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## The Benefit of Inclusion in Early Childhood Classrooms

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**The Benefit of Inclusion in Early Childhood Classrooms**

Taylor Webb

Northwestern College

A Literature Review Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

Dr. Theresa Pedersen

**Abstract**

The purpose of this literature review is to demonstrate the benefits of inclusion in preschool classrooms and encourage educators to embrace this practice. According to the experts, inclusion provides social and academic benefits along with learning what preservice teachers know about inclusion. The reviewed research suggests when inclusion is incorporated in preschool classroom settings, it benefits all children. The conclusion of this review includes recommendations of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood settings and how it can be used to make inclusive preschool classrooms a place for all students to learn and grow.

*Keywords: Inclusion, Early Childhood Special Education, Preschool, Disabilities, Inclusion in Preschool, Special Education*

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### **The Benefit of Inclusion in Early Childhood Classrooms**

The inclusion of children with a range of disabilities in regular educational settings has been a practice in the United States since the 1960s (Guralnick, M. J., & Bruder, M. B., 2016) and is also a worldwide trend. Industrialized and other developing countries have created policies and laws to promote inclusion. Several researchers have suggested the successful implementation of inclusive practices depends mainly on the willingness of educators (Rakap, et al., 2017). Although considerable progress has been achieved regarding the research and laws supporting preschool inclusion, access to inclusive preschool environments remains intangible for many children with disabilities in the United States (Barton, E. E., & Smith, B. J., 2015). Inclusion in preschool classrooms has been a growing need as more and more young children under the age of five are being diagnosed with disabilities. Creating inclusion classrooms with a highly qualified early childhood special educator is crucial to providing high-quality education to children with special needs. According to Sucuoğlu, et al., “Successful inclusion in preschool education requires teachers to modify the instructional setting, use effective instructional methods and strategies, adapt instruction, and provide equal learning opportunities for all children” (2014).

The problem is many educators and parents do not understand the benefits of including children with special needs in preschool classrooms. Since preschool is one of the very first school experiences for all children, including children with special needs in classrooms is beneficial to all children. Explaining the benefits as to why preschool classrooms should be inclusive will help bring better awareness to families and other educators in early childhood (Justice, L. M., 2020). Many young children diagnosed with disabilities before the age of three will begin to receive special education services called early intervention. When children become

three years old, Part B services provide them with special education school based services ensure they benefit from their educational programs (Podvey, M. C., et al., 2013). Early intervention services look different than services in general education preschool. This difference can be confusing to families and educators. It is important to emphasize the importance of inclusion to families. Families of children with special needs want their child to be successful in their preschool setting. Having access to inclusive classrooms is vital in the early success of the youngest children. Preschool inclusion requires broad scale efforts and changes across multiple facets of an already complicated EC landscape (Barton, E. E., & Smith, B. J., 2015). There is a gap in the practice of early childhood education as the model of inclusion varies across the world.

The purpose of this literature review is to highlight the benefits of inclusive preschool classrooms using research. The inclusion of children with special needs into regular education classrooms has been a practice in education now for many years. The rise of inclusion has been boosted by its documented benefits whereby students with special needs in inclusive classrooms are better able to learn, make more progress in academic skills, and develop adaptive behavior when compared with students educated in special schools (Lee, et al., 2015). The research aimed to answer two questions; What are the social and academic benefits of inclusion in preschool classrooms? Do preservice and general education preschool teachers have the appropriate knowledge about inclusion?

Research for this literature review was found using databases in DeWitt Library online sources such as ERIC and Gale Academic OneFile. Articles were found using search terms such as 'inclusion', 'early childhood special education', 'preschool', 'special education', and 'inclusion in preschool'. The studies reviewed ranged in publication years from 2012 through

2021. This literature review goes in-depth on areas found within the research such as: what is inclusion, the social and academic benefits of inclusion, preschool teachers' thoughts and knowledge on inclusion, and how inclusion should be in all preschool classrooms. Unfolding these areas will help educators and preservice teachers to understand how this classroom model will create a better learning environment for all. A high-quality inclusive classroom with higher ratios of more competent peers, in particular, is related to positive outcomes for children with disabilities (Barton, E. E., & Smith, B. J., 2015).

## **Review of the Literature**

### **What is Inclusion?**

Inclusion has been a widely discussed topic in the field of early childhood education since the early 1960s. The first government funding supporting this practice was through the Handicapped Children's Early Education Act (HCEEP) of 1968 (Guralnick, M. J., & Bruder, M. B., 2016). This Act provided grants to develop and model intervention programs for infants and young children with disabilities. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), federal early childhood programs have encouraged educational services for preschool children with disabilities to be delivered in general education classrooms (Barton, E. E., & Smith, B. J., 2015). Inclusive education refers to the placement of children with disabilities in age-appropriate general education classrooms alongside their typically developing peers. The Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) define preschool inclusion by access, participation, and supports. In the study by Guralnick & Bruder (2016), 700 projects were funded over 30 years to research programs demonstrated the effectiveness of teaching young children with disabilities in programs with young children without disabilities. The program had four main research goals related to inclusion: access, accommodations and feasibility; developmental progress; and social integration. According to the research, access to inclusive programs and classrooms remains challenging with the four goals. The rapid growth in early childhood has caused inclusion rooms to vary across the United States. This issue is of importance because early childhood inclusion is integral to quality early childhood programs and classrooms.

