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Examining Quality Inclusive Practices in Early Childhood Education

Laura Wagner

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Laura Wagner

Northwestern College

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According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and

Rehabilitative Services, & Office of Special Education Programs (2015), it is estimated

that 740,000 children in the United States between the ages of 3-5 have an identified

disability that qualifies them to receive special education services. Around 66% of those

children are being served in an inclusive setting, where teachers teach students who have

a disability alongside students who are typically developing. Each of those 740,000

children deserves a high quality early childhood experience.

Many early childhood educators are now teaching in inclusive settings, teaching

students with mild, moderate, and severe disabilities in a classroom setting alongside

general education students. The problem for educators teaching in this setting is meeting

the needs of all their students. The range of needs in an inclusive classroom can be very

wide and teachers need support to implement quality inclusion. Teachers and educators

need the skills and knowledge about what constitutes quality inclusion and how it can be

successfully implemented. The purpose of this research study is to examine studies about

quality inclusive practices that fall under the categories of support, participation, and

access and explore how the quality of inclusion can be measured.

This literature review will focus on the characteristics and practices of quality

inclusion and how inclusion can be measured by focusing on the questions, "What are

important practices that foster high quality inclusion?" and "How can inclusion be

measured?" The peer-reviewed research included in this literature review was completed

in the last ten years and was found on the ProQuest ERIC database. This literature review

will begin by examining the research that explores the important practices of quality

inclusion and will look at how inclusion can be measured in the classroom, as well as

measurement tools that are emerging. It will conclude by recommending areas of future

research that will further inclusion in the early childhood setting.

Literature Review

To be able to accurately measure the quality of inclusion, there must be agreement

on the important practices of quality inclusion. The practices that promote quality

inclusion which are highlighted in this literature review will be classified under the

categories of access, participation, and support. These have been identified by the

Division for Early Childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young

Children as the defining features of high-quality inclusion in their 2009 statement:

> "Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that
>
> support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless
>
> of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members
>
> of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences
>
> for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of
>
> belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and
>
> development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of
>
> inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and
>
> services are access, participation, and supports." (DEC/NAEYC, 2009, p.2*).*

Supports

Supports in an inclusive setting refer to the infrastructure that exists to support the

inclusive practices taking place in the classroom. Supports that will be discussed further

in this literature review include teacher preparation, parent and teacher relationships, and

leadership in inclusive settings.

Research shows that teachers are a key factor in providing quality inclusion. A peer-reviewed mixed method study conducted by Bakkaloğlu, Sucuoğlu, and Yılmaz (2019) used the correlational screening model. The study included 47 classrooms in Turkey across 13 different inclusive settings. The researchers used the Inclusive Classroom Profile observational tool, interviews, survey questions, and rating scales. The results showed that teachers' positive attitudes about inclusion, adequate pre-service training, and their relationships with their students were the main predictors of quality of an inclusive preschool program. The results of this study highlight the importance of supporting teachers to gain knowledge and experience relating to inclusion. The researchers claim that educators' training should become a top priority in early childhood because it relates directly to the quality of inclusive classrooms (Bakkaloğlu, H., Sucuoğlu, N. B., & Yılmaz, B., 2019).

A mixed method study by researcher, Pelatti (2016) and her team aligns with the premise that a teacher's preservice training is a significant predictor of classroom quality. This study compared 85 publicly funded early childhood classrooms to 79 inclusive early childhood education classrooms using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System and detailed questionnaires. The research focused on the process quality, which is the quality of teacher-student interactions in the classroom. Process quality has been documented as having a direct effect on student achievement and can be broken down into the three subcategories of instructional support, emotional support and classroom organization. The data showed that in each subcategory of process quality, the lead teacher's highest postsecondary degree was a significant indicator of the quality observed in their

classroom. The researchers again showed that the teacher's education is a significant predictor of the process quality in their classroom.

