
Practice Reports

Early Learning Visual Impairment Services Training and Advancement (EL VISTA) Project: Leading the Way for a New Profession within a Profession

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The field of visual impairment—specifically, the area of early intervention—has benefitted from the knowledge and experience gained by its pioneers in both research and practice. David Warren compiled a comprehensive review of the literature in his book *Blindness and Early Childhood Development* (1977), with a second edition published in 1984. His work served as a resource for understanding the knowledge base of the field of visual impairment, while also pointing to areas of needed research. According to him, a surge in research occurred following his original 1977 publication, providing the field with a better understanding of development in young children with visual impairments. Fraiberg's (1959) foundational work on early child development added to professionals' understanding of motor and cognitive development.

A large study by Ferrell, Shaw, and Deitz (1998) investigated development across domain areas. In the 1990s, several studies were published on early language development and social attachment in young children with visual impairments (Dote-Kwan, 1995; Dote-Kwan & Hughes, 1994; Erin, 1990; Tröster & Brambring, 1992). Along with this growing body of research, services for infants and toddlers with visual impairments became more prevalent throughout the United States. Although the availability of services in some

areas remains problematic today, in other regions some agencies have been providing services to infants and toddlers for more than 30 years (for example, at the Anchor Center for Blind Children, Blind Babies Foundation, Blind Children's Center, Children's Center for the Visually Impaired Preschool Services, and Foundation for Blind Children). The collaborative work of these agency leaders, along with researchers in the field of early intervention and visual impairment, has improved opportunities for families of children with visual impairments. For example, Babies Count (Hatton, Schwietz, Boyer, & Rychwalski, 2007), a census of young children aged birth to 3 years with visual impairments, originated in the collaborative work of researchers and agency leaders (Bishop, 2006). Another collaborative effort among three center-based agencies resulted in Project PRISM (Ferrell et al., 1998). Project PRISM, funded by the U.S. Department of Education Services, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), was a longitudinal study of the patterns of visually impaired children. That study was initiated by the field and is considered the foundational work that has contributed to the developmental guidelines that vision professionals use today when providing early intervention services. Other OSEP-funded projects have developed resource materials for early intervention programs to use in the training of teachers of students with visual impairments and families to promote the development of infants and toddlers with visual impairments or deafblindness. Utah's SKI-HI Institute and its Vision Impaired InService in America (VIISA) curriculum (Morgan, 1995) is a resource curriculum designed to support providers of vision services to children ages birth to 5 years (Dennison, 2000). Project PLAI (Promoting Learning through Active Interaction) has developed resource materials for early intervention programs to use to teach families how to promote their infant's communication development. Project PLAI

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developed an early communication curriculum (Chen, Klein, & Haney, 2000a; 2007) and accompanying videotape (Chen, Klein, & Haney, 2000b; 2007). The project then evaluated these materials while training early interventionists to use the curriculum with families and their infants with deafblindness. The Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Institute, Early Intervention Training Center for Infants and Toddlers with Visual Impairments and Their Families, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was a national project that developed resources with the goal of building the capacity of colleges and universities to prepare personnel to serve infants and toddlers with visual impairments and their families. Interactive multimedia training modules were developed in partnership with faculty members, consumers, and service providers (Hatton, 2004). In addition, researchers and leaders collaborated to develop a white paper outlining recommended practices by early intervention and visual impairment professionals in their work with children (Hatton et al., 2003). It was from this research, practice, and policy base that a new early intervention training program, Early Learning Visual Impairment Services Training and Advancement (EL VISTA), at Illinois State University (ISU) was built.

Experts in the field of visual impairment (Corn & Hatlen, 1996; Davidson & Harrison, 2000; Salt, Dale, Osborne, & Tadic, 2005) have agreed that training that combines early intervention and visual impairment standards and recommended practices requires a specialized set of knowledge and skills. Children with visual impairments or deafblindness from birth through the age of 22 years receive services from trained teachers of students with visual impairments and orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists. Yet teachers of visually impaired students and O&M specialists are typically not fully trained in the developmental patterns of babies and children with visual impairments or deafblindness; the

effect of vision on the development of children; and the effect of vision loss on children, families, and society as a whole (Kesiktaş, 2009). Anthony (2014) agreed with Kesiktaş (2009) that few teachers of visually impaired students and O&M specialists were adequately trained to address the unique needs of infants and toddlers with visual impairments and their families; and that some U.S. states may also be experiencing critical personnel shortages (DeMario & Heinze, 2001; Ludlow, Conner, & Schechter, 2005).

