

Lessons Learned from an Interdisciplinary Approach to Educator Preparation

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors describe the benefits and challenges of an interdisciplinary preparation program involving students in special education and counseling graduate degree programs. Special Education teachers and related service personnel often lack ‘shared knowledge, skills, and expertise’ specific to the professional standards of each discipline (Quezada et al., 2021). Consequently, they tend to struggle when serving on school-based problem-solving teams faced with the challenge of planning, implementation, and monitoring of evidence-based practices (EBPs) for students with intensive disabilities and social emotional needs. One possible alternative to discrete discipline preparation programs is the possibilities of improving practice through interdisciplinary professional training models. Unlike traditional silo approaches to educator preparation, interdisciplinary preparation approaches provide opportunities for special education teachers and related service personnel to exchange expertise of discipline specific knowledge and skills through meaningful application in shared coursework and collaboration in clinical field experiences. In this article, we describe an example of an interdisciplinary preparation program titled, Intensive Needs Teacher and Counselor Training Program which originated in 2017. Lessons learned through implementation of our interdisciplinary preparation program suggest evidence of potential barriers and invaluable benefits to this unique approach to educator training, as well as recommendations for best practices are shared.

KEYWORDS

Applied behavior analysis, evidence-based practices, interdisciplinary preparation training, mental health, school counselors, and special education teachers

School problem-solving teams focusing on the provision of interventions for struggling students typically include special education teachers and other related service providers such as counselors, school psychologists, nurses, and/or social workers to name a few. These education professionals are traditionally among the first to respond when a K-12 student experiences significant disruptions to their learning and the learning of their peers. Special education teachers and related service providers are frequently asked to effectively collaborate with other professionals to identify and implement intensive evidence-based practices (EBPs) for students with the most challenging concerns (e.g., applied behavior analysis [ABA]).

For many K-12 schools, a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) involves problem-solving teams that provide early intensive interventions with the intent of accelerating student learning that has fallen below their peers. Conceptually, the ultimate desired outcome of MTSS is to avoid further development of serious learning challenges by a student (Friend & Cook, 2020). Essentially, MTSS is a comprehensive framework based on a tiered progression of intensive interventions applied based on specific needs of a student. One major drawback for MTSS teams is the lack of shared understanding among members. In most cases none of the professionals serv-

ing on the MTSS team have participated in interdisciplinary preparation training that prepares them to collaborate, and exchange discipline-specific knowledge, terminology, and skills (Olsen et al., 2016). Instead, many teacher preparation programs and training of related service professionals rarely include sufficient teaching of the required skills and application of interdisciplinary collaboration and group problem-solving required for effective participation in the identification and implementation of intensive EBPs for students with disabilities (e.g., ABA; Foxx & Anderson, 2020).

Discrepancy Between Preparation and Practice

Many children with disabilities who have highly intensive needs require the combined expertise of a variety of educators including but not limited to special education teachers, early interventionists, and related service professionals, working together to determine interventions and support for students with the greatest needs. Despite expectations that special education teachers and related service personnel collaborate and prescribe appropriate interventions for students with challenging needs, their diverse professional backgrounds and training make it challenging for them to collaborate due to their lack of shared information, understanding, and experience (Quezada et al., 2021; Smith, 2010). Several studies suggest that although special education teachers receive varying levels of preparation in functional behavior assessments (FBA) and behavior intervention plans (BIP); (e.g., including but not limited to a full course on the topic, content integrated across multiple courses, selected course sessions on topic), their training specific to implementation of EBPs is insufficient in terms of determining how to apply these interventions with the most challenging students exhibiting intensive behavior, academic, and/or social-emo-

tional concerns (e.g., Anello et al., 2017; Bettini et al., 2019; Brownell et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2013; Flynn & Lo, 2016; Garland et al., 2013; Henderson et al., 2020; Mayton et al., 2010). Additionally, many special education teacher preparation programs do not provide on-going and meaningful clinical field experiences for candidates to learn and apply collaborative interactive teaming among professionals serving on interdisciplinary teams (e.g., school counselors, nurses, psychologists, social workers; Anello et al., 2017).

