

Preparing Special Education Teachers to Support Autistic Female Students' Well-being

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ABSTRACT

Educators are often unaware of the academic difficulties, sensory challenges, social isolation, and emotional distress many autistic female students experience within inclusive K-12 educational environments (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Tomlinson et al., 2020; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). Research indicates that autistic female students attribute many of these difficulties to their teachers lacking understanding and specialized knowledge regarding their specific experiences of autism, which often differs from those of male autistic people (Tomlinson et al., 2020; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). Consequently, teacher training must move beyond traditional male-centric paradigms to address the distinct female presentation of autism and the educational needs of autistic female students (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Tomlinson et al., 2020; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). To bridge this research-to-practice gap, this article introduces the SAGEWell framework. The model emphasizes four key actions: (a) supporting understanding of autism in females; (b) advocating for equity in assessment and service provision; (c) growing inclusive practices; and (d) empowering collaboration with students, families, and other school professionals. Through a series of vignettes, an application guide, a visual model, and a practical checklist, this article provides teacher educators with a structured path to develop the competencies special educators need to recognize and meet the needs of autistic female students, thereby enhancing their overall well-being.

KEYWORDS

Autism, autistic females, inclusive education, special education, teacher preparation

Olivia, a special education teacher candidate in her final student teaching placement, was initially thrilled to work with Maya, an autistic fourth-grade student who shared Olivia's love of reading and creative writing. However, a few weeks into the semester, Olivia noticed that Maya was missing several days of school each week. When she reached out to Maya's mother, she was surprised to learn that when Maya came home from school, she was falling apart. Maya's mother described Sunday night stomachaches, morning meltdowns at the front door, and afternoons of tears and withdrawal at home. Olivia was stunned. She saw no signs that Maya was struggling in the classroom. Maya appeared to be thriving. She was quiet, consistently earned passing grades despite often taking longer than others to get started on work, and never asked for help. Earlier, Olivia even told her university supervisor, Dr. Woolf, that she was questioning Maya's diagnosis and her need for services. She based her skepticism on Maya's lack of externalizing behaviors, a historical hallmark of autism that her introductory coursework emphasized. Olivia wondered, "Do I really even know what autism is?"

The Hidden Reality of Autistic Females in Schools

Autism is a developmental disability that shapes how a person experiences the world due to differences in communication, social interactions, sensory processing, and cognitive style (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2024). Although it is formal-

ly known as autism spectrum disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), we use the term *autism* and identity-first language throughout this article to reflect a neurodiversity-affirming stance and respect the preferences of the autism community (Bottema-Beutel, 2021). While the presentation of autism varies widely (APA, 2013), autistic females¹ often manifest subtler core autistic traits (i.e., subjectively better communication and social skills than males based on societal standards) and possess a heightened social awareness (Harrop et al., 2024). This awareness frequently leads to them attempting to mask their autistic traits to gain social acceptance. Masking refers to the conscious or unconscious attempt to hide one's autistic traits to appear neurotypical in social settings (Cook et al., 2021). Masking is associated with increased psychological distress, including anxiety and depression (Beck et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2024), and can obscure the path to an accurate diagnosis (Lai et al., 2023). Understanding masking is critical for school-based teams, as autistic students who regulate their behavior and try to blend in with peers and adults may have their needs go undetected (Putnam et al., 2025). Researchers theorize masking may explain not only why teachers are less likely to identify and report concerns about autistic females, but also why caregiver and teacher accounts of these students' characteristics frequently misalign (Putnam et al., 2025; Sturrock et al., 2021).

Olivia's confusion reflects a documented trend where teachers, who often function as the gatekeepers to services, lack understanding of how autism can manifest in female individuals (Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). This knowledge gap contributes to the under-identification

and inadequate levels of support for autistic female students (Zakai-Mashiach, 2023). Lacking access to needed services and accommodations often leads to emotional distress and school avoidance, which has been reported in first-hand accounts of autistic females' educational journeys (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024). Left unaddressed, unmet needs in the educational environment can negatively affect these students' academic performance, mental health, and well-being (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Barriers to Success in Inclusive Environments

Synthesizing the findings from three systematic reviews, multiple barriers to inclusive educational environments for autistic female students were identified, many of which go unnoticed by teachers (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025; Tomlinson et al., 2020). Four themes emerged from the challenges autistic female students commonly face: academic difficulties, sensory and environmental challenges, social isolation, and emotional distress.