For example, in the state of Illinois, 158,522 births were reported in 2014 (Illinois Department of Public Health, 2014). Assuming a similar annual birth rate and a 0.3% prevalence of visual impairment (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2011), we would expect approximately 1,425 children under 3 years of age to have visual impairments in Illinois. However, Illinois only has 24 early intervention professionals trained in visual impairment that meet state requirements to work with infants and toddlers (Western Illinois University, 2016). With so few credentialed service providers, it is likely that not all infants and toddlers with visual impairments in Illinois are receiving the early intervention and visual impairment services they so desperately need.

The number of infants and toddlers with visual impairments or deafblindness who deserve and require highly skilled teachers of visually impaired students and O&M specialists trained in early intervention points to the need for additional programs that prepare personnel in early intervention (Dennison, 2000; Dote-Kwan, Chen, & Hughes, 2001; Gray, 2005; Summers, Leigh, & Arnold, 2006). However, it is likely that current personnel in the early intervention and visual impairment fields lack appropriate training to serve the population of children ages birth to 3 years on their caseloads (Anthony, 2014). The field of visual impairment must prioritize this need with a new profession within a profession,

teachers of visually impaired students and O&M specialists who are a highly trained subset of the field of visual impairment, in order to meet the unique needs of infants and toddlers ages birth through 3 years who are visually impaired or deafblind. In other words, the visual impairment field needs highly trained early intervention and visual impairment personnel in order to meet the unique needs of infants and toddlers with visual impairments or deafblindness and their families.

Since services for children aged birth to 3 years with visual impairments and their families were mandated by Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997), there has been an increased focus on early intervention. Organizations such as the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), as well as vision-specific organizations—notably the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER) Infant and Preschool Division—recognize and support the early intervention field (DEC, 2014a). However, although each division has sets of skills, standards, and recommended practices for personnel preparation, these sets are not always specific to the early intervention and visual impairment field. One notable exception is the curricular standards from AER’s Infant and Preschool Division (AER, 2014). Studies in the visual impairment field that have addressed particular guidelines for effective early childhood special education programs for children with visual impairments have actually drawn attention to the lack of guidelines for providing early intervention services to the visually impaired population (CEC, 1994; Corn & Hatlen, 1996; Davidson & Harrison, 2000; Salt et al., 2005).

Standards, guidelines, and recommended practices from both the early intervention field and the field of visual impairment could guide the development and implementation of

a personnel training program that is focused on providing high-quality training so as to produce new service providers to meet the unique needs of these infants and toddlers. Such training would create a group of early intervention and visual impairment trained professionals within the field of visual impairment and would mitigate the “. . . personnel issue where the field seeks more specialists with the necessary knowledge and skills to work with children with visual impairments and their families” (Kesiktaş, 2009, p. 828).

This new early intervention and visual impairment classification requires that a program be developed to address the need for highly trained and skilled personnel to meet the unique needs of these infants and toddlers. To address the need for trained personnel to serve children and their families, ISU was awarded a five-year OSEP personnel preparation grant, EL VISTA (H325K140108) beginning in 2014. The primary goals for the project are: (1) to improve the quality of personnel who are fully credentialed to serve infants and toddlers who are visually impaired or deafblind who live in urban and rural areas where there are critical shortages; (2) to increase the number of personnel who are fully credentialed to serve these infants and toddlers who live in urban and rural areas where there are critical shortages; and (3) to create and implement a clear, effective plan for evaluating the knowledge and skills of graduates.

GOAL 1

Since a specific set of standards, competencies, and recommended practices was not available for the specialized training of these professionals, EL VISTA staff members initiated work on the first goal by reviewing recommendations for quality personnel development from national organizations in early childhood special education (DEC, 2014b) and visual

impairment or deafblindness; Division on Visual Impairments and Deafblindness (DVIDB, n.d.), CEC; and AER Infant and Preschool Division (AER, 2014). The practices in these organizations were cross-referenced and combined. The result became the foundation for the development of five graduate courses (assessment, intervention, family/professional collaboration, multiple disabilities/deafblindness, and professional practice in early intervention and visual impairment), two early intervention and visual impairment-specific practicum experiences, and multiple learning activities that each scholar would complete.

