

Chapter 8

Autism From Multiple Perspectives: Developing Interdisciplinary Changemakers

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ABSTRACT

Autism is the fastest-growing category for public education across the United States, however there is a continued shortage of highly qualified professionals. Supporting children with autism requires specialized knowledge and skills in evidence-based practices. Although a majority of individuals on the autism spectrum are supported by professionals from multiple disciplines, focus on autism in pre-service preparation is often developed without an interdisciplinary focus and without viewing autism through multiple lenses. This chapter shares the development, framework, multi-year outcomes, lessons learned and future direction for an interdisciplinary professional preparation program in autism. The program's conceptual framework includes disability studies, neurodiversity, and intersections with diversity, equity, and inclusion. Participants are guided to examine differing perspectives, collaborate across disciplines, and consistently reflect upon their own practice to develop the skills of reflective practitioners and changemakers in autism.

INTRODUCTION

Meet Michael, an eleven-year-old boy in the fifth grade. According to school and medical evaluations, he has been diagnosed with autism and intellectual disability. For the upcoming school year, Michael has been placed in a specialized classroom designed for children on the autism spectrum. This year, the class will have a new teacher, Ms. Blake, who is experienced in working in special education yet has

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had minimal formal professional development in the area of autism. Michael's classroom is supported by a team that includes a social worker, speech-language pathologist, music therapist, and occupational therapist. Each of these professionals spends time within the classroom providing push-in or group-based lessons as well as individual therapy for most of the students in the classroom. Because the support professionals all have caseloads that include many students across several schools, Michael's team rarely has time to meet in person.

Michael's speech primarily consists of repeated phrases from his favorite television program featuring a talking train. These phrases are often in narrative form with a variety of intonations and voice impressions that sound similar to the characters on the television program. Michael's parents have indicated they often do not understand what he is trying to communicate. During the upcoming year, the team, led by the speech-language pathologist, will introduce an iPad mini with the TouchChat program to augment Michael's communication. Michael's speech-language pathologist will be the primary professional to introduce and teach him to use this device.

At school, Michael appears to enjoy math the most, particularly content that involves operations, measurement, and patterns. However, the team is perplexed that Michael consistently becomes frustrated during math class as they implement the scripted math modules, even when the content is similar to that in some of the math-based computer games that he seeks out on his own. Michael often comes to school without having his homework completed. His parents have indicated that they must both work together with Michael for at least two hours in order to complete the homework worksheets. When Michael is upset at school, he will often scream, "I must go home now," repeatedly and attempt to hit or spit on adults or other students who approach him.

At home, bedtime usually takes over an hour. Michael has a routine of jumping on a trampoline, doing a 10-minute relaxation session of yoga, washing his face, brushing his teeth, and writing numbers. It takes him a while to fall asleep, but once he is sleeping, he will sleep all night. However, if the family does not complete the entire routine, Michael becomes upset. When the parents consulted the school team about bedtime help, Michael's teacher recommended they try a visual checklist that he responds well to at school.

At both school and home, Michael often takes items apart, including clocks, computers, televisions, and thermostats. Both parents and teachers have walked back into the room and found Michael sitting in the midst of dismantled devices, examining them excitedly.

Although Michael is a unique human being with his own unique fingerprint, this may sound like a typical story about someone on the autism spectrum. After hearing about Michael, you may be wondering, what is the outcome for a child like Michael? Will he ever be able to live independently? In what kind of job could he excel, or could he even have a job? What will Michael's relationships look like in the future, and what support will he need? It is not unusual to hear stories about autism that characterize individuals with the difficulties and barriers that they face. Alternately, we may also encounter stories about individuals on the autism spectrum who have overcome great obstacles to reach "normalcy" or whose strengths are so extraordinary that we can't relate to them as human beings. Or read stories about good Samaritans reaching out to offer kindness by taking them to the prom, offering them a job, or giving them a chance to play on a sports team. How do these stories shape professional beliefs and perceptions of autism? Are there voices missing from these stories, or are they otherwise incomplete? What might professionals gain from learning about how to shift perspectives and consider Michael's story in a different way?

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