Additionally, a study that aligns with the previous research study was completed by researchers Warren, Martinex, and Sortino (2016) using mixed methods to measure the success of an inclusive program and examined the stakeholder's perception of the indicators of a quality early childhood program. The study examined the progress of 46 children—18 students with disabilities and 28 students without disabilities—using the Brigance Diagnostic Inventory of Early Development II. The average growth by the students in the inclusive program exceeded the state-expected growth in each area measured, which is why researchers refer to the program as successful. Stakeholders of the program, including parents, teachers, classroom associates, administration, and district office staff and support personnel were included in focus groups and the conversations were recorded and coded. The quality indicators of the program that were identified and agreed upon by the stakeholders were hiring of highly qualified teachers who had previous experiences teaching general education and special education, involvement of staff in program development, ongoing monthly professional development, a continuous improvement model, and support from the district office. Their assessment of highly qualified teachers being a characteristic of their successful inclusion program is in line with other studies.

Some disagreement about whether early childhood educators are prepared to teach in an inclusive setting after their specific, prescribed pre-service training at a college or university A quantitative study conducted by Sucuoğlu, Bakkaloglu, Iscen Karasu, Demir, and Akalin (2014) measured the knowledge of best practices of inclusion

instruction of 169 preschool teachers in Turkey. This research study proved that the169
preschool teachers that participated in the Inclusion Knowledge Test, only answered an
average of 29.5% of the questions about inclusion. The one factor that dramatically
increased teachers' scores on the test were pre-service classes about special education
inclusion, which most teachers participating in the study did not have. This research
study confirmed that the type of classes that pre-service teachers take has an impact on
the quality of inclusion in the classroom.

An additional study supports that a teacher's pre-service training is important to
their knowledge and practice of inclusion. In a quantitative study conducted by Kwon,
Hong, and Jeon (2017) they collected data through interviews of ninety-one four and
five-year-olds and a survey from their teachers showed that a teacher's bachelor's degree
in early childhood education along with training specific to special education and
inclusion were positively associated with to the teacher's inclusive practices and their
attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. This is significant because requirements for pre-
service teachers differ from institution to institution. The data collected reveals that it is
imperative for teachers to have adequate coursework and experience, specifically related
to special education, to be ready and prepared to work with typically developing children
as well as children with disabilities in an inclusive setting (Kwon, K., Hong, S., & Jeon,
H., 2017).

Although studies show that pre-service training in special education is important
for quality inclusion practices, other studies show that teachers feel unprepared, even
with pre-service training. In a qualitative study completed by Walsh-Yusuf (2018), the

data collected by coding interviews of 72 teachers from the state of Georgia showed that most teachers do not perceive themselves as prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom.

Similarly, a qualitative study completed by Bryant (2018) supports the conclusion of Walsh-Yusuf s research. Bryant interviewed eight early childhood professionals who had at least a bachelor's degree in education. Seven out of the eight participants agreed that their pre-service training did not include enough education specific to teaching students with disabilities. The teachers agreed that training and professional development was important to do their job and meet the needs of all students.

Information that directly contradicts Bryant's study comes from research by Anderson, E. M., & Lindeman, K. W. (2018). This qualitative study exposed the perspectives of preschool teachers who teach in an inclusive setting. Fourteen early childhood educators from New York were surveyed and interviewed. Of the 14 early childhood educators, all of them self-reported that they were well prepared to meet student's needs and that they felt prepared to deal with challenging behaviors.

Although there are differences in the research about whether the currently prescribed pre-service training for educators adequately helps teachers feel prepared to teach in an inclusive setting, there is agreement that the teachers who have had courses or professional development around special education and students with disabilities deliver higher quality inclusive instruction than educators who do not. According to the research, quality inclusion includes a prepared teacher, specifically in special education.

