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Inclusion: Exploring the meaning and the mindset in early education

All children are unique in their development. Some children have distinctive developmental abilities and disabilities that require a closer look at the practices, tools, and mindsets incorporated within programs. This means it is time for all programs to take an in-depth look at inclusion – its meaning and practice – if it has not occurred yet. Inclusion is a part of all aspects of education and society and yet many feel ill-informed about it.

According to the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, “The number of 3- to 5-year-olds with disabilities in regular classrooms has been on the rise for the past decade, increasing by 32 percent between 1992 and 2001, according to the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs. While most preschool classrooms have at least one child with a disability, teachers often have little or no training in educating and caring for these children.”

Exploring the meaning and key components of inclusion helps to start the inclusion conversation. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) in 2009 developed a joint position statement on inclusion that states: “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 definition features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports.”

“Inclusion... is important, not just educationally, but socially. You make friends and you get to know people and you learn how to navigate through life by being with your peers in your community ... Disability is part of our natural diversity ... But inclusion can only work well if teachers and students have the proper supports in place to do it well ... Show that you see the child as a child, and not a case to manage.” Dan Habib, Director, “Including Samuel”

The typical focus of inclusion is on individuals with disabilities. However, it is also understood that inclusion can be used in a broader context relative to opportunities and access for children from culturally and linguistically diverse groups. For example, it is now acknowledged that culture has a profound influence on early development and learning, and that early care and education practices must reflect this influence. Children with disabilities vary widely with respect to their racial/ethnic, cultural, economic, and linguistic backgrounds. In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children ages 3-21 are entitled to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

LRE requires that, to the extent possible, children with disabilities should have access to the general education curriculum, along with learning activities and settings that are available to their peers without disabilities. (NAEYC and DEC 2009).

“The trend toward more inclusive, collaborative approaches to educating young children has brought about shifts in roles and responsibilities. For example, early childhood educators must be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work effectively with each and every child. Likewise, early childhood special educators and specialists must be competent to support early educators by collaboratively providing their specialized services in inclusive early care and education settings.” (National Professional Development Center on Inclusion)



The National Professional Development Center on Inclusion encourages programs to ensure that early educator competencies (what a person knows and can do) reflect knowledge, skills, dispositions, and emerging research of effective practices for working in inclusive settings with children with and without disabilities and children who are dual language learners (DLL). They also encourage inclusion competencies that are linked with quality professional development opportunities, accountability systems, and other components of a comprehensive early childhood system.

Forming inclusion policies helps establish a system of services and supports that reflect the needs of children with varying types of disabilities and learning characteristics. Hold informed and innovative discussions about inclusion and invite everyone involved to the table. This ensures shared assumptions and beliefs of the entire program and its community in developing an inclusion philosophy. No matter what the type or size of program, quality inclusive practices can be identified, their strengths and weaknesses discovered, and strategies created of how to form collaborations with others to build support and awareness of inclusion best practices.

"... Enrolling a child with a disability does not constitute inclusion. They need to be able to 'participate' in the program which will often mean adaptations. I always try to appeal to people (even when I hire new staff) by expressing to them that the extra work on the front end for some children means less daily stress and more daily success!" (Kathleen Z., Preschool Director)

Inclusion embraces best practices in education, such as:

Access – Provide a wide range of activities and environments for every child and offer multiple ways to promote learning and development, such as using Assistive Technology (AT) and using multiple and varied formats of instruction, both of which are a part of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). **Participation** – Use a range of instructional and intervention approaches to promote engagement in play and learning activities, and a sense of belonging for every child, with or without disabilities. This involves implementing a range of tiered models that promote learning and participation of all children—through differentiated instruction, scaffolding, routines-based teaching, positive behavioral supports,

to explicit interventions— all providing multiple options for participation. Social-emotional development and behaviors that facilitate participation are critical to inclusion, as well as learning in all developmental domains. **Supports** – Put into place a quality framework and infrastructure of systems-level supports, such as program philosophies and policies, professional development, specialized services and therapies, and opportunities for communication and collaboration among families and professionals, to support high quality inclusion.

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