Early Childhood Education and Special Education: Establishing and Strengthening Common Bonds for Inclusion

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Abstract

The issue of inclusion has generated much attention and dialogue for both early childhood and special education educators. The fact remains that common ground needs to be established and strengthened so that early childhood and special education teachers work collaboratively to promote the welfare and teaching of all children This article provides a general overview of issues of early childhood inclusion in the US and explores several options that enable early childhood educators and special educators to work collaboratively together.

Key-words: Inclusion, early childhood education, special education

Almost all early childhood and special education educators would agree that all children may learn in environments that provide motivation and that are challenging. However, the fact remains that both disciplines have consistently operated independent of one another. Given the past history, it would appear that both disciplines were quite different philosophically and in actual practices utilized with children. Early childhood teachers often cited the lack of educational training and knowledge in working with children with disabilities as their primary reason for not being able to assist children with special needs. On the other hand, special education teachers cited the lack of knowledge with respect to developmentally appropriate experiences in teaching children who are typically developing and also advancing their expertise in working with children with disabilities as their primary focus.

The Issue of Inclusion

The idea of including children with disabilities in early childhood education classes is not a new concept. When the Federal law (PL 94-142, IDEA) initially passed in the 1970s and students with disabilities were placed in regular classrooms, the practice of mainstreaming began. At that time, the most important point of mainstreaming was physical placement of students with disabilities rather than individualization of educational content. Moreover, mainstreaming was not for all. It was for students who proved that they could compete with their peers without disabilities. In the 1990s, the concept of inclusion took the place of mainstreaming, and

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has been recently become the term of choice relying greatly on individualization for effective implementation (Wood & Lazarri, 1997).

One has to first understand the diverse viewpoints on the meaning of inclusion. Inclusion involves students receiving an education in the same place as their peers, bringing needed services to the student and individualizing the information as appropriate for each student (Wood & Lazarri, 1997). However, the meaning of the term inclusion is often ambiguous and varied. There are some educators who prefer the full inclusion model, that have all children irrespective of their disability present in regular education classes. As many early childhood teachers have worked with children who have a wide range of special needs and as most early childhood classrooms focus their programs on individualized and developmentally appropriate learning, as well as providing peer tutoring, the setting may be ideal for inclusion. A sharp contrast from full inclusion is the completely self-contained special education classroom, which has been the commonly used model to serve the needs of children identified as having disabilities.

Proponents of full inclusion and those who resist it are committed to the idea that children should be in environments that give them maximum learning opportunities as well as the mandate of the Federal law (PL 94-142, IDEA). The differences exist in their viewpoints revolving around the question of what that environment should be like and how it can be achieved.

Professionals who desire full inclusion believe that a separate but equal opportunity model does not give children with disabilities the best forum for reaching their potential achievement levels (Shapiro, Loeb, & Bowermaster, 1993; Van Dyke, Stallings, & Colley, 1995). These individuals are concerned that children with severe disabilities need to be in integrated settings in order to give them normalized experiences so that they may learn the social interaction skills that will make it possible for them to be included in the broader society (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). They believe that by being placed in a classroom for typically developing children, even those children with severe disabilities will have the opportunity to interact with peers and develop friendships. This importance of developing friendships has been highlighted in a number of inclusion models (Bergen, 1993; Perske, 1988). According to Lewis and Doorlag (2003) many benefits are shared when students with special needs are members of general education classrooms. For instance, when inclusion happens, special students remain with their peers and are not segregated from the normal activities of the school. Labeling can be deemphasized.

Advocates of full inclusion support the idea that frill inclusion also has several benefits to children who are typically developing. To them, these children will lose their fears and stereotypic thinking about children with disabilities by having these children as peers. Proponents of full inclusion believe also that having children with special needs in the regular classroom will not prevent children who are typically developing from continuing to learn at their highest potential. Mastropieri and Scruggs (2004) summarize arguments of proponents of inclusion. Proponents of full inclusion argue that inclusive placement in the general education class is a civil right for all students with disabilities and all students are better accepted and care more for others, and

become more embracing of individual differences in inclusive environments. They also believe that inclusion reduces stigma. It is more efficient and promotes equality.

In contrast to the full inclusion approach, most of the opposition comes from professionals who want to maintain the present continuum of options that include special education self-contained classrooms, resource rooms that provide services on an as-needed basis, and other mainstream options. Among the present continuum of options, a sharp contrast from full inclusion is the completely self-contained special education classroom, which has been the commonly used model to serve the needs of children identified as having disabilities. Professionals advocating the present continuum of options, specifically self-contained classrooms, have two concerns related to the social skill/self-concept dimension and academic achievement goals. These professionals are concerned that children with severe and mild to moderate disabilities may be ignored and that the focus would be on inclusion of children with mild developmental delays such as learning disabilities (Mather & Roberts, 1994). They are fearful that there will be a return to the conditions of the past in which many children who needed assistance were overlooked in the standard curriculum for al, classrooms.

