

Chapter 18

Interdisciplinary Special Educator and School Counselor Preparation: Supporting Equitable Student Outcomes in the COVID–19 Era


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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide readers with a rationale and blueprint for interdisciplinary programs like Project TLC, which prepare preservice special educators alongside school adjustment counselors. First, the authors discuss the rationale for Project TLC, including the current state of K-12 student mental health and social emotional learning, particularly in the context of public health and racial pandemics and issues pertaining to personnel shortages and attrition in both teaching and counseling. Then, the authors outline the blueprint of an interdisciplinary program including strategies for recruitment and retention of diverse students and a plan for shared coursework, fieldwork, and other learning opportunities that buoy graduate student development and preparation for serving students as collaborative colleagues. Throughout, the authors present the Project TLC blueprint with considerations for how this interdisciplinary training approach that utilizes faculty expertise and partnerships within local school communities can be translated into other communities.

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused abrupt and profound changes for teachers and counselors, as it stripped away opportunities for school-based practitioners and children, including our most vulnerable children, to exist in shared learning environments. The most marginalized children were left behind with severe consequences for academic achievement and mental health (Meherali et al., 2021). These stressors, compounded by the stressors associated with the public health and racial pandemics that have swept the nation, laid bare existing inequities in education, and created new wily stressors for educators and students.

As the country watched this disaster unfold and bore witness to the resultant increase in adverse consequences for students and school staff alike, the authors of this chapter looked for opportunities to capitalize on existing school-based resources with an aim of tending to the social and emotional needs of young people with and at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) who attend Boston Public Schools. To do so, the authors, who are colleagues at a Northeastern public university, formed a collaboration across the programs of Special Education and Counseling (with a concentration in School Adjustment Counseling), given the shared expertise in socio-emotional learning within both programs. This collaboration was formed to rethink the ways in which they were preparing graduate students for collaborative roles in schools that are rapidly evolving in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, set against the backdrop of a long history of racial inequities in education. With funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, the authors embarked on a 5-year Interdisciplinary Personnel Preparation grant funded project titled Project Teachers Learning with Counselors (TLC) in Fall 2021.

Project Teachers Learning with Counselors (TLC) was launched with the goal of ensuring the interdisciplinary preparation of 15 master's level candidates across two disciplines: Special Education (SE) and School Adjustment Counseling (SAC) at a public research university in the Northeast. In Massachusetts, the term school adjustment counselor is used to denote school mental health counselors. The authors of this chapter, representing the Special Education and Counseling (with a concentration in SAC) programs at a university, collaborated to prepare personnel to support academic outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs), with particular attention on social-emotional learning (SEL) by way of shared coursework, group assignments, coordinated field experiences, and structured joint activities.

PURPOSE OF CHAPTER

The purpose of this chapter is to provide readers with a rationale and blueprint for interdisciplinary personnel preparation program like Project TLC, which prepare preservice special educators alongside preservice school adjustment counselors to enhance outcomes for students with disabilities, notably with EBDs. First, the authors discuss the rationale for Project TLC, including the current state of K-12 student mental health and SEL, particularly in the context of a public health pandemic, and issues pertaining to personnel shortages and attrition in both teaching and counseling. Then, the authors outline the blueprint of an interdisciplinary program (developed using data-informed best practices), including strategies for recruitment and retention of diverse students, and a plan for shared coursework, fieldwork, and other learning opportunities that buoy graduate student development and preparation for serving students as collaborative colleagues. Throughout, the authors present the Project TLC blueprint with considerations for how this particular interdisciplinary training approach that utilizes faculty expertise and partnerships within local school communities can be translated into other communities.

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