Early Childhood Inclusion: Challenges and Strategies from the 2014 Preschool Inclusion Survey

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Preschool Inclusion Webinar Series (Part 1 of 3)

Research shows that young children with disabilities and their families reap substantial benefits from participating in regular early learning and development programs, as do their peers without disabilities. However, over the last quarter century, the rate of children with disabilities being educated in inclusive early childhood programs has increased by less than 6 percent.

To shed light on the barriers to preschool inclusion, Erin E. Barton of Vanderbilt University and Barbara J. Smith of the University of Colorado Denver surveyed hundreds of early childhood and special education administrators and practitioners. This 2014 Preschool Inclusion Survey[1] is a national look at the challenges of preschool inclusion and prospective solutions.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THE CASE FOR PRESCHOOL INCLUSION

The 2014 Preschool Inclusion Survey was conducted, in part, because there is a strong research base supporting high-quality preschool inclusion. The survey builds on a 1992 paper published by Smith, Salisbury, and Rose[2] on policy options for preschool mainstreaming. That report and other more recent research describe the following results:

- Children with disabilities can be effectively educated in inclusive programs that use specialized instruction.
- Inclusion benefits all children, both with and without disabilities.
- Families of all children generally have positive views of inclusion.
- Inclusion is not more expensive than separate instruction.
- Children with disabilities do not need to be "ready" for enrollment in inclusive programs.

Additionally, policy makers and professionals specializing in education for children with disabilities promote inclusive early childhood programs. Federal programs offering services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education

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[1] Barton, Erin E. and Smith, Barbara J. (2015). *The Preschool Inclusion Toolbox: How to Build and Lead a High-Quality Program*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing. http://products.brookespublishing.com/The-Preschool-Inclusion-Toolbox-P834.aspx

[2] Smith, B. J., Salisbury, C. L., & Rose, D. F. (1992). Policy options for preschool mainstreaming. *CASE in Point*, 7(1), 17-30.

Act (IDEA) Part B Section 619 identify inclusive preschool programs as the preferred placement option for early education. The Division for Early Childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young Children issued a joint statement in 2009 endorsing inclusion in early childhood programs.[3]

ABOUT THE 2014 PRESCHOOL INCLUSION SURVEY

Barton and Smith's 2014 Preschool Inclusion Survey was sent electronically in January 2014 to State-level coordinators of IDEA Part B Section 619 programs in all U.S. States and Territories. In addition to completing the survey, the coordinators were asked to share the survey with contacts who were familiar with challenges and solutions to preschool inclusion. A total of 238 individuals from 32 States and one U.S. Territory responded. They represented a mixture of special education coordinators; Head Start and early childhood program directors; school- and district-level educators, administrators, and special education professionals; and other specialists who work with children with disabilities.

The survey defined inclusive preschool programs as those in which children aged 3 to 5 with Individual Education Programs (IEPs) receive special education and related services in settings where at least 50 percent of their peers do not have IEPs.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Challenges to Preschool Inclusion

The 2014 Preschool Inclusion Survey asked respondents to identify the primary challenges they saw to including children with disabilities in regular preschool programs. Figure 1 lists the challenges recognized by survey respondents and the percentage of respondents citing each challenge.
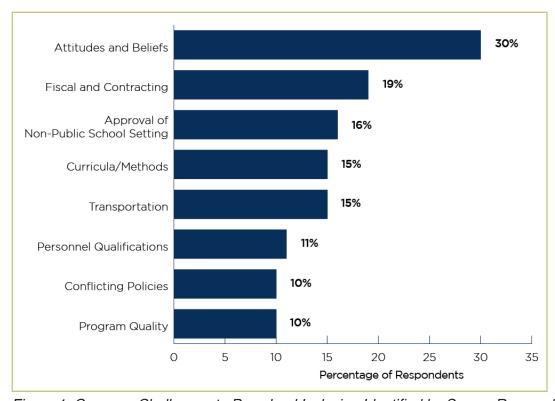

Figure 1. Common Challenges to Preschool Inclusion Identified by Survey Respondents

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[3] Links to these statements and additional resources on preschool inclusion are available on the Early Childhood Technical Assistance (ECTA) Center's Inclusion webpage at *http://ectacenter.org/topics/inclusion/default.asp.*

Attitudes and beliefs

Thirty percent of survey respondents said attitudes and beliefs about inclusion of children with disabilities were barriers to developing more inclusive preschool programs. The responses indicated a number of common concerns, including

- lack of communication or collaboration among school districts and other regular early childhood programs (20 percent of responses);
- belief that some children will "lose" in inclusive settings (20 percent of responses);
- staff preparedness to provide high-quality services, among both regular early childhood staff members and special education and related service staff (17 percent of responses);
- lack of awareness or understanding of the facts about preschool inclusion (16 percent of responses);
- turf issues between regular early childhood and special education programs and personnel (14 percent of responses); and
- lack of respect among all programs and personnel (12 percent of responses).

