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RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE

Including Everyone from the Start: Lessons Learned from Head Start

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This research to practice article summarizes the findings from a case study focused on examining how children with disabilities were included in eight Head Start classrooms in one Midwestern Head Start program. Lessons learned from this study provide important implications for practice. Specifically: (1) Teachers must be provided with support to recognize and address the individual needs of children with disabilities in their classroom; (2) Teachers need to intentionally facilitate peer interactions between children with and without disabilities; (3) Key stakeholders involved in serving children with disabilities should prioritize developing effective partnership; (4) Efforts are necessary to reduce the negative impacts of external factors, such as the uneven distribution of children with disabilities across classrooms, influencing the quality of inclusive classroom environments.

Keywords: inclusion, Head Start, collaboration, peer interactions

Mihai and Butera (2017) report findings from their case study focused on one Head Start program in a Midwestern state. In this study, data gathered in classroom observations and teacher interviews were employed to examine how children with disabilities were included in eight Head Start classrooms. Specifically, the study examined how Head Start teachers planned and adapted activities for children with disabilities in their classrooms, how children with disabilities participated in activities and interacted with peers and adults, and how teachers collaborated with other professionals about the needs of children with disabilities. Findings from the study revealed that teachers understood the importance of addressing children's individual needs and were motivated to teach so that all children learned. However, teachers differed in the extent to which they made adaptations to support the needs of children with disabilities in their classrooms and

how well they facilitated peer interactions. These differences provide important lessons about how children with disabilities can be included in inclusive preschool classrooms.

The program under study is located in a rural area and served children from six different counties. Teachers were from the communities; they were experienced and had worked with young children for at least 6 years. Considering these circumstances, the findings from this study may be limited in generalizability. The implications for practice, nevertheless, are particularly important to consider given that a substantial number of children with disabilities are enrolled in Head Start, and programs should strive to ensure that children with disabilities are well-served. In the following, we present four themes that outline lessons to be learned from this study.

HELPING TEACHERS TO RECOGNIZE AND ADDRESS INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Simply placing children with disabilities in the same classroom with typically developing peers is insufficient to support optimal developmental outcomes. Rather, early childhood programs must provide accommodations and adaptions to meet the needs of children with disabilities and ensure they are active participants in the classroom (Hurley & Horn, 2010). Further, children with or without disabilities must have multiple opportunities to actively engage with one another (Diamond & Hong, 2010). Only then will preschool inclusion lead to "a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning" as emphasized in the joint position statement on inclusion of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; DEC & NAEYC, 2009, p. 2).

The eight teachers in our study differed considerably in how they planned and adapted activities for children with disabilities. Some of the teachers worked with children in small groups, simplifying activities, and focusing on children's specific areas of need. For example, Martin both simplified and expanded the storybook reading activities based on what he knew about the children. Similarly, Laura provided Colin with sensory activities during station time because she felt he needed them. Teachers sometimes planned activities with children's IEP goals in mind. For example, Lynn planned math activities where children counted jellybeans, performed simple addition and subtraction, or sorted them by colors, depending on the children's abilities and learning needs.

However, in other instances, children's specific needs were not acknowledged in lesson planning. Some teachers seemed uncertain about how to support children with disabilities in the classroom, as was the case of Hannah, who explained that she "got the tip of the iceberg" from taking an introductory course in special education in her early childhood education degree program. She found her teacher preparation to be insufficient to provide children with disabilities in her classroom with the support they needed. Other teachers also reported that they felt that additional training was needed. However, other teachers seemed unaware that they might benefit from professional development. Under such circumstances, it is imperative to provide opportunities for self-reflection about teaching and adequate support for teachers to ensure quality learning environments are provided for all children. Clearly, some teachers need additional professional development and support to enact high-quality inclusive practices. It is important for administrators to regularly assess teacher needs and ensure that they are provided with the knowledge and skills necessary to teach the children in their classroom, who may have a variety of needs that change from year to year.

