Preparing Students and Families for a Lifetime of Inclusion

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Context is a critical determinant for some very significant life events. From the beginning of time, each isolated and cumulative event has set the stage for subsequent outcomes. Tom Haring's research agenda was one such outcome and occasioned much of my subsequent behavior of scientific inquiry. I had the honor of being exposed to Tom's superior intellect in the early 80's as a special education teacher working for Riverside County schools. Mine was a typical segregated classroom setting for students with autism, located on a regular school campus. I had initiated some efforts to mainstream my students with age-appropriate non-disabled peers, and was also pioneering the Individualized Critical Skills Model (ICSM) (California Department of Education) of community-based instruction, having been exposed to Lou Brown, Steve Zivolich and Ian Pumpian. Nonetheless, I was still compelled to effect a greater change, when Tom Haring arrived at our county district office to provide in-service teacher training on social context theory, social networks, and multiple exemplar generalization. These theoretical foundations appeared to be some of the key components to a broader outcome than simply teaching someone to brush their teeth and wash their hands. This brief introduction into Tom's research world was exactly what I needed to infuse context theory into practice for my students. This also prompted me to take the next step in my career, the pursuit of advanced research in social context theory, combined with a doctorate in education with Tom Haring at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Several of my research investigations were and continue to be predicated on Tom's influence. One line of my research examines similarities of context for the ideal quality of life for individuals with the most significant support needs and their typical counterparts in our culture. Quality of life is defined by meaningful relationships, a stable source of income, some

knowledge, a sense of control over ones environment, sources of relaxation and recreation, and good health (Brown, Friefeld, & Schiller, 1993; Nota, Soresi, & Perry, 2006). There appears to be very little divergence on this issue regardless of what people can or can not do, regardless of their sexual, religious, or political orientation, regardless of their color, where they live or even how they get from place to place.

Many have attempted to analyze setting events or laboriously elicit contrived conditions that occasion this quality of life (e.g., Chadsey-Rusch, Gonzalez, Tines, & Johnson, 1989; Gaylord-Ross, 1989; Gaylord-Ross & Haring, 1987). With all good intentions, attempts at laboriously designing contrived non-inclusive contexts with efforts to generalize from these contexts are flawed. As a result, individuals who have not developed generalized quality of life indicators in natural contexts with non- disabled peers require greater and more significant support services. As a result, graduating students with significant disabilities, receiving instruction in contrived settings, continue not to get and keep high quality jobs, or make and keep long lasting friendships, or have equal access and opportunity (White & Weiner, 2004).

The optimal context for initiating a lifetime of inclusion appears to be the most inclusive setting during the early childhood years and not only impacts the critical quality of life indicators for the student but also has the potential to effect the broader system that can perpetuate an inclusive focus for subsequent school setting contexts (Peck, 1993; Villa & Thousand, 2000).

What are some of the critical predictors for a lifetime of inclusion?

1. Families are well prepared to advocate for their child's most inclusive life experience, as a result of exposure to a successful inclusive early childhood program experience.
2. All education professionals are equipped to teach learners with the most diverse educational needs.

3. Young people are able to perceive all people as valuable and deserving of respect and admiration, because of an inclusive early childhood setting.
4. Early childhood leaders, board members, and administrators have developed and hold a core belief system that all individuals are deserving of respect and admiration and should not be separated from others for any reason.
5. A community which includes early childhood parents of typically developing peers who have learned the value of inclusion from experience, must be in place that embraces and values diversity and belongings.