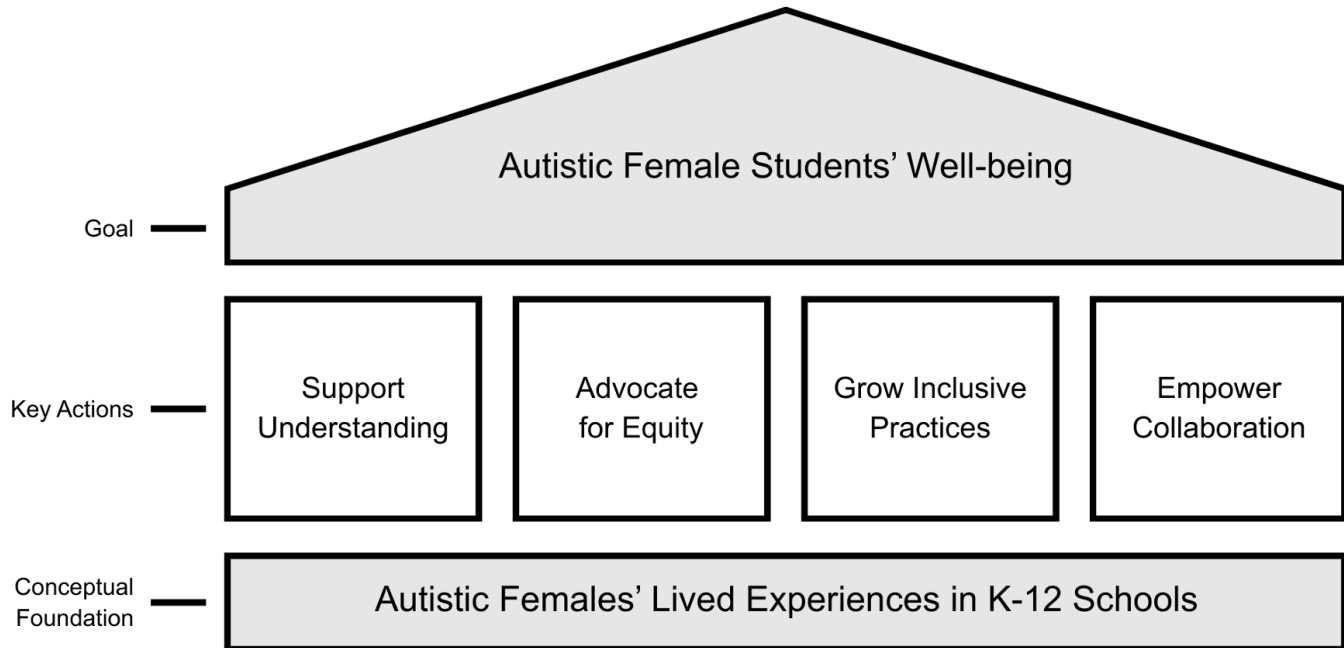
First, academic difficulties frequently relate to executive functioning demands, particularly in planning, organization, and task initiation (Jacobs et al., 2021; Sturrock et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Communication differences, such as varying capacities for listening comprehension and a lack of the verbal confidence required to self-advocate, can hinder autistic females' abilities to follow complex instructions or request assistance. Moreover, teachers' limited specialized knowledge on how to adapt materials or provide accommodations often compounds these academic challenges (Tomlinson et al., 2022; Zakai-Mashiach, 2023).

The school's physical environment also exacerbates academic struggles (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021). High noise levels, crowded spaces, and the unpredictability of staff or schedule changes create a persistent state of sensory overload that impairs learning capacity. For many autistic female students, the sheer size and social density of inclusive settings become significant impediments to feelings of safety and security (Myles et al., 2019).

For autistic female students, social isolation often heightens feelings of vulnerability in school (Myles et al., 2019). While many autistic females describe trusted friends as a vital source of security in chaotic school settings (Myles et al., 2019), they struggle to maintain these protective relationships (Jacobs et al., 2021). Instead, autistic females report profound difficulties fitting in (Sturrock et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2022) and find themselves ignored, rejected, or bullied by peers (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021; Josefsson & Johansson, 2024; Myles et al., 2019). Common instructional practices intended to foster collaboration, such as requiring students to find a partner, can inadvertently reinforce feelings of isolation (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019) because such tasks depend heavily on existing social connections and peer acceptance. To navigate the social demands of the school environment and blend in with their peers, many autistic females resort to using the mentally and emotionally draining practice of masking (Zakai-Mashiach, 2023).