Along with a prepared teacher research revealed that a positive relationship between the families and the teachers was another characteristic of a high-quality inclusive setting. When teachers and families create a healthy relationship to support their

child's development, the positive outcomes in an inclusive setting increase. The parent-teacher relationship shows up frequently in the literature about quality inclusive practices but studies that probe the relationship between parents of children with disabilities and teachers in inclusive settings are limited (Sucuoğlu, N. B., & Bakkaloğlu, H., 2018).

   A quantitative research study completed by Sucuoğlu and Bakkaloğlu (2016), examined the relationship between parents and the teacher that taught their child. The study interviewed 44 mothers and also the teacher who taught the mother's child. Twenty-two of the mothers interviewed had students with disabilities in the class and the other 22 mothers had children in the same classroom without disabilities. Both the teachers and the mothers rated their parent-teacher relationship on the Quality of Parent-Teacher Relationship Scale (QPTRS). Overall, the both the mothers and the teachers rated their parent-teacher relationship as moderate to high quality. The mothers who had children with disabilities viewed their relationship with the teacher less positively than the mothers of children without disabilities. The result of this study gives insight into the quality of family-teacher relationships for parents who have children with disabilities compared to parents of children without disabilities.

   Additional research reveals that leaders and administrators of inclusive settings contribute to the quality of inclusive practices provided in the classroom. Administrators oversee hiring, training, and evaluating teachers and support staff, as well as creating and maintaining the budget and shaping expectations for their staff (DeMatthews, Serafini, & Watson, 2021). A qualitative study that explored the influence of leadership on quality inclusion, conducted by DeMatthews, Serafini, and Watson (2021), focused on extensive interviews with six administrators who were credited by their school district as having

successfully created an inclusive school. Through coding of interviews, the

administrators were put into two categories that fostered success: improvement-focused

or intersectional-focused. To help foster an inclusive school, the leadership in the study

was either focused on improvement or relationships. This gives insight into the leadership

qualities needed to help foster high quality inclusive practices.

Access and Participation

According to the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) (2009) and the National

Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009) another feature of

quality inclusion is access. Access refers to the wide array of environments and activities

available to the students with and without disabilities and removing learning barriers for

students. Scheduling and placements for students in inclusive settings is an important

practice in giving each student access to high quality inclusion.

Providing engaging activities and learning environments is a critical component

of access. Engagement in an inclusive setting is crucial for all students to learn. A study

conducted by Coelho and Cadima (2019) examined which types of activities had higher

engagement in an inclusive setting. This quantitative study examined 184 preschoolers in

39 inclusive preschool settings and found that more time in a whole group instructional

setting was a negative predictor for engagement compared to more time in free play,

which is a positive predictor for child engagement. For students who had disabilities or

were identified as at-risk, more time in a whole group setting had a greater negative effect

on engagement than the same amount of time for a typically developing child. During the

researchers' observations, whole group activities accounted for 50% of the activities

happening in the classroom. Quality inclusion practices engage all students and their

classroom scheduling can reflect that.

Another factor in providing quality inclusive instruction through access is the

placement of students with disabilities. In some programs, the ratio of students with

disabilities in the classroom does not go over 50% to provide high quality instruction for

all. In a quantitative study completed by Rhoad-Drogalis and Justice (2020) examined

the association of the percentage of students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom to

the children's language knowledge, print concepts, and alphabet knowledge scores at the

end of the school year. The study included 516 preschoolers in 75 classrooms. The

proportion of special education students making up the composition of the class ranged

from 7% to 92%. The results showed that there was no association between the spring

achievement in the literature scores and the percentage of students in the early childhood

classroom with mild to moderate disabilities. This research proved that the ratio in a

classroom of students with disabilities to students without disabilities is not a factor to be

considered when considering high quality inclusion practices. Rhoad-Drogalis and Justice

(2020) discuss the implications of this study to mean that programs do not necessarily

have to cap the number of students in their inclusive programs to ensure academic

success. Rhoad-Drogalis and Justice (2020) do acknowledge the limits of this study,

being that only literacy scores were examined and not other areas of development. They

recommend that similar studies be conducted to see what the effects of the ratio of

students with disabilities are on other developmental areas.