The method of delivery for the coursework and practica stems from another OSEP-funded personnel development project, AIM to Be Ahead (Lartz, 2013), which prepares professionals to work with infants and toddlers with hearing loss and their families. The delivery of the core 15-graduate hour curriculum is offered simultaneously to professionals at two locations in the northern and central part of the state over a one-year period.

The assessment course provides an in-depth focus on developmentally appropriate methods and instruments used in completing a functional vision and learning media assessment, O&M assessment, and developmental assessment on young children with visual impairments or deafblindness. Scholars are given the opportunity to practice administering the assessments using various case studies. Instruments covered in the course include: The Oregon Project for Visually Impaired and Blind Preschool Children (Anderson, Boigon, Davis, DeWaard, & Southern Oregon Education Service District, 2007), the Cortical Visual Impair-

ment Range Assessment (Roman-Lantzy, 2007), the Individual Sensory Learning Profile Interview (Anthony, 2003), Project IN-home Sensory Impaired Training and Education (INSITE) (Clark, Wilson-Vlotman, & Morgan, 1984), the Communication Matrix (Rowland, 2017), Teaching Age-Appropriate Purposeful Skills (TAPS) (Pogrud et al., 2012), and the Carolina Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers with Special Needs (Johnson-Martin, Attemeier, & Hacker, 2004). In addition, scholars learn how to administer the Routines Based Interview (McWilliam, 2010).

The course on intervention strategies is designed to help scholars learn about early development and the effect of vision loss on that development. In addition, scholars explore a variety of resources to apply possible activities, accommodations, and strategies that could be applied to family outcomes after viewing recorded home visits as well as observing home visits in person. These experiences provide additional opportunities to work with fellow scholars and course instructors to brainstorm developmentally appropriate practices that could be applied in a multitude of situations.

The working with families/professional collaboration course has scholars learn the importance of a family-centered approach, including early intervention foundational concepts. Guest lectures and contact with parents of children with visual impairments provide scholars with opportunities to explore the parent perspective.

The multiple disabilities/deafblindness course includes an in-depth study of the most common disabilities that accompany vision loss in young children; the characteristics of those disabilities; and their effect on assessment, family,

collaboration, and intervention. Areas of the expanded core, including assistive technology, are explored as they relate to specific disability needs. Resources specific to early intervention for vision and orientation and mobility are also highlighted.

The practicum course is the signature piece in the EL VISTA program. It is the key to producing highly trained and highly qualified personnel. It provides an opportunity for scholars to go into families' homes and work with infants and their early intervention provider. This aspect of the program is unique to the early intervention model and is quite different for scholars in the field of visual impairment who have only had experience in school settings. Students apply what they have learned from coursework, including the use of an approach designed by the second author that encourages the use of family-centered practices (Ely, Gullifor, & Hollinshead, 2017). Research is currently being conducted to explore the efficacy of this approach to promote family-centered practices when used by early intervention and visual impairment professionals with families and their infants and toddlers with visual impairments.

EL VISTA is different from existing personnel preparation programs in that the courses offered are not electives one can take to obtain information on how to work in early intervention and visual impairment. Early intervention and visual impairment content in the courses are not modules that stand alone as extra content available within courses offered in personnel preparation programs that focus on visual impairment or deafblindness. The combined courses offered in EL VISTA lead to a graduate specialization certificate

recognized by the Illinois State Board of Education.

GOAL 2

To address Goal 2, EL VISTA project staff members recruited certified teachers of visually impaired students and O&M specialists for the first scholar cohort, who began the program in 2015. To date, 10 teachers of visually impaired students and O&M specialists have completed the program and are eligible to serve families and children in Illinois. Another 10 scholars are currently enrolled in the second cohort. The EL VISTA project ensures that qualified personnel who graduate from the program have a positive effect on the shortage of professionals who are eligible to serve in the State of Illinois early intervention system.

GOAL 3

To address Goal 3, a series of formative and summative assessments have been used. Student-generated assessments include self-perception surveys that are administered before and after training that assess progress towards the recommended practices and standards that undergird the EL VISTA curriculum. These include scholar ratings of the importance and confidence of implementation of each of the recommended practices and standards. In addition, scholar assessment includes written reflection responses to observations of intervention sessions, and course and instructor evaluations. Feedback comes to students at set points in the program from the practicum field mentors and EL VISTA course instructors and supervisors. Finally, parents whose children receive intervention during the practicum experience are asked to evaluate the

scholars who worked with them and their children on a select number of recommended practices and standards. A variety of informal and formal evaluations completed by scholars, EL VISTA project staff members, and an external evaluator have created an effective plan for evaluating the knowledge and skills of students.