Although a growing body of research strongly supports the efficacy of educating preschoolers with disabilities in a full inclusion environment (Odom, 2000), a variety of barriers continue to persist (Kohan & Buka, 1999; Peck, Hayden, Wandschneider, Peterson & Richarz, 1989). Many of these obstacles appear to be related to sociopolitical issues of the early childhood school culture such as: social values (Smith & Rose, 1993), fear (Eiserman, Shisler, & Healy, 1995), budgetary constraints (Janko & Porter, 1997; Odom, et al, 2000; Smith & Rose, 1993), teacher preparation concerns (Dinnelbeil, McInerney, Fox, & Juchartz-Pendry, 1998), curriculum standards (Peck, Hayden, Wandschneider, Peterson, & Richarz, 1989), specific administrator support, training and attitudes (Leiber, et al., 2000) and the prevalence of a public non-subsidized preschool model (Lieber, et al., 2000; Odom, et al., 2000). Even after decades of efforts, widespread implementation of early childhood inclusive education remains an unmet goal (Gallagher, 2000).

Simon, Karasoff, & Smith (1992) define full inclusion using the following guidelines:

1. All students attend the school to which they would go if they had no disability.
2. A natural proportion of students with disabilities occurs at any school site.

3. A zero-rejection philosophy exists so that no student would be excluded on the basis of type or extent of disability.
4. School and general education placement are age and grade appropriate, with no self-contained special education classes operative at the school site.
5. Effective instructional practices, e.g., cooperative learning and peer instructional methods, receive significant use in general educational practice at the school site.
6. Special education supports and services are provided within the context of the general class and in other integrated environments (e.g., community and vocational settings).

Ryndak, Jackson, and Billingsley (2000) offer to expand on this definition by including these essential 7 themes: (a) placement in natural typical settings; (b) all students together for instruction and learning; (c) supports and modifications within general education to meet appropriate learner outcomes; (d) belongingness, equal membership, acceptance, and being valued; (e) collaborative integrated services by education teams; (f) systemic philosophy or belief system; and (g) meshing general and special education into one unified system. The drawback to this definition for the early childhood context is that, since there is no current federal mandate for preschool, many of these guidelines do not apply.

Due to the absence of legislation, public school systems struggle to implement full inclusion without a public funded model of support other than Headstart or State subsidized programs (Lieber et al., 2000). Generally, families of preschool children (infants to 5 years of age) with disabilities are offered a single segregated school setting that is funded by the school district. Even though this one program-fits-all strategy does not meet Least Restrictive Environment federal mandates, the segregation is rationalized, since the district does not have non-disabled students enrolled. As a result of the current systemic segregation problems with

public funded preschools, students with disabilities are often denied best practice services in inclusive contexts. The federal mandate, which does support a more inclusive preschool setting, is that the child's placement be as close to home as possible, and that the child go to the school he or she might ordinarily attend if not labeled (Part B, IDEA, 1997).

The few public school systems reporting inclusion have provided services to preschool children with disabilities in the contexts of subsidized public and non-public settings such as: Head Start, State funded programs, private preschools and day care programs (Odom et al., 1999). Some districts have chosen to create the 50-50 model, where one half the class consists of students with disabilities and the other half are typical students. Other school districts have opted to place a few typical students from the community in more restrictive segregated settings for part or all of the school day, euphemistically called "reverse mainstreaming. These efforts are considered non-data based revisionist strategies in response to parent and professional inclusion advocacy, however; unfortunately fail to provide the needed natural context settings for the students served.

Barriers to inclusion generally consist of attitudes and values, time constraints, limited training and preparation, limited resources, and public policy (Cavallaro & Haney, 1999; Liu & Pearson, 1999; Smith & Rapport, 2001). Nevertheless, the past 25 – 30 years have yielded empirically based benefits of inclusive practices at the early childhood level in the following areas: learning, goal attainment, generalization, behavior improvement, decrease in stigma, and social benefits (Friend & Cook, 1992: Hunt et. al., 1994; Levine & Antia, 1997; Lord & Hopkins, 1986; Odom & Diamond, 1998; Staub et. al., 1998). These inclusive benefits address such variables as improvements in reaching IEP goals, higher instances of generalizing to novel conditions, significant reductions in challenging behavior, and development of social skills and friendships.