Of great concern to special educators is that children with mild or moderate disabilities will be overlooked in the classroom because teachers gear the curriculum to the typical child, especially in the academic achievement area. These educators strongly believe that without the options of special education classrooms and teachers, children with disabilities may not be able to achieve at the level that they could achieve if they had a one to one or small group environment with a teacher who focuses specifically on their particular learning modalities (Mather & Roberts, 1994). Additionally, proponents of partial/optional inclusion assert that if children with disabilities have repeated failures in doing regular classroom academic tasks, they will not develop a positive self-concept (Dickman, 1994). Mastropieri and Scruggs (2004) also summarize arguments of proponents for a continuum of services. According to them, some proponents state that a continuum of service options is necessary for the integrity of the service deliver)' system; the regular classroom may be stigmatizing, general education teachers are not prepared for full inclusion, general education classrooms may not have sufficient resources.

It is well documented that arguments opposing full inclusion do make presumptions about regular early childhood classroom environments and teaching styles that may not be accurate. In examining current early childhood education practices, it would appear that the preschool and kindergarten levels are more likely to provide opportunities for meeting individual children's needs. There are many choices of activities, peer interaction is strongly encouraged, and the curriculum is planned to meet the individual needs of all the children. This is often the case in early childhood special education classes that combine developmentally appropriate activities with attention to individual needs of children with disabilities.

In summary, many early childhood and special education educators would agree that the goals of inclusion are the ones they support. Some do disagree on what environment may be best for which children with what types of disabilities, how and by

whom decisions should be made, and how the costs of providing such environments may be borne by the schools.

Establishing and Strengthening Common Bonds

The educational goals and recommended practices of early childhood educators and special education educators are very similar, making it much more possible for them to work together in team teaching approaches (Bergen, 1994). This is evident as both early childhood and early childhood special education models utilize a team of staff' members. They both individualize children's learning experiences, both stress social skill development, and both include curriculum opportunities for children to use a range of learning modalities. When proponents of full inclusion do describe what the classroom should resemble to make inclusion work, they describe a classroom that is quite similar to the early childhood classroom, especially those at the preschool and kindergarten level. It does appear that a connection between both early childhood and special education could be established. The question still remains: Why is the issue of inclusion of such great concern for both early childhood and special educators? How can we establish common bonds and continue to strengthen these bonds between early childhood and special educators and promote inter-professional collaboration for the good of all children?

One has to first establish an understanding of the development of all children and how' all children develop learning skills. The first common bond would be to ensure that all pre-service teachers have a strong knowledge base in child development. In order to be an effective teacher, one has to be familiar with the cognitive, social, physical, and emotional growth of all children. Teachers have to be familiar with sensitive periods, unique episodes in development when specific structures of functions become especially susceptible to particular experiences in ways that alter their future structure or function (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It should also be known that certain early experiences uniquely prepare the young children for the future by establishing certain capabilities at a time when development is most plastic and responsive to stimulation. In addition, a variety of environmental factors play a significant role in modulating early brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This knowledge would greatly assist all teachers in diagnosing and evaluating what a child is capable of doing and then prescribing strategies for promoting and enhancing particular skills. Of particular importance for early childhood teachers is to become aware of the many varied disabilities that some young children have such as hearing, speech and vision impairment, juvenile diabetes, language delays, autism, Down syndrome, and neurological impairments for example. The implication remains that all pre-service teachers need to be educationally sound when it comes to totally understanding children's growth and developmental processes. The major issue here is that often teachers get some type of category course in their undergraduate preparation program, but not much on strategy.

Of primary importance is to understand the philosophical bases that teachers of children who are typically developing utilize in their classroom settings. As there are

several philosophies for teaching young children, one of them has received much attention. According to Branscombe (2000), constructivism is a scientifically-researched theory that explains learning as a physically and mentally active process. The theory takes into account experience, growth and development over time and emphasizes social interaction with peers and autonomy. The basic premise behind the theory is that all individuals construct their own knowledge through observing, questioning, documenting, and reflecting.

The philosophical foundation of constructivism is based on the cognitive theory formulated by Jean Piaget. According to Piaget, children develop schema, or conceptual systems, through the process of equilibration as they construct their knowledge. This process is made of two complimentary processes: assimilation and accommodation. In assimilation, children acquire information from the environment and incorporate it into their existing schema or systems of knowledge. Children revise their existing system of knowledge through accommodation when the information they gather cannot fit with the system. The result is a balance of existing and new knowledge, an equilibration. Assimilation and accommodation complement one another and operate together. It is the schema that is modified as the child assimilates and accommodates information. Both assimilation and accommodation are needed for learning (Trawick-Smith, 2000).

