Access, Accommodation, and Attitude

Promoting Inclusion in the Early Childhood Classroom

by Aja McKee and Dorothy Friedlander

Inclusion, the practice of educating children with special needs in classrooms with their typically-developing peers, allows educators to create an environment for all students to live and work together and build a community. On a large scale, building a school environment that has an inclusive direction is an influential way to combat discriminatory attitudes in society (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher & Morton, 2008). From a narrower, individualized perspective, inclusion provides young children the opportunity to grow socially and cognitively (Odom, Buysse & Soukakou, 2011). Inclusion for young children is not just the act of creating an environment that is considered less restrictive. It is a program that focuses on "participation, social relationships, and learning outcomes for all children" as common goals (Odom et al., 2011, p. 345).

As inclusive practices continue to grow, questions arise such as what makes inclusion successful and how do teachers implement strategies that promote inclusion? Practical strategies for classroom staff are needed so that early educators can support inclusive practices and pave the way for all children to be part of a classroom. Examining the attitudes of teaching staff, actualizing strategies by providing materials that promote equality, and determining accommodations that students may need create a recipe for successful inclusive experiences in classrooms. Early educators need everyday solutions to the challenges they face; it is the combination of knowledge and strategies that will allow all children to flourish in inclusive environments.

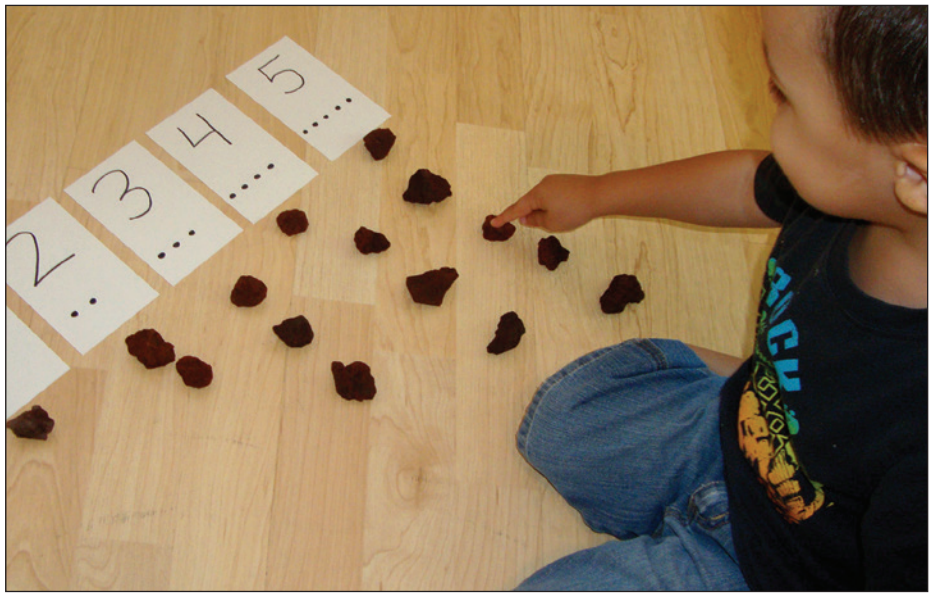
The Importance of Attitude

'Inclusion' can be defined as the moment teachers begin to shift from teaching 'most' or 'some' students to reaching

Aja McKee, an early childhood educator since 1996, has taught general and special education preschool, and has consulted on inclusive practices. She recently graduated with a Ph.D. in Education with an emphasis in Disability Studies at Chapman University, where she works as an educational consultant for the Thompson Policy Institute on Disability and Autism. Additionally, Aja is adjunct at California State University, Fullerton where she teaches and does fieldwork supervision for early childhood special education credential students.

Dorothy Friedlander has worked with students with disabilities since 2005. During this time she has worked as an independent facilitator, behavior interventionist, and most recently taught preschool. She graduated from Brandman University in Irvine, California with a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, and is currently pursuing her credential and master's in special education.

