

# **INCLUSION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS: A KALEIDOSCOPE OF DIVERSITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Programs for young children are ever changing, becoming a kaleidoscope of diversity as inclusion is implemented. Inclusion of students with diverse levels of disabilities has caused concern from parents and teachers. This article presents some concerns that arise from inclusion and ways of dealing with them.

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## **Problem**

All areas of education face changes and challenges constantly. Early childhood education is no exception. A recent challenge teachers in early childhood face is the advent of inclusion. Implementing inclusion in early childhood classrooms creates more diversity among the children. Inclusion of students with various disabilities has caused concern among parents and teachers. There are some concerns that need special attention when including students with disabilities in the early childhood classrooms. This article describes some of the concerns and ways of dealing with them. Research conducted over the past 30 years has indicated that some 6% to 10% of children and youths have emotional or behavioral problems that seriously impede their development and require treatment in order for these children to function adequately in school and society (Kauffman, Lloyd, Baker, & Riedel, 1995). According to Roach, Halvorsen, Zeph, Giugno, and Caruso (1997), these data may not accurately reflect the number of children with disabilities that are being served in the general education classroom. Many states are believed to be under-reporting the actual number of children placed in general education classrooms.

Reforming public education to accommodate the needs of special education children placed in regular classrooms is a vital issue (Fried, 1998). For several years there have been arguments concerning the placement of children with disabilities in the regular classrooms. When inclusion children are placed in the regular classrooms the teachers are required to provide individualized instruction for the inclusion children. This may take away time the teacher is able to spend with the other children. In addition, many teachers feel inadequately prepared to deal with the inclusion children. The effects of placing inclusion children in regular classrooms have been both positive and negative (Baines, 1994).

Many public school systems are working with the communities to address problems such as these. One school system that has developed a successful approach to these problems is the Cincinnati Public School System. The school system, along with numerous businesses

and concerned citizens, began a study entitled Inclusion 2000. Inclusion 2000 is designed to promote awareness by including people with disabilities in educational and community projects. Many businessmen feel that the Inclusion 2000 is good business sense because nearly 25% of the population in Cincinnati have someone in their households with a disability. One of the goals of the program is to change negative attitudes about people with disabilities (<http://inclusion.ort/htdocs/2000/index.html>). Placing the inclusion child in the regular classroom provides group interaction and a feeling of universality for the child (Fields, 1995). As the students accept each other, they recognize common problems and work cooperatively to solve those problems. It is also important for the teacher to model acceptance of the inclusion children.

Over the past few years, researchers have been putting together valuable information concerning including children with disabilities in the early childhood programs (Jones & Rapport, 1997). It is the responsibility of all educators to increase their knowledge of early childhood education and develop an awareness of their responsibilities to all children. Early childhood educators need help in providing the best possible instruction for all children, including the children with disabilities who will be placed in the regular classrooms. The following suggestions will help the teachers deal with the inclusion children when they are placed into the regular classrooms.

### **Preparing for Inclusion**

Initially, teachers need to be prepared to deal with inclusion children. Schnailberg (1996) described some ways to help teachers. Organizing inservice training for the teachers who have inclusion students is very helpful. Working with a special education consultant to help develop the curriculum for the children is important. Providing released time for teachers to attend inclusion conferences also helps teachers. In addition, it is very important to involve parents in the program. Conferences should be held with parents regularly. Parents should provide information concerning the strengths, talents, and gifts of the included child so that teachers can focus on what the child can do (McConnell, Hubbard-Berg, & Keith, 1996). Parents should be kept informed of the children's progress. They should be advised of problems that occur and work with the teacher in finding solutions to the problems. As the child's first teacher, parents play an important role in the child's educational program.

Once the child is placed in the class, one of the first concerns is letting group members get to know each other as a way of building trust and acceptance. As trust builds, group members feel more accepted by the group. To a student with a disability, acceptance is a constant issue. Stussman (1997), a former special education student, gives his personal point of view on inclusion by sharing how he felt when separated from

regular classroom students. He points out how students can become withdrawn and unhappy with school once there is a realization of the separation from regular children. After being told by his friend that his friend was going into a “regular class” he remembers the sadness that he felt because he was still in the special education class. At age 11, his parents realized that he wasn’t being challenged academically and had him placed in the regular classroom. By the end of the second year, he was reading on grade level. From there he went on to receive a college degree and today has a successful career as a technology coordinator. Stussman (1997) gives this advice to teachers and parents of children with special needs: “Do not limit children. If children do not perceive barriers, they will amaze you with what they are capable of doing” (p. 21).

A first grade teacher, Anita F. Miles, (1998) described how her nephew began to reach many of the important milestones in his life due to the modeling he saw from peers after being placed in a regular classroom. She described his excitement of being invited to his first “real” birthday party by one of his classmates. Miles (1998) stated that studies have shown that the development of social skills is often linked to future occupational success or failure. Being placed in regular classrooms allows inclusion students to learn social skills through interaction with their peers (Smith & Dowdy, 1998). Placing students with disabilities into the regular classroom with their peers reflects the inclusion philosophy that acknowledges the importance of the real world for students’ learning (Van Dyke, 1995). Research on best practices indicates that special needs students that are not segregated or taken out of the regular classroom do better academically and socially (McLeskey & Waldron, 1995; Van Dyke, 1995) than those students who are taken out of the regular classroom.

