


Chapter 23

Social Emotional Development and Early Childhood Mental Health: Special Education and Social Work Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes Project Adversity and Resiliency Interventions for Social Emotional Development in Early Childhood (Project ARISE), a preservice interdisciplinary training for early childhood special education (ECSE) and social workers (SW) to support young children and their families with high-intensity social emotional needs who require early childhood mental health support (ECMH) through collaborative and inclusive services. One key to understanding why many young children continue to be excluded from inclusive settings is understanding the differences between disciplines, as well as systemic inequities. To address these challenges, the program honors a holistic and interrelated development approach within the tenets of ECMH. This chapter begins with an overview of the program's essential theoretical frameworks. Then, the chapter shares key elements that define the program. Finally, the chapter shares reflections and next steps for interdisciplinary programmatic development.

INTRODUCTION

Experiences and interactions in early childhood impact overall development, leaving a lasting impression on learning, physical, and mental health outcomes of young children (Center for the Developing Child

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at Harvard University [CDCHU], 2016). Developmentally appropriate practice recognizes children as part of families and their communities, where young children begin to develop a sense of self, identity, and belonging, while beginning to construct ideas of differences (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020a). In the early years, it is vital young children have enriching learning experiences and supportive, nurturing adults to support them in acknowledging and valuing differences in others. Moreover, high-quality early childhood learning environments and practitioners can support this by fostering positive self-awareness, comfort, and joy with human diversity in themselves and others (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019).

Equipping practitioners with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to support the holistic interrelated development of young children with disabilities and their families who are from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds is critical. Practitioners, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and governing bodies share a responsibility to prioritize and promote high-quality early childhood education for all young children, regardless of race, ethnicity, native language, gender, ability, socioeconomic, and other characteristics (American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees et al., 2020). A component of professional preparation is the theoretical frameworks included in programs (e.g., antibias education); other essential pieces include opportunities for practice and feedback throughout their program. Practitioners must have opportunities to learn with and about individuals of different personal (e.g., disability, race) and professional backgrounds (e.g., training field, experiences) to equitably provide positive early learning experiences for young CLD children with disabilities and their families (NAEYC, 2019).

With limited to no training in preservice preparation programs, it is unreasonable to expect new practitioners to know best practices for collaboration and working with related fields once they enter the workforce. It is time for IHEs and disciplines who work with young children with disabilities and their families to remove discipline silos so they can embrace the healthy development of disciplinary identities that includes the spirit of collaboration and partnership. Interdisciplinary personnel preparation is more important than ever to serve young children with disabilities and their families from CLD backgrounds in inclusive learning environments. Collaborative efforts must shift to a more equity-empowered and interdisciplinary focus (Blanchard et al., 2021; NAEYC, 2019). The Project Adversity and Resiliency Interventions for Social Emotional Development in Early Childhood (Project ARISE) values and mission align with the empowerment of families and other practitioners to have strong partnerships within and across interdisciplinary teams.

The Project ARISE program at San Francisco State University (SF State) is a 325K personnel preparation grant funded through the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the U.S. Department of Education. The purpose of Project ARISE is to provide preservice interdisciplinary training for early childhood special education (ECSE) and social workers (SW) to support young children and their families with high-intensity social emotional needs who require early childhood mental health support (ECMH) through collaborative and inclusive services. Project ARISE is an equity-focused interdisciplinary preparation program that forged a new cross-college collaboration that is the first of its kind at SF State. Project ARISE seeks to address state and nationwide shortages of high-quality professionals trained to deliver family centered, racially and culturally responsive, and child welfare-focused services for young children with social emotional needs who are from diverse backgrounds and exposed to adverse experiences. To do this, Project ARISE has committed to: (a) recruiting scholars from nontraditional (e.g., career switchers, para-educators) and unrepresented backgrounds (e.g., race, ethnicity, native language), (b) providing shared coursework, (c) providing shared learning experiences (e.g., institutes/conferences), (d) providing coordinated field experiences, and (e) ongoing scholar support.

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