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Implementing Effective Inclusion in Prekindergarten

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A Literature Review Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

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Abstract

This literature review will act as a guide for implementing quality inclusion effectively in preschool classrooms. The inclusion of children with special needs in education is of concern to educators worldwide. “Inclusive education involves the transformation of the education system- legislation and policy, systems for financing, administration, design, delivery, and monitoring of the education and the way schools are organized” (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020, p. 3). This literature review examines the variables predicting overall quality, curriculum, training, tools for communication and engagement, teacher views, and peer interaction pertaining to inclusion in prekindergarten classrooms. Two themes were constant in the research: training and support. Effective training for all involved, as well as support from government, administrators, districts, and peers, greatly increases the quality of preschool while ensuring effective inclusion.

Keywords: Early Education, inclusion, peer impacts, preschool, prevention, special education, student-teacher relationships

Implementing Effective Inclusion in Prekindergarten

Inclusion of students with special needs is rapidly growing in education around the world. In many countries, preschool inclusion is implemented based on laws and regulations and involves the provisions of educational experiences to children with developmental disabilities alongside their typically developing peers within the same settings (Bakkaloglu et al. 2019). Though “inclusion” can have several definitions, this paper uses the term to mean the including of students with disabilities alongside the general student population (Inclusion, n.d.). Students with disabilities historically were excluded and often were tended to in institutions instead of classrooms. For more than 50 years, organizations made up of persons with disabilities, parents, and advocates have been working towards inclusion of all students into the classroom. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was a law requiring access to programs and activities including public schools that was funded by federal agencies. Two years later in 1975, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), which was the largest milestone leading to inclusions allowed access to education for all students (History, 2020).

The U.S. went from excluding nearly 1.8 million children with disabilities from public schools to then providing special education services to more than 7.5 million children with disabilities by 2018 (History, 2020). The EHA received a name change in 1990 making it The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or what is referred to today as IDEA.

Peer reviewed research articles with in the last ten years were included in the literature review and were found through the Northwestern College using the ERIC database. Article topics included preschool inclusion and the effectiveness of inclusion in early childhood. The

articles shared one or more of the following keywords: preschool, inclusion, peer impacts, student-teacher relationships, prevention, early education, and special education. Articles were excluded from the review only if they were out of the time frame given or not relevant to the specific research.

This literature review discusses quality and effective inclusion in the preschool classroom setting. The studies included in this literature review give insight to the effectiveness of full inclusion in the preschool classroom setting.

The literature review highlights a few factors that are important when it comes to full inclusion practices such as variables that predict the overall quality of the program including curriculum, training and tools. The literature review also highlights the teacher views of inclusion, teacher interactions and peer impacts which contribute to children's success within the classroom in terms of inclusion practices.

Review of the Literature

Variables Predicting Overall Quality

Inclusion is becoming a principle way of teaching, but the need to have a way to measure the key parts of inclusion practices for fidelity still exists. In 2015, Fyssa and Vlachou used the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP) to complete a mixed method study. The study was in 52 preschool units located in the northern, western, and central parts of Greece and was to examine the quality of practices that Greek teachers use to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in general preschools. Of the 96 teachers in the classrooms, 58 were early childhood education teachers and 38 were early childhood special education teachers. The main goal of the study was to investigate the applicability of the ICP to a different cultural and socio-educational environment. The results of the study showed that adaptations of space, materials, equipment, adult-to-child

communication, and feedback scored midrange; while adult involvement in peer interactions, adult guidance of children's play, membership, support for social communication, adaption of group activities, and transitions between activities were in the low range. Fyssa and Vlachou (2015) concluded that provisions offered to students with disabilities who attended general preschool programs were mainly of poor quality. Infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children participate in center-based settings that function in a rather poor manner.

