



# Me, Too!

## Inside Preschool Inclusion

The Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion

### Words and actions: How teachers' differing beliefs about inclusion affect classroom practices

*"We found that, although our teachers used similar phrases to describe inclusion, they imbued these phrases with a wide variety of meanings."*

It is widely accepted that inclusive educational environments are beneficial both to children with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. Nondisabled children have an opportunity to experience a diversity of abilities, and children with disabilities have opportunities to model the social and linguistic skills of their more competent classmates. However, the degree to which both of these groups of children benefit from an inclusive setting depends greatly on educators' beliefs about inclusion and the ways in which they implement those beliefs in their programs. Providing an appropriate educational environment that serves all children is a terrific challenge facing administrators, teachers, and the families who participate in these programs.

Teachers differ in how they structure their classrooms and design lesson plans for inclusive classrooms. Many of those differences stem from two contrasting teacher perceptions of the classroom setting: the view that the classroom is a group where all participants are expected to conform to the whole, and the view that the group is made up of individuals with different personalities, skills and needs. In the first model, instruction is offered in a similar way to all children. In the second model, instruction is modified so that children with a range of abilities can participate.

Another important factor that affects the preschool educational environment is whether educators choose to ignore, explain or celebrate the differences among children in their mediation and support of peer interactions. The teachers who choose to ignore differences express the need that kids have to blend in and not be singled out. Teachers who choose to explain differences want to respond to children's questions and natural curiosity about uncommon situations. Those who choose to celebrate differences feel the need to highlight and respect the unique qualities of the individual child.

There is a wide variety of opinions concerning how children in preschools benefit from inclusion and in defining exactly what inclusion means. For some teachers, proximity itself satisfies their definition of an inclusive educational environment. For others, inclusion implies a complete and full participation in all social and educational aspects of the classroom. These differences in beliefs and the influence they have on program implementation have a profound effect on the quality of preschool education for children with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. An article by researchers with The Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion examines these types of preschool settings and the attitudes and actions of educators in each circumstance.

### **About ECRII**

The Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion (ECRII) is a national research project funded by the U.S. Department of Education for a five-year period to study the inclusion of preschool children with disabilities in settings with typically developing children. The goal of ECRII is to identify factors that help inclusion work, factors that hinder inclusion, and strategies that may support the inclusion of young children with disabilities in classrooms and communities. This comprehensive study of preschool inclusion is being done by researchers at five universities in different regions of the country: San Francisco State University, the University of Maryland, the University of North Carolina, the University of Washington, and Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.

### **About this brief**

Information provided comes from an in-depth look at inclusion in 16 preschool programs across the country. The programs studied represent urban, suburban, and rural communities, culturally diverse adult and child participants, and many different ways of including young children with disabilities in typical settings. ECRII researchers have tried to describe and learn about inclusion from the viewpoint of the people most involved in it—children with and without disabilities, families, teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Data collection included interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of relevant documents.

**This ECRII brief may be freely reproduced and disseminated, provided appropriate reference is given.**

### **Brief source**

Lieber, J., Capell, K., Sandall, S. R., Wolfberg, P., Horn, E., & Beckman, P. (1998). Inclusive preschool programs: Teachers' beliefs and practices. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 13*, 87-106.

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