

## Chapter 9

# Partners in Improving Social Communication in Children With Disabilities in Urban Early Childhood Settings

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This present chapter describes the focus and aims of the partners in improving social communication in early childhood special education (PISCES) program at California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA). The chapter begins with an overview of the aims and focus of the PISCES program in general; providing an interdisciplinary and collaborative training experience to graduate students in early childhood special education and applied behavior analysis who provide services to minimally verbal children with disabilities. After describing the context of the University, the shared experiences of students in the two programs are described in detail. These shared experiences include coursework, fieldwork, and PISCES specific activities. After describing the PISCES program, the authors consider some of the lessons learned, and importantly, how some features of the PISCES program can be sustained going forward. The chapter concludes with a call for ongoing, community-based action research to further inform service provision with early childhood special education populations.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Professionals from a variety of disciplines provide support to young, minimally verbal children and their families with disabilities, including children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) across home, school, and community settings. Early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers and applied behavior analysis (ABA) professionals are often at the forefront in supporting this population. They are also expected to work together to best support these children and families. However, individuals in these professions (ECSE and ABA) often have distinct disciplinary knowledge and ways of communicating about service provision (e.g., their roles vary, and they write and target different types of goals). They may also work in different settings and often have distinct funding streams for services. These theoretical and foundational differences in training and aims often leave children with disabilities and families without cohesive support.

Effective collaboration is fundamental to promote positive outcomes for children with disabilities and their families (Dillon et al., 2021; McLeskey et al., 2017), and given the common occurrence of these two disciplines working together in the field, it is critical that training on interdisciplinary collaboration is emphasized in preservice training programs for both disciplines. For these reasons and more, the authors felt it was important to pursue a training program, *Partners in Improving Social Communication in Early Childhood Special Education (PISCES)*, focused on interdisciplinary collaboration among preservice ECSE teachers and applied behavior analysts in an urban, minority-serving institution whose students support diverse, under-resourced families within and surrounding the metropolitan area.

Collaboration can be complex and requires clear communication from all parties involved. The chapter aims to address how the PISCES program promotes interdisciplinary collaboration between ECSE and ABA to effectively support young children with disabilities and their families. First, the chapter provides an overview of relevant literature and challenges in the field in effective interdisciplinary collaboration between the two disciplines, including theoretical differences (e.g., behavioral vs. developmental), curriculum and skills, discipline-specific terminologies, and roles and responsibilities. Second, the context of the preservice training program is presented through a description of the public urban university, participant scholars, and the faculty. Third, the chapter provides a detailed description of the components of the program (including shared coursework and other features). Lastly, lessons learned and future implications are presented in the conclusion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Differences**

Training in early childhood emphasizes developmentally appropriate practices for education services for young children with and without disabilities. Assessments, goals, and interventions are determined based on children's developmental levels, which requires knowledge and clear understanding of typical child development. In this sense one might imagine that professionals in ECSE may place emphasis on selecting developmentally appropriate goals, and in articulating their work in a developmental context. On the other hand, ABA professionals conduct their work from a behavior analytic theoretical foundation. Following from this, it would make sense that ABA professionals might place emphasis on measuring behavior in an objective manner, assuring there is careful progress monitoring including graphing

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