

Topic: Develop and use instructional strategies to meet the needs of individual learners.

Odom, S. L., Buysse, V., & Soukakou, E. (2011). Inclusion for young children with disabilities: A quarter century of research perspectives. *Journal of Early Intervention, 33*, 344-356.

Context

Since the passage of PL 99-457 in 1986, much research has been conducted on the practice of including children with disabilities in early childhood settings with typical peers. Although terms have changed over the last quarter century, preferred practice continues to support placement of in natural environments with full participation in social relationships and learning opportunities. Unfortunately, access to this type of inclusive education is still unavailable for many young children with disabilities.

Purpose of Article

The article synthesizes the key findings of the research and professional literature on the practices of inclusion.

Previous Research on Inclusion

Five themes have emerged from the research on inclusion:

Theme 1. Benefits from Inclusion

The research supports the positive sociological outcomes of inclusion for children with disabilities including increased engagement, friendships, and social acceptance. Researchers have also provided evidence that inclusion helps children with disabilities in the development of communication, cognitive, gross motor, and self-help skills.

Theme 2. Specialized Instruction is Needed

Placing children with disabilities in high quality inclusive settings has not been sufficient to produce positive developmental outcomes. Researchers have maintained that specialized interventions, such as embedded learning opportunities, activity-based intervention, and peer-mediated interventions, were essential in meeting the needs of children with disabilities in inclusive settings.

Theme 3. Collaboration is Essential

The research has also supported the fact that collaboration with other adults was critical to the success of inclusion. The most effective collaborative practices noted in the literature were “joint participation in planning, shared philosophies, shared ‘ownership’ of all children ... and administrative support” (p. 348). More recent research has also supported the benefits of coaching and mentoring educators in inclusive child care programs and implementing co-teaching models between early childhood and early childhood special education teachers.

Theme 4. Systems of Support Are Necessary

Researchers have found that administrators play an essential role in supporting effective inclusive practices. Administrative resources necessary for inclusion include “resources for professional development, ongoing coaching and collaboration, and time for communication and planning” (p. 348).

Theme 5. Typical Peers also Benefit

Researchers have established that typically developing children benefit from inclusion. They make developmental gains, actively engage in classroom activities, develop friendships, and develop positive attitudes about disabilities when they participate in inclusive settings.

Current Research on Inclusion

Two emerging areas in the research continue to help inform inclusion practices today: (a) quality of early childhood inclusion, and (b) the application of RTI.

Quality of Early Childhood Settings. Although several efforts have been made to develop measures to assess high quality environments in

early child settings, less research has been conducted on how to measure high quality inclusive practices for children included in these settings. However, two instruments hold much promise in this regard. The *Quality Inclusive Experiences Measure* (QIEM; Wolery, Pauca, Brashers, & Grant, 2000) and the *Inclusive Classroom Profile* (ICP; Soukakou, 2012) were developed to assess the quality of inclusion for children with disabilities. The link between program quality and outcomes for children with and without disabilities continues to be an area for future research.

Response to Intervention (RTI) and Early Childhood Inclusion. A growing area of research in early childhood inclusion has been the use of tiered models of instruction. Much of this research has focused on social-emotional development and academic learning (i.e., the Teaching Pyramid; Recognition & Response, Building Blocks). A position statement on tiered approaches for promoting inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings is available from DEC/NAEYC (2009).

Future Directions of Research on Inclusion

Several influences within and outside of the field of education will potentially influence the future of research on inclusion. The first is the field of implementation science, which would involve moving inclusion practices to a larger scale at the state and national level. The second factor that will influence research on inclusion is the growing demands of teaching more ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse young children in early childhood settings. Teachers will be required to differentiate and individualize instruction due to the changing demographics in their classrooms. Those demands could create opportunities for developing specialized instructional approaches and increasing state funded programs and inclusive opportunities for children with disabilities. Lastly, the economic downturn has resulted in careful analyses of the cost factors of inclusive versus self-contained special education programs. Preliminary results indicated that inclusive programs were equal to or less expensive than self-contained programs.

Conclusion

The article provides an overview of the previous research on inclusion as well as the more recent research on the assessment of the quality of inclusion and the RTI model of services. Future influences on inclusion were also addressed related to implementation science, changing demographics, and the current economy.

References

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Research-to-Practice Briefs provide summaries of key studies that inform practice related to early childhood special education. The series is designed specifically to support community college faculty who prepare candidates to work with children with special needs in the early childhood setting.

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The ACCEPT (Advancing Community College Efforts in Paraprofessional Training) Project is a federally-funded cooperative agreement between the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte College of Education. The focus of this effort is the inclusion of special education content in the coursework and experiences provided within the associate degree program in early childhood education at targeted state-supported community colleges in North Carolina.

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