Classroom quality is dependent upon several variables such as children, the experiences of teachers, the physical characteristics of the environment, as well as legal regulations and teacher salaries (Bakkaloglu et al, 2019). Forty-seven preschool classrooms in 13 schools in Turkey were part of a mixed method study developed by Bakkaloglu et al. (2019) regarding the issues of quality in inclusive preschool classrooms. The purpose of this study was to find if characteristics related to teachers, children with disabilities, and classrooms predict the quality of inclusive preschool classrooms. The Turkish form named ICP (Inclusive Classroom Profile), which was used in the study in Greece, was also used in this study. Teachers were identified as a predictor for overall quality based on their opinions of inclusion, educational training, and based upon their relationships with their students. The quality of this inclusion practice was found to be in the inadequate to poor range when looking at support, communication, feedback, monitoring children's learning, and family-professional partnerships. In other quality inclusion practices the outcome was higher for adaptation to space, materials, and equipment.

Focusing on the environment, social aspects, and policies, Barton and Smith (2015) researched challenges and solutions to achieve quality inclusive preschool classrooms. After receiving 238 responses from 32 states, their survey revealed that most challenges were local and state issues. Of the responses, 227 indicated major challenges stemming from policies relating to

program quality, personnel, funding, transportation, approval of private/nonpublic school programs, conflicting policies between schools and non-school districts or programs, and differing curricula or methods between school districts and non-district programs (Barton and Smith, 2015). Only 100 participants offered solutions to the challenges that were listed. The solutions consisted of a) identifying and leveraging current resources, b) supporting ongoing research, and c) using an implementation science framework (Barton and Smith, 2015).

Previous studies looked at specific variables such as environment, social aspects, policies; however, Pelatti et al. (2016) compared the types of inclusion settings by conducting a qualitative study examining quality in 164 classrooms in two preschool settings: some publicly funded and others an inclusive early childhood setting. There were mostly moderate differences recorded. Factors found to alter the results between the two settings were income status of families as well as training for teachers and paraprofessionals.

According to researchers Pelatti et al. (2016), Barton and Smith (2015), Bakkaloglu et al. (2019), and Fyssa and Vlachou (2015) many variables of a quality preschool classroom with inclusion were repeatedly pointed out as key factors including: policies, support, communication, and quality relationships with co-workers, students, and families. However, training for teachers and paraprofessionals to implement effective teaching was one of the factors found that alter the entire inclusion setting.

Training and Executing with Fidelity

Teacher training sessions are important not only before but also during a teacher's career to allow teachers to improve their skills. Two studies were reviewed, one focusing on pre-service teachers and the other on classroom practitioners. The study conducted by Storie et al. (2016) was a mixed method study of three pre-service teachers and a student they selected with a delay

in expressive language. The study involved intervention, training, and feedback. During the intervention, researchers provided immediate verbal coaching to pre-service teachers resulting in data from all three groups indicating an increase in functional communication during intervention when naturalistic communication strategies were used such as wait time or choice making (Storie et al, 2016). Storie et al., (2016) found that the implementation of intervention practices was key to a successful inclusion and researcher D'Agostino et. al. (2019) confirms Storie et al.'s (2016) findings in a qualitative study on Telehealth and naturalistic development. This study looked to further extend the literature and evaluate telehealth training for general education inclusive preschool practitioners to increase fidelity of naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions for children with varied disabilities. The six preschool practitioners in this study showed an increase in implementation of interventions (D'Agostino et al. 2019). Both studies by Storie et al., (2016) and D'Agostino et. al., (2019) had a common factor of fidelity within the training, intervention, and feedback.

Professional development and trainings have become an important focus in education. Rakap et al. (2017) examined 29 preschool teacher candidates' general attitudes toward inclusion, their willingness to work with children with disabilities, and their level of comfort in interacting with children with disabilities after the teacher candidates completed two special education college course. Results of the study found that the special education courses positively impacted teacher candidate attitude towards inclusion, their willingness to include children with severe disabilities, and their level of comfort when interacting (Rakap et al, 2017).