Although placement is important, simply placing a student in an inclusive setting

doesn't secure access to inclusion in the classroom. A qualitative study completed by

Rietveld (2010) examined three students' with disabilities experiences in an inclusive

classroom. A year of observations revealed that due to the hidden nature of peer culture,

teachers were mistaking quality inclusion for the mere participation of students with

disabilities in their program instead of the quality of their participation. Put simply, being

in an inclusive setting does not guarantee quality inclusion. Rietveld (2010) stated in the

discussion of the data that the adults in this study were focused on just including the

student in the environment and didn't help to foster social peer relationships. As a result,

the students had experiences where others identified them as inferior or they were

excluded. One example listed in the study was when a classmate referred to a child with

disabilities as a baby because he had to use a different cup than the other children. When

the teacher talked about the incident, she said that was the peer's way of understanding

the different cup and they were pretty accepting of it. Rietveld (2010) gave suggestions of

teaching social norms and skills and not ignoring negative interactions, which can lead to

increased marginalizing of students with disabilities. The teaching of peer relationships

did not happen in the study and researchers claim that to be an important aspect in quality

inclusion.

Similarly, to the research done by Rietveld (2010), another study conducted by

DiGennaro, Dusek, and Quintero (2011) affirms the importance of social skills

instruction in a quality inclusive setting. The study used mixed methods to examine

behavior and friendship in an inclusive 3rd through 5th grade setting. Although the study

focused on students older than preschoolers, it confirms the importance of social skills

instruction in quality inclusive settings. In the study, it was found that 45.5% students

with disabilities were rated by their teachers as integrating socially with peers as opposed

to 83.3% of students without disabilities (DiGennaro, Dusek, & Quintero (2011).

Similarly, teacher-reported expectancies showed 58.3% of students with disabilities

adjusted to classroom routines compared to 100% of students without disabilities

(DiGennaro, Dusek, & Quintero (2011). Teaching social skills is important to help

students with disabilities participate in the norms of classroom expectations.

Measurement

While there is plenty of literature about the importance of inclusion in preschool

and legislation supporting it, it is surprising that there is very limited information about

the quality of early childhood inclusive practices in the United States (Soukakou, E. P.,

Winton, P. J., West, T. A., Sideris, J. H., & Rucker, L. M., 2014). In another study by

van Rhijn, T., Maich, K., Lero, D. S., & Irwin, S. H. (2019), they discussed the

importance of more research that focuses on the characteristics and contributors to quality

early childhood programs. This research will inform policy-makers and professionals

about the structural features that advance quality early childhood settings.

The few studies that have been completed have measured the overall program quality of

preschool programs and not focused specifically on the quality of the inclusive practices.

One study that fits into this category of overall program quality was published in

2014. The team of Jeon, Buettner and Hur (2014) studied over 90 classrooms and

compared the quality of classrooms that participated in QRIS (Quality Rating and

Improvement Systems) to classrooms that did not. They found that classrooms that

participated in the QRIS had higher scores on the global quality of the classroom along

with teacher emotional support, academic support, and literacy quality in the classroom.

Although the study tells us about the quality of the early childhood classroom, it doesn't

focus specifically on inclusive practices. It is feasible that students with disabilities may be in a setting that scores high on overall quality but they are not receiving high quality instruction that meets their individual needs.

A key reason there have not been many studies done specifically on the quality of inclusion in preschool classrooms is because there is not a widely used assessment that measures inclusion. The following studies presented research to support several measurement tools that aimed to fill the void of a measure of quality inclusion.