Research support for preschool inclusion has been increasing. According to the U.S. Department of Education, across all states, fewer than half (approximately 42.5%) of children with disabilities, aged 3-to-5 years-old, received their special education and the related services



in a regular EC classroom (Barton, E. E., & Smith, B. J., 2015). The work used a qualitative survey to identify and describe challenges to preschool inclusion in their program, community, and state to suggest solutions. This survey was administered to 238 people of various roles including school district special education coordinators, child find coordinators, district special education directors, and state Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) coordinators. The results of the research revealed it is time to collaborate across systems, districts, and states to enact preschool inclusion to promote the success of all children. The sluggish growth rate of preschool inclusion highlighted in the research and supported by their survey suggests school districts need more support to change these attitudes and beliefs and implement high-quality preschool inclusion (Barton, E. E., & Smith, B. J., 2015). These findings were compared to previous survey results were conducted more than 20 years ago and found the challenges and solutions changed very little. In other words, there is still more than can be done to support and implement high-quality inclusion in early childhood.

Inclusive preschool consists of more than the physical placement of children; it includes full classroom participation, development of relationships with peers, and provision of specialized learning opportunities for children with disabilities (Justice, L. M., 2020). In 2014, 66% of preschool-aged children with disabilities attended inclusive classrooms for part or all of their school day. Many advocates of inclusive practices support state-specific benefits derived from educating children with and without disabilities alongside one another. A mixed-methods study conducted by Justice (2020) aimed to answer two questions: first, whether the percentage of children with mild/moderate disabilities in inclusive early childhood classrooms associated with the language and literacy achievement of children with and without disabilities, was controlled for peer abilities; and second, whether the relationship between the percentage of

children with disabilities and children's achievement vary based on children's disability status. In Justice's study, 516 preschool children in 75 classrooms were administered language and literacy assessments in the fall and spring. The study found the percentage of children with disabilities was not related to children's spring achievement for three outcomes: language, print-concept knowledge, and alphabet knowledge. "These results suggest including more children with mild/moderate disabilities in early childhood preschool classes was not detrimental to children's learning in these skills areas. Importantly, these effects were observed in the context of important covariates, including peer skills levels, thus can be considered as distinct from peer effects operate in preschool settings" (Justice, L. M., 2020, p.92). Interestingly, Justice (2020) also found of the 26 studies included in this review, 23% of the studies found positive effects of inclusion, whereas 58% reported neutral effects and 9% reported negative effects of inclusion. Some of the negative effects highlighted were standards may be lowered in the classroom to accommodate those children with disabilities and typically developing peers may act out to get the attention of the adults. However, while the effect of inclusion may be mixed, high-quality inclusive preschool settings shared better outcomes for all children.

Providing interventions and supports for young children with disabilities is widely accepted. The study by Blackmore et al. (2016) examined the perspectives of parents who enrolled their child with a disability in a mainstream early childhood setting. Fifteen families whose children were attending a mainstream setting for at least six months were recruited to participate in the qualitative interviews. According to the research, four key findings emerged: 1) parents are primarily motivated to enroll their children in mainstream early childhood services because they seek social interactions for their children with typically developing peers; 2) despite increasing support at the policy level for inclusive early childhood education, families

encountered many challenges in securing a place for their child at a center was willing and able to meet their child's needs; 3) parents felt their child's development was supported by attendance at a mainstream center, particularly in relation to communication and behavior; and 4) parents believed positive developmental change in their child was the direct result of service quality and imitation through peer interaction (Blackmore, R., et al., 2016). Parents want high-quality early childhood programs will improve their child's development along with early childhood educators who help support parents in every aspect they need.

In early childhood special education, there are two separate programs to meet the needs of young children with special needs: early intervention services and school-based early childhood special education services. According to Podvey, et al., (2013) "early intervention provides for a home-based, family-centered program. Special education provides for center-based programs are concerned with children's educational abilities" (p. 211). A qualitative study by Podvey, et al., (2013) sought to discover families' experiences when receiving related services and how these services affect the shift from a family-centered to an educational program. Six families were interviewed throughout the transition with their children from early intervention services to school-based services. The results of the research revealed families cannot maintain the level of involvement they could experience in early intervention once their child has entered preschool special education. In other words, families need to be more involved and can be once the transition occurs from early intervention to school-based early childhood special education instruction.

Early intervention (EI) and early childhood special education (ECSE) services provide young children with delays or disabilities with high-quality educational and societal opportunities. These services can increase children's cognitive, behavioral, and physical

capabilities by mitigating the effects of their delays or disabilities (Morgan, P.L., et al., 2012). However, some groups of children may be disproportionately represented in these services. In the study by Morgan et al. (2012), a large sample of children aged 48 months participated in the mixed methods approach in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study- Birth Cohort. This study aimed to answer three questions: 1) to what extent are children who are minorities at greater risk for low levels of numeracy and receptive language knowledge; 2) are children who are minorities disproportionately represented in EI/ECSE generally, and if so, are they over-or under-represented; and 3) do professionals disproportionately diagnose children who are minorities as having communication, attention, or learning delays or disorders? According to the findings, by 48 months, minority children are disproportionately under-represented in EI/ECSE. Under-representation was evident both before and after statistical control for a wide range of potentially confounding factors (e.g., gender; SES; low birth weight; relative numeracy; and receptive language knowledge; and frequency of problem behavior).