Similarly, according to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2015), school-employed mental health professionals (i.e., counselors, psychologists, social workers) receive specialized training in meeting the mental and behavioral health needs of students with disabilities. School counselors are trained to provide socio-emotional support for students. Furthermore the primary mission of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2015), is to prepare school counselors to address barriers and to assess ways to maximize students' success in schools, communities, and their family structures by offering education, prevention, crisis, and short-term interventions until the student is connected with available community resources. School counselors receive specific training to recognize warning signs (e.g., changes in school performance, attendance, mood changes, and trauma) and provide early intervention or crisis interventions that promote psychosocial wellness and development for students including students with disabilities (Foxx & Anderson, 2020).

Even though school counselor preparation programs train students to provide socio-emotional support to students of varying abilities, they lack specific knowledge and skills of EBPs in ABA, BIP, and FBA (McIntosh & Av-Gay, 2007). Researchers in the field of school

counseling have noted that, while 83% of school counselors provide interventions and behavioral support for students with disabilities, many counselors have not completed course work during their graduate program specific to effective approaches to working with students with intensive disabilities (Milsom, 2002; Milsom & Akos, 2003). This is critical given there is a lack of school personnel with the expertise needed to provide successful behavior and mental health/trauma support to students with disabilities. McIntosh and Av-Gay recommend that schools cultivate expertise in FBA and note that teaching other school personnel (e.g., counselors) to effectively lead behavior support for working with students with intensive disabilities will yield better long-term effects in implementing EBPs than when related service professionals such as counselors, lack in their ability to effectively contribute on problem-solving teams due to their limited knowledge and skills in EBPs.

Shortages in Education Personnel

To further complicate issues surrounding the critical need for professionals trained to provide support and services to children with intensive challenges, many states report significant challenges in meeting the overall demand for quality, fully credentialed special education teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The shortages of highly qualified special education personnel tend to occur most notably in urban and rural communities (Bill et al., 2022; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Peyton et al., 2021; Rock et al., 2016). This issue of teacher shortage has amplified to a critical level in many states since the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020. Researchers have predicted increased teacher shortages for some time; however, more recent national data suggests that not only are teachers leaving the profession at high-

er-than-expected rates, but they also are choosing to do so earlier than anticipated since the onset of the pandemic (Bill et al., 2022). As a result, many states have relaxed teacher licensure requirements leaving school administrators to hire individuals who are not fully credentialed and who are teaching while earning licensure through alternative pathways (Nagro, 2023a, 2023b). Similar to the issues surrounding teacher shortages, ASCA (2015) recommends a ratio of 1 school counselor per 250 students, yet the National Center on Educational Statistics (NCES) reports the national average is 408:1, with only 17 states averaging less than 350 students per counselor (NCES, 2021). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS) 2023, there were about 336,000 school counselors employed in elementary and secondary education, falling short of ASCA's recommended ratio.

Continued shortages of special education teachers and related personnel (e.g., school counselors) negatively affect the quality of services provided to infants, toddlers, children, and credentialed education personnel is at a critical level across the country as the needs of all students, especially those needing intensive interventions, continue to increase and become more complex (Bill et al., 2022). Nagro (2023b) suggests the shortage of special education teachers is among the most pressing issues facing special education leaders and should motivate education professionals to work toward generating innovative strategies moving forward that are intended to alleviate the teacher shortage.