Training for teachers is not the only training that is needed with fidelity to support a quality inclusion setting. Researchers Brown and Stanton (2017) examined the important role of paraprofessionals and their experience in the preschool special education and general education

classrooms. In this mixed method study. Brown and Stanton (2017) acquired data qualitatively through observation and interviews. The data highlighted how paraprofessionals make meaning of their job requirements, educational background, and experiences working with children with and without disabilities. The researchers also gathered qualitative data through a survey. Twenty paraprofessionals from seven preschool classrooms in the United States were part of this study. Qualitative results showed three themes, the first two being responsibilities, and context. Paraprofessionals have similar responsibilities as teachers; however, they are executed differently based on student tasks. The first theme is influenced by paraprofessional motivation (willingness to complete a task) and teacher acceptance (willingness to allow more responsibility). The second and third are an interplay of relationships led by teacher receptiveness and paraprofessional motivation. Paraprofessionals were observed acting similar to teachers during transitions, recess, or other non-structured context; the same was not true for during academic lessons inside the classroom. Quantitative results from the survey showed that 90 percent of paraprofessionals did not feel rewarded when they went above and beyond their expected jobs, whereas the majority feel supported by their teachers, most do not feel comfortable going to their teacher with concerns. Most do not receive regular training in their field.

One weakness noted in Brown and Stanton (2017) and Rakap et al, (2017) studies was the lack of training and support for the paraprofessionals in the classrooms. Training and professional development lead to pivotal changes for teachers and paraprofessionals. With a changing education field from only general education classrooms and special education classrooms to mostly inclusive classrooms, teachers and paraprofessionals are being required to make commitments to learning without continuous training sessions.

Curriculum in Inclusive Preschool Settings

One important training piece to a quality inclusive preschool program is curriculum.

Four teachers and four students in Turkey were part of a mixed method study to examine the effects of the embedded instruction provided by preschool teachers to students with developmental disabilities in their classes on the acquisition of target behaviors (Firat and Ergenekon, 2021). Firat and Ergenekon (2021) researched if preschool teachers would respond 100% correctly to the control including embedded instruction provided by simultaneous prompting, writing and implementation of a written plan, and maintain skills with 100% accuracy. The embedded instruction provided to children with developmental disabilities is effective in terms of the acquisition of their target behaviors, children with developmental disabilities reached the performance levels of their typically developing peers regarding those target behaviors. Teacher training was provided in the schools of the participating teachers prior to the study. Results in this study indicate that the preschool teachers could implement the embedded instruction provided by simultaneous prompting procedures with a high level of treatment fidelity. Children in this study were able to maintain their target behaviors at one, four, and eight weeks after the embedded instruction procedure was completed (Firat and Ergenekon, 2021).

A similar study related to curriculum was conducted by Gunter, Caldarella, Korth, and Young (2012) as a mixed method study with 84 preschool children. Two teachers used the Strong Start Pre-K social-emotional curriculum in their classroom while the other two teachers were in the control group. The purpose of the study was to examine the effects of social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum on social and emotional competence of the student. Researchers examined student scores on the Emotional Regulation Subscale (PreBERS) with a

focus specifically on controlling anger, reactions, and taking turns. Scores were also examined on internalizing behavior, such as no response to affection, fear, or difficulty making friends. Teacher perception, relationships between adults and children, children seeking help or adult support were measured for emotional regulation purposes. Results of this study for emotional regulation show interaction between group and time with little statistical power and only some change in effects. When looking at internalizing behavior, there were significant interaction and effects between time and group and the same for teacher perception. At the conclusion of the study, teachers noted an increase in students' emotional regulation when Strong Start Pre-K was implemented with fidelity (Gunter et al, 2012).

