



Me, Too! Inside Preschool Inclusion

The Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion

How inclusion works: The beliefs and experiences of those who implement and participate in inclusive programs

During the last decade, the number of preschoolers with disabilities who participate partially or fully in inclusive settings has grown significantly. The benefits of an inclusive educational experience for children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers have been well documented. Less is known about the meaning of inclusion for the administrators and educators who implement the integrated programs and the families who participate in them. An article by researchers with the Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion examines the sometimes surprising differences between the theory of inclusion and the implementation of inclusive practices. Several of the researchers' most significant findings are summarized below.

What occurs in classrooms on a daily basis,... what educators believe, and how families express what they want and make sense of what they receive, provides clues about what inclusion means to those who experience it.

- **Beliefs Versus Behaviors** Different interpretations of the meaning of inclusion resulted in a wide range of types of inclusive settings. The actions of administrators, educators, and families were often inconsistent with their stated views about inclusion. In some cases, centers that were considered to be proponents of inclusion regularly recommended segregated settings for children with more challenging behaviors. Often, individualized services were inadequate for promoting full participation by children with disabilities, and teachers and directors lacked the skills and training to fully implement inclusive programs.
- **The Where and When of Specialized Instruction** In many situations, educators had difficulty defining specialized instruction and finding appropriate times to incorporate IEP goals and objectives into classroom routines. In combined categorical programs, it was frequently unclear which individuals were responsible for developing, implementing, and evaluating those goals. In some instances, adults' attempts to implement specialized instruction interfered with children's interactions and participation in the classroom. Inadequate teacher training and staff-to-child ratios hindered the quality of specialized instruction, especially for children with challenging behaviors.
- **Open Versus Closed Door Programs** Researchers found a variety of ways in which centers welcomed or inhibited children and families from participating in programs. In some cases, parents felt their child had to work to "earn" a placement in an inclusive classroom setting, and to overcome the negative attitudes of administrators and multi-disciplinary teams. In other cases, parents found willingness on the part of administrators and teachers to schedule regular meetings to evaluate the best possible placements for their children. The proximity of the inclusive classroom to the rest of the school greatly affected the amount of participation by the child and family in the workings of the school community, in positive and negative ways. In the best situations, the interconnections among children, families, and staff contributed to an open door environment that allowed all participants to take full advantage of inclusive opportunities.
- **Institutional Versus Child and Family Time** The degree to which school

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personnel and program planners respected families' time constraints played a major role in families' participation in the school community, and their ability to access inclusive programming. Due to the circumstances of particular placements, some children spent more time in transit than receiving individualized services. When administrators were insensitive to families' busy schedules, communication and services suffered. In other centers, flexibility on the part of school personnel encouraged participation by allowing families to deliver and collect their children according to their own schedules. In some settings, frequent informal meetings enhanced the relationships and communication between families and staff.

In order to enhance families' participation in school communities and increase the benefits of inclusive education, the researchers suggest organizations:

- Support staff in their efforts to become competent professionals
- Schedule services that match the daily schedules of children and families
- Encourage open communication with families to ensure appropriate placements.

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

Janko, S., Schwartz, I., Sandall, S., Anderson, L., & Cottam, C. (1996). Beyond microsystems: Unanticipated lessons about the meaning of inclusion. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 17*, 286-306.

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