The combined academic, sensory, and social pressures produce significant emotional distress, including chronic stress, anxiety, and physical exhaustion (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025).

¹We utilize the term "female" to refer to biological sex, reflecting well-documented sex-based differences in how autism manifests across the lifespan (Lai et al., 2023; McFayden et al., 2023). This terminology is intentionally inclusive of all gender identities among those assigned female at birth who share sex-influenced autistic traits and the associated risk of diagnostic bias (Lai et al., 2023; Uglik-Marucha et al., 2026).

FIGURE 1: The SAGEWell Conceptual Framework

Left unaddressed, these compounding burdens can lead to withdrawal and emotionally driven school avoidance (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Josefsson & Johansson, 2024). To address these barriers, the field must reimagine how special education teachers are being prepared to work with autistic students, including those whose presentations have been historically unrecognized.

The SAGEWell Framework

The documented experiences of autistic female students offer compelling evidence that current educational practices are insufficient to meet their specific but often overlooked needs, and yet teacher education has largely failed to keep pace. Specifically, there are growing calls for teacher training that moves beyond male-centric presentations to address the specific presentation and educational needs of autistic female students (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025; Tomlinson

et al., 2022).

To bridge this research-to-practice gap and present teacher educators with a structured path forward, we introduce the SAGEWell framework. This four-pillar model offers special education faculty a structured approach to preparing the next generation of special education teachers with the competencies necessary to recognize and effectively support autistic female students. The framework emphasizes four key actions: (a) *supporting* understanding of autism in females; (b) *advocating* for equity in assessment and service provision; (c) *growing* inclusive practices; and (d) *empowering* collaboration with students, families, and other school professionals. We summarize the SAGEWell conceptual framework in Figure 1.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE SAGEWELL FRAMEWORK

The SAGEWell framework offers a strategic response to the documented

barriers autistic female students face in K-12 settings by translating research into concrete teacher preparation goals. It was developed by synthesizing current literature on autistic females' lived experiences in K-12 schools with the *Initial K-12 Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators* (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2020), and is further informed by our collective experience in special education teaching, university instruction, and community advocacy. The first author, an autistic female, led this developmental process.

The following section introduces the four pillars of the framework and establishes their evidence-based foundation. Each pillar is mapped to the aforementioned professional standards, demonstrating how the key actions of the SAGEWell framework align with the essential knowledge and skills required of beginning special education teachers. Table 1 details this alignment.

TABLE 1: SAGEWell Alignment with CEC Initial Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators

SAGEWell Pillar	Aligned CEC Standard	Key Learning Objective for Candidates
Support Understanding	Standard 2: Understanding and Addressing Each Individual's Developmental and Learning Needs	Identify the unique presentation of autism in females.
Advocate for Equity	Standard 1: Engaging in Professional Learning and Practice within Ethical Guidelines	Advocate for improved outcomes by recognizing and addressing disparities in assessment and service provision for autistic females.
	Standard 4: Using Assessment to Understand the Learner and the Learning Environment	Select appropriate data and apply it to standard measures to mitigate diagnostic bias rooted in male-normed autism presentations.
Grow Inclusive Practices	Standard 3: Demonstrating Subject Matter Content and Specialized Curricular Knowledge	Utilize specialized curricular knowledge regarding effective executive function and communication supports to select and implement accommodations that would be beneficial to autistic females.
	Standard 5: Supporting Learning Using Effective Instruction	Engage in effective instruction by adjusting instructional strategies and learning environments based on autistic female students' reported needs.
Empower Collaboration	Standard 6: Supporting Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Growth	Collaborate with school professionals to support the well-being of autistic females by addressing social exclusion and emotional stress.
	Standard 7: Collaborating with Team Members	Collaborate with professionals, students, and families to plan programs and promote autistic female student self-advocacy.

Note. Standards are quoted from the *Initial K–12 Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators (CEC, 2020)*.