Quality preschool curriculum and the ability to adjust the curriculum for individual student needs is important for the success of a quality program. Drossinou-Korea and Kydoniatou (2016) conducted a qualitative study with one student that aimed to understand the difficulties and the problems that arise in the usage of evaluation in persons with autism spectrum disorder. Focus was on the pedagogical evaluation of all sectors of kindergarten curriculum by preschool early intervention programs. Researchers Drossinou-Korea and Kydoniatou (2016) examined whether the evaluation information accompanying the referral of a pupil could be trusted or misleading for the teacher and student participation through understanding of the Learning Readiness Activities. The evaluations confirmed that usage of Levelling Evaluation Tests in persons with autism spectrum disorder leads to misleading evaluative information. The findings of this study concluded that the teacher had the advantage of familiarization with the child and sets a different basis for evaluation and intervention throughout their everyday contact (Drossinou & Kydoniatou, 2016). Drossinou and Kydoniatou

(2016) implies that in early childhood settings, quality which is teaching with fidelity is made up of many valuable parts that need to be tailored to each child's needs.

Tools for Communication and Engagement

Communication and engagement techniques are two important tools that teachers use to help students learn. Teacher Talk defined by Kwon et al. (2011) is the teacher's verbal interactions with the child that could facilitate peer interaction. A mixed method study examined the role of teacher talks including promoting peer interactions, adequacy of social IEP objectives to reflect children's social functioning and guide provisions, differences in peer interactions, and the use of teacher talks in inclusive and segregated settings. Thirty preschool children were observed based upon praise, modeling, describing, prompting, and directing while using teacher talk (Kwon et. al., 2011). Results of this study indicated that students were found to interact slightly more with teachers than their peers when teacher talk was used by the teacher. In 2014, Irvin, Boyd, and Odom conducted a mixed method study on adult talk, which is an expanded variant of teacher talk focused on the type and frequency of verbalization directed at students. This study included 73 students across 33 classrooms that were serving students with autism spectrum disorder. In the study by researcher Kwon et. al., (2011), the suggestion for future research included examining nonverbal interactions as well as teacher talks to promote peer interaction. The second study by researcher Irvin et. al., (2014) focused on examining if adult talk directed at children varied by disability type. The amount of positive social contact and peer relations talk propose that relationship-building with students with ASD is a difficult task proving that the type of disability does affect teacher comfort in teaching adult talk.

Teaching communication to students is different than giving them an opportunity to communicate. Schauf (2018) used a mixed method to determine if providing students with

opportunities to respond would result in positive student behaviors. Twenty students with a quarter of them on Individualized Education Plans for a learning disability or ELL services were studied to see if given opportunities to respond (such as choral responding, response card strategies, hand signals, and wait time) would decrease the behaviors in the classroom. The results collected in week one showed 13.75 opportunities to respond were given and 11.25 negative behaviors were recorded. By week six, 21.25 opportunities to respond were given and negative behaviors had declined to five. The study concluded that when the teachers provided the students with an opportunity to respond the student's negative behaviors decreased and student engagement increased.

In addition to giving students the opportunity to communicate and respond, offering students another form of communication through writing is another tool to enhance student learning. A qualitative study conducted by McCloskey (2011) details how a writing community in an inclusive preschool classroom promoted social engagement and literacy learning of all students. The study was based upon a three-year dataset that followed a group of children through their two years prior to kindergarten and their kindergarten year (McCloskey 2011). Year one of the study was strictly observational while year two and three the researcher began going to the classroom and implementing bookmaking groups. By creating writing relationships and using instructional approaches that work from a child's strengths, McCloskey (2011) was able to foster growth and provide a context for students to notice each other's strengths (McCloskey, 2011). Using strengths in themselves and each other allowed for engagement in the classroom.

Students in an inclusive setting are not always verbal and still need an opportunity to communicate with peers. Laubscher et al. (2020) discuss how communication in an inclusive

setting is important not only for children with disabilities to communicate with adults and peers but also for those typically learning peers to understand them and respond as well as teachers.

Visual scene displays (VSDs) is an assistive technology tool used to support social communication between children with disabilities and their peers, thereby promoting inclusion within the preschool setting (Laubscher et al. 2020). Communication comes in many formats and happens in various ways. Allowing the opportunity for peers to communicate in addition to adults is essential for successful inclusion in preschool.

