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They Said: Preparing Future EI Providers Across Disciplines through an Academic Partnership

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Credentials Display

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Over the past 10 years, the New York City (NYC) Bureau of Early Intervention (BEI; <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/providers/resources/public-health-action-kits-early-intervention.page>) has been training NYC early interventionists across disciplines and their clinical supervisors through learning collaboratives about using evidence-based family-centered best practices, embedding interventions in routine activities (natural environments), and performing collaborative coaching with parents and caregivers. In the NYC Early Intervention (EI) Program this is called embedded coaching. These EI best practices are in addition to each discipline's professional practices. The BEI explored many types of training, including field observations, coaching for supervisors, and engagement of supervisors in communities of practices for self-reflection and problem-solving so that they would be able to implement best practices with EI parents and caregivers, because one to several days of professional development and training modules were not enough to recruit, train, and retain a high quality interdisciplinary EI workforce.

The BEI heard from early interventionists that they did not learn about EI best practices in their graduate programs. This was consistent with the lack of preparation to work in EI reported in a national Office of Special Education Program-funded study by the Center to Inform Personnel Preparation Policy and Practice in EI and Preschool Education (https://uconnuicedd.org/projects/per_prep/). Therefore, the NYC BEI decided to launch academic partnerships with city and state graduate programs to prepare graduate students across different disciplines to work in the EI program using best practices. The following questions were posed to Dr. Jeanette Gong, NYC BEI's director of Intervention Quality Initiatives and the director of the project, as well as to the leads at each of the academic partnerships.

Dr. Beth Elenko:

How did the NYC BEI select graduate programs to participate in the academic partnerships?

Dr. Jeanette Gong:

The NYC BEI approached graduate programs that were part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system because their student body reflects the cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of NYC families that we serve. In addition, a majority of these students not only live in the five boroughs (Brooklyn, Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island) but also continue to live and work in NYC after they graduate in order to support a diverse EI workforce.

The NYC BEI initiated contact with discipline-specific CUNY graduate programs to see if they would be interested in meeting with the BEI to discuss a potential academic partnership. The NYC EI leadership went to these meetings to describe the NYC EI program, its goals, and the significance and components of the academic partnership. If a graduate program was interested, they would submit a proposal that:

1. Described how they would develop and incorporate the EI foundational core components into their existing graduate program curriculum and fieldwork placements with infants and toddlers with and without disabilities (birth to 3 years of age).
2. Identified and hired faculty with EI and birth to 3 years of age knowledge and experience to create the curriculum and teach the courses.
3. Identified the key faculty and person(s) to coordinate and participate in the academic partnership, including collaborating and attending meetings, further developing their EI programs, and participating in shared program evaluation and fieldwork.

Change takes time and perseverance. In the academic context, developing and revising curricula includes many steps for approval at the program, college, city, and state levels. The BEI learned that it

was important to have a faculty member that was passionate about supporting high quality EI best practices. It was essential to have a champion in each program.

Dr. Beth Elenko:

Tell me about each of the programs and the key elements.

Dr. Jeanette Gong:

Currently, the NYC BEI has six academic partnerships with four CUNY colleges (Brooklyn College, Hunter College, Lehman College, and Queens College) and one with the State University of New York (SUNY) Downstate Health Sciences University. Each academic partner has integrated EI principles into their discipline-specific graduate program in different ways, as well as collaborated on interprofessional experiences for their students.

Dr. Jacqueline D. Shannon:

Brooklyn College's Early Childhood (EC) and Art Education Program's *Advanced Certificate in EI and Parenting* (ACEIP; 18-credits; six, 3-credit courses; the only one in New York State [NYS]) is open to multidisciplinary professionals specializing in children from birth to 5 years of age (e.g., EC, occupational and physical therapists, psychologists, social workers, special educators, speech language pathologists) to prepare the EI workforce across disciplines with a focus on typical and atypical infant and toddler development and parent-infant relationships; family-centered, culturally-responsive, and evidence-based practices; infant mental health; reflective-practice and supervision; and a transdisciplinary approach to working in partnership with culturally and linguistically diverse families with children with disabilities. The program offers clinically rich fieldwork with families and infants in various settings (e.g., families' homes, Early Head Start, EI/childcare settings, and/or hospital and medical settings) with 280 fieldwork hours (with reflective supervision) embedded throughout the coursework.