Pillar One: Support Understanding

The first pillar, *Support Understanding*, addresses the critical need for teachers to recognize the unique presentation of autism in females as a prerequisite for fostering student well-being (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). Although school-based awareness of autism has expanded significantly in recent years, teachers remain less informed about how autism manifests in females and frequently do not notice their support needs or refer them for a special education evaluation (Myles et al., 2019; Gosling et al., 2024; Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). Without these referrals, autistic female students cannot access important services. Neglecting these needs during school years often triggers long-term consequences, including chronic mental health issues and persistent social difficulties that continue into adulthood (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Prevailing stereotypes of autism,

which typically align with the overt, externalized behaviors often demonstrated by males, contribute to the limited number of referrals (Munroe & Dunleavy, 2023). In contrast, autistic females more frequently internalize feelings and mask their differences by mimicking peers and managing how they appear to others. Their repetitive movements, preferences for sameness, and focused interests may mirror those of non-autistic peers, though often at a significantly higher intensity. Additionally, autistic females have an increased likelihood of mental health concerns, such as depression or anxiety (Lai et al., 2023). Teachers and clinicians may misinterpret these symptoms as the primary cause of a student's struggles, which can result in a misdiagnosis and a failure to identify underlying autistic needs.

Because teachers regularly observe students' social interactions with peers and adults, they play a vital role in the timely recognition and identification of

autism (Zakai-Mashiach, 2023). Supporting an understanding of how autism manifests in females allows teacher educators to equip candidates with the knowledge necessary to identify these distinct presentations and see past masking behaviors. Developing the capacity to recognize the female presentation of autism is necessary to meet professional standards that require candidates to leverage their understanding of individual differences to address each student's learning needs (CEC, 2020).

Pillar Two: Advocate for Equity

To mitigate the systemic bias faced by autistic female students, special education teachers must possess the skills to advocate for equity in assessment and service provision. While the ratio of diagnosed autistic males to females has decreased since 2000, significant disparities remain (Harrop et al., 2024). Autism prevalence among eight-year-olds is 3.4 times higher in males than

in females (Shaw et al., 2025), with females consistently diagnosed later than males—a delay that is particularly pronounced for females without intellectual disability (Harrop et al., 2024). These diagnostic disparities extend into the school setting, where autistic females are 26% less likely than autistic males to receive special education services (Menezes et al., 2023). These disparities are further shaped by race and ethnicity, as school psychologists demonstrate significantly less confidence in autism classification decisions for Black students and are less likely to consider an autism classification for Latine females than for Asian females (Golson et al., 2022). Because schools identify nearly 18% of autistic students through special education eligibility alone (Shaw et al., 2025), special education teachers occupy a unique position to advocate for and address these disparities.

In the absence of dependable biological markers, autism diagnosis relies on observing behavioral traits, a practice historically shaped by the male profile of autism (Cook et al., 2024). Diagnostic and eligibility criteria were developed primarily from male samples, meaning sex-based assumptions about autism are embedded in the very tools used to identify it (Menezes et al., 2023). These assumptions can influence how teachers and other school personnel interpret student behavior when making referral and eligibility decisions (Golson et al., 2022). When entering the field, new special education teachers may encounter multidisciplinary team members whose gendered perceptions of autism lead them to question whether an evaluation is warranted for a potentially autistic female student (Urbaniak & D'Amico, 2025). This hesitation may result in missed or delayed identification and the denial of special education eligibility. Such exclusion bars these students from accessing specially designed instruction

and related services and predisposes them to depressed self-esteem, isolation, decreased educational success, and more significant mental health issues (Lai et al., 2023).

CEC (2020) professional preparation standards and ethics mandate that candidates advocate for improved student outcomes while remaining sensitive to social and cultural diversity. In addition, candidates must possess the technical skill to select and implement assessment procedures that provide a valid picture of a student's individual needs. This requires teacher educators to develop their candidates' ability to select data that account for the female presentation of autism and to apply these data to standard measures to meet eligibility criteria (Munroe & Dunleavy, 2023). Such preparation ensures that future teachers can fulfill their professional obligations to contribute to accurate eligibility determinations and secure the services necessary for student well-being.