Rationale for Interdisciplinary Preparation

As a result of the increasing shortage of special education teachers and related service personnel, a few preparation programs have begun to explore *interdisciplinary professional preparation*. Interdisciplinary programs are defined

as two or more disciplines training together through shared coursework, group assignments, and coordinated field experiences (Miller & Stayton, 2006; Smith, 2010). Although not new, interdisciplinary personnel preparation provides a feasible solution to the lack of shared knowledge and skills typically experienced by teachers and related service personnel when engaged in school-based teams providing EBPs for students with disabilities. For example, in early intervention Birth-K special education preparation programs, an interdisciplinary approach to training is considered *recommended best practice* (Miller & Stayton, 2006; Smith, 2010). K-12 education professionals may consider ways to replicate early intervention Birth-K special education interdisciplinary preparation and provide integrated training and ample opportunities for special education to practice effective collaboration skills (e.g., communication, building partnerships, planning, and decision-making) with other related service colleagues as well as students' families prior to serving on MTSS teams and making important decisions for K-12 students.

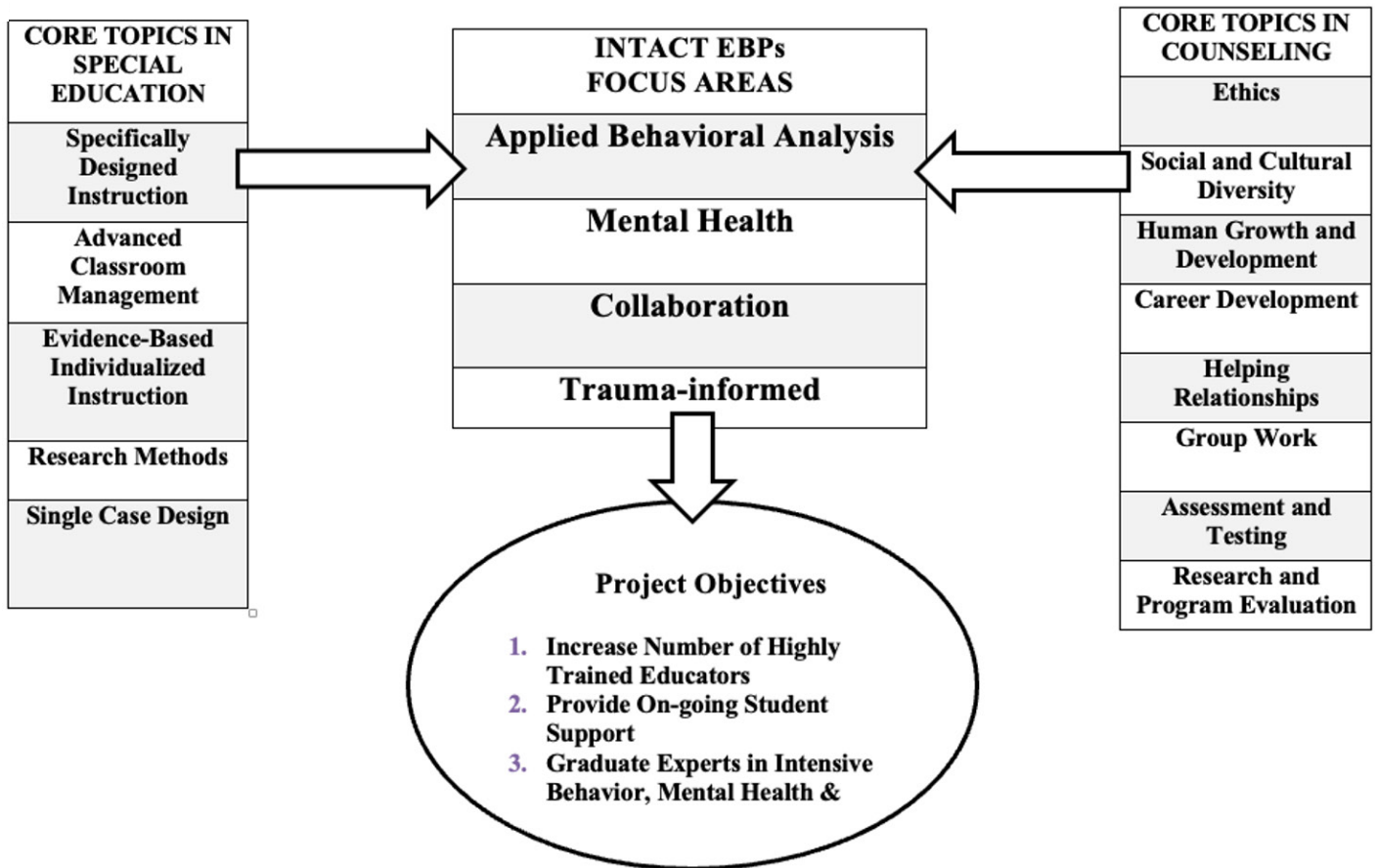
Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches to personnel preparation provide students with experience working and learning in team environments like those in which they are likely to work once employed (Smith, 2010). For most children with intensive needs, it is challenging for education personnel from across disciplines to work together in determining the best EBPs for a student in crisis because most professionals are trained in isolation, and lack shared knowledge, skills, and expertise with their colleagues from other disciplines (McIntosh & Av-Gay, 2007). Interdisciplinary approaches to personnel preparation, however, provide opportunities for special education teachers and related service personnel to combine and share expertise of discipline specific knowledge and skills