Another cognitive-developmentalist was Lev Vygotsky who differed slightly from Piaget in two fundamental ways. First, he assigned a greater importance to the role of language and to the contributions of social interactions among children. He believed that as early as the preschool years, children use language to guide learning. Language was not just a mode of expression but a tool for constructing knowledge. Social interaction was also necessary for learning. Adults or teachers in particular, "scaffold" children's learning by giving assistance but at the same time challenging children to think on their own. He emphasized the "zone of proximal development" that is a period during problem solving when a task is just beyond a child's level of mastery. This is a time when an indirect prompt or question may help children solve the problem independently.

On the contrary, the behaviorist theory contends that all that children are and will become is derived from experience. A child's mind is a blank slate or an empty vessel to be gradually filled by the environment. Development in all areas from personality type, to the ability to read, to career preferences are all a result of environmental influences. This theory holds that parents and teachers must purposefully shape young children's learning. Additionally, this theory argues that maturation and genetics are relatively unimportant in human development. This is a sharp contrast from constructivism that holds that children construct their own knowledge. In working and teaching children who are typically developing, most teachers would utilize the constructivist approach.

It has long been recognized that professionals who specialize in early childhood education and early childhood special education will play the most extensive role in the inclusion of young children with special needs (Cook, Klein, & Tessier, 2004). It is the teachers who must structure the environment, adapt the materials,

determine the child's most profitable mode of learning, and select appropriate teaching strategies to encourage specific behaviors. Research to date suggests that systematic intervention efforts guided by teachers are necessary in order to promote successful inclusion (Bricker, 2000; Rose & Smith, 1993).

Problems and Solutions to Establish and Strengthen Common Bonds

In order for the full inclusion model to work, some rethinking of present early childhood classrooms with respect to methods of instruction and staffing patterns is needed. Therefore, a variety of concerns and recommended solutions, as suggested by Bergen (1997) follow. For example, a concern exists when few regular early childhood teachers have been prepared to work with children who are not typically developing. Difficulties may occur in the inclusion process. General education teachers who have little experience with students with special needs may be reluctant to participate. Both typical and special students and their parents may be apprehensive. Such difficulties are minimized when general education teachers are skilled in dealing with special students (Lewis & Doorlag, 2003). To fulfill such a multifaceted role, teachers are expected to develop competencies characteristic of both the early childhood educator and the special educator. Fortunately, the skills needed include the same skills that are necessary to work with all young children. However, successful inclusion of children with disabilities requires additional skills and expertise. Historically, there has been considerable discussion in the field regarding the need to combine the developmentally appropriate practices of early childhood education (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and the strategies and best practices of early childhood special education (Carta, Atwater, Schwartz, & McConnell, 1993). For example, Horn, Lieber, Sandall, Schwarz, and Li (2000) have described the need to train early childhood educators to use "embedded learning opportunities" to incorporate teaching strategies related to specific individualized outcomes or goals into the daily activities in the typical early childhood environment.

The solution may be to encourage institutions of higher learning to prepare pre-service teachers in early childhood with content related to the development of all children, including children with disabilities, with respect to methods of curricular and behavioral adaptation for these children. In contrast, many special education teachers have not had sufficient preparation in traditional early childhood curriculum and methods. Therefore, the solution may be to prepare special education teachers with the methods and curricular models utilized in early childhood classrooms. Specifically, this type of knowledge may assist special education teachers to help other teachers integrate developmentally appropriate and individually planned models of instruction. An interdisciplinary approach in teacher preparation programs that enables both special education and early childhood pre-service teachers to receive specific teaching strategies would be the first step.

Additionally, Bergen (1997), has suggested that related services personnel such as speech pathologists and physical therapists have distinctly separate and non-collaborative personnel preparation programs that have often resulted in their graduates

holding only the perspective of their own professional discipline. A solution may be to provide interdisciplinary programs for preparing professionals whose work roles will require them to be working together with early childhood professionals. Early childhood teachers would also benefit from this collaborative approach by learning more about the services that speech pathologists and physical therapists provide.

There must be curricular reforms and team teaching approaches that have early childhood and special education teachers working together in the classroom in a collaborative fashion. Both early childhood and special education teachers would share joint responsibility in team teaching or teaching/consulting models that adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of all learners. As Wood and Lazarri (1997) state successful inclusion of children with disabilities in regular education classrooms requires teamwork among professionals and parents. If early childhood education teachers are to make inclusion a true reality, they will have to work with special education teachers, administrators, and parents to make this happen.

