

Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms: Voices From The Field

by Karen Wise Lindeman and Elizabeth M. Anderson

“Just last week we had a student who can’t walk who was standing in his mobile stander and doing a puzzle and another child stood right across from him and cheered him on and clapped for him. And it was right there he realized that some children need more assistance than others. We talk about it at circle time.... We all need what we need and fair doesn’t mean that we need the same thing.”

Hannah, Inclusive Preschool
Special Education Teacher



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Best practices in early childhood education point to the benefits of inclusion for young children (Mogharreban & Bruns, 2009). However, when special education and general education teachers in inclusive settings conceptualize and deliver services to young children differently, it can create challenges (Frankel, Gold, & Ajodhia-Andrews, 2010).

In an effort to define the term inclusion and better identify the key components of high-quality inclusive preschool programs, the Council for Exceptional Children Division of Early Childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young Children issued a joint statement in 2009. The statement defines inclusion as the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The goal is for young children and their families to have a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and opportunities for optimal development and learning.

However, many teachers who are dedicated to creating inclusive classrooms are finding themselves struggling to meet the increasingly complex

needs of today’s young children in a new era of learning standards and accountability reforms. We listened to both general education and special education teachers in inclusive pre-kindergarten settings. In order to realize the benefits of inclusive settings for young children, we hope to identify and respond to the challenges voiced by these teachers.

“For the children who come in ‘typically developing,’ I’ve heard many of the parents say that they’ve chosen this program because they want their children at a very early age to be familiar with people with different abilities and they value it.”

Holly, Inclusive Preschool
Special Education Teacher

Teachers’ Voices: Benefits for Children and Families

Many inclusive early childhood teachers believe young children with disabilities benefit from attending an inclusive program because it gives children with developmental delays or diagnosed disabilities the opportunity to learn alongside their non-disabled peers.

Jackie, a special education teacher, remarked, "For the children with special needs, it's giving them opportunities to learn from and interact with children who are typically developing and it's giving their families a sense that this is a nice early childhood program because it is very normal in appearance even though there are a lot of therapeutic things built into it. Families get the sense the children are successful in a community-based program, which is wonderful." Jean, a general education teacher, believes her class "teaches [children without disabilities] tolerance and acceptance." The classroom "exposes the [students] to different types of children with a variety of needs... so I think they are taught a lot of compassion and empathy."

A general education teacher, Mark, noted his inclusive classroom mirrors the broader society. He shared, "I mean this [inclusive pre-K classroom] is really just a precursor for life. It is a good thing because you are going to have to deal with different populations and different people as adults." Children without disabilities develop a greater acceptance of children with different abilities.

The pre-kindergarten classroom can be a "win-win" for all children. Kristy, a special education teacher, described, "When it [inclusive preschool] is done in a correct way with appropriate ratios, I think it is great because children can learn about disabilities. In our classroom, children with disabilities can have role models that are more 'typical' so there is someone to play with and communicate with and learn skills from."

Suggestions for the Field

Best practices in early childhood education utilize an anti-bias framework. As shared by the teachers, inclusive preschool classrooms are ideal settings for achieving anti-bias curriculum goals. The first two goals include children being aware of difference and being able to

articulate this diversity with confidence, pride, and empathy. The last two goals are to help children explicitly identify unfairness and then take action in a positive way (Derman-Sparks, 2010). Persona Dolls or puppets with disabilities can allow teachers to reenact real classroom interactions and then discuss reactions or next steps so the anti-bias goals can be intentionally realized. Children and teachers find it easier to discuss how Jimmy the doll in a wheelchair might have felt during the game. The class can design a plan to combat this unfairness for the doll first and then apply these new skills in real life. Other best practices in early childhood education include several social-emotional curricula that can be purchased, such as PATHS or Second Step. These curricula are scripted, but can help teachers maximize the already unique nature of the inclusive classroom and take full advantage of the benefits this setting provides.

Moving from family interaction to family engagement strategies can also maximize the benefits of inclusive settings. Families can attend, visit, and volunteer but until Epstein's framework (2002) for creating and leading is realized, families are not truly engaged. Looking at each family's fund of knowledge, whether they have a child with or without a disability, is also critically important for adding to and expanding the curriculum. These funds of knowledge rely on each family's unique strengths and are an essential ingredient for strong engagement within the classroom and school community.

"We are able to share ideas, especially in planning."

Mark, General Education
Pre-kindergarten Teacher

Teachers' Voices: Collaboration

Inclusive preschool teachers value the formal and informal opportunities their settings provide to work collaboratively. By working collaboratively to support a diverse group of children and families, many early childhood and early childhood special education co-teaching teams are able to develop mutual goals, satisfy personal needs of being valued and respected, and maximize the experience and expertise of all members. Diane, an inclusive preschool general education teacher, remarked, "We plan for every week together so we know what books we are going to read for circle time, what art projects we are going to do, and what we are going to do for small groups. So we know what we are going to do from week to week... and that really helps a lot."

Inclusive preschool settings also provide opportunities for meaningful collaboration with interdisciplinary team members that may include speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, social workers, or nurses. Meghan, a general education teacher, said, "I think having therapists on site and having the therapist at a weekly team meeting helps us [general education teachers] really get to know the children with special education goals and do a good job meeting them as a team." Working collaboratively with related service providers also fosters new insights into teaching practices. Lori, a general education teacher, shared, "I think these classrooms [inclusive pre-K] open a whole new world for teachers to actually see things I may have overlooked before."