EL VISTA Program Evaluator Kay Ferrell investigated the scholars' perceived value of their practicum experiences. She found that the first 10 scholars who completed the project were very positive about their practicum experiences. "They perceived course components as valuable, deemed standards as important, and expressed intermediate to advanced competency in almost every standard, suggesting that the course met its objectives" (Ferrell, 2016). Additional data will be collected on the next 10 scholars, those who completed the program in the summer of 2016. EL VISTA graduates are leading the way in their new profession while representing the growth of a community of highly trained and qualified teachers of visually impaired students and O&M specialists to provide services to infants and toddlers with visual impairments or deafblindness. Toward that end, the EL VISTA leadership team places significant emphasis on the dissemination of information. For example, it has created a professional early intervention and visual impairment website, <http://eiviprofessionals.com>, which is specifically for teachers of visually impaired students and O&M specialists who serve infants and toddlers with visual impairments or deafblindness. It offers these professionals a platform to gather information about recommended practices, to share interven-

tion ideas, and to post a calendar of events related to the profession.

The EL VISTA project at ISU is geared toward filling the critical need for highly trained and highly qualified interventionists who become part of this newly formed early intervention and visual impairment profession within the overall visual impairment profession. ISU is leading the way in this new emerging specialization by offering training that addresses the specific and unique needs of these infants and toddlers. Experts in the field of visual impairment have stressed the importance of having professionals involved in early intervention with infants and toddlers who are trained in both visual impairment and early intervention, since this dual training will help lead to positive outcomes for children and families (Dote-Kwan et al., 2001; Ferrell, 2011; Ferrell, Bruce, & Luckner, 2014; Pogrund & Fazzi, 2002). EL VISTA is training teachers of visually impaired students and O&M specialists in the five foundational concepts of early intervention as identified by Pletcher and Younggren (2013): family-centered and relationship-based practices, natural environments, child learning, adult learning, and quality team practices. The combination of these five foundational concepts with guidance from researchers in the field of visual impairment suggests that adaptations to the child's environment that meet the child's visual needs are crucial to the child's growth and development in the areas of motor, cognition, communication, and social interactions (Alfaro, 2015; Chen et al., 2007; Dunnnett, 1999; Erickson, Hatton, Roy, Fox, & Renne, 2007; Fazzi et al., 2002; Herrera, 2015; Ihsen, Troester, & Brambring,

2010; Metell, 2015). The unique curricular design employed in the EL VISTA project that forges recommended practices and personnel preparation curricular standards from both the early intervention field and the visual impairment field is leading the way in the creation of a new profession: the early intervention and visual impairment profession.

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Personnel Preparation in Visual Impairment: A Responsive, Individualized Model

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The following excerpt from the vision statement created by the developers of the Na-

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tional Plan for Training Personnel (NPTP) to Serve Children with Blindness and Low Vision embraces positive outcomes for individuals with visual impairments.

We envision a future world in which each individual is valued by society. In this society, the needs of each individual are respected and addressed. Individuals from diverse language, cultural, ethnic, and disability backgrounds are perceived and see themselves as contributing members of society. They have high expectations for leading fulfilling lives. (Mason, Davidson, & McNerney, 2000, p. 11)

A key factor in promoting the outcomes described in this mission statement is the teacher. Specifically, knowledge of subject matter tied to national standards along with effective pedagogy can positively influence student learning (Blankenship, 2004). Certainly, university preparation is the foundation for effective teachers. For aspiring teachers in the vision profession, access to personnel preparation programs can be a challenge (Ambrose-Zaken & Bozeman, 2010; Bozeman & Zebe-hazy, 2014).

NPTP (Mason et al., 2000) was formed through the visionary work of a national community of highly regarded professionals to address the critical shortage of personnel necessary to improve the educational outcomes of children who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision). To the new and ambitious leadership at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMB), NPTP became a blueprint for everything the vision studies program wanted to accomplish in designing a program for the six New England states (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont).

This report examines the 25-year evolution and outcomes of UMB's Vision Studies program and the Northeast Resource