Policies and procedures

The second largest category of challenges identified by survey respondents relates to policies and procedures affecting early childhood programs. More than a quarter of responses indicated that general policies related to early care and education presented challenges to inclusion. The remaining responses connected challenges to specific procedures. Most challenges related to local policies and procedures, with State-level and Federal-level policies and procedures cited less frequently.

Most policy and procedure challenges identified by respondents were in the areas of

- implementing effective fiscal policies and procedures, such as contracting and blending funding streams;
- approving non-public school programs as placements for children with disabilities where they would receive their special education and related services according to their IEP; and
- providing transportation for children to program sites.

Resources

The primary challenges related to program resources identified by survey respondents were

- lack of available spots for children in community programs;
- lack of resources for transportation for typically developing children; and
- lack of resource for itinerate services.

Solutions to Increasing Preschool Inclusion

In addition to identifying challenges to preschool inclusion for children with disabilities, survey respondents were asked to describe strategies or potential solutions for encouraging higher rates of inclusion.

Attitudes and beliefs

Many of the attitudes and beliefs described as discouraging preschool inclusion boil down to misunderstandings or a lack of information about the processes for and effects of including young children with disabilities in regular early childhood programs. Survey respondents suggested the following strategies for building awareness of and support for preschool inclusion:

- Educate local program administrators about the benefits of preschool inclusion.
- Provide user-friendly materials on the benefits and laws related to inclusion.

- Provide models of high-quality, inclusive programs that teachers, parents, and administrators can visit to see inclusion in practice.
- Provide opportunities for practitioners, administrators, and families to explore concerns, benefits, and possible solutions related to inclusion.

Respondents also cited insufficient communication and collaboration among preschools and programs serving children with disabilities as a challenge to inclusion. They proposed the following solutions:

- Establish cross-disciplinary teams.
- Establish an inter-agency inclusion team.
- Provide materials and opportunities for administrators to learn about preschool inclusion and how to achieve it.
- Provide joint professional development for school district and community personnel to learn and work together.
- Ensure support to community programs for early childhood special education and behavior support.
- Build a culture of collaborative problem solving around inclusion.

Policies and procedures

Survey respondents offered a number of strategies to address inclusion challenges related to policies and procedures for early childhood programs. Strategies related to local-level policies and procedures include the following:

- Require a co-teaching practicum covering both early childhood and early childhood special education for educators seeking certification.
- Provide training and coaching to community programs and itinerate early childhood special education services.
- Create memoranda of understanding and contracts with community programs that address program quality.
- Provide paraprofessionals who can support children in community programs.
- Create tuition-based access to district early childhood programs for children without disabilities.
- Reimburse parents for transportation to program sites.

Strategies related to policies and procedures at the State level include the following:

- Ensure that State-funded pre-kindergarten, Title I programs, and programs for children with high needs are inclusive.
- Provide State training and technical assistance to district and community early childhood programs.
- Create a State-level inclusion team for "barrier busting" that responds to local concerns.
- Disseminate materials from the State to districts highlighting creative ways to provide inclusion, examples of inclusion, and incentives for inclusion.
- Integrate and blend funding streams from different programs—such as special education, Title I, State-funded pre-kindergarten, child care, and Head Start—to create inclusive settings.

Resources

To overcome challenges related to a lack of financial or professional resources for preschool inclusion, survey respondents suggested the following:

- Inform stakeholders that inclusive early childhood services do not cost more than separate services for children with disabilities.
- Integrate and blend funding streams from different programs.
- Increase collaboration among programs serving young children.
- Redistribute resources among itinerate or consultative programs and separated services.
- Raise public awareness of the benefits of preschool inclusion in an effort to increase the potential resources available.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Barton, Erin E. and Smith, Barbara J. (2015). *The Preschool Inclusion Toolbox: How to Build and Lead a High-Quality Program.* Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.
http://products.brookespublishing.com/The-Preschool-Inclusion-Toolbox-P834.aspx

Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center Inclusion page
http://ectacenter.org/topics/inclusion/default.asp

Smith, B. J., Salisbury, C. L., & Rose, D. F. (1992). Policy options for preschool mainstreaming. *CASE in Point*, 7(1), 17-30.

Webinar recording: Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities, Session 1: Opportunities, Initiatives, and Key Resources
http://ectacenter.org/~stream/calls/2014/inclusion-2014-10-28/

Webinar presentation slides: Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities, Session 1: Opportunities, Initiatives, and Key Resources
http://ectacenter.org/~ppts/calls/2014/inclusion-2014-10-28.ppt