through shared coursework and clinical field application.

Specifically, the intended outcome of interdisciplinary preparation programs is the development of shared expertise in delivery of special education supports and services, including early implementation of EBPs for students with disabilities. With this shared learning across disciplines, special education teachers and related service providers have a clearer understanding of cross-discipline-specific terminology, and knowledge of EBPs in working with students with challenging concerns. Using these shared skills, special education and related service professionals are better equipped to effectively collaborate in decision-making MTSS teams when determining the most appropriate needs and interventions for challenging students with disabilities.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this article is to provide a model of an interdisciplinary preparation program that emphasizes shared training of special education teachers and counselors in their use of EBPs. Because there are gaps across special education teacher and counselor preparation programs in terms of acquiring professional skills necessary to effectively collaborate and fulfill their responsibilities on MTSS school teams, the two disciplines are a seemingly good fit for the creation of an interdisciplinary training program. By sharing our interdisciplinary preparation program, we describe steps involved in the determination of a related service graduate program that would naturally involve collaboration in schools with special education teachers, as well as determination of the selection of shared courses that would make up our interdisciplinary preparation component. The authors also share how logistical decisions were made across the two graduate programs to identify the steps involved in recruitment and determination of student

FIGURE 1: INTACT Project Overview

acceptance into the interdisciplinary preparation program. Finally, we share the benefits, barriers, challenges, and potential positive impacts of this alternative approach to educator preparation based on the INTACT outcomes over the past 7 years.

INTACT PREPARATION PROJECT

The INTACT Project originated out of response to a growing need for highly qualified and licensed special education teachers and related service professionals across our state. Fortunately, in 2017, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services published a grant competition focusing specifically on the creation of interdisciplinary preparation projects intended to prepare special edu-

cation teachers, early intervention, and/or related service personnel for professional practice in classrooms and school settings in providing support to students with highly intensive disabilities. For most children with high-intensive needs, it can be extremely challenging for education personnel from various disciplines to work together on school support teams such as MTSS, in determining EBPs and practices because of their lack of shared knowledge, skills, and understanding of interventions (Quezada et al., 2021; Smith, 2010). Interdisciplinary approaches to personnel preparation, however, differ by providing opportunities for special education teachers and other related services to combine and share expertise of discipline specific knowledge and skills through opportunities to collaborate as well as practical application of EBPs in providing support

to K-12 students with disabilities. We chose to focus our interdisciplinary training project on ABA, interdisciplinary collaboration, and mental health and trauma-informed EBPs due to the high percentage of students with disabilities across the state that were either suspended from school and/or sent to alternative learning placements each year because of their highly intensive behavior and often complex ability and/or social emotional and behavioral needs.