Teacher Views of Inclusion

Teacher perceptions of inclusion can impact the quality of their teaching, the environment of the classroom, as well as the capacity for student learning. A qualitative study of 169 preschool teachers was conducted to develop the Inclusion Knowledge Test (ITK) for “assessing preschool teachers' knowledge of inclusive practices and to examine its psychometric characteristics” (Sucuoglu et al. 2014, p.1477). Researchers prepared 45 short stories in six categories and open-ended question to elicit the teacher’s thoughts, knowledge, and reasoning. The data collected from this test showed that the lowest scores for teachers were incidental teaching, working with families, preparing IEPs, classroom and behavior management, and naturalistic teaching strategies. Similar to the findings in this study were the findings in the qualitative study conducted by Zabeli and Gjelaj (2020), which explored how preschool teachers understand inclusive education in a system that is undergoing transition and facing significant overall challenges. Ten preschool teachers were interviewed in this study. Research concluded that although teachers understand inclusive education, they mainly relate this notion to children's rights. Challenges that arose were creating inclusive culture, inadequate structure, not enough financial resources, lack of support for teachers and assistants, and lack of family support (Zabeli

& Gjelaj, 2020). Despite the challenges, participants were optimistic about the prospect of inclusive education.

Teacher attitude can be positive or negative and have a direct effect on staff and students. Engstrand and Roll (2014) researched a mixed method study of 21 preschool and kindergarten teachers in Sweden. The study examined the relations among preschool teachers' attitudes of the inclusion of children with autism and perceived self-efficacy. Their results showed no relations were found between teachers' perceived self-efficacy and attitudes towards inclusion, although a relationship was found between participation in in-service training and efficacy to make decisions (Engstrand & Roll, 2014). Hong Kong, Lee et al. (2015) surveyed 410 principals and teachers to examine the attitude toward including children with special needs in regular classrooms. The results were comparable to the previous study: teacher acceptance varied depending on the student's needs, a low correlation existed between the teachers' knowledge and experience, and the role of the staff made no significant difference in their attitude.

There are different topics that play a role in an inclusive classroom as Bryant (2018) discovered from interviewing eight general education preschool teachers using a qualitative method. Researcher Bryant (2018) was looking for a better understanding of the role preschool teachers perform in the educational environment. Through the interview process, nine themes were identified. The first two themes focused on people on the outside and their view of preschool teachers as babysitters and their lack of understanding regarding the developmental level or the curriculum of the preschool environment. The next four themes were in regards to training for general education teachers and special education teachers. All participants had received at least one course in special education as well as training in a formal setting and on the job settings. The next two themes were that training affects attitudes and attitudes affect

teaching. The final theme that emerged was the need for proposed improvements and additional training (Bryant, 2018). Bryant (2018) looked at the whole picture; outside views, trainings, and how to make improvements.

The quality of an inclusive preschool classroom based on the teacher's view has many contributing factors. The teacher's knowledge and experience not only with inclusion but also teaching students with diverse needs are crucial factors. It was found that also the views of those outside of the classroom and the lack of understanding about what goes on in the classroom can influence teachers' perspectives of inclusion. The challenges such as funding or supports for the staff and families can impact teacher perceptions, as well. All these circumstances can influence student learning and growth, academically and socially.

Peer Interaction

Social and academic skills are critical for everyday life. They are presumed to be so critical that most states including the state of Iowa, which uses GOLD Teaching Strategies, has created standards that measure preschoolers' social emotional and academic growth. Rhoad and Justice (2020) completed a study involving 516 preschool students in 75 inclusive preschool classrooms with an average classroom size of 14, with half of them having disabilities. The researchers looked at three of the standards: language, print concept, and alphabet knowledge. The results of the study indicated that the percentage of students with disabilities did not predict children's spring scores; however, disabilities served as a predictor in all models for the children with disabilities. Children with and without disabilities are not differently influenced by the percentage of children with mild/moderate disabilities (Rhoad & Justice, 2020).