Pillar Three: Grow Inclusive Practices

Growing inclusive practices involves teacher educators developing candidates' abilities to design learning environments and use instructional strategies that benefit autistic females. Currently, teachers in inclusive settings frequently misunderstand the needs of autistic female students and lack the knowledge to attend to their executive functioning, social-emotional, and communication challenges (Jacobs et al., 2021; Myles et al., 2019). Moreover, many teachers do not consistently provide individualized accommodations or adapt materials to suit autistic female students' needs (Tomlinson et al., 2022; Zakai-Mashiach, 2023). Insufficient specialized teacher competence and inadequate classroom adaptation leave autistic female students feeling anxious, stressed, frustrated, and sad, which can result in

absenteeism and jeopardize academic performance (Anderson, 2020; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Research on autism-focused support is comprised of 84% male participants, which undermines claims of evidence-based practices being universally effective (Hume et al., 2021). This skewed representation limits generalizability to autistic females, whose experiences and needs differ from those of males. Consequently, to meet professional standards, teacher educators must train special education teacher candidates to critically evaluate the evidence base of any strategy and ground their practice in literature that centers autistic female experiences. Research specific to this population shows that autistic females value flexible yet structured learning environments aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST, 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021; Josefsson & Johansson, 2024). Autistic females also respond favorably to personalized accommodations, including tools for subtle, non-verbal communication of their needs, such as signal cards or a digital/written check-in (Tomlinson et al., 2022). By teaching candidates to move beyond theoretical understanding to the technical execution of such instructional strategies, teacher educators enable them to provide effective instruction and create classroom environments that promote learning and emotional well-being.

Pillar Four: Empower Collaboration

Autistic female students' wellbeing depends not only on effective instruction but on having quality relationships with others at school. Teacher educators address the fourth pillar by preparing candidates to lead collaborative efforts that prioritize the social-emotional needs and well-being of autistic females.

FIGURE 2: SAGEWell Curriculum Integration Checklist

- Does the current curriculum that addresses characteristics of autism include content on the female presentation of autism?
- Is the history of male-aligned diagnostic criteria for autism and its impact on female identification discussed as part of the ethical and legal obligations of assessment?
- Are pre-service teachers required to analyze and apply informal data (e.g., student interviews, anxiety screeners) to eligibility criteria to mitigate bias in standardized measurements?
- Is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) utilized by course instructors to model its application in the classroom?
- Are pre-service teachers taught specific strategies for explicitly teaching the unwritten social rules and expectations of a classroom or school setting?
- Are pre-service teachers provided hands-on practice with accommodations and supports that address the expressed needs of autistic females?
- Is content included for teaching techniques for incorporating student voice and student-centered planning?
- Are candidates given opportunities to practice non-judgmental listening and empathetic communication with families regarding internalizing behaviors (e.g., school refusal, anxiety)?
- Is a mechanism in place (e.g., joint lecture, shared assignment) to facilitate collaboration between Special Education and School Counseling/Psychology candidates on student well-being (e.g., anxiety regulation)?

Because current school service models overlook the female presentation, standard interventions frequently fail to meet autistic females' actual needs (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024). For autistic females, interpersonal connections within the school environment are vital for addressing emotional distress and academic concerns (Jacobs et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Therefore, effective support must center relationship-based strategies (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). Relational approaches deemed helpful by autistic females include access to trusted staff who understand their individual needs, assistance with conflict and anxiety management, and the provision of safe social spaces (Jacobs et al., 2021; Myles et al., 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Implementing these relational supports depends on candidates acquiring the skills to collaborate with autistic female students, their families, and school professionals. First, teacher educators must emphasize the need to prioritize

collaboration with autistic female students. Positive student-teacher relationships alleviate some of the classroom difficulties and emotional burden this population faces (Jacobs et al., 2021). Listening to these students' thoughts and understanding their needs is fundamental to building trusted relationships and providing appropriate instruction and accommodation (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Tomlinson et al., 2022). Second, teacher educators must train candidates to cultivate and maintain positive connections with families. These partnerships nurture the emotional well-being of autistic female students and help facilitate a return to the classroom for those with emotionally driven absenteeism (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024). Finally, candidates must learn to coordinate valued interventions with school professionals. This involves working with school psychologists to explore coping strategies, speech-language therapists to support social communication, and school staff to schedule check-ins and to gain access to quiet

areas where students feel safe (Myles et al., 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

By developing these capabilities, teacher educators prepare candidates to meet professional expectations and implement a variety of proactive and responsive strategies to create caring environments that prioritize autistic females' academic and emotional well-being. Empowering students to voice their needs and participate in problem-solving recognizes them as essential members of their own support team. This approach drives responsive collaboration among all team members while promoting self-determination through the development of self-advocacy skills necessary for autistic female students to participate in their own program planning (Shogren et al., 2024; Shogren & Raley, 2022).