Some teachers, like Cathy and Roberta, reported feeling uncomfortable when they singled children out by making adaptations to activities. Cathy explained that a child with a developmental delay in her classroom "doesn't really get a lot of accommodations because he wants to do what everyone else does." Similarly, Roberta believed children are different from each other, and it is important to accept their differences and to teach children to respect each other. An important lesson from this case is that while acceptance and appreciation of differences should be fostered when working with young children, it is important to also provide children with needed accommodations and adaptations. Ensuring that children with disabilities have access to activities and are supported in their participation are central features of early childhood inclusion and all programs would do well to implement them (DEC & NAEYC, 2009).

THE IMPORTANCE OF FACILITATING PEER INTERACTIONS

The teachers in our study also differed considerably in how they facilitated peer interactions in their classrooms. Some teachers appeared to be more aware than others of the potential difficulties that children with disabilities might experience in initiating and sustaining interactions with peers. Noticing that Jimena, an English Language Learner with a speech and language impairment who had difficulty playing with her peers, Juanita joined the children's play herself. She facilitated interactions by providing suggestions based on what children were already doing and extending their play to include Jimena. In Martin's classroom, several children had behavior problems, which negatively impacted their interactions with peers. Martin's approach was to explicitly teach children the classroom rules, emphasize them often, and facilitate interactions when children had difficulties playing together, at times entering their play. Laura was purposeful in her praise of children with disabilities in her classroom emphasizing positive attributes and creating a positive climate in her classroom, where all children played and interacted well together.

In classrooms where teachers were not observed consistently supporting positive peer interaction, children with disabilities had difficulties forming relationships with their classmates. This was the case of Becky in Hannah's classroom. Children noticed her behavior as different from theirs and were reluctant to interact with her. Lyle, in Cathy's classroom, also had difficulties interacting with peers. In one instance, several children who were playing in the sandbox left when Lyle climbed in. Only when a teacher facilitated activities, did we observe Lyle actively engage with other children. It is clear that Head Start teachers must be purposeful in planning and implementing opportunities for children to interact with one another. While we know that there are benefits for children with disabilities when they are educated alongside more competent peers, particularly in language development and social competence (Hanusek, Kain, Markman, & Rivkin, 2001; Justice, Logan, Lin, & Kaderavek 2014; Rafferty, Piscitelli, & Boettcher, 2003), it is important to note that children without disabilities also benefit from interactions with their peers who are unlike them. Teachers can work to maximize these benefits by facilitating interactions in which all children actively engage with one another. This can also contribute to creating a sense of belonging and the development of friendships, particularly important features of inclusion (DEC & NAEYC, 2009).

The Value of Collaboration

When the different professionals serving children with disabilities work well together, outcomes for children are likely to improve (Hunt, Soto, Maier, Liboiron & Bae, 2004). Still, research suggests that preschool teachers and various specialists often struggle to work together (Brown, Knopf, Conroy, Googe, & Greer, 2013; Butera, Friesen, Horn, Palmer, &Vaiouli, 2016). This was evident in our study, both within and outside of the Head Start program. Overall, teachers worked well with one another and appreciated the opportunity to plan together and to share lesson ideas. However, teachers differed in the extent with which they found the program's disabilities coordinator to be supportive. In some instances, the disabilities coordinator lacked sufficient time to provide teachers with help, particularly when the same coordinator visited several locations and had additional assigned tasks. Given this circumstance, the disabilities coordinator and the teachers had not developed the collaborative relationship that was needed if teachers were to welcome and adopt provided suggestions. Considering that disability coordinators are the primary resource for teachers regarding children with disabilities, it is important to understand how Head Start programs can foster better collaborative relationships between teachers and other professionals who are to support them.

Several of the teachers in our study had difficulties collaborating with the school district, particularly the early childhood special education teachers serving children who were dually enrolled. Juanita and Lynn reported feeling frustrated with the lack of communication with the school district program, which only took place when they initiated it. Juanita described her participation in the IEP meetings as minimal even when she made an effort to attend. Without an active role in developing the children's IEPs, the document itself provided Juanita with little guidance on how to help children with disabilities in her classroom. Martin believed the school district saw their Head Start program as a "day care center" and failed to recognize the work of the teachers in supporting children and families. Since collaboration between key stakeholders is essential for implementing high-quality early childhood inclusion, it is imperative that Head Start programs and school districts prioritize communication and collaboration between professionals serving young children with disabilities. It is also essential for classroom teachers to be more meaningfully included in IEP meetings, as is required by IDEA.