Several researchers (Fullan, 1991; Harvey, Voorhees & Landon, 1997; Peck, Furman & Helmstetter, 1993) have identified numerous common dynamics that have led some systems to develop inclusion opportunities for preschoolers with disabilities. Six dynamics were identified as influencing the development of inclusive preschools: key personnel, shared vision, public policy, training and external support, organizational structure and community influence. Lieber et al., (2000) found that the strongest facilitator of inclusion was key personnel, ranging in personnel level from teachers to superintendents.

Although researchers have provided an important start to identifying factors that facilitate preschool inclusion, important longitudinal information about this subject continues to be limited. This chapter reports the results of a four-year preschool inclusion effort and outcomes at multiple private non- subsidized preschool settings in Orange County, California. The Full Inclusion Preschool Project (FIPP) was a multi-year performance based grant funded by State tobacco taxes for early childhood health and education endeavors. The primary grant recipient for this project was a non-subsidized private preschool in collaboration with the Department of Special Education at a local state university.

This chapter addresses the relevance of context for durable inclusive practices by a) describing longitudinal outcomes of multiple fully inclusive, non-subsidized, private preschool settings; b) reporting the longitudinal impact and student outcomes of inclusive preschool over a 4 year period; c) describing influencing dynamics for the implementation of inclusion and outcome factors reflecting previous research; and d) presenting a preschool model of inclusion that adheres to a natural proportion representation of the population at large.

Project Supported Students

Over a four-year period, a total of 78 children, ages two to six, were provided fully inclusive preschool opportunities during the four-year project. Supported students were recruited

for the project by FIPP and preschool staff dissemination efforts through: school districts, parent advocacy groups, Regional Center (a State agency servicing consumers with developmental disabilities), preschool newsletters, and word of mouth. Supported students also came under the auspices of the project as a result of being identified by project staff, an added bonus of having qualified personnel on site who could assist with early identification. Funding constraints and maintaining natural proportions of classroom compositions resulted in a waiting list of potential supported students who were identified has having disabilities prior to the project. As openings were available, each applicant was accepted into the program. As a result there was a zero reject rate based on identified disability for applicants to enter the program as an opening occurred at their age level.

Eighty nine percent of the supported students of the project were male, while 11% were female. The primary disability labels of the supported students were as follows: 56% Autistic, 16% Developmental Disability, 12% Deaf and Hard of Hearing, 8% emotionally disturbed, 4% Cerebral Palsy, 4% Pervasive Behavior Disorder. The families' socio-economic backgrounds were evenly distributed across high, medium and low designations and the majority of families were of white ethnicity. Two-thirds of the preschoolers were born in the United States. Other families came from Israel, South Africa, Russia, and elsewhere.

Seventeen percent of the supported students also attended their district's special education SDC preschool programs during the week. While FIPP offered the parents a 5 day a week full time program that included a half day preschool with the option of an afternoon child care program, some parents still chose to have their children in the public segregated preschool settings part-time. For example, one participant would attend a FIPP site 3 days per week and attend a district preschool special day class two days week.

Program Needs Assessment

At the initiation of this project, there were no reported subsidized or non-subsidized preschool programs engaging in inclusive educational practices in the county. School districts in the area reported providing preschool services for students with disabilities in segregated settings. Some schools reported reverse mainstreaming with more than 50% of the class population having a disability. Head Start programs in the area, that were mandated to hold a 10% opening for children with disabilities, reported that those limited slots were made available only for children with the mildest disabilities.

Project Initiation

Prior to receiving the grant, the project author and director had conducted a one-year pilot study resulting in inclusive opportunities at a non-subsidized private preschool setting (Preschool A). The Full Inclusion Preschool Project (FIPP) was funded to expand this pilot effort to 45 supported students and to expand services to 3 other non-subsidized preschools that would offer similar inclusive environments.

FIPP received its award in order to support school readiness outcomes for preschool students with disabilities ages 2 to 5. The school readiness goal was primarily defined by the project as the measurable outcome of preparation for general education kindergarten and first grade. Therefore, school readiness was operationally defined as transitioning from the full inclusion preschool to full inclusion general education kindergarten and first grade.