Photograph provided by the author



'all' students (Florian, 2012). Successful inclusion has four components:

- All children make progress on their individualized outcomes or goals.
- All children make gains in their personal development and in the acquisition of knowledge and skills.
- All children are welcomed by staff members and their peers in each program and are accepted as full members of the group.
- Parents are pleased that their child is comfortable and happy, as well as making gains in the group setting (Cross, Salazar, Dopson-Campuzano & Batchelder, 2009).

All of these components have one common denominator: the teacher's attitude. In order for a child to make gains in her personal development, her teacher must convey the belief that the child is able to make progress and meet her individualized goals and objectives. If the teacher does not believe the student with the disability belongs in the class or feels uncomfortable because she is uncertain how to work with the child, it may be reflected in the child's progress. Having strategies in place will ease the teacher's initial discomfort and establish a feeling of competence, which in turn helps the child progress.

Cross and colleagues (2009) agree that it is critical to look at teachers' attitudes when examining inclusive practices. A teacher's attitude is based on direct and indirect experiences related to people with disabilities. The interactions she has had previously are key factors in her perceptions of how children with disabilities will do in her classroom.

When it comes to welcoming children of all abilities into a classroom, teachers must help each child feel like she is an important member of the classroom community. This can be done by providing the child with materials she needs to participate and by making accommodations and modifications as needed, but also by providing a supportive, welcoming atmosphere. The language teachers use — along with their disposition toward teaching children with special needs — is an important component affecting the success of the inclusion efforts.

In this vignette, teacher Tanya views Miguel's difficulty walking with his peers as a barrier.

> Miguel has had multiple problems since starting in my class. We have worked through some, but one that has become really difficult is his inability to follow the rules while walking with his friends. He pushes and touches his friends and cannot stand still. He is constantly talking or moving. I have him walk with another teacher by his side. I need him to follow directions because other students are starting to copy him.

Now let's take a look at how Tanya could express a different attitude when describing Miguel's challenge.

> Miguel has made some great strides since joining the class. We have had challenges along the way, but that is not unusual for any child. The latest challenge we have encountered has come during transition time. Miguel has a hard time following the rules when walking with his friends. Often he walks with another teacher by his side. This is all right because it is what he needs right now to be successful. I want him to be part of the class and will continue to support him while he learns appropriate behavior when walking with his peers.

Different language used by the teacher quickly shapes the attitudes of other adults and children. Reframing language can prove very beneficial and help send a strong inclusive message.

Additionally, educators report feeling more comfortable with students who need fewer adaptations to the curriculum and environment (Huang & Diamond, 2009). One example of this challenge is described by Jonathan, a new teacher.

"Evette is visually impaired and needs a lot of equipment. I am not sure how to use the equipment or how to address her disability with the other students in the class. I did not know anyone with a disability growing up, and I feel somewhat uncomfortable. I also have not received any special training on how to work with a child who is blind. Without experience in this, I am not sure how to teach her best."

Many preschoolers who have a disability, especially a physical disability such as a visual impairment, will have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is a legal document that provides a detailed description of the child's strengths, learning preferences, and deficit areas. Additionally, goals based on the child's strengths should be written to target areas of need (Batshaw, Roizen & Lotrecchiano, 2013). All children in the United States, beginning at the age of three, must have an IEP if they qualify for special education services (before age three, children have an IFSP, an Individualized Family Service Plan).

The IEP is developed by a team that includes specialists in any area the child demonstrates a deficit. These areas include developmental, pre-academic/academic, and functional needs (Batshaw et al., 2013). Information that influences the IEP includes the most recent formal evaluation of the child, as well as parental concerns. In addition, the IEP

team may include a representative from the potential program the child may attend, a general education teacher, as well as the parent; this is dependent on state regulations or guidelines. The role of the parent is an essential one because the parent is the child's first teacher and the one who knows the child best. It is legally mandated that the parent and a general education teacher (unless excused by the parent) participate in the IEP process.

The IEP document determines what services the child should receive, how the services will be delivered, and what accommodations and modifications are needed to assist the child in making educational progress. For example:

- a child who is visually impaired may have a teacher who specializes in working with students who have a visual impairment on her IEP team. These teachers are often referred to as vision teachers.
- a child who demonstrates a deficit in fine motor skills may need an occupational therapist.
- a child with autism who demonstrates multiple deficit areas including social, communicative, and behavioral needs that impact his learning may have a team that includes a speech therapist, early childhood special education teacher, and a behavior therapist. Additionally, all IEP teams would include the parent(s), and a representative of the local education agency (please see the resource list for more information regarding the IEP process).