Since 2014 we have had 535 graduate students in our EC/EC special education program complete at least one of our six courses in the ACEIP program, over 400 completing at least three courses, 50 completing five courses, and 14 students completing all six EI courses.

Dr. Michael Bergen:

The Brooklyn College Master of Science Program in Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) offers the specialization in EI and welcomed its first cohort in the Fall of 2019. The specialization is an option in the graduate program open to students who have been accepted into the M.S. program in SLP. Students take five courses that integrate EI principles encompassing curricula that may not ordinarily be covered in traditional SLP programs, including early brain architecture and development; reflective practice and supervision; dyadic work with families; diversity and health equity issues unique to EI; infant mental health; pediatric feeding and swallowing; work with children who are medically fragile and/or who have complex needs; and interprofessional practice while emphasizing evidence-based, family-centered practice. In addition to didactic coursework, students in the specialization engage in a specially designed practicum in which they work with infants, toddlers, young children, and their families in both community- and home-based settings and with carefully selected affiliate speech-language pathologists who have experience in reflective supervision.

Dr. Sara B. Woolf and Dr. Peishi Wang:

The Queens College Graduate Program in Special Education, Educational and Community Programs created a new, integrated, 43-credit Master of Science degree in EC Special Education and Bilingual Education. This integrated MSED program is funded by the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Grant # H325K160140 (2016-2021).

Our goal is to prepare bilingual EC special education teachers to work with young children who are English Language Learners with special needs and their families in NYC. This master's program fully integrates both special education and bilingual education content, pedagogy, and practices. On completion, candidates will earn an MSED degree and will be eligible for two certifications in NYS: EC Special Education (birth to 2nd grade) and Bilingual Education.

The EI content is incorporated into their EC courses and incorporates evidence-based and values-rich practices to ensure that candidates learn how to partner with families to enhance family and child outcomes.

In addition to the bilingual EC special education MSED program, we have our regular EC special education MSED program (birth to 2nd grade). This is a 36-credit program that is designed for candidates who have an initial certification from NYS in either EC education or childhood education. The program prepares candidates to teach students across the spectrum of disabilities and educational support needs. The EI content is embedded in the EC special education courses through the lens of culturally sustaining and responsive pedagogy.

Finally, we have a post master's advanced certificate program in EC special education. This 18-credit program is designed for candidates with a master's degree and existing certification in either EC education or childhood education. The program prepares EC and/or childhood general education teachers to work with young children with special needs (birth to 2nd grade). The EI content is also embedded in the courses through the lens of culturally sustaining and responsive pedagogy.

Since joining the academic partnership in 2016, we have graduated five cohorts, approximately 75 students across the abovementioned three programs. Some of our graduates are currently working as EI providers in their communities.

Dr. Beth Elenko:

The SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University's Occupational Therapy Program, Specialization in EI (SEI), is built on two previously federally-funded advanced EI training programs: The EI Certificate Program (EICP) to prepare practicing occupational therapists who want to work in EI (U.S. Department of Education, OSEP [2003–2009] Grant #H325A030062), which then became a pre-service (entry-level) training of EI professionals called the EI Specialization Program (EISP) for preservice occupational therapists (U.S. Department of Education, OSEP [2008–2013] #HR325A03006). The SEI is embedded into the entry-level master's occupational therapy curriculum. Students apply prior to their second year, and those that are accepted engage in four additional elective courses that are presented in online and hybrid formats in addition to participating in a family partnership experience and an EC internship to integrate family-centered best practices and reflective practice.

