

Chapter 6

Preparing a New Generation of Early Autism Educators: An Interdisciplinary Personnel Preparation Grant

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ABSTRACT

Despite young children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) making up larger portions of early intervention caseloads and classrooms, many educators and related service providers do not receive explicit training and practical experience in supporting these students until they encounter them on caseloads. This chapter provides an example of a personnel preparation program emphasizing interdisciplinary training of early intervention (EI)/Early childhood special education (ECSE) service providers and speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to serve young children with ASD. Specifically, the chapter will discuss the Preparing a New Generation of Early Autism Educators (PANGEA) personnel preparation grant (H325K180170), funded through the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the U.S. Department of Education. Descriptions and rationales for required competencies, coursework, and practicum will be described as well as induction support. Finally, the chapter will review strengths and positive outcomes, challenges, and future directions for similar interdisciplinary grants.

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INTRODUCTION

The Preparing a New Generation of Early Autism Educators (PANGAEA) program at University of Oregon is an H325K personnel preparation grant funded through the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the U.S. Department of Education (H325K180170: PI Shire, Co-PI Patricelli). The purpose of Project PANGAEA is to provide interdisciplinary pre-service training, focusing on explicitly training future special educators (Early Intervention (EI) master's program) and future Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs: Communication Disorders and Sciences (CDS) master's program) to serve young children with disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Project PANGAEA seeks to address the nation-wide shortage of highly trained practitioners focused on supporting young children with disabilities by: (a) recruiting and graduating a diverse pool of high-quality scholars, (b) preparing well-trained EI/Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) professionals who can provide high quality services to young children with high intensity needs and their families, and(c) providing induction support to graduates.

The PANGAEA project grant has provided funding for a total of 29 scholars to date with an additional 9 scholars who will complete the program by the 22/23 academic year. Scholars are guided through a series of coursework and practical experiences to develop proficiency in delivering high-quality interventions to young children with ASD while also expanding skills for working on interdisciplinary teams.

BACKGROUND

Within both the fields of EI/ECSE and CDS, there are ongoing and critical shortages of personnel to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Currently, reports based on responses from 49 states/territories indicated significant shortages of ECSE personnel for serving children under IDEA Part B (ages 3-21), with most states identifying shortages of both SLPs and special educators (CEC, 2020). In a report by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (Sopko, 2010), 40 of 41 states responding identified significant shortages in personnel to provide services through IDEA Part C (ages birth to 3). Surveys conducted at both the national and state level demonstrate that school districts and contractors experience difficulty finding personnel to fill positions in EI/ECSE (AAEE, 2021). Project PANGAEA works to address this personnel shortage by matriculating providers prepared to enter the field of special education and meet necessary requirements for state and national certification in their respective professional organizations.

The prevalence of ASD is estimated at 1 in 44 children in the US, and data indicates that children are being diagnosed at earlier ages (Maenner et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2021). Because children with ASD are being diagnosed at earlier ages, they are more likely to enroll special education services during the early intervention years. It is increasingly likely that early career special educators and related service providers will encounter children with ASD on their caseloads and in their classrooms. It is necessary to prepare EI/ECSE providers entering the field to support children with ASD in core areas of need including social communication and interaction as well as regulation (Masi et al., 2017). Tager-Flusberg & Kasari (2013) estimated that 30% of children diagnosed with ASD are preverbal and working on developing functional spoken language through age five. There is, however, considerable evidence to show that young children with ASD who participate in high-quality, evidence-based interventions, can make significant growth in communication and other core domains of development (e.g., Kasari et al., 2021). While the research into evidence-based interventions is promising, there continues to be a research-to-practice gap impact-

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