Project Implementation

The FIPP Model. FIPP was comprised of three components: the family, the staff/faculty, and the external agencies. Each component overlapped and central to all were the children. Each component was essential to the full inclusion model and was central to decision making, planning, design, and ongoing program development and evaluation. The project was supported by three critical underlying mechanisms: collaboration, communication, and common goals. The

success of the project was predicated on the delicate balance of each of these mechanisms and components. Successful inclusion was measured by how all parents viewed the program, how the staff and administration viewed the program, whether the supported students were meeting their IEP/IFSP objectives, whether the supported students were engaged in daily activity, whether the supported students were making friends, and finally, whether the supported students graduated and transitioned to a full inclusion kindergarten placement.

Settings. The large southern California County in which this project took place is a suburban community of 800 square miles. The current population exceeds three and one-half million, with an annual median family income of $71,200. The four non-subsidized private preschool sites were recruited contingent upon the stated commitment of each preschool director to the inclusion goals of the FIPP project. At Preschool A, the director position was replaced three times during the four-year project. The latter two directors were less committed to inclusion than the first initiating director was. As a result, the number of new supported students decreased each year at this site, but was recouped by corresponding increases at the other project sites. Directors at the remaining three preschools, B, C, and D continue to administer full inclusion activities at their sites. As a result, they continued to offer inclusion opportunities to new applicants with disabilities even after the conclusion of project funding. Preschool A has not maintained this practice.

Preschool A served as the central, model demonstration site for the other three early childhood centers. Preschool A served 180 students, B served 173, C served 40, and D served 180. During the project period, only Preschool B & D were accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Both A & C were preparing for accreditation. Only Preschool B & D were designated wheelchair accessible. All four preschools followed a child-directed, developmental model of early childhood education. All

four preschools had previously admitted students with disabilities in an informal capacity, and the directors from only A & B had received previous formal training to do so.

Within a 10-year timeframe, prior to the project, Preschool A had admitted four students with disabilities, B had admitted seven, C admitted two, and D admitted one. During the first year of the project, A admitted 12 preschoolers; B admitted 13. C admitted five and D admitted seven. For the subsequent 2 years of the project, each site sustained natural proportions. In year 2, A admitted 15, B accepted 16, C brought in 10 students, and D brought in nine. In the final year, numbers of admissions increased somewhat; A accepted 18, B accepted 16, C's acceptance increased to 12, and D increased to 17.

Project personnel. The Project Director, a faculty member from a local university, and two Inclusion Specialists (IS) provided training and consultation for all preschool staff, parents, and the community. The Inclusion Specialists had masters and credentials in Early Childhood Special Education, and came with a range of experience in early childhood inclusion.

All preschools followed the staff-to-child ratio of one staff member to ten students as mandated by the NAEYC standards. Therefore, every classroom had at least two general education teachers with either early childhood education units or completed certificates.

An Inclusion Facilitator was hired for each classroom in which a child with a disability was fully included. Since FIPP adhered to the natural proportion, and no more than two FIPP students were placed in a classroom, Inclusion Facilitators and the general education teachers were not responsible for more than two children with disabilities per room. No one classroom ever had more than two students with an IEP. This ratio would change during outdoor play, during the time that staff took their breaks. Preschool teachers included the supported students in all activities and environments.

Facilitators' education ranged from a high school degree to a Bachelors degree. Those with BA's were mostly in psychology or related fields. Several of the facilitators were post-baccalaureate students from the university pursuing their masters and credentials in early childhood special education. Facilitators' experience had a vast range as well. Whereas, several had only early childhood experience, a few had direct experience working with students with disabilities or had siblings with disabilities (see Table 2).

Other personnel included itinerant service providers from the school districts, or funded by medical insurance policies, or hired privately by the families. Itinerant services as designated by either the IEP or IFSP included speech and language, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and behavior support.