INTEGRATING THE SAGEWELL FRAMEWORK IN SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PREPARATION

Building upon the SAGEWell pillars established in the previous section, the following application guide offers teacher educators explicit strategies for integrating these competencies across a typical special education preparation curriculum. Figure 2 provides a checklist for this process.

Instructional Strategies for Supporting Understanding

The first step in implementing the SAGEWell framework requires teacher educators to intentionally expand the curriculum so that candidates recognize the diverse ways autism presents in the classroom. When instruction contrasts the traditional, male-normed autism characteristics with the subtle profiles more common in females, candidates will be better situated to support students like Maya before they reach the point of autistic burnout. Raymaker et al. (2020), drawing from community-based

participatory research, describe autistic burnout as a syndrome characterized by prolonged exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimuli due to chronic stress of unmet support needs. Professional preparation should explicitly cover the female presentation of autism, emphasizing that females commonly internalize their feelings and exert significant effort to control their behavior and emotions while at school (Munroe & Dunleavy, 2023). Teacher educators should explain that due to greater social motivation, autistic female students often mimic their peers' social cues in an intense effort to fit in, thereby camouflaging their differences (Hull et al., 2020; Munroe & Dunleavy, 2023). Instruction must also highlight that repetitive movements may appear more inconspicuous, and that focused interests in females regularly appear more typical or socially acceptable than those of their male autistic peers. Lastly, faculty should teach candidates about the increased likelihood of co-occurring mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety, that can lead to a misdiagnosis or the complete overshadowing of the underlying autism (Lai et al., 2023).

Faculty can integrate content on the female presentation of autism into introductory coursework detailing the characteristics of exceptionalities to support an expansive understanding of autism from the beginning of their training. To provide candidates with a clear illustration of these traits, teacher educators can use comparative case studies featuring different presentations of autism. This enables candidates to practice identifying the hidden needs of students who mask their autistic traits alongside more traditional profiles. Faculty can also incorporate first-person perspectives to make visible the lived experiences of autistic females. While some faculty or candidates may bring their own autistic

lived experience to these discussions, additional perspectives can be integrated through guest speakers, memoirs, or digital media. Finally, candidates can critically analyze how autism is portrayed in popular media, examining why male characters are more frequently represented and what that may signal.

Strategy Snapshot: Revisiting Dr. Woolf and Olivia

After her discussion with Olivia, Dr. Woolf realized that her current introductory special education course did not include content specific to the female presentation of autism. This omission left Olivia unprepared to recognize that Maya's quiet, compliant behavior was actually a form of masking that led to profound exhaustion. Prompted by Olivia's confusion regarding Maya's high-achieving but quietly struggling student profile, Dr. Woolf revised her autism module. As part of this revision, she invited an autistic female self-advocate to speak to her class. The guest speaker shared how her desire to belong led her to copy her peers, despite the deep internal distress it caused her. The guest speaker described the intense mental energy expended to conceal her passion for butterflies, which included the urge to flit about her classroom, and the collapse and withdrawal that occurred when she reached the safety of her home. Candidate feedback following the revised module indicated a meaningful shift in perspective, with many reporting increased confidence in recognizing autistic female students and their needs.

Instructional Strategies for Advocating for Equity

To implement the second pillar of the SAGEWell framework, teacher educators must prepare candidates to advocate for equity by addressing the diagnostic disparities that prevent autistic females from accessing services (Golson et al.,

2022; Menezes et al., 2023). Instruction should explore how diagnostic tools developed primarily from male samples often fail to capture female presentations of autism, contributing to disparities in diagnosis and service provision (Rea et al., 2023; Tien et al., 2025). Professional training must also underscore the ethical and legal obligations to use technically sound assessment tools suitable for autistic females (CEC, 2020). In addition, teacher educators should teach candidates to supplement traditional diagnostic measures with informal data. For example, faculty can demonstrate how anecdotal notes, student reporting through interviews or questionnaires, and family stories yield the qualitative data necessary to build a comprehensive student profile (Benedict et al., 2022). Candidates must then learn to connect the specific traits of the female presentation of autism to existing eligibility criteria to prevent autistic female students' needs from being dismissed.