Very few professionals in teaching or administration have had systematic training in how to work effectively as a part of a team. Therefore, an effective solution may be to provide workshops or clinics on how to promote team approaches, that is, practice in working in team situations as well as observations of effective team interactions. Because few university faculties have engaged in team teaching situations they need to develop the ability to model effective team approaches to students. With respect to problems and suggestions related to personnel resources, preschools and primary schools must have a sufficient number of adults, including special educators, to make inclusion models truly individualized (Bergen, 1997).

They must be able to adapt instruction, given the appropriate supports that teachers need to be successful. Special educators should be on a school team so that they may provide individualized support for children in every classroom. Team members can consist of a special educator, speech pathologist, physical therapist, early childhood teacher, school psychologist and school counselor. Another problem exists when special educators feel that their expertise is not always considered. Therefore, a focus of team discussions and in-services needs to be developed that utilizes the expertise of all members of the team. Special educators need to believe that their efforts are significant and worthy of consideration when working with early childhood educators.

Another problem exists when school administrators lack clear guidelines on assessment and placement policies related to what is the least restricted environment for children. Therefore, as cited by Will (1986), problems may be in environments rather than in children. According to Bergen (1997), the preferred model of assessment should include a team assessment conducted within the regular classroom environment that notes what supports may be given or adaptations made by the teacher or other team members to make the experience successful for all children. This approach begins with the least restrictive end of the continuum and moves to a more restrictive environment but is always based on the best needs of the child. Given the mandates for academic achievement and standardized testing that all schools face, the issue of fairness, with respect to adaptations of academic work for children with disabilities is problematic

(Bergen, 1997). It would appear that this is a problem not easily solved. However, what is needed is a strong commitment among all educators to collaborate together to reach consensus as to how adaptations and evaluations of performance will be negotiated for children who have disabilities. Collaboration is the most vital factor to develop successful educational experiences for all students, not only ones who are difficult to teach. In a survey of more than 1000 school districts implementing inclusive education programs, the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI) identified seven factors that are necessary for inclusion to be effective. One of them is collaboration (between general and special educators, evaluation and classroom personnel, related services providers and classroom instructors (Lipsky, & Gartner, 2001). As Smith (2001) also states "True" collaboration requires some important conditions such as voluntary participation, having shared goals and responsibility for outcome-accountability, team-based decision making, pooled-resources, and partnership based on trust and respect. To Smith, when characteristics of collaborative settings exist, all students profit. Additionally, assessment procedures for children who are typically developing and children with special needs must continue to be developmentally appropriate.

Models of social acceptance provided by teachers, and their facilitative efforts to encourage social skill development, are essential for the important goal of inclusion to be achieved. Providing activities that engage children in cooperative learning, peer tutoring and teaching, gaining empathy for others, promoting respect for all children, and practicing pro-social skills have to be embedded in the classroom environment if inclusive practices are to be achieved. Teachers in both disciplines believe that all children, regardless of their disability, should have the opportunity to learn through a range of modalities. Also, they believe that if typical children have the opportunity to play and learn with children with disabilities during the early childhood years, social acceptance is valued and appreciated. This concept of a diverse society' includes and values all children, which in turn allows them the opportunity to learn at their highest potential. The realization of that concept will be in the hands of children who experience, play with, and learn with children in an inclusive environment.

Early childhood educators are in the best position to demonstrate that inclusion can be a successful venture. Given the models of Head Start, early intervention programs, and public and private preschool inclusion efforts, much is being learned about best teaching practices. It does appear that both early childhood educators and special educators have much to learn from each other but one can also conclude that they share common values, methodology, and perspective as to how all children may successfully achieve.

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Erken Çocukluk Eğitimi ve Özel Eğitim: "Kaynaştırma" için Ortak İlişkilerin Kurulup Geliştirilmesi

Özet

Özel eğitime gereksinim duyan çocukların normal gelişim gösteren akranları ile birlikte eğitim alması olarak tanımlanabilecek "Kaynaştırma (Inclusion) "kavramı, okulöncesi öğretmenler ile özel eğitim öğretmenleri arasında pozitif etkileşimlerin kurulup geliştirilmesini zorunlu kılmaktadır. Bu makale, ABD'de okulöncesi eğitimdeki kaynaştırma uygulamalarıyla ilişkili önemli konuları irdelemekte ve özel eğitim öğretmenleri ile normal okul öncesi eğitim öğretmenleri arasında nasıl olumlu etkileşimlerin kurulup destekleneceğine yönelik çözümler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Kaynaştırma, okul öncesi eğitim, okul Öncesi Özel eğitim