Our interdisciplinary preparation began with a conversation among three faculty members from two different departments within our college of education. The discussion centered on critical issues and topics not currently being addressed in our special education preparation programs and conversely the school counseling preparation training. From this interaction among faculty, it became

clear that each program had knowledge and skills not being addressed but that desperately needed to be included in both preparation programs. For example, our special education preparation training does not sufficiently address mental health conditions experienced by students in general as well as students with disabilities, as well as EBPs. Similarly, the faculty in counseling preparation voiced frustration with meeting professional standards in their core courses that specifically trained students in the school counselor preparation training to learn to work with students with disabilities. None of the counseling faculty have expertise in working with students with intensive behavioral disabilities and therefore, critical knowledge of EBPs related to supporting students with intensive behavior challenges is not taught in the counseling preparation programs. Regardless, graduates of the counseling preparation are asked to assist with developing behavior assessments and daily intervention plans in K-12 schools. As a result of this conversation, we decided to create an interdisciplinary preparation program that would provide curricular and clinical field opportunities for special education and counseling graduate students, while maintaining the integrity of the two distinctly different advanced degree programs.

Interdisciplinary Component of INTACT

Interdisciplinary personnel preparation differs in contrast to discipline-specific professional training in that students enrolled in special education and related service preparation are provided intentional opportunities to learn shared skills (e.g., crisis interventions, BIPs,) in classes together with other education professionals enabling them to practice collaboration more efficiently in terms of understanding knowledge, skills, and related terminology across disciplines.

In addition to the advanced coursework in each degree program, the interdisciplinary component of the INTACT Project focuses on building capacity of special education and counseling graduate students through their participation in a four-course sequence focusing specifically on learning ABA, interdisciplinary collaboration, and mental health and trauma related EBPs. The shared courses included in the INTACT Project are the following: (a) ethics in applied behavior analysis, (b) concepts and principles of behavior analysis, (c) consultation in school counseling, and (d) trauma-informed practices (see Figure 1). The INTACT shared courses are delivered online synchronously each semester during the academic year as well as summer sessions.

Students in the INTACT project enroll in the four shared interdisciplinary courses together, allowing them many opportunities to collaborate and build partnerships while completing class sessions and assignments. Course assignments and clinical field experiences are coordinated by course instructors allowing INTACT students several opportunities to collaborate on projects and share knowledge and discipline expertise with one another. Figure 1 illustrates the main topics of the advanced core courses of each degree program, the impact of the shared interdisciplinary courses, and the primary objectives of the INTACT Project.

The INTACT students also complete a year-long collaborative culminating assignment involving cross-discipline peer – pairs involving a counseling student and a special education student. In the collaborative assignment, students participate in consultation and problem-solving EBPs for their case students in their clinical K-12 schools. They are responsible for meeting throughout the final year in the INTACT program and their degree programs to discuss whether

the interventions have been effective and those that have not been successful with their K-12 case students. At the conclusion of their degree programs and the interdisciplinary preparation training, the cross-discipline peer-pairs present their collaborative assignments in terms of progress made because of the EBPs implemented with their K-12 case students. Community partners (e.g., principals, special education directors, district administrators) and faculty from the university are invited to INTACT students' presentations of the outcomes from their collaboration and problem-solving culminating projects.

The information that follows describes the intentional planning of logistical aspects of an interdisciplinary program that would need to be negotiated before the shared training is launched and prior to enrolling students. For teacher educators interested in creating an interdisciplinary training program, the first step needs to focus on conceptualizing with a faculty member from a related service preparation program, what is the overarching goal of the shared preparation. One approach to determining a related service degree program is to examine local K-12 student and school/district data and asking community partners who are the critical education professionals that are expected to respond to the students with the most intense needs. Gathering input from principals, district administrators, teachers, and parents of students with disabilities will be invaluable in determining which professional degree program is the best fit and will be the most applicable to schools and professionals with the immediate region/state. At this step the two faculty members representing the preparation programs begin to engage in dialog about possibilities of identification of the knowledge and skills and EBPs most needed by special education teachers and related service professionals to