Personnel roles and responsibilities. The Project Director (PD) was responsible for administering all grant activity. In addition, the PD collaborated with school district administration, which included coordination of Individualized Education Plans (IEP's), coordination of integrated therapy services, collaboration with school site administration and families, overall staff development, and family advocacy and support.

Inclusion Specialists (IS) were responsible for large group and individualized staff training and in-class modeling, staff management, scheduling, program modifications and adaptations, direct instruction to the students with disabilities as needed; participant assessment and data, family support, coordinating general education staff and special education support staff or Inclusion Facilitators. Each IS supervised at two of the project preschool sites.

Although the Inclusion Facilitators (IF) were mandated to follow NAEYC guidelines as a staff member, key responsibilities included: (a) interacting with all children in the classroom, (b) using positive behavior support, (c) encouraging social interaction with typical peers and staff, (d) assisting all children with difficult tasks to enhance generalization and independence, (e)

overseeing safety, (f) supporting families, (g) working collaboratively with all preschool staff, and (h) attending all preschool staff meetings.

Inclusion Facilitators were recruited from direct advertising, from the University Early Childhood Special Education program, from the University Department of Child and Adolescent Studies, and from local community college early childhood programs. It is critical to note that IFs were assigned to classrooms rather than students. IFs were to be seen as an integral part of the school and each classroom as opposed to being perceived as a "Velcro aide" attached to a particular student. This model of having the aide as the sole supporter of the included student is demonstrated to interfere with the role of the general education teacher. It creates an inappropriate dependence on adults, interferes with the development of social relationships with peers, and impedes learning (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997). Therefore, the purpose of assigning the IF as a staff member for the entire class was to ensure the likelihood of independence from staff and more interdependence and socialization among the children. The IF was then perceived by staff, children and parents as a co-teacher. This also impacted the positive acceptance of the project by the regular preschool staff, since project staff was part of their team for all the students in their classroom.

Personnel training and support. Training was delivered either by the Project Director, the Inclusion Specialists, or consultants specializing in distinctive areas of program need. Trainings were held on average of once per month in the evenings for all staff. A training stipend was provided to general education preschool teachers for any training time beyond typical staff meetings. Areas of pedagogy included: Characteristics of disabilities, curriculum and methods in early childhood special education, inclusive practices, modifications and adaptations, positive behavior support, overviews of physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy. Trainings were generally designed to meet the specific needs of students in the

program but were presented to assist with all students with or without identified disabilities. For example, training was conducted on visual aids that could be adapted for use with any student at the preschool, to be described in more detail in the curriculum section (Morrison, Sainato, BenChaaban, & Endo, 2002).

The Inclusion Specialists also conducted specialized trainings once per week during brief weekly meetings. These meetings more specifically addressed individual immediate needs of students, their families, or teachers. These trainings were more practical and technical in nature. For example, these trainings would address specific classroom management targets, such as where to seat a child to optimize social interaction or a make-and-take session to facilitate a specific classroom adaptation. For example, one child had significant difficulty maintaining engagement during Circle Time. In order to hold his attention, the IF was trained to create and update a picture book that would help him keep track of each of the Circle Time activities by using Velcro to stick pictures of the order of events in his book as they occurred. This was helpful for him, but the entire class enjoyed and made use of his book as well.

Lastly, daily staff training was provided by way of in-classroom immediate feedback and modeling provided by the Project Director or Inclusion Specialists. During randomly selected times throughout the day, IS were scheduled to spend at least 30 minutes within each classroom to provide individualized training and support as needed by each participant and their teachers. Per week, an IS spent an average of two hours per day in each classroom. When an IF was absent, the IS often served as a substitute teacher if none were available.

Family training. The Project Director provided the families with training in family rights and advocacy, IEP's resources, positive behavior support, and home-based methods of instruction such as toilet training, or visual aides. These training sessions were scheduled every other month in the evenings. The meetings were not mandated and childcare was always

provided free of charge. Regularly, at least five families were represented at every meeting and every family came to at least one meeting. In some case, both parents came, and in some only one parent was able to attend. When needed on an individual basis, the IS would visit the home to assist with individual training.