Similar findings on minorities in early childhood special education were done in a study by Harvey & Wennerstrom (2021). The goal of the study was to advance equity in early childhood education as society faces issues of inequalities in education (Harvey, H., & Wennerstrom, E. K., 2021). Using a mixed-methods approach, the study explored the following research questions: 1) for parents of DLLs, what are their perceptions about their experience with a preschool evaluation for special education services; and 2) how are their cultural and linguistic backgrounds represented in the evaluation process? The findings from this study revealed three main themes: (a) relationships and interactions, (b) home language and cultural context, and (c) evaluation process. Parents who felt heard and valued by professionals reported feeling positive about their experience. Early childhood practitioners should honor and recognize the family's

perspectives, values, abilities, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds as the diversity within early intervention and early childhood special education continue to grow.

### **The Social and Academic Benefits**

Inclusion has numerous social and academic benefits for all children. In inclusive settings, “[c]hildren with disabilities can practice and improve their social/affective, communication, and gross motor skills via rich social experiences, observational learning processes, and interaction opportunities within daily activity contexts” (Zakai-Mashiach, M., et al., 2021, p. 13). Having children with disabilities surrounded by others who have high-level skills is beneficial for peer acceptance and engagement. Inclusion has benefitted all children with disabilities, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The study by Zakai-Mashiach, et al. (2021), aimed to expand theoretical and empirical knowledge on ecological and fit variables can enrich the social inclusion of children with ASD in regular preschool settings. Their mixed-methods study included 193 typically developing preschoolers in 16 regular public preschool classes with one child with ASD in each class. The study was conducted in Central Israel. The study aimed to answer two questions: 1) what endogenous variables characterizing the social behavior of typically developing children in the preschool class (Theory of Mind abilities, social profile, and social status) may contribute to their natural social interest toward the included child with ASD; and 2) what exogenous factors characterizing the preschool environment (teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion and the areas of inclusion support needed for the specific child with ASD) may contribute to the natural social interest of typically developing children toward the included child with ASD? The results indicated significant contributions of three variables: (a) typically developing children’s prosocial behaviors, (b) teachers’ attitudes about their training regarding inclusion, and (c) areas

of inclusion support needed by the specific child with ASD (Zakai-Mashiach, M., et al., 2021). These findings demonstrate the possible interactions among children with ASD and their typically developing peers happen within the classroom, but may require support. The study by Zakai-Mashiach et al. will help gear future inventions and educational practices for students with ASD and other disabilities in the preschool classroom.

In preschool, young children have multiple opportunities throughout the day to interact with one another through play and conversations. A similar study by Justice, et al. (2014) aimed to determine whether peer effects operate within early childhood special education (ECSE) classrooms in which preschoolers with disabilities are educated alongside typical peers. The qualitative study addressed two questions; 1) to what extent are peer effects observed in inclusive ECSE classrooms; and 2) if such peer effects do occur, are they observed for both children with disabilities and typically developing children? Using a sample of 670 preschoolers in 83 ECSE classrooms had 55% of children with disabilities, Justice, (2021) found peer effects are found in ECSE settings; children's spring language scores were significantly related to the language skills of their classmates and among children whose classmates have relatively low language skills; and children with disabilities are more likely to be influenced by the skills of their peers than are those children without disabilities. In other words, the social and academic skills of children in ECSE classrooms with typically developing peers benefit from these interactions.

Increasing social skills and peer acceptance in early childhood classrooms helps all children achieve. Syrjamaki, et al. (2019) found, “[p]eer interaction and play are considered fundamental aspects of full participation. Free-flowing, child-initiated play is a typical context for peer interaction, and shared activity and imagination in play promote cognitive development as well as social development. By playing with peers, children share their routines and their

values and experiences” (p. 560). The study by Syrjamaki, et al. (2019), examined three questions: 1) what kinds of social initiatives did children make in guided play activities; 2) how did the ECSE professionals respond to the children’s initiatives; and 3) what consequences followed from the chains of initiatives and responses? According to the findings, these main initiative categories were found – nonverbal, verbal, unnoticed, and ignored. One hundred ninety-seven initiatives were taken by children with special education needs, while 98 were taken by their typically developing peers. Among the initiatives taken by the former, 38% were nonverbal. Additionally, 9% of nonverbal and verbal initiatives remained unnoticed and 5.4% were ignored by the ECSE professionals (Syrjamaki, M., et al., 2019, p. 563). Surprisingly, the majority of the interactions from children with special needs were done verbally. The study by Syrjamaki et al. supports the proposition using an inclusive classroom can benefit social interactions not only for children with special needs but for typically developing peers as well.

One of the best ways to build social and academic skills in any early childhood setting is through play. Play is an essential step in a young child’s development as it helps build social experiences will impact their development. Children with disabilities may not have the foundational skills required to participate in the peer-based play activities are essential to more advanced social development (Jamison, K. R., et al., 2012). Teaching social skills helps to develop a foundation on which appropriate social behaviors develop. In preschool classrooms, there are many strategies increase social skills, such as social competence, hierarchical play, and individual adaptations. These strategies become tools a teacher can use to increase the social skill development of children with and without disabilities. According to Jamison, et al. “These small changes can lead to changes in social competence may last a lifetime” (p. 15).