TABLE 1: Demographic Breakdown for INTACT Scholars (Cohorts 1, 2, 3, & 4; n=55)

Degree Program	Number of Scholars	Percentage
Counseling	28	50.9%
Special Education	27	49.1%
Race		
Black	8	14.5%
White	41	74.5%
Hispanic or Latino	4	7.3%
Other	2	3.6%
Gender		
Female	44	80.0%
Male	9	16.4%
No Answer	2	3.6%
Current Job Positions		
GenEd Teacher	2	3.6%
SPED Teacher	23	41.8%
Administrator/Director	1	1.8%
Other	27	49.1%
No Answer	2	3.6%

effectively collaborate in the provision of services and support for students with disabilities.

Choosing a faculty peer collaborator in each discipline is a critical step in the process. The participating faculty leaders need to be committed to interdisciplinary preparation and value collaboration among educators. We chose to focus our interdisciplinary training on working with K-12 students with intensive behaviors, mental health, and trauma-related needs for the INTACT Program due to state data suggesting that students with disabilities (e.g., autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), intellectual disabilities, behavioral disabilities) received the highest frequency of disciplinary actions such as corporal punishment, expulsion, and/or removal from school settings to alternative

learning placements. Additionally, the Department of Special Education and Child Development and Department of Counseling at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Cato College of Education have a long-standing collaborative relationship across several years so partnering with faculty from school counseling seemed most appropriate and natural. After reaching out to the school counseling faculty it was clear that collaboration with counseling faculty in the creation of the INTACT interdisciplinary preparation was a good fit because special education teachers and school counselors typically are the first responders in schools and therefore, the two graduate programs seemed perfect partners in exchanging knowledge and skills through shared coursework.

For special education preparation

faculty considering creation of an interdisciplinary preparation program, an important lesson to note from our experience is to spend time negotiating shared course work, including time reviewing syllabi and talking with potential instructors about the purpose of the interdisciplinary collaboration students need to experience in the shared classes. This stage takes time and may not eliminate problems for students due to differences in schedules. We chose to guide the selection of courses included in the interdisciplinary training as shared coursework had to meet the following criteria: Be beneficial for special education and counseling students and be scheduled around core courses in each degree program. This is an important stage for the faculty representative from each degree program because it requires

TABLE 2: Demographic Breakdown for Graduated INTACT Scholars

	Follow Up C1	Follow Up C2	Follow Up C3	Percentages
Number of Scholars	n = 5	n = 9	n = 9	
Current Job Positions (n = 23)				
GenEd Teacher	0	0	0	0%
SPED Teacher	2	4	3	39.13%
School Counselor	3	3	5	47.82%
Administrator/Director	0	1	0	4.35%
Program Specialist	0	1	0	4.35%
Other	0	0	1	4.35%
Current School District (n = 21)				
CMS	3	2	2	26.08%
Other District	2	7	6	65.21%
Title 1 Status (n = 21)				
Yes	4	2	3	39.13%
No	1	7	5	56.52%

commitment to the shared course(s) to enroll students out of field, and thus, has major implications for how an instructor structures a shared class in terms of including opportunities for collaboration and exchange of knowledge and expertise among the special education and counseling students, and successful completion of major assignments. We have already switched out three of the four original shared courses in the INTACT project, and as a result we have different faculty involved as instructors then we did at the beginning of the project. Adjustments based on course evaluations, informal conversations with faculty and students are critical to the sustainability of the interdisciplinary program.