Additionally, the IEP can provide the teacher with the name of the specialists who will be working with the child so she can contact them to help train the classroom staff and assist with implementation of the IEP.

It is important to note that research has found that even when teachers did not have formal training in working with students with disabilities, their willingness to learn and attempts to implement strategies and practices shared with them by specialists make a significant impact on the success of the students (Forlin, Earle, Loreman & Sharma, 2011). By being willing to use specific strategies, make adaptations, accommodate, and make the modifications required, the atmosphere in the classroom becomes welcoming to all learners.

Equal Access

Gathering the right materials is essential to successful inclusion. This means two things: First, each child should have access to all of the materials provided to the other children in the class. If typically-developing students have journals to write in, a student with a disability should also have a journal to write in. This seems like an obvious way to promote inclusion, but it is often overlooked. Debbie, a behavior interventionist who supports children with autism in preschool classrooms, says this is often the first barrier children with disabilities face when they are included in the general education setting.

"Oftentimes I bring Samantha into the general education classroom so she can participate with peers during tabletop activity time. Sometimes there are not enough pieces of the project for Samantha to participate, and I spend my time cutting out pieces to make sure she has everything she needs. While I can quickly and easily make the pieces, it is the feeling that I take away from this moment. I feel as though Samantha was an afterthought: left out of the big picture, and not included as part of the class."

Providing access to materials is one way we promote a sense of equality and belonging for all children.

Second, provide modified materials to children with disabilities as needed so they can actively participate in all activities. This can prove challenging for early educators, as Jennifer shares here:

"Jade is limited in what she can do physically. I am not sure how to make the most of her experience in my class. She likes to be with her friends, but is not able to do the same things they can. For example, using crayons is hard for her. She cannot hold them in the same way others can. I often find a different activity for her to do whenever we color."

Jade could be included in coloring by giving her chunky, easy-to-hold crayons during art time. There are many different-shaped writing tools available. For children with fine motor difficulties, egg-shaped crayons or chalk can be easier to grasp while markers or oil pastels require less pressure to make a mark. In the early childhood setting, materials are made for children of all different abilities and once teachers begin to notice what modified materials look like or how they can alter existing materials, they will see how easy it can be to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities. Refer to the resource list for websites that sell chunky crayons and other modified tools for children with disabilities.

Another example of modified materials that can be used in classrooms is rounded paintbrushes. While toddler classrooms use rounded paintbrushes because of the age of the children and a focus on helping children develop hand-eye coordination, these paintbrushes can also work well for preschool children with motor difficulties. Having several types of paintbrushes available to students who need


Photograph provided by the author

them is an easy way to make sure all students can access painting materials and promotes creativity for all.

Everyday Accommodations and Modifications

The terms 'accommodation' and 'modification' often make early educators apprehensive because they fear they may not implement them correctly. However, they need to realize they are accommodating and modifying for all children's needs all the time. An accommodation is focused on how students learn. The expectation is the same for all children in the class, but how the material is presented or accessed by the child with special needs is different. For example, when preschool teachers have a 'wiggly' student in circle time, they may move the child next to support staff who can sit with him and help him focus. Or they may find another place in the circle area that provides the child more room to wiggle, and is less disruptive to others. The expectation is that all children will participate in circle time, and the accommodation is preferential seating for the wiggly student. Additionally, providing an accommodation such as a squishy toy that the child can keep in his pocket, gives him the opportunity to engage in a sensory experience, thus decreasing his need to move.

In another scenario, if a child is having difficulty cutting with scissors, the teacher provides hand-over-hand assistance. The expectation is that the child will cut the same material his peers are cutting; however, the teacher will help him access the material by providing him a simple accommodation.