Family financial support. The grant budget provided private preschool tuition stipends to families based on need. As a result, no students were prevented from participation due to family income.

Public school district collaboration. At the start of the project, the Project Director met with administrative personnel from surrounding school districts to develop a collaborative effort between the project and the students they were serving. Several subsequent meetings with these personnel were held over the three-year period. The PD also offered consultative services to the districts to ensure seamless, consistent service coordination, program planning and implementation, and transition activities for students entering inclusive kindergarten and first grade. In a number of instances, school districts paid the private preschool tuition costs on behalf of their student enrollments as part of their IEP LRE objectives. In other cases, the district paid for a part-time paraprofessional to meet IEP inclusive goals. These staff were trained and supervised by the FIPP staff to serve as an IF in the students' classroom.

University collaboration. Two of the sites were set up by the Project Director as Professional Development Sites for university based teacher preparation for the credential in Early Childhood Special Education. Student teachers were assigned to specific classrooms to fulfill competencies and some class sessions were held at the sites. The Project Director conducted student teaching supervision and taught the classes.

Individualized Education Plans/Individualized Family Service Plans. The Inclusion Specialists drafted IEP or IFSP objectives for meetings with districts. All plans were developed

using a family centered approach. The IS would then train personnel about these objectives and infuse them into daily activities. If a child was not eligible for district services or was denied services, FIPP developed "in-house" IEP's. The Inclusion Facilitator and general education teachers would attend their included student's IEP. On some occasions when the student's least restrictive environment was being questioned, either the Inclusion Specialist and/or the Project Director would also attend to advocate for the child and family. Several IEP meetings were held at a FIPP preschool site once the student was enrolled in the program.

Curriculum. In addition to following the NAEYC child-directed, developmentally appropriate model of early childhood education (Bredekamp, 1990), various curriculum and methods were employed either as a result of parent requests and IEP's or due to the nature of their empirical validity and recognition of best early childhood special education practices. Peer Mediation (Weiner, 2005; McGee et al., 1991), Picture Exchange Communication Systems (Frost, 2001) and other instructional adaptations were developed for each student as needed. Additional curriculum packages were also incorporated as part of the instructional strategy, including: TEACCH (Schopler et al. 1995), pivotal response training (Koegel, Symon, & Koegel, 2002), and "floor time" (Greenspan et al. 1998). The PD also incorporated other best practices such as positive behavior support (O'Neill, Horner, Albin, Sprague, Sotrey, & Newton, 1997**)** and task analysis (Carter & Kemp, 1996; Haring & Kennedy, 1988; Wolery, Ault & Doyle, 1992**)**.

In order to maintain a developmentally appropriate curriculum, several other approaches were infused within the naturally occurring, child-directed activities. Incidental teaching (Hart & Risley, 1975), for example, which uses a series of graded prompts to develop target behaviors in child-initiated interactions between an adult and a single child, was employed with all children in generating and maintaining spontaneous communication. These and other strategies that embed

instruction within child-initiated activities have been supported by the research (e.g., Fox & Hanline, 1993; Losardo & Bricker, 1994; Warren & Bambara, 1989). They appear to be effective means for achieving the discrete goals developed for an individual child with disabilities, and at the same time they seem compatible with the child-directed nature of developmentally appropriate preschool programs.

One of the most effective school wide systems of adaptations was the use of visual aids (Xin, J. F. & Holmdal, P. (2003). These supports were: (a) to teach all students to follow routines, (b) to assist with transitions, (c) to augment communication, and (d) to facilitate participation and the ability to follow along with an activity. Examples of visual aids included photographs or iconic picture schedules, photographs or iconic picture representations used to label items in the classroom, home/school communication daily logs, photographs or copies of pages from books with added visual displays. Although visual aids have been demonstrated in the literature to be a most promising practice for students with disabilities, these augmentations facilitated learning for most of the students in the childcare facilities.