Suggestions for the Field

Although teachers often find collaboration professionally fulfilling, it can be challenging when different roles conflict or goals compete. By clearly defining a co-teaching model,

the potential benefit of having several staff members in one room can be optimized. By co-planning the story or art activity, teams can further clarify the role of each adult. For example, the special education teacher could lead while the general education teacher supports. Or during free-choice time, one teacher could focus on a specific skill in the blocks area while the other teacher is focusing on a different skill or assessment at a different learning center. This type of planning and level of intentionality is essential to the success of inclusive classrooms.

Teachers often voice that finding time each week to collaboratively plan lessons and delineate adults' roles can be very challenging, especially when many related service providers are also involved. By stipulating team-planning time in children's IEPs, interdisciplinary team meeting times now become a mandatory part of each teacher or therapist's schedule. This is especially helpful for the itinerant therapist who may come in and out of several buildings in one day.

Teachers' Voices: Meeting Diverse Needs

Technology and other tools can help save time and align assessment data to development. Teachers often describe increased frustration about trying to effectively meet the needs of so many diverse learners in one room. Regarding struggling to meet the needs of children without disabilities, Meghan, a general education teacher, noted, "I think the other issue is how we are meeting the needs of the general education population. As a general education teacher, I do not feel that we do as good of a job preparing the general education population for what they have coming for them."

Teachers also shared feeling increased levels of stress from trying to implement new learning standards and

accountability practices. A general education teacher lamented, "When I am being assessed on how my Head Start children are doing, [administrators] say they aren't compared to other children per se in the building, but I know they are. There is a little bit more pressure on teachers in the inclusive pre-K classrooms than in just the typical pre-K classrooms."

Carrie, a special education teacher, described, "We need to get the pre-K kids ready for kindergarten whereas the children with disabilities who come in and are just three [years-old], they are not even close to being ready... it is a challenge for us to try to raise standards for the pre-K children when the children are at such different levels." According to Kristy, a special education teacher, with new standards and accountability reforms comes "a return to a 'yours' and 'mine' mentality." Amanda, a special education teacher summed the challenges she is facing in her inclusive pre-kindergarten classroom this way, "It is kind of survival mode for most of our programs."

Suggestions for the Field

Teaching Strategies' Gold assessment tools align with the popular Creative Curriculum. HighScope's COR Advantage uses typical child development, a constructivist approach, and is aligned to standards to guide assessment in all domains. Both assessment tools provide online data management and an app for phones and iPads that allow quick uploads of narratives, anecdotal records, photos, and work samples. Teachers and families can both view these notes and add comments. Other apps sold as organizational tools such as Three Ring or iDo can lighten the paperwork load and foster collaboration among interdisciplinary teams. For example, even a therapist who has already left the classroom for the day can be included

on the notes from the day's story time.

In addition to authentic observations and updated shared portfolios aligned with child development, simply re-envisioning a team's view of readiness for school can be helpful. Lilian Katz reminds us to address intellectual skills and not just solely the academic skills needed for school success (DEY, 2015). Inclusive settings provide important opportunities for children to learn self-regulation, critical thinking, and turn taking. Documenting the number of letters identified (academic readiness) by a child must be accompanied by assessing a child's ability to work collaboratively with peers or problem solve to gain a full picture of a child's development.

Teachers' Voices:

Limited Resources

Many teachers describe the need for additional resources in inclusive classrooms as critical for addressing the challenges and realizing the benefits of inclusive settings. The need is high for financial resources to hire and retain highly qualified and better trained support staff. One special education teacher shared, "We [the agency] do not have the money to really pay our one-to-one aides. They would actually make more money if they worked at a grocery store."

Teachers also voiced a need for more targeted professional development for classroom teams on best practices for inclusive settings. Jackie, a special education teacher, remarked, "I try to say [to classroom staff] that every moment is a teachable moment and we are not really here to just reprimand or to control, but we are here to guide and teach. That's a new way of thinking for many people because these people coming in, they don't have the background or training that we [lead teachers] received."

Suggestions for the Field

Funding for inclusive settings is very limited, but there are possibilities such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2016). This law stipulates that school districts are now permitted to use Title I funding for early childhood, eliminating prior restrictions for only elementary or secondary education. This new federal law has generated renewed hope that federal funding, state block grants, and funds to support increasing the quality of early childhood education will find their way to inclusive preschool settings.

It is now widely accepted that children benefit from early access to a high-quality preschool program. The benefits of inclusive settings for children with disabilities are also readily recognized (Soukakou, Winton, West, Sideris & Rucker, 2015). However, the benefits of inclusive settings must be realized by both children with and without disabilities in order for this model to be successful. According to the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, inclusive settings are designed to provide access to specialized supports and quality early learning experiences for all children (ED & HHS, 2015). However, the voices of teachers suggest that even when they feel well prepared, have a positive outlook about inclusion, and are eager to work collaboratively, they often face significant challenges trying to create quality learning experiences for all children in today's climate. By listening and responding to what teachers have to say, we can address the challenges and realize the benefits of inclusive settings for children, families, and teachers.

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