Everything from recruitment to entrance requirements of students as well as their progression in the interdisciplinary program need to be negotiated and decided by the faculty leaders and communicated and agreed upon by faculty of each degree program at the onset of initial planning. We encourage

anyone that is considering initiating an interdisciplinary program to map out the project's overarching goals, objectives, and student performance outcomes that are critical proficiencies for students to acquire by completion of their training. The faculty leaders also need to discuss a means of evaluating the students' development of collaboration and leadership skills acquired throughout the shared courses and their degree programs. The INTACT project created a culminating event titled The INTACT Summer Institute, as a culminating event when students demonstrated their knowledge and skills learned within the shared courses such as the use of EBPs in special education and/or school counseling. Students work in peer pairs in the final year of the project and their degree programs, collaborating with a peer partner on identifying and utilizing EBPs for case students in their school sites.

To date, a total of 55 students have successfully graduated from the INTACT Project (see Table 1). According to responses to our follow-up sur-

vey, which was sent to 55 INTACT graduates, 23 of whom responded to the post-graduation survey. Of those respondents, we learned that INTACT graduates are employed across a variety of occupations, specifically school counseling, administration and program specialists. Of the graduates working in school systems, seven are employed within a large urban district and 15 were reported as 'other,' with nine out of the 23 graduates working in Title 1 Status schools (see Table 2).

LESSONS LEARNED FROM INTACT AND FINAL THOUGHTS

This article shares one example of an interdisciplinary preparation program involving special education teachers and school counselors at the graduate level. The authors share their experiences working with the INTACT students as well as the lessons learned from the first seven years of the program. Feedback from graduates of the INTACT program

has been invaluable in terms of its' use in continuous improvement of the project as well as identifying the benefits of the program for students. Entry, mid-point, and exit surveys were the primary measures used to collect feedback from our INTACT students on the benefits of the collaborative field experiences and interdisciplinary courses in ABA and mental health, and trauma-informed EBPs.

Graduates of INTACT shared written comments on follow-up surveys about the positive impact of the 2-year interdisciplinary partnering they experienced throughout the project. INTACT graduates stated that through the opportunities to build partnerships with special education and counseling students, they increased their confidence to effectively collaborate with other professionals, elevated professional relationships, and generated a more comprehensive set of skills across students from both degree programs. The following comment made by an INTACT graduate in her exit survey responses stated how she is currently using the knowledge and skills acquired in the interdisciplinary training,

"I am a member of our school improvement and MTSS district team. I am able to use the skills and information acquired in the INTACT program to help our school and district meet the needs of students with challenging behaviors or mental health needs."

Graduates also noted specific benefits to having participated in the program. For example, one graduate stated he perceived "Opportunities to collaborate across disciplines to better understand one another," and another "Increased knowledge . . . of role clarification, perspective, approach, and intentionality."

Finally, graduates of the INTACT Project shared their appreciation for the realistic and impactful opportunities to gain experience from peers across disciplines through intervention research

projects and school-based internships, shared expertise, knowledge, and interactive applications of professional MTSS teaming skills in the required shared classes (e.g., activities and/or major assignments in shared courses requiring students to collaborate and problem-solve, as well as their culminating collaborative projects). This feedback suggests alternative preparation such as the INTACT Program has the potential to elevate graduate students' preparedness to deliver high-quality services and support for K-12 students with disabilities in terms of meeting their needs of intensive support, mental health, and/or trauma-related intervention services.

In this article, the description of the INTACT Project is intended to provide one example of an interdisciplinary preparation training program meant to bolster the development of collaborative knowledgeability among special education teachers and school counselors. What distinguishes the INTACT preparation is its unique focus on special education training in alliance with school counseling preparation as a shared multi-tiered partnership of cohesive support to K-12 students in need of intensive interventions. With the identified shortages of high-quality and fully credentialed special education teachers and related personnel, there is a clear need for additional examples of interdisciplinary educator preparation programs. Barriers for students in the INTACT Project illuminate areas for growth and adaptation in the creation and implementation of interdisciplinary preparation in the future. Because of the absence of other examples of interdisciplinary preparation for K-12 special education teachers and related service providers, further investigation that expands knowledge through exemplary models of this alternative training is imperative and worth consideration and exploration.

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