Incorporating advocacy for accurate eligibility determination into coursework on evaluation and assessment ensures that candidates can establish how autistic females satisfy the eligibility criteria for autism and defend their access to special education services. During instruction, faculty can encourage candidates to critically analyze how supplemental data, such as student interviews and anxiety screeners, can uncover masked difficulties missed by standard autism evaluation measures. To establish an evidence base for these discussions, teacher educators should assign readings on diagnostic inequities. Additionally, candidates can participate in a mock IEP meeting based on a case study of an autistic female student. By using both formal and informal data during this activity, candidates can practice using quantitative and qualitative information to advocate for necessary support.

Strategy Snapshot: Dr. Woolf and Dr. Catalani

Dr. Woolf shared her revised course content and her concerns about candidates misidentifying autistic female students when she met with her colleague, Dr. Catalani, who teaches the assessment course. Dr. Catalani agreed that ensuring accurate eligibility determination for this population was a critical professional responsibility. To address this as part of her curriculum, Dr. Catalani developed a simulation of an eligibility meeting for a high-masking female student being evaluated under the category of autism. During the activity, candidates received data, including a student interview, an age-appropriate anxiety self-assessment, observations, and traditional formal assessment data. Using this data, the candidates mapped the masked difficulties revealed in the interview and anxiety self-assessment to the eligibility criteria. This exercise demonstrated that informal, student-informed data can counter diagnostic bias and function as a critical tool for advocating for equity in the eligibility determination and service provision of autistic female students.

Instructional Strategies for Growing Inclusive Practice

The third pillar of the SAGEWell framework calls on teacher educators to develop candidates' abilities to design and deliver effective instruction to autistic female students. Instruction should focus on the practical application of UDL principles to proactively address diverse needs and to offer the flexible structure that benefits autistic females' learning (CAST, 2024; Jacobs et al., 2021). Rather than relying solely on reactive interventions delivered in a separate setting, candidates must learn to employ strength-based approaches that honor the specific interests and abilities of autistic females and respect their preferences to be supported in the general

education classroom (Jacobs et al., 2021; Zakai-Mashiach, 2022). Professional preparation must also encompass the design and implementation of beneficial environmental modifications and accommodations for autistic females, such as sensory-safe zones or visuals to indicate the need for breaks (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Teacher educators can ground their practice in the scholarship and lived expertise of autistic female researchers and autistic self-advocates. For instance, Kathryn Urbaniak led a systematic review (Urbaniak et al., 2025) that provides critical insights into the secondary education barriers faced by autistic girls, while Botha et al. (2024) discuss appropriate language usage when working with or talking about autistic individuals.

Teacher educators must embed evidence-based practices within coursework on instructional methods to effectively transfer theoretical learning to the practical application of this knowledge (Juarez & Purper, 2018). Because UDL implementation can be complex in practice, teacher educators should model its principles within their own courses. By doing so, they demonstrate feasible ways to offer universal supports without compromising academic rigor. Additionally, candidates can perform a UDL makeover of a lesson plan, revising it to meet UDL principles. To address the hidden curriculum, faculty should use think-alouds to make implicit expectations explicit. In other words, by articulating the unspoken rules, values, and expectations inherent in their pedagogy, faculty can clarify how to align implicit expectations with clear instruction. Faculty can also ask candidates to complete a sensory and executive functioning audit of a cooperating classroom and create accommodations based on the findings to facilitate hands-on practice with adjusting environments and designing instructional aids.

Strategy Snapshot: Dr. Sabine and Inclusive Methods

After Dr. Woolf and Dr. Catalani shared the positive impact of their revised course content at a department meeting, Dr. Sabine decided to revisit how he taught UDL in his inclusive education methods course. He revised his approach to teaching UDL by centering the flexible, proactive scaffolding autistic female students need. Dr. Sabine modeled UDL principles throughout the semester and explained his pedagogical choices to make his thinking visible to students. For a major reflection assignment, he offered candidates multiple means of expression, including a traditional written paper, a video diary, a storyboard, or an interactive digital experience. Dr. Sabine gave chunked verbal and written instructions in class, along with a detailed rubric that made assignment expectations explicit. He explained to his candidates that this combination of flexibility and structural clarity was an intentional strategy that honors the strengths and interests of neurodivergent students while also accommodating for their executive function and communication needs.

