

Chapter 21

Creating and Sustaining Collaborative Professional Development in Special Education: Lessons From the Interdisciplinary Training Project in Special Education and School Psychology (SP2)

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ABSTRACT

Shortages in personnel qualified to address the academic, behavioral, and mental health needs of people with disabilities are well documented. The limited interdisciplinary training professionals in special education and related disciplines receive greatly exacerbates the challenges faced by exceptional populations, particularly in regions that have historically struggled to provide sufficient access to special education services. This chapter describes the Interdisciplinary Training Project in Special Education and School Psychology (SP2), a federally funded, interdisciplinary program that combines elements of the School Psychology, Special Education, and Applied Behavior Analysis programs at the University of Iowa. Specific sections describe the national and state-level context supporting the development of SP2, identify the components designed to promote interdisciplinary knowledge and competence, and delineate challenges associated with creating and maintaining interdisciplinary programs.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-6438-0.ch021

INTRODUCTION

Shortages in personnel with appropriate qualifications threaten to limit the ability of children with disabilities to access services. Schools increasingly lack the requisite numbers of school psychologists needed to address student social-emotional needs, interpret student assessments, and support school-wide prevention strategies in behavior and academics (Castillo, et al 2014; NASP, 2021; Strein et al., 2014). The scarcity of school psychologists compounds the limited supply of special educators. Well-documented teacher shortages and attrition are more pronounced in rural areas such as those comprising much of the Midwestern US (Berry et al., 2012; NASP 2017). The shortage of special educators is worsened by the difficulty K-12 schools have in finding special educators who are qualified to address the high-intensity needs of students with disabilities (American Association for Employment in Education, 2016).

The number of students who currently receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) exceeds 6.4 million (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2020). The proportion of students exhibiting problem behavior or otherwise requiring treatment for social-emotional issues at the national level has also increased dramatically (Kauffman & Badar, 2018). Of every 10,000 individuals between the ages of 3 and 21 served under IDEA between 2016 and 2017, 13 were removed to an alternative placement; 73 out of every 10,000 were expelled or suspended for more than 10 days (USDOE, 2020). The supply of school psychologists and special educators falls well short of the demand for services. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends a ratio of 500 to 700 for every school psychologist (NASP, 2020). Only 37.2% of school psychologists reported ratios that met the NASP standard (NASP, 2020; Walcott, et al., 2018), with the actual ratio of students to psychologists in the US estimated to be 1,381 to 1. Boe and colleagues (2008, 2013) noted declines in the numbers of special education teachers and attrition (10%) at levels double those of general educators. The Learning Policy Institute identified special education as “the number one field with severe shortages” (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 10).

The demand for special educators more generally has coincided with an increase in need for services specifically associated with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). ASD refers to a range of developmental disorders evident in early childhood characterized by impairments in communication, social interactions, and restricted interests and stereotyped behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Recent prevalence estimates indicate that ASD occurs in 1 in 44 children (Maenner et al., 2021). Service providers ideally address skill deficits associated with the disorder using procedures and interventions supported by substantial empirical research (Anderson & Carr, 2021; Eikeseth et al., 2002; Granpeesheh et al., 2009; Matson & Smith, 2008). Interventions based on the principles of applied behavior analysis (ABA) represent a range of approaches demonstrated to develop functional skills (e.g., communication, play), decrease dangerous behavior, and improve overall levels of functioning (Anderson & Carr, 2021; Peters-Scheffer et al., 2011; Sallows & Graupner, 2005). Yet the demand for ABA services far exceeds the availability of people that are qualified (e.g., board-certified behavior analysts) to oversee and implement important elements of individualized treatment plans (Ferguson et al., 2019; McGee & Morrier, 2005; Scheurmann et al., 2003). The resulting shortage of effective training opportunities for staff and families represents a serious problem for consumers seeking effective ABA services. As people with disabilities enter a wider range of settings (e.g., inclusive schools), the absence of effective staff training has (a) resulted in a disparity between research-based guidance and actual service administration (Dillenburger, 2017) and (b) has the potential to delay learning.

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