Although the number of children in a classroom with disabilities did not have an effect on student learning, Justice et al. (2014) developed a mixed method study using 670 preschool

students from 83 classrooms with 55 percent having disabilities to determine whether peer effects, specific to language growth, would have the same outcome. This research operated within early childhood special-education classrooms in which preschoolers with disabilities are educated alongside typical peers. Results of this study confirmed that peer effects are found in early childhood special education (ECSE) settings; children's scores were significantly related to the language skill of their classmates. Information gathered during observation was that the interactions are an influential tool for the development of children.

In examining peer effects, the target of specific skills should be considered. In the mixed method study run by Stanton, Denning, and Jamison (2012), eight children with special needs from the same classroom were evaluated with their typically developing peers on turn-taking skills. The children participated in communication intervention targeting peer-directed initiations and responses. Children were taught the roles in dramatic play themes. Intervention sessions that are conducted each week were used during these sessions, and data was collected using the PLBC to measure verbal and nonverbal communication between peers. Results showed similar strengths to previous research including an increase in initiations with an immediate peer response from children with and without an IEP. A couple explanations were given including the possibility that all students may have had a delay in language development, or teachers were scaffolding their interactions during play sessions. During a qualitative study conducted by Coelho et al. (2019), another skill was analyzed, the relations between self-regulation and engagement in inclusive preschool settings using Head-Toes-Knees-Shoulders. The assessed population included 247 students in 42 classrooms in Portugal. Findings showed that self-regulation skills can influence children's engagement.

Noggle and Stites (2017) used Hermeneutical Theory (interpretation) in their qualitative study exploring how children make meaning of the experience of participating in inclusive classrooms as children without disabilities. Three children were observed over a full academic school year looking for social growth in typically developing peers. All three students demonstrated gains in the way that typically developing children view their peers with disabilities over time. Not all of the children expressed or demonstrated their gains the same way. Student one learned he could play with peers that had communication difficulties as time passed, whereas student two appeared to accept peers from the beginning of the year and their outlook did not change as the year progressed. Student three kept his opinions to himself only to tell his mother about peers he plays with at home. In a similar study, Zakai et al. (2021) researched the social interest of 193 typically developing peers with autism spectrum disorder. The findings demonstrated the significant role played by multiple settings, typically developing children's own high prosocial abilities, the preschool teachers' more positive attitudes, and the included child's lower degree of needed inclusion support.

Teacher views have proven to impact student growth in an inclusive setting; however, teacher modeling could create a larger impact than peer modeling. Loutsch (2020) examined the effects of peers modeling versus teacher modeling using a qualitative method study. The study was made up of four staff members, 12 typically developing peers, and eight special education students. The areas of focus were social and cognitive development. Both peers and teachers have a direct impact on the development of not only social and cognitive development but also the language. Peers modeling showed greater increases in GOLD scores in the areas of social and language development while the teacher modeling showed higher in cognitive

development. Both teacher and peer modeling prove to be fundamental for students in an inclusive setting.

Conclusion

An increased focus has been placed on the inclusion of students with learning difficulties into the general education classrooms. Publications included in this literature review were examined in order to find resources that would act as tools for an effective inclusive classroom, specifically a quality preschool classroom. Certain areas were searched starting with variables that play a role in an inclusive classroom, including space, equipment, adult and child ratios and interactions, communication, training, attitudes, and supports. The publications also viewed curriculum, which is only useful when taught with fidelity. This point also holds true for the trainings provided to preservice teachers and current teachers, as well as to all staff connected to students. The review looked at tools used for communication and engagement of students, offering opportunities for students who are verbal and nonverbal to interact with adults and their peers, build relationships, and strengthen their social-emotional development. Preschool teachers' understanding of inclusion and their attitude towards it were key factors in this research and proved to have effects on peer interaction. A common matter throughout the literature was the lack of study done on the level of specific needs. The level of learning for each student, whether typically developing or one that has learning difficulties, varies from child to child and leaves "the question" unclear if this gap can be measured. Two frequent themes did arise in the review: the importance of training before and during a teaching career and the supports needed to have effective inclusion in a quality preschool classroom.

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