However, with the goal of all preschools to be inclusive, some are non-inclusive due to the extreme needs of some young children. For those students. Play-based learning is often skill-based with a focus on therapeutic intervention, rather than exploration and discovery (Fallon, J., & MacCobb, S, 2013). A study completed in Ireland by Fallon & MacCobb (2013) used research to establish what free play if any, children with learning disabilities engage in when not supported by adults in a preschool setting. The study used five children with global developmental delays between the ages of three and six years old. The results of the research revealed “[f]ive children with learning disabilities engaged in both play and non-play behaviors when they had no adult support. Three children spent more time engaged in non-play behavior. When playing, children were found to engage in sensory-motor play” (Fallon, J., & MacCobb, S, 2013, p. 218). In other words, support from adults is not always necessary to facilitate play between children with disabilities, but may be necessary to initiate interactions between students.

An important social skill learned typically in the preschool years is turn-taking. This critical skill is essential for early childhood development and for building social relationships. A study by Stanton-Chapman et al. (2012) evaluated the turn-taking skills of children with and without disabilities who participated in a social communication intervention targeting peer-directed initiations and responses. The quantitative study consisted of eight children in one preschool classroom. Results from this study showed all eight participants demonstrating increases in initiations with immediate peer response, including the children without Individual Education Program (IEPs). These findings may also strengthen the call for directing more focused efforts toward promoting social communication skills by early childhood professionals because initiations and responses are skills needed for school success (Stanton-Chapman, T. L.,



et al., 2012, p. 88). Simply put, engaging young children in a variety of social situations will allow them to participate and understand appropriate social skills.

Interactions between peers with and without disabilities are important for a young child's social and cognitive development. There has been a longstanding emphasis in early childhood programming to provide children with disabilities with the opportunity to interact with typically developing peers within the context of ECSE inclusive classrooms (Chen, J., et al., 2019). These interactions amongst peers may not always be positive, but do create teaching moments as they occur. The study by Chen et al. (2019) aimed to illustrate the social networks experienced by both children with disabilities and their typically developing peers in these inclusive classrooms. Four hundred eighty-five preschoolers from 64 ECSE inclusive classrooms were studied using a mixed-methods approach. The findings of this research revealed “[c]hildren with disabilities were less likely to interact with peers in their play networks compared to typically developing children, but no difference was found between children with and without disabilities in terms of their conflict networks” (Chen, J. et al., 2019, p. 2787). Children were also 1.51 times more likely to play with peers who shared the same disability status. These findings seem to indicate children with disabilities are more likely to play and interact with other children who have disabilities. While the goal is always to encourage those with disabilities to interact with those without, it can be challenging at times, especially with more severe disabilities.

Many young children with significant disabilities may require additional resources to interact with their peers in a social aspect. Little is known about how the use of augmentative and alternate communication (AAC) in preschool may impact language development for children with complex communication needs (Barker, R. M., et al, 2013). Preschool children who experience significant communication delays along with disabilities struggle to communicate

effectively with family, teachers, and peers. In the study by Barker et al. (2013), 71 children with developmental delays were evaluated using two surveys to investigate the relationship between a child's reported experience of AAC and a child's receptive and expressive language in two years. The results demonstrated the peer's use of the AAC system, when interacting with the child, was associated with gains in overall language skills, particularly comprehension. These results suggest the importance of peer interaction with other children who use the AAC system to communicate. Teaching young children the importance of allowing users of AAC systems to communicate with adults and peers is another way social acceptance and interactions are taught. These skills will be beneficial throughout their life.

### **Preschool Teachers' Thoughts and Knowledge on Inclusion**

Preschool teachers often have limited knowledge or experience with inclusion. With the push for inclusive early childhood classrooms, many teachers support the idea but lack skills to adapt the curriculum. The lack of skills can lead to negative attitudes and frustration by teachers. "Early childhood teacher preparation programs strive to develop teachers with knowledge, skills, and dispositions to meet the needs of the young children in today's classrooms" (Atiles, J. T., et al., 2012, p. 62). While the goal is to prepare teachers to the best of their ability, experiencing an inclusion classroom firsthand provides teachers with the opportunity to learn new skills as they teach.

The study by Anderson & Lindeman (2017), used research to shed light on the perspective of inclusion classroom teachers. Their qualitative study had two purposes: 1) to examine the perspectives of general education and special education teachers working in inclusive prekindergarten settings in the U.S. on recently adopted early learning standards and accountability reforms; and 2) to explore what general education and special education teachers

perceive as some of the benefits and challenges of today's inclusive prekindergarten classrooms in the U.S. The results revealed four themes: 1) teachers in inclusive prekindergarten settings value collaboration; 2) teachers believe all children can benefit from an inclusive prekindergarten setting; 3) teachers note significant challenges in today's inclusive prekindergarten settings; and 4) teachers need additional resources to realize the benefits of today's inclusive prekindergarten settings (Anderson, E. M., & Lindeman, K. W., 2017). According to Anderson & Lindeman (2017), "Findings from this study also suggest even when teachers feel well-prepared, have a positive outlook about inclusion, and are eager to work collaboratively, they can face significant challenges to creating quality learning experiences for all children" (p. 138). The study by Anderson & Lindeman shows even though preschool teachers feel prepared and have a positive outlook on the idea of inclusive preschool classrooms, the challenges they face to make learning a high-quality experience for all still exists.