Teachers need to prepare children for the inclusion child that will be added to the class. They can do this by talking with them about the child before he/she is placed in the classroom. Teachers need to help the children develop an awareness and understanding of the child’s physical and mental problems. For example, to understand the hearing impaired child, the teacher might ask the children to cover their ears as she speaks to them. For the visually impaired child, the teacher might blindfold some of the children and let other children lead them around the classroom. This would demonstrate the difficulties a hearing and visually impaired child has to cope with. Ways the children can help the inclusion child need to be discussed. Through simulations, class discussions, and modeling, teachers can help children develop an awareness and understanding of the inclusion child.

### **Classroom Environment**

Another concern is the classroom environment. The physical arrangement of the classroom may need to be modified. Furniture may need to be rearranged to provide more space for pathways for children in wheelchairs. In the inclusive classroom students are doing different things, independently and with others. They are moving from one learning environment to another. The classroom needs to be arranged to allow for freedom of

movement. Learning centers should be used. These should be used in small groups or with partners. Learning centers provide academic and social skills. The classroom should be student-centered. Students should have the opportunities to make choices. This helps develop responsibility. The children should consider the classroom a community in which each student is important and contributes to the success of the community.

### **Adapting the Curriculum**

The curriculum should be modified to meet the needs of the inclusion child. Cutting (1998) listed the following ways to adapt the curriculum:

- Adapt the way instruction is delivered to the learner, by speaking more slowly and extending the time allowed for the child to respond.
- Place the students in cooperative groups as an effective approach to accommodating diverse interests and capabilities.
- Adjust the extent of participation required. For example, during a map activity, the included learner can hold the globe while others point out locations.
- Adapt the amount of time allowed for learning or reduce the amount of work to be completed.
- Determine how the special student responds best to instruction. If the child has strong oral language skills, allow him or her to answer questions orally instead of in writing. Some students may be able to respond by pointing to pictures or by writing on the computer. (p. 7)

### **Teaching Strategies**

Another concern of teachers is that inclusion children must acquire the skills to adjust, cope, and succeed in regular education classrooms. Their ability to do this affects their self concepts. Teachers can help these children by using strategies that enhance self-concept and self-efficacy. Kendall and DeMoulin (1993) have identified strategies teachers may use: (a) use peer tutoring, (b) present lessons in a multisensory manner, (c) design lessons to include relevant materials, (d) provide “student active” learning centers. (e) design lessons so that students will have small successes and attainable goals, (f) teach to the personal interests of the students, and (g) provide motivational activities before each lesson followed by step-bystep sequential directions and instructions, and ending with a review of the lesson. An important element of the success of these children is the belief of the regular classroom teacher that children with disabilities can learn successfully and deserve the opportunity to learn in a classroom with children their own

age (Van Dyke, 1995). Many of the teaching strategies that help inclusion children to succeed will also help children in the regular classroom to be successful as well.

Mainstreaming disabled students into a computer classroom is frightening to some teachers. Helping the students to acquire computer skills is challenging. One teacher who faced this challenge was Joyce A. Burtch (1999). She was used to dealing with computers in a regular classroom, but mainstreamed children seemed almost impossible to handle. A colleague introduced her to KIDLINK on the web. KIDLINK is a grassroots, nonprofit organization whose goal is to build better worldwide relationships. Through this organization Burtch was able to obtain the help she needed to work with the inclusion children. She communicated with other teachers who were working with disabled students. They shared ideas and encouragement. With enthusiasm and support from the organization, Burtch's students were able to successfully participate in a computer-based project, write a book, and demonstrate the value of cooperative learning.

### **Assessment Procedures**

When the "included child" is assessed by the same means as the other children in the classroom they tend to fall behind and become discouraged. Use of standardized tests do not accurately measure their progress (Vann, 1997). With the national move to inclusive settings in elementary classrooms, teachers need a better way than standardized testing to assess students. Gettinger and Stoiber (1998) suggested using performance-based tests such as "teachers' storytelling." Performance-based testing indicates individual progress made by students. It also allows for observation and reflection. Portfolios are also good to use for assessing inclusive children.

Portfolios indicate progress over time. The teacher can look through the samples of the children's work and determine whether the children are progressing or if additional help is needed. The children's strengths and weaknesses can be determined. Another important way the portfolio helps in assessment is that it gives the children as well as the teacher a time for reflection. Self-evaluation is a critical aspect of portfolios. Portfolios are extremely useful for parent conferences. They provide parents an opportunity to examine the child's work instead of just looking at letter grades. This gives the parents a much better insight into the child's progress.

### **Conclusions**

As more children with disabilities are being included in the regular classroom, teachers must be prepared to deal with inclusion. The classroom environment, adapting the curriculum, teaching strategies to use, and assessment present valid concerns for teachers and parents. These concerns can be alleviated through preparation, organization,

planning, and support from the administration. By helping the teacher to acquire the necessary skills and information needed to work with inclusion children, everyone benefits. Having inclusion children in the classroom can be an exciting, challenging and rewarding experience.

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