The family partnership experience allows students to work directly with a young child and their family to understand the family's perspective (Elenko, 2019). The EC internship includes day care observations to observe typical development in this natural environment and attend SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University Hospital's biweekly NICU Follow up clinic to observe and identify potential delays and refer to EI.

Since joining the academic partnership in 2014, the SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University has graduated four cohorts of students who have completed this training. Past students have stated, "The SEI expanded on my OT skills and helped me to see the bigger picture of the family as my client and allow me to observe families and see windows of opportunity to embed my interventions."

Dr. Jeanette Gong:

There are two other partners that recently joined us: Hunter and Lehman Colleges. Hunter College's Silberman School of Social Work, coordinated by Dr. Patricia Gray, initially provided free continuing education courses. The school is now integrating EI best practices into its master's in social work curriculum and collaborating with the NYC BEI on an EI Service Coordination Professional Development Institute.

Lehman College's Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences created an EI Specialty Track in their master's program. Lehman College, coordinated by Leslie Grubler, MA, CCC-SLP, TSHH, transformed an office into a home environment in their Speech and Hearing Center for evaluations and simulations. Young children have responded immediately to this change; for example, some have immediately taken off their shoes once they enter the room, which signals how comfortable they are. In addition, Lehman has created innovative ways to coach parents and to use materials from the client's home as part of the clinic services.

Dr. Beth Elenko:

While these programs may differ, what are the core components that the academic partners share?

Dr. Jeanette Gong:

The academic partners are all expected to incorporate the following EI competencies into their curriculum:

1. Knowledge of typical and atypical childhood development and behavior (birth to 3 years of age) to support quality evaluations, on-going monitoring of progress, and creating developmentally appropriate individualized strategies in partnership with parents and caregivers.
2. Understanding the multicultural and diversity factors related to engaging and working with EI families that support communication, collaboration, and quality evaluations and service provision. Respect and understanding each family's culture should be the common thread throughout a family's journey in EI, from referral to transition.
3. Understanding the parent-child dyad; the significance of parents and caregivers in supporting children's development, including social and emotional development; and enhancing families and caregivers' knowledge and capacities to help their children via coaching and consistent and effective communication, coordination, and collaboration (between the early interventionists and service coordinators and with parents and caregivers on the team). Parents learning new ways to support their children's development is one of the family goals of EI nationwide.
4. Understanding and using evidence-based, family-centered best practices with parents by respecting, considering, and integrating the family's information, history, way of doing their routines (culture), priorities, concerns, and resources through every step in their EI journey. This should be reflected in service coordination, in evaluations, in the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) functional outcomes, and when creating individualized strategies with parents and caregivers during service provision. National professional associations across disciplines, the OSEP workgroups on natural environments, and evidence-based research all

recommend that early interventionists use family-centered best practices in their work with children with disabilities and their families.

5. Using self-reflective practice and reflective supervision to support on-going professional development. To be able to work effectively with culturally diverse families and to integrate family-centered best practices, EI professionals should self-reflect on their work to better know and understand their own values and implicit bias and how they impact their communication (via words, attitude, and body-language), perceptions, expectations, and actions with others.
6. Facilitating fieldwork and clinical placements in EI settings that include homes and community settings such as childcare programs. Many EI therapists and teachers shared that most fieldwork placements occur in classroom settings working with children 4 years of age and older. This fieldwork experience contrasts greatly with working in home and community settings where most EI services are provided with parents and caregivers present.

Dr. Beth Elenko:

What have you seen as benefits of this partnership?

Dr. Jeanette Gong:

Since fieldwork and clinical placements in EI settings are rare, the NYC BEI and the academic partners are currently working with several EI provider agencies on a fieldwork and clinical placement manual for both the EI clinical supervisors and the graduate students. Working in collaboration with EI providers ensures that the manual will capture the requirements for EI administration, for the graduate programs, and for the EI providers.