With the rise of inclusion in preschool classrooms, the attitudes and outlooks by teachers can vary. "Inclusive education is likely to be unsuccessful when teachers do not hold positive attitudes toward inclusion" (Lee, F. L. M., et al., 2015, p. 80). The study by Lee et al. (2015) used quantitative data to research three questions: 1) what are the attitudes of the preschool teachers regarding the inclusion of children with special needs in regular classrooms, and does this vary depending on the nature of the child's special need; 2) how does teachers' acceptance of inclusion relate to their knowledge of special needs and their experience teaching children with special needs, and do these relationships vary depending on the nature of the child's special need; and 3) do teachers' training and professional roles matter when it comes to teacher attitudes of inclusion? This research was conducted in Hong Kong as one of the few countries in the Asia Pacific region to promote inclusion in preschool classrooms. The data collected from a

survey of 489 principals and teachers in regular education organizations revealed teachers reported more acceptance of children with specific learning difficulties, speech and language difficulties, or children who were gifted and talented, with approximately 70% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with their inclusion into regular classrooms. Children with other types of special needs, however, did not attract the support of teachers to be included into regular classrooms. Children with visual impairments obtained the least support, with only 39.1% of teachers either agreeing or strongly agreeing to accept them into their regular classroom. The same survey also showed because of the low correlations among the three aspects of inclusion (knowledge, experience, and acceptance), it is unlikely for any strong prediction of either knowledge or experience on the acceptance of inclusion to operate in any of the areas of special needs. Additionally, the same survey demonstrated being trained in special education was associated with a higher acceptance of inclusion, irrespective of their professional roles in school (Lee, F. L. M., et al., 2015). These findings seem to indicate teachers do, in fact, accept the practice of inclusion but due to the lack of understanding and background of certain disabilities, many teachers still are not comfortable with inclusive classrooms.

Understanding what preschool teachers know about inclusion is an important aspect of a highly-qualified inclusive classroom. A study by Sucuoğlu et al. (2014) developed a knowledge test to assess the knowledge levels of preschool teachers and their experience with students who have special needs in their classrooms. The test also measured age, undergraduate experience, and special education coursework in preservice education. The study looked at 169 preschool teachers in Turkey. The findings showed the preschool teachers have very limited knowledge of inclusive practices, and their Inclusion Knowledge Test (IKT) scores did not change according to their experience or whether or not they had children with disabilities in their classroom.

However, there was a significant difference between the IKT scores of the teachers who did and did not have a special education course during their preservice training (Sucuoğlu B., et al., 2014). While having a background in special education coursework did have an effect on the knowledge of some teachers, there is still a lack of consistent preservice education with all teachers. This inconsistency leads to a negative attitude by preschool teachers when students with disabilities are included in their classrooms as they do not feel comfortable or have the appropriate knowledge to provide a high-quality learning experience.

Inclusion classrooms have children with and without special needs in them. A study by Demirkaya & Bakkaloğlu (2015) examined the student- teacher relationships in a preschool classroom in Turkey. The study gathered research from 40 preschool teachers with 54 students with and 54 students without special needs (SN). “The first finding of this study shows students with SN have more conflict but less closeness with their teachers than their peers without SN” (Demirkaya, P. N., & Bakkaloğlu, H., 2015, p.168). The student-teacher relationships of students in the two groups were compared using the Mann-Whitney U test, and the variables predicting student-teacher relationships were analyzed using stepwise regression. The study showed social skills predicted closeness with teachers, conflictual student-teacher relationships were predicted by problem behaviors, and dependent student-teacher relationships were predicted by teacher experience and classroom size (Demirkaya, P. N., & Bakkaloğlu, H., 2015). In other words, the study found teachers appeared to be closer with students without special needs compared to those with special needs.

A similar study examined the attitudes of teachers of the inclusion of preschool children with autism in Sweden. “Although the majority of Swedish children in need of special support are included in mainstream preschools, the challenge for teachers is actually to integrate these

children into the everyday activities, relationships, and routines of the preschool” (Engstrand, R. Z., & Roll-Pettersson, L., 2014, p. 170). A study by Engstrand & Roll-Pettersson (2014), aimed to answer three questions regarding teacher attitudes towards inclusion: 1) attitudes towards the inclusion of children with autism and demographic variables, such as years of teaching experience and educational background; 2) perceived efficacy, years of teaching experience, and educational background; and 3) perceived efficacy and attitudes towards the inclusion of children with autism. The quantitative study gathered information from 21 preschool teachers who held Bachelor’s or a Master’s degree and worked with children with autism. The findings revealed preschool teachers held positive attitudes towards children with autism, and this was significantly related to the number of credits in special education taken during preservice education. However, teachers showed neutral attitudes towards the inclusion of children with autism into general preschool classrooms. No relation was found between teachers’ perceived self-efficacy and attitudes towards inclusion, although a relationship was found between participation in in-service training and efficacy to make decisions. The study discussed the implications concerning early childhood education professional development and supervision (Engstrand, R. Z., & Roll-Pettersson, L., 2014). Preschool teachers who took special education courses during preservice training or had higher education levels in special education tended to view inclusion more positively than those have less education. The need for preschool teachers to have more training in special education would truly benefit the perspective on the importance of inclusion.