A measure developed by Soukakou and her team (2014) called the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP), "an observation measure designed to assess the quality of classroom practices in inclusive preschool programs" (Soukakou, E. P., Winton, P. J., West, T. A., Sideris, J. H., & Rucker, L. M., 2014, p. 223), was showcased in a study published in 2012. The quantitative study, which included 45 classrooms, shows that the ICP measures inclusive practices in the preschool classrooms with high validity and has a good factor structure. The tool uses 12 practices that are assessed through a 2-3 hour observation and a short teacher interview.

In another study conducted by Soukakou and her team (2014), tested and presented additional findings on the reliability and validity of the ICP. The measure was piloted in the United States by 51 inclusive classrooms in North Carolina. Soukakou, E. P., Winton, P. J., West, T. A., Sideris, J. H., & Rucker, L. M. state in their 2014 work: that the study shows similar findings to their first study in the United Kingdom, which showed evidence of "reliability, construct validity and factor structure of the measure." (p.233) The assessors who were trained to use the measure with provided researchers with the information about the usability of the ICP. Findings from the study also showed

that the users of the measure rated the ICP an average of four out of five for usability of

the assessment.

Soukakou and her team (2018) published another mixed method study that

explored the first use of the ICP as a professional development tool to increase the quality

of inclusive practices in the early childhood classroom. In the study, four early childhood

inclusion advisors administered the ICP in 21 inclusive settings and scheduled follow up

meetings to introduce the ICP and share feedback from it. On a five-point scale, where

five is the highest, the advisors rated the ICP an average of 4.2 on easy to use and an

average of 4.6 on providing important information related to inclusion quality. The

advisors scored the ICP an average of 4 on whether they would recommend the tool to

others for professional development. According to another study by Soukakou and her

team (2019), the assessment includes essential questions for teachers to ask and reflect on

in each of the 12 areas of inclusion assessed in the measure to encourage growth and

improvement. Soukakou (2019) notes that further research has to be done to examine

how a multi-component professional development program can be developed using the

ICP to support early childhood professionals.

Another assessment that has emerged due to the lack of measures to assess quality

inclusion in early childhood is the SpeciaLink Early Childhood Inclusion Quality Scale

(SECIQS). A quantitative study published in 2019 by van Rhijn, Maich, Lero, and Irwin

uses 588 early childhood programs across Canada and examines the use of the two

subscales: inclusion principles and inclusion practices. Their study shows that "factor

analyses supported the use of the SECIQS for assessing inclusion quality" (van Rhijn, T.,

Maich, K., Lero, D. S., & Irwin, S. H., 2019, p. 107). Both subscales in the assessment

related strongly to the director or administrator's rating of how the program is

administering quality inclusion, which is evidence of the construct validity of the

measure.

Conclusion

A study conducted by Barton and Smith (2015) surveyed 238 people who played

a role in an inclusive early childhood setting (teachers, paraprofessionals, service

providers, administrators, area education agency members) about the challenges to

inclusion in their preschool programs. Barton and Smith (2015) compared their answers

to a similar survey given more than 25 years ago, in 1993. From 1993 to 2014 the

challenges facing inclusion in the early childhood setting have primarily stayed the same

and include attitudes and beliefs, fiscal policies, non-public school policies, curriculum

differences, and personnel policies. Barton and Smith (2015) suggest in their discussion

of the survey results that the growth in inclusion practices has been sluggish. The

discussion of the results states that inclusion is not easy. To improve inclusion practices,

there must be research to inform and change practices. The most urgent areas that need

further research to help improve inclusion practices include broader studies examining

the ICP and the SECIQS as measures to assess inclusive practices. To improve a practice,

there must be a universal way to measure it.

Early childhood teachers face many challenges to meet the needs of all the

students in their classroom. In a joint statement by the DEC and NAEYC that outlines the

features of quality inclusion practices, the DEC and NAEYC stated that features of

quality inclusion are access, participation, and supports. This literature review has

examined some of the practices in access, participation, and supports that support high

quality inclusion, as well as some promising measures that can be used going forward to

assess the quality of inclusion practices.

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