Not all interactions with the school district were negative, and we had the opportunity to observe one particularly positive collaboration. Sylvie, a speech language therapist who worked with several of the teachers in the study, was appreciated for her willingness to consult with teachers on how to address children's individual needs. Sylvie sometimes worked with children in the classroom instead of pulling them out and, at times, she also ate lunch with Head Start children and teachers. It is important to understand how collaborative relationships could be developed so that children are provided with additional support beyond the limited time spent with specialists. This will likely lead to children's better acquisition of skills and generalization across settings.

The Role of External Factors

Factors external to the teachers' direct work with children influenced the extent to which they were able to focus on the effective inclusion of children with disabilities in their classrooms. Several of the teachers reported that the amount of paperwork that they needed to complete

interfered with their ability to plan for all children, including children with disabilities in their classroom. Further, the uneven distribution of children with disabilities across classrooms interfered with teachers' efforts to plan and implement adequate learning activities. Some teachers had several children with significant needs while others had only a few children with disabilities whose special needs were mild. Overall, across the classrooms, many more children were identified by the teachers as having special learning needs than were identified with a disability (i.e., had an IEP). All of the Head Start classrooms included a lead teacher and an assistant. In addition, they had support from parent volunteers and a specialist who came in the room. However, in some circumstances, when classrooms included several children with significant needs for support, teachers and teacher assistants too often found themselves preoccupied with ensuring the safety of the children and had less time to plan and adapt activities. In Hannah's room, Becky needed one-on-one support to prevent her behaviors from interfering with her safety or the safety of the other children in the classroom. Hannah's teacher assistant, Jamie, spent much of her time supervising Becky, which interfered with her ability to help with classroom activities. This case clearly illustrates that having an equal number of children in each classroom is not equitable, and programs should consider the specific needs for support that children have.

Teachers explained to us that children were placed in classrooms depending on bus routes. In this rural Head Start program, a bus had to sometimes travel a long distance to pick up a child from an isolated location. No doubt, the costs associated with placing children with more intense needs equitably across classrooms must be considered. However, since the percentage of children with disabilities in a classroom is associated with the overall quality of the classroom environment (Gallagher & Lambert, 2006), it is important to consider how children are placed in classroom to provide better learning environments for all children.

The Head Start program benefitted from a partnership with a community mental health program. This was an important resource, but underutilized. Teachers explained that while a behavior therapist came to consult twice a month, given the high turnover within the center, teachers were unsure who would be visiting their classroom next. Teachers also reported that they did not receive feedback after a mental health specialist had visited their classroom.

Of great concern, from teachers' perspectives, were the missed opportunities to collaborate with all of those who are serving children in their classrooms. The Head Start teachers had ongoing opportunities to get to know the children and their families. Other professionals should make the most of the resource provided by Head Start teachers' knowledge and experience. Since children transition to school after their time in Head Start, effective partnerships between key stakeholders are essential if the goal is to maintain the "head start" that children receive in preschool.

CONCLUSION

The Head Start teachers in our study and the children in their classrooms provided valuable insight into how the inclusion of children with disabilities can best be supported in Head Start. While teachers understood the importance of addressing children's individual needs and were motivated to support the development of children in their classrooms, they differed in how they addressed the needs of children with disabilities. Two important features of effective early childhood inclusion relate to ensuring that children with disabilities have access to activities and

are supported to actively participate in the classroom (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). As we observed the classrooms in our study, we concluded that inclusion was best supported when teachers recognized and addressed the individual needs of children with disabilities in their classroom through intentional planning of activities and specific efforts to facilitate peer interactions between children with and without disabilities. Lastly, when including children with disabilities, it is important to promote the development of effective partnerships between all stakeholders serving children with disabilities and to make efforts to reduce the negative impacts of external factors, such as the uneven distribution of children with disabilities across classrooms.

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