Regardless of the training some preschool teachers may have, an important piece to making inclusion successful is the way teachers interact and engage with all students. “The level of engagement of children with disabilities has been found to be lower than of their typically

developing peers in inclusive settings” (Andre, A., et al., 2019, p. 166). A study in a French preschool by Andre et al. (2019) examined how the interactions between the engagement of a child with ASD and the participation of the adult unfold over the course of a school year in two activities at preschool (free play and activities are adult led). The results of the preliminary exploration revealed the typical interactions developed differently over time. Indeed, during activities were adult led, observation behaviors with the passive participation of the adult intensified. Moreover, active engagement behaviors, without and with adult participation, meaningfully increased during free play (Andre, A., et al., 2019). Adult interaction and engagement with young children with disabilities is important. Especially with children with autism, providing experiences to facilitate social engagement is beneficial. When adults plan meaningful interactions, the success of the child will be greater and allow them to apply the skills on their own.

Successful implementation of inclusive practices depends mainly on teachers’ attitudes towards children with special needs and their inclusion, and teachers’ willingness to work with children with special needs in their classrooms (Rakap, S., et al., 2017). The importance of future teachers developing a positive attitude towards inclusion and children with disabilities is crucial during the preservice part of their career. The study by Rakap, et al. (2017) aimed to answer four questions: 1) in what ways does participation in two special education courses impact preschool teacher candidates’ general attitudes towards inclusion of young children with disabilities; 2) in what ways does participation in two special education courses impact preschool teacher candidates’ attitudes towards inclusion of young children with severe disabilities; 3) in what ways does participation in two special education courses impact preschool teacher candidates’ level of comfort when interacting with young children with disabilities; and 4) in what ways does

prior experience with individuals with disabilities impact the relationships between participation in two special education courses and preschool teacher candidates' (a) attitudes towards inclusion, (b) willingness to work with children with severe disabilities and (c) comfort level when interacting with young children with disabilities? Thirty-one teacher candidates who were enrolled in an early childhood teacher education program at a university participated in the study, which used using a mixed-methods approach. The findings demonstrated both special education courses positively influenced teacher candidates' attitudes, willingness, and comfort levels. However, the impact of the second course focused on helping teacher candidates learn and apply instructional strategies to work with children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms was much larger (Rakap, S., et al., 2017). Preservice preschool teachers held positive attitudes towards the inclusion of young children with special needs before they took any special education courses. While some teacher candidates initially showed some discomfort, the more experience they had, the greater their comfort level. In other words, with more firsthand experience and background knowledge, the more likely a preschool teacher will support the idea of inclusion in early childhood classrooms.

Preservice teachers are the future of education. The goal should be to prepare them to their best ability so they can be successful in a classroom. With regards to children with disabilities, the amount of field placements take place in a preservice education can correlate to the increased efficacy of a preservice teacher. A study by Atilas et al. (2012) examined whether preservice teachers' sense of efficacy in addressing the needs of children with developmental delays or disabilities would increase as they spend more time in inclusive classroom settings. The quantitative study at a Midwestern university included 165 undergraduate students enrolled in teacher education classes. The results "showed a significant positive correlation between



preservice teachers' efficacy of working with children with developmental delays or disabilities and their inclusive field experiences" (Atiles, J. T., et al., 2012, p. 62). These findings indicate a need for preservice programs to spend time in inclusive classrooms so the candidate can develop a positive correlation with children with disabilities. The time spent in these classrooms will provide a greater experience and prepare future teachers to be successful implementing appropriate practices for all children.

### **How Inclusion Should be in all Preschool Classrooms**

Enrolling a young child into preschool is the first step in their school experience. While there are a variety of preschool programs from private, state funded, Head Start, and daycare options; only a select few will accept or be willing to take on a child with a disability. "High-quality preschool programs should enhance the early learning experiences for all young children, including those from low-income households and those with disabilities, and develop the knowledge and skills necessary for academic success when they enter formal school environments" (Pelatti, C. Y., et al., 2016, p. 830). Including children with disabilities should be an option in all preschool settings, but it is not always the case. Private programs can be selective about who they want to serve. Other programs may not be equipped to fully accept a child with special needs or have teachers who are licensed in special education. The goal is to always include children with disabilities into all settings, but such a setting may not be accessible for all.

The study by Pelatti, et al. (2016) compared the quality of two types of preschool classrooms; publicly funded Early Childhood Education (ECE) and inclusive ECE. The research aimed: 1) to characterize and to determine differences with regard to process and structural quality in publicly funded ECE and inclusive ECE classrooms; and 2) to examine whether and to what extent the process quality varied when controlling for structural quality and classroom

income/race variables. The research examined 164 classrooms (85 ECE and 79 Inclusive ECE) in the Midwest. According to the findings: 1) similar trends in the descriptive findings for process and structural quality in publicly funded ECE and inclusive ECE; 2) significant differences in specific areas of process quality in publicly funded ECE and inclusive ECE; and 3) the predictors of process quality (Pelatti, C. Y., et al., 2016). While the study found similarities and differences in both programs, the need for inclusive ECE programs is essential for children with disabilities. High-quality programs will help the child to develop essential knowledge and skills for later success.