Instructional Strategies for Empowering Collaboration

Empowering collaboration, the fourth pillar of the SAGEWell framework, calls on teacher educators to emphasize that supportive relationships are the foundation of well-being for autistic female students (Ayirebi & Thomas, 2024; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). Faculty must teach candidates that collaboration is not merely an adult-centered process. To address internal struggles like anxiety and exhaustion while promoting self-advocacy, collaboration must extend to the student as an active partner. To prepare teacher candidates for these conversations, teacher educators must deliver explicit instruction on relationship-building communication strategies like

active listening, which was identified by autistic youth as helpful to successful inclusion (Bolourian et al., 2021). Active listening requires the listener to demonstrate engagement by paraphrasing the speaker's message, posing clarifying questions as needed, and maintaining open, attentive body language (Weger et al., 2014). For nonspeaking autistic students or those with higher communication support needs, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) can help facilitate these conversations through multimodal communication strategies, including augmentative and alternative communication (AAC; Donaldson et al., 2023). Multimodal, student-centered communication is indispensable when building trust with students and their families and understanding students' individual needs, which are integral components of positive relationships with autistic female students (Tomlinson et al., 2022). As a result, professional preparation must include techniques for initiating student-led planning and methods for interprofessional teaming. Faculty must specifically prepare candidates to work alongside school counselors, psychologists, and SLPs to provide autistic female students support at the intersection of anxiety, social-emotional regulation, and communication.

Within coursework focused on collaboration, policy, or classroom management, teacher educators should integrate purposeful activities that reflect the collaborative demands candidates will encounter in the field. Faculty can facilitate paired "turn-and-talk" discussions where candidates practice active listening skills. Candidates can rehearse this skill by interviewing one another about their current academic experiences, asking questions such as, "What is challenging?" "What supports are most helpful to you?" and "What do you wish your instructors knew about you?" During this activity, faculty should teach

candidates how to solicit feedback from students across a range of developmental levels. This activity mirrors the student-centered collaboration candidates will need to facilitate in their own classrooms. Furthermore, faculty can demonstrate interprofessional collaboration by co-teaching a class session with a colleague from a school counseling or school psychology program. This joint session creates opportunities to discuss cooperative strategies for supporting emotional regulation and mental health in autistic females. Together, these experiences prepare candidates to build the relationships autistic female students depend on to thrive.

Strategy Snapshot: Returning to Dr. Woolf and Olivia

Recognizing that Maya's needs extended beyond Olivia's current training, Dr. Woolf called upon her university network to model interprofessional collaboration in action. She paired Olivia with Fatima, a pre-service school counselor completing a placement at the same school site, to create an interprofessional partnership in the field. Olivia crafted a student profile for Maya while Fatima collected resources on anxiety regulation. The two candidates then collaborated to merge their information, resulting in a co-designed, personalized action plan that Olivia could implement immediately. This interprofessional teamwork demonstrated that combining specialized knowledge creates a richer and more responsive support network for autistic female students.

CONCLUSION

Maya's narrative of unrecognized autism-related distress exemplifies a pervasive problem in K-12 settings: autistic female students whose needs remain invisible to even the most well-intentioned teachers. When special education teachers lack the specialized knowledge

to identify the unique presentation of autism in females, they cannot provide the support necessary to prevent the anxiety, exhaustion, and school avoidance that threaten autistic females' academic engagement, mental health, and overall well-being. The SAGEWell framework gives teacher educators a research-informed response to this critical challenge. By organizing essential competencies into four action-based pillars, the framework translates research into practice in a way that is generalizable across a variety of teacher preparation programs and contexts.

Teacher educators hold a pivotal position in advancing the field's capacity to serve autistic female students. By supporting understanding of the female presentation of autism; advocating for equity in assessment and service provision; growing candidates' inclusive skills; and empowering collaboration with students, families, and professionals, special education faculty can prepare teachers capable of recognizing and addressing long-overlooked needs to enhance autistic female students' well-being.

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