Modifications focus on what the child is learning. When providing modifications, the expectation of what the student will learn is different. For example, when working on one-to-one correspondence, the teacher may practice counting ten objects with one student, while counting five objects with another. The number of objects the teacher chooses to target depends on the child's ability. To ensure success and to help scaffold a student to the next stage, a teacher may modify the activity to meet the child's needs. Another example of a modification can be seen when providing an activity such as puzzles to young children. Many of the students may be working on puzzles with ten or more pieces, while one child is provided with a five-piece puzzle. The expectation has been modified for the child who needs a five-piece puzzle to be successful.

When teaching preschool, early educators are working with children between the ages of three and five; this age group accounts for a large developmental span. Many skills grow and change significantly during this time. Early educators are already experts at scaffolding new skills and accounting for developmental levels. These are just more ways to promote inclusion. In other words, while the range of accommodations and modifications needed may be different, preschool teachers already have the essential skills to promote inclusion of all students.

Finally, some teachers will feel more comfortable working with children with disabilities than others. Understanding why inclusion is important, examining one's personal attitude, and using practical strategies will assist you in promoting inclusive practices in your classroom. Support from veteran teachers and administrators is also essential when creating an inclusive learning environment. It's about access, support, accommodation, and attitude. When we believe that every child has the right to be in our classroom and the right to have his needs met, we have a winning attitude that makes inclusion work.

References

Batshaw, M. L., Roizen, N. J., & Lotrecchiano, G. R. (2013). *Children with disabilities* (7th edition). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Connor, D. J., Gabel, S. L., Gallagher, D. J., & Morton, M. (2008, September/November). Disability studies and inclusive education-implications for theory, research, and practice [editorial]. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 12*(5–6), 441–457.

Cross, L., Salazar, M. J., Dopson-Campuzano, N., & Batchelder, H. W. (2009, April). Best practices and considerations: Including young children with disabilities in early childhood settings. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 41*(8), 1–8.

Florian, L. (2012). Preparing teachers to work in inclusive classrooms: Key lessons for the professional development of teacher educators from Scotland's inclusive practice project. *Journal of Teacher Education, 63*(4), 275–285. Retrieved: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0022487112447112

Forlin, C., Earle, C., Loreman, T., & Sharma, U. (2011). The sentiments, attitudes, and concerns about inclusive education revised (stacie-r) scale for

measuring pre-service teachers' perceptions about inclusion. *Exceptionality Education International, 21*(3), 50–65.

Huang, H., & Diamond, K. E. (2009, June). Early childhood teachers' ideas about including children with disabilities in programmes designed for typically developing children. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 56*(2), 169–182.

Odom, S. L., Buysse, V., & Soukakou, E. (2011). Inclusion for young children with disabilities: A quarter century of research perspectives. *Journal of Early Intervention, 33*, 344–356. Retrieved: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1053815111430094

Resources

Head Start: "The ABCs of IEPs" video: https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/Disabilities/Staff%20Support%20and%20Supervision/Orientation/TheABCofIEP.htm

Center for Parent Information and Resources
"10 Basic Steps in Special Education"
www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/steps/

Supports, Modifications, and Accommodations for Students:
www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/accommodations/

Wrights Law: Advocacy and law library with articles, cases and additional resources.
www.wrightslaw.com/

Including Children with Special Needs: Are You and Your Early Childhood Program Ready? by Amy Watson and Rebecca McCathren
www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200903/BTJWatson.pdf

CONNECT Modules: Learn more about embedded interventions, which promote inclusive practices in early childhood:
http://community.fpg.unc.edu/connect-modules/learners/module-1

Materials for students with disabilities:
Chunky crayons
www.discountschoolsupply.com/Product/ProductDetail.aspx?Product=31251

Modified chairs to accommodate students:
www.discountschoolsupply.com/keyword=students+with+special+needs&scategoryid=0

Modified scissors:
www.therapro.com/Adaptive-Scissors-C51666.aspx

Connections: 75 Occupational Therapy Tools That Cost Less Than $1:
http://otconnections.aota.org/aota_blogs/b/pulsecheck/archive/2015/01/26/75-occupational-therapy-tools-that-cost-less-than-1-for-pediatrics-amp-geriatrics.aspx

—■—