The NYC BEI is also planning with academic partners to create a practice mentor network with the graduates from the academic partnerships and with clinical supervisors from the fieldwork and clinical placements. With the COVID-19 pandemic impacting the way services are provided, the academic partners are planning to update their curriculum to include telehealth and teletherapy best practices.

Dr. Jacqueline D. Shannon:

Brooklyn College's ECAE has created simulations of the NICU and home experiences at the New York Simulation Center for the Health Sciences (NYSIM)/The CUNY/NYU Langone Medical Center in Bellevue Hospital, allowing students in all academic partnership programs to participate in interdisciplinary EI simulation modules that integrate health care simulation instruction to support cross-discipline experiences and collaborations. The simulation includes a realistic mock NICU setting (with premature manikins and actors playing the role of neonatologists and nurses) and two mock home visits (with actors playing the role of parents) to provide our graduate students with authentic, interprofessional realistic learning experiences in these EI settings. Reflective practice strategies are implemented into seminars to further engage students in reflective supervision. These simulation modules also strengthen students' skills in understanding medical terminology, brain and fetal development, developmental care in NICU, and the hospital experiences of premature and medically fragile infants and their families in relation to later development and potential developmental delays. We have invited graduate students and faculty as well as EI providers from our academic partners to participate in these activities together. NYSIM provides educational interprofessional practice and simulation activities for individuals in a variety of disciplines. These activities have taken the form of simulated cases in which groups of students from multiple professions pre-brief, engage, and debrief cases together. The activities also have provisions for observers to participate.

Dr. Beth Elenko:

This partnership has allowed us to collaborate interprofessionally through simulations. The SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University occupational therapy and Lehman college SLP students have engaged in an interprofessional education simulation team experience in the Lehman college home environment where actors represented parents and the students engaged in a family with the parent to address their concerns as a team. This was done live, previously, in the simulated home environment, but this year will be done in a virtual format to bring occupational therapy and SLP students together in a team simulation.

Dr. Michael Bergen:

The academic partners have provided a forum where professionals from different disciplines can meet regularly to discuss the unique challenges of our professional services and to try to troubleshoot these together. We have also been able to work more closely with EI service providers and agencies to learn about their needs. The resulting work has helped to overcome challenges with student placements and has helped contribute to a placement handbook which is near completion.

Dr. Sara B. Woolf and Dr. Peishi Wang:

This collaboration reflects a deep and sustained commitment across participants and is grounded by our collective sense of professional ethics, vision, and integrity. The academic partners focus on ensuring a highly skilled EI workforce and facilitating systemic adoption of evidence-based practices to support families and children with exceptionalities. Our projects share a common focus to increase access to high quality coursework, field-based learning, and continued participation in and support of our professional network. We are hopeful that our efforts will ultimately lead to meaningful systemic change on multiple levels, not the least being a larger pool of community-based organizations that self-identify as being interested in and willing to adopt practices and policies that reflect prevailing best practices. In addition, we anticipate that we will engage in scholarship, training, and advocacy that will directly benefit children and families as much as our respective programs, students, and affiliates. Finally, the ongoing academic partnership has allowed us the opportunity to collaborate across disciplines and even across CUNY schools through simulation experiences. Our students noted that it was one of the most impactful experiences for them.

Dr. Michael Bergen:

We hope that the continuing growth of the academic partnerships can serve as a model for other regions to consider adopting and to encourage enhanced EI curricula and collaboration in professional training programs. But, most importantly, we hope that with a focus on evidence-based practice we can contribute toward a brighter future of health equity for the vulnerable EI population.

Dr. Jacqueline D. Shannon:

The academic partnerships have allowed faculty across disciplines to collaborate with each other and with our EI provider colleagues. Our interdisciplinary partnership models interprofessional collaboration to our graduate students in each discipline, allowing each of us to integrate what we learn from each other into our programs and curriculum. It also provides opportunities for our students to engage in interprofessional experiences across disciplines by having them engage in shared experiences as well

as having faculty develop deeper partnerships with our EI provider community so they are engaged and participating in the process, particularly as we further develop and deepen student fieldwork experiences.

