

Topic: **Build child, family and community relationships that promote child development and learning.**

Erwin, E. J., Puig, V. I., Evenson, T. L., & Beresford, M. (2012). Community and connection in inclusive early-childhood education: A participatory action research investigation. *Young Exceptional Children*, 15(4), 17-28. doi:10.1177/1096250612451759

Context

Inclusive education for young children has numerous benefits for all children and their families. In fact, there are abundant resources that support and describe high-quality inclusive education and competencies for early childhood practitioners. However, discrepancies between research and practice related to inclusion in early childhood education continue to exist.

Purpose of Article

To further understand the research to practice gap, authors used a participatory action research (PAR) approach. PAR was implemented to collaboratively extend understanding of community and diversity. The authors actively involved individuals who directly benefited from the information gathered from the research. The team of researchers consisted of stakeholders, families, practitioners, administrators, local university researchers, and graduate students. The key question specific to this research was: *What does it mean to be fully inclusive across all aspects of diversity?*

Method

The team used semi-structured interviews to gather data from 15 families and 5 staff members who reflected a balance of characteristics and diverse viewpoints. Data were analyzed through collaborative discussion and by reviewing interview transcripts. Patterns, themes, codes, and questions emerged. The authors further discussed lessons learned and implications for how the field can approach services provided to children with disabilities and their families.

Findings

After an analysis of data, authors focused on one set of findings related to the meaning of community within an inclusive early childhood environment. The first key finding included the meaning of membership, which was found to include many factors for both families and staff. The sense of belonging is at the center of inclusive practices. By establishing intentional rituals and routines each day, making time to connect, and being purposeful and consistent about creating opportunities to connect, families and staff can foster a sense of belonging within the inclusive environment.

The second key finding included the essence of connections. Collaboration is critical when providing high-quality inclusive education. To do so, authors suggested scheduling adequate time to plan and reflect, establish written protocols to successfully support all children, and ensure diverse perspectives at meetings.

The final key finding included understanding of difference within the context of community. Many factors exist when it comes to what diversity means and how it is understood. To fully embrace diversity, a solid commitment to foster deep learning about differences and create smooth transitions when children move from one classroom to another was suggested.

Conclusion

This article addressed the discrepancies between research to practice with inclusive education practices in the early childhood field. A qualitative investigation using PAR approach was used to deepen the understanding of community and diversity.

How to Use This Article

Using the key findings, scholars could conduct an evaluation of a local inclusive preschool program. Scholars could use the suggestions provided by the author to interview staff and administration on practices they use to further understanding, embrace diversity, and create a sense of community. Likewise, practitioners and practitioner-scholars could use the key elements of membership, collaboration, and context to enhance the inclusive environment.

About Research-to-Practice Briefs

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.

About the ACCEPT Project

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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