Classroom inclusion. FIPP supported students were included in age-appropriate classroom and playground settings at natural proportions. FIPP staff offered support with immediate curriculum modifications needs or planning. FIPP staff also provided class-wide positive behavior support, thereby preventing behavior challenges posed by all students. All staff designed modifications and behavior support plans, and the Inclusion Facilitator (IF) provided direct support to the student or indirect support to the general education teachers to implement developed strategies. Successful inclusion was measured by: (a) whether students were meeting their IEP objectives in this LRE, (b) parent satisfaction with the program (Weiner, 2006a), and (c) whether students graduated to a fully inclusive general education kindergarten or

first grade setting. Long-term follow-up tracks students to determine whether they remain in full inclusion placements.

Peer mediation, play-dates and friendship. FIPP staff provided additional small group peer mediation in social skill curriculum. A small group would include one FIPP participant and no more than three other typical peers (Weiner, 2006b). The group was assisted and prompted by an Inclusion Facilitator. The IF would identify some preferred and reinforcing activities with the children's input. Suggestions such as building a highway system and having cars drive on the highway were employed as the context for focusing on specific IEP objectives such as increasing social responding to typical peer's bids, or occupational therapy goals. For example, as the students were building the highway, typical peers would ask supported students questions such as, "What piece do you need? Or "Do you have the curve?" Employing a model developed by Weiner (2005) the IF would indirectly prompt the peers to persevere if the participant did not reply, or she would directly prompt the participant to reply. In another example, one participant was learning to use a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS; Bondy & Frost, 1994). Peers were involved in the exchange serving as respondents and reinforcers. Peer mediation was conducted in classrooms as well as all other site locations including playgrounds.

Parents of the supported students were strongly encouraged to arrange for playdates with the typical peers. This was one of the more challenging strategies for the families, not for the preschoolers. However, it proved to be one of the more successful methods for long-term friendship maintenance. Since natural relationships were formed due to common interests, FIPP staff facilitated this strategy by helping parents to contact the parents of the peers to whom the supported students were attracted. FIPP staff suggested options as unobtrusive as offering to carpool, or an invitation to a birthday party, to more intrusive conditions such as having a

playmate over for the afternoon. Many parents reported their first ever invitation for their children with disabilities to be invited to a non-disabled peers house to play.

Outcomes

Preschool Inclusion

Forty-five students with disabilities were successfully included in age appropriate naturally proportioned preschool classes at four project-supported sites. Successful inclusion was measured by how the parents viewed the program, how the staff and administration viewed the program, whether the supported students were meeting their IEP/IFSP objectives, and whether the supported students were making friends. Supported students that were involved in the project over multiple years graduated each year into the next age group at their preschool along with their non-disabled classmates and friends. Due to flexibility with birthdates, four families elected to retain their child in the pre-k classroom for an additional year.

Preschools B, C, & D have continued to fully include students with disabilities in their preschool centers. Preschools B & D collaborate to get private and public funds to support a part-time Inclusion Specialist who shares her time across the two sites. Both preschools use these funds to continue to staff supplementary teachers in those classrooms where students with additional needs are placed. In addition, some districts continue to support a teaching assistant for some of the students. Preschool C continues to fully include students as well, similarly, by procuring private and public grant awards. Preschool C was also involved in a state-wide three year training funded by the State Department of Education. Preschool A stopped accepting new students with disabilities at the conclusion of the project. This preschool is the site that has had multiple preschool directors over the project period, as well as upper management turnover. This outcome for Preschool A supports the research related to the critical impact of leadership on factors effecting preschool inclusion.

Effective Curriculum Strategies

The small group peer mediation activity was seen as one of the more critical aspects to the program. The typical peers enjoyed these small group activities and were always eager to be chosen to participate. Mediation led to the development of relationships, the achievement of several IEP objectives, and the expansion of social repertoire.