It is a challenge recruiting diverse multidisciplinary professionals for the NYC area since NYS does not require these disciplines to have specialized training with infants and toddlers to become an early interventionist.

As the program has grown, we are confident that new early interventionists participating in home visits through their fieldwork will be uniquely qualified for consideration by EI agencies hiring in the future.

There is a shortage of extremely skilled early interventionists across disciplines who work effectively with NYC's linguistically and culturally diverse families, particularly those living in under-resourced communities. The academic partners are well positioned to serve as a model of collaboration for our diverse student body, with many of our students from multilingual homes that possess the cultural sensitivity required for this job.

Dr. Beth Elenko:

This is a truly unique partnership that started simply to meet a need to increase the education of providers. It has evolved over the years to be an academic collaboration with the NYC BEI and now includes several NYC EI provider directors and clinical supervisors to prepare the next generation of early interventionists with a deep philosophy and experience in family-centered best practices, engaged in interprofessional experiences including shared coursework, simulation experiences, case-based learning, clinical practice and fieldwork, and reflective supervision. We appreciate the support from the NYC BEI to invest in the future education and preparation of EI providers across disciplines.

The NYC BEI Academic Partnership Collaborators

Dr. Michael Bergen is the director of the Davidow Speech Language Hearing Center at Brooklyn College and is on the faculty of the Doctor of Audiology (AuD) Program at the CUNY Graduate Center. Dr. Bergen is a NYS licensed, ASHA certified audiologist who has been employed by Brooklyn College since 1994. He is the project director and co-founder of Brooklyn College EI Specialization in Speech-Language Pathology.

Dr. Beth Elenko is currently an associate professor at New York Institute of Technology. She directed the SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University's Specialization in EI as part of the academic partnership from 2014–2020. She directed two previously federally-funded advanced EI training programs: The EI Certificate Program (EICP) to prepare practicing occupational therapists who wanted to work in EI (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education [2003–2009] Grant #H325A030062), which then became a pre-service (entry-level) training of EI professionals called the EI Specialization Program (EISP) for preservice occupational therapists (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education [2008–2013] #HR325A03006).

Dr. Jeanette Gong is the Director of the Intervention Quality Initiatives Unit in the BEI in the Division of Family and Child Health at the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. In addition to the six academic partnerships, the NYC BEI also has an EI Parent Text Messaging Program and a Learning Management System that offers free, on-line professional development trainings that provides CEUs for OTs/OTAs, PTs/PTAs, SLPs/FYs/audiologists, LCSWs/LMSWs, and CTLEs for EC teachers.

Email BEI at EmbeddedCoaching@health.nyc.gov for more information about our professional development programs.

Dr. Jacqueline D. Shannon is founding chair of the Early Childhood Education and Art Education Department at Brooklyn College, CUNY. She is associate professor of Early Childhood/Early Intervention. She co-directs the Advanced Certificate in Early Intervention and Parenting program (with Haroula Ntalla, MEd, CSE, LP-LP, and Karen McFadden, PhD). She was chair and higher education board representative of New York City Local Early Intervention Coordinating Council (2016-2020). Drs. Shannon and McFadden also co-direct the Inclusive and Family-Centered Infant-Toddler Care (iFAM-iTcare) Research project.

Dr. Peishi Wang is an associate professor of special education at Queens College, CUNY. She is the co-director of *Project InBASE*, an integrated master's program in bilingual early childhood special education funded by a US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Grant # H325K160140 (2016-2021). She has been part of the academic partnership since 2016.

Dr. Sara B. Woolf is currently an associate professor at Queens College, CUNY. She is also the co-director of *Project InBASE*, an integrated master's program in bilingual early childhood special education funded by a US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Grant # H325K160140 (2016-2021). She has been a part of the academic partnership since 2016.

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