Parents of young children select which preschool their child will attend. While the choices may be limited due to income or disability, the quality of the program should be prioritized. The study by Glenn-Applegate et al. 2016 was conducted to understand what caregivers, and caregivers of children with special needs in particular, consider when selecting a preschool. The research aimed to answer four questions: 1) what preschool selection factors are considered by caregivers who enroll their children in early childhood special education preschools; 2) to what extent do caregivers who enroll their children in special education preschools prioritize structural, process, and familial quality among their preschool selection factors; 3) among caregivers who enroll their children in early childhood special education preschools, to what extent do caregiver characteristics relate to their preschool selection factors; and 4) to what extent do caregivers' preschool selection factors relate to the quality of their children's early childhood special education preschool, when controlling for caregiver characteristics? The qualitative results from questionnaires and assessments revealed caregivers prioritized interpersonal teacher characteristics and safety when selecting preschools. Caregivers' felt process elements of quality were more important than structural or familial elements of

quality. Caregivers whose child had a disability were more likely to prioritize structural elements of quality than caregivers whose child did not have a disability. No relationship was found between caregivers' preschool selection factors and the quality of the classrooms in which their children were enrolled (Glenn-Applegate, K., et al., 2016, p. 123-124). When selecting a preschool, there are many factors drive a parent's decision, especially for those who have a child with a disability. A more inclusive approach to program quality will help make preschools better for families and the children they serve.

Engaging children at such a young age through playful activities is important for their development and may be important for prejudice-reduction interventions (Birtel Michèle, D., et al., 2019). With young children not having control of their environment and who is part of it, Birtel Michèle et al. (2019) completed three studies in Italy to examine how prejudice is perceived by young children, especially with disabled and black children. The aim of the first study was to test whether modifying the imagined contact paradigm by including an interesting and engaging task for young children (drawing a picture) can be employed to stimulate mental imagery and reduce prejudice. The aim of the second study was to replicate and extend the findings obtained in the first study. In order to do so, the researchers introduced two main differences. The aim of the third study was to replicate and extend findings obtained in Studies 1 and 2. Results revealed preschoolers in the experimental condition, relative to a control group, reported less intergroup bias in the form of contact intentions and resource allocation as well as greater behavioral inclusiveness; effects were mediated by improved intergroup attitudes. The present three experiments consistently suggest imagined contact can promote more positive inter--group relations in terms of more positive outgroup attitudes, and greater willingness to engage in contact with the outgroup (Birtel Michèle, D., et al., 2019, p.1067). This technique of

imagined contact has been shown to be effective in reducing prejudice in 4-to-6 year-olds.

Young children from an early age can learn about ways to reduce prejudice within their preschool room and learn how to be accepting of all children including those with disabilities.

Inclusive preschool classrooms can be truly inclusive where all special education services are brought into the classroom or the child can be removed from the classroom to receive some of their services. When children with disabilities are included in the general education preschool classroom, they are able to participate in the same activities as their typically developing peers. Preschool students with disabilities engage in social interaction with peers less often than children developing typically in inclusive classrooms (Erin, M. C., 2012). Erin's qualitative case study aimed to look at theories of literacy and how the inherent structure of special education and those promoted by scholars interest emergent literacy and the impact upon inclusive classroom settings. While the research only focused on one child, the results revealed the child forged relationships with his classmates through bookmaking and how the goals of both his IEP and team were met in this instructional approach to inclusion. Hence, the data for this article come from the categories detail sections of the bookmaking groups in which his IEP goals were addressed and instances where the goals of the special education team were addressed (Erin, M. C., 2012). An inclusive setting integrates the IEP goals of a child with disabilities into daily activities will increase the social interaction with peers and other adults. This natural way of integrating their special education services into the regular education part of their school day will maximize their learning and facilitate their development.

When gathering information for a child's IEP, there are many documents and procedures to make a plan truly individualized for the child. The documents include the child's strengths, current achievement levels, challenges, interests, and parent concerns. The study by Alasuutari &

Vehkakoski (2019) gathered research on Finnish classrooms to answer two questions: 1) what kinds of patterns of describing support measures can be identified from the sequential pedagogical Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) documents of children with Special Education Needs (SEN) over the years; and 2) what kinds of content-related and linguistic features are peculiar to the different patterns of describing this support? The mixed-methods analysis of the data revealed four patterns of either disjointed or interlinked descriptions of support in sequential pedagogical documents: missing, repetitious, disorganized, and explicit. The findings show, with the exception of the last pattern (explicit), the development, justification, and validation of the support measures systematically over time were lacking in 87% of the cases, and the descriptions of support were imprecise, incoherent, or nonexistent. However, when support was carefully revisited, further defined, and/or regenerated, and its efficacy was assessed in sequential recordings, as was done in the last pattern of explicit descriptions, the child's documents exhibited coherent continuity (Alasuutari, M., & Vehkakoski, T., 2019, pp. 328, 334). While IEP documents are critical to the educational growth of a young child with disabilities, the inconsistency in creating the plans can result in low-quality education. Creating a suitable plan will ensure a child's growth and development in their educational setting is essential in their schooling career.

