practice: How Degree Apprenticeships Support Early Educators. *YC Young Children*, 74(4), 46–54. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26783376>
- Office of the Administration for Children & Families. (n.d.). *Examples of State and Local Early Childhood Workforce Strategies*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/ecedclappendix>



The Impact of Cohort Learning: A Case Study of an ECEPTS Early Educator Apprenticeship

WEBSITE: www.ECEPTS.org | EMAIL: ecepts@ecepts.org | 

(c) 2024 Tides Center/Early Care & Education Pathways to Success. All rights reserved.