The number of children being diagnosed with ASD has been increasing in the United States in recent years. According to Wei et al. (2014): "schools and their special education services can be seriously challenged as they seek to support the needs of the steadily growing number of students with ASD" (p. 167). With young preschool aged children being diagnosed with ASD, the special education services they require can range from educational support, speech/language services and occupational therapy. The study by Wei et al. (2014) examined

two research questions: 1) what is the national picture of special education services provided to students with ASDs across the age range; and 2) do students whose disability, demographic, and family characteristics differ receive a different set of special education services? The study focused on preschool-aged children, ranging from 3-to-5 years-old, and special education student's aged 6-to-17 years-old. According to the study, for preschool students with ASD, the two most common special education services were speech/language and occupational therapies (85.2% and 65.3%). Preschool students with ASDs had significantly lower odds of receiving adaptive physical education, specialized computer software or hardware, and special transportation. However, they had significantly higher odds of receiving learning strategies/study skills supports, controlling for demographic characteristics, disability severity, and family involvement. Elementary school students with ASDs had higher odds of receiving adaptive physical education, specialized computer software or hardware, and special transportation than their preschool peers, and secondary school students with ASDs had higher odds of receiving mental health and social work services through their schools than their elementary school peers (Wei, X., et al., 2014, pp. 171-172). The variety of special education services children with disabilities need throughout their schooling career can be limited based on the programs the school has to offer. The implementation of quality special education services for all children with disabilities, especially those with ASD, are crucial for a high-quality education.

Executive function (EF) is a multi-faceted construct involves the dimensions of working memory, inhibitory control, and attention shifting are deployed for problem solving (Kuhn, L. J., et al., 2017, p. 2586). Children with disabilities may have impairments limit the use of their EF skills. While most young children are diagnosed with a disability at a younger age, those who are not diagnosed early are at risk for deficits and delays of EF abilities. This can lead to struggles

with school achievement. Kuhn, et al. (2017) completed a study where they looked to answer this question: whether children with disabilities perform similarly to their typically developing peers in the domains of: (1) completion rates; (2) scoring within a typical range (avoids floor and ceiling scores); (3) percentage of items correct; and (4) quality rating of administration across a battery of EF tasks. The data was gathered from 846 preschool children in New York and North Carolina using a diagnostic EF touch battery tool. The findings revealed children with disabilities performed similarly to their typically developing peers across a variety of metrics for evaluating the battery, ranging from percent correct scores to administrator quality ratings. Thus, the battery may be considered an easy to-administer, performance-based assessment tool in which children with disabilities do not perform systemically worse than typically developing peers (Kuhn, L. J., 2017). Children with disabilities have the ability to use their EF skills to perform alongside their peers. The study did not sample children with severe disabilities; however, the results share an outlook on the abilities children with disabilities have.

### **Conclusion**

Inclusion is a topic researched and practiced for many years. Educators have been researching the topic to discover the benefits inclusion provides to children in school settings. Many researchers in this literature review aimed to answer these two research questions: 1) what are the social and academic benefits of inclusion in preschool classrooms; and 2) do preservice and general education preschool teachers have the appropriate knowledge about inclusion? While this literature review was able to adequately answer these two questions, there are still areas within these questions need to be addressed in future research.

Many of the documents cited in this literature review focused primarily on the social benefits of inclusion. Social benefits are one of the most important areas in preschool inclusion, however, future research should examine more areas of academic benefits in preschool inclusion. Several documents touched on the academic benefits in preschool, but more recent and relevant data should be pursued. Many of the studies reviewed had small sample sizes, perhaps skewing the research in favor of middle-class families. Another area of future research should focus on general education preschool teachers' thoughts and knowledge on inclusion. The research reviewed for this literature review provided information on this question. However, more recent research would be beneficial. Also gathering data from a larger sample of general education teachers who work in inclusive classrooms may reveal additional information.

Many educators and parents do not understand the benefits of including children with special needs in preschool classrooms. Research has been conducted to understand the benefits of inclusion in preschool classrooms. The research reviewed uncovered four themes: 1) what is inclusion; 2) the social and academic benefits of inclusion; 3) preschool teachers' thoughts and knowledge on inclusion; and 4) how inclusion should be in all preschool classrooms. The key



discoveries and outcomes of this literature review demonstrate the benefits of inclusive preschool classroom settings and encourage educators and schools to provide inclusive classrooms. The literature also addressed how preservice teachers have limited to moderate experiences with students with disabilities. These experiences play into how new teachers accept inclusion practices in their classrooms and adapting materials to meet the needs of all students. Recommendations for the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices were provided to support inclusion in preschool classrooms.

These findings from the literature review impact the field of early childhood education by supporting the benefits of inclusion practices in preschool classrooms. The research showed how all students in preschool benefit and learn from inclusive settings. Students with a range of disabilities are able to learn and grow developmentally from the guidance of their typically developing peers. Including all children with disabilities into regular preschool classrooms is a vital part in providing access for families to have a high-quality preschool experience for their child.

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