Transition to General Education Kindergarten (School Readiness)

As defined, successful inclusion of the FIPP project emphasized the child's attending their neighborhood general education kindergarten classroom in the fall after graduation. This transition from full inclusion preschool to full inclusion k-12 setting was targeted by the grant as a priority mission in terms of school readiness.

During the period of the FIPP project, twenty-four of the forty-five project supported students reached transition age for admittance to kindergarten. While school readiness is generally associated with academic and social benchmarks, the project defined readiness chronologically as it related to inclusive entrance into the general education public school system. Therefore, the focus was on the actual outcome of successful placement of each student in a general education kindergarten class, regardless of whether they met the requisite academic and social benchmarks. In other words, even students with significant disabilities moved on to attend their neighborhood general education public school.

To summarize, during the first year of the project two eligible students successfully entered and completed their general education kindergarten year in a general education classroom, meeting their IEP objectives. During the second year of the project, five students graduated to their neighborhood general education kindergarten placement, therefore, 100% successfully entered and completed their general education kindergarten. In the third year of the project, 4 students or 100% of the students in that year successfully entered and completed their general

education kindergarten. In the final year of the project, twelve students were eligible for kindergarten placement, 100% successfully entered and completed their general education kindergarten.

Family Satisfaction

All families that participated in the project reported high levels of satisfaction with the program. Several families wrote letters to governing agencies such as their local legislator or the funding agency seeking additional funding for continuance. In collaboration with directors from Preschools B, C & D, families have successfully engaged in private fund raising and grant efforts in order to retain one of the Inclusion Specialist positions to be share with all three schools. Families also reported in their evaluations that the positions of Inclusion Specialists, Inclusion Facilitators, and Project Director, were essential to the success of including their children. One family whose child was involved in an informal inclusive situation with their school district prior to the project reported that comparatively their child's rate of growth and progress during FIPP far exceeded his gains without FIPP.

Perhaps most importantly, parents were pleasantly surprised and so grateful when their child was invited to a birthday party or invited over to friend's house. Moms and Dads, who never thought it possible, saw their child making real friends.

Transition to General Education First Grade (School Readiness)

FIPP has followed student inclusion progress up to six through nine years of age. During the project's duration, twelve students were eligible to transition to first grade. Eleven of twelve students transitioned from general education kindergarten classes to first grade. All eleven students were then successful in transitioning to second grade general education placements. One of the 12 students moved to a private segregated school that provides specialized instructional and behavior programs for students with autism.

As of this school year, 2005 - 2006, the eleven students continue to be fully included in general education classrooms. Since the termination of project funding, over the last three years, five students have joined the list of those being fully included. Interestingly, on one public school campus with a special day class, a more restrictive setting, three of the FIPP graduates continue to be fully included and are now in the second grade there.

Playdates and Friendship

As a result of peer mediation efforts, naturally occurring relationships, and parent assistance, typical peers of all the supported students initiated varying levels of contact at school and outside of school. Initiations at school took the same form as any initiation among the preschoolers. Verbal and nonverbal examples included inviting supported students to enter a game, sharing toys, sharing lunch, commenting, requesting, greeting, etc. Initiations outside of school included play-dates and invitations to parties. As of this academic year, parents of the supported students report that their child maintains ongoing contact with at least one friend that was made during preschool.

Conclusion

The Full Inclusion Preschool Project (FIPP) demonstrated a model non-subsidized alternative to segregated subsidized special education options. One of the primary issues with the development of inclusive preschool opportunities identified in current research is the limited number of public preschool settings (Lieber et. al, 2000). The FIPP project secured four private preschool sites that demonstrated a successful innovative strategy to meet LRE and full inclusion needs. During the course of the project, school districts collaborated with the inclusion efforts for their forty-five students. Since the conclusion of project grant funding, all involved districts continue to collaborate with three of the four original FIPP preschools. As a result, school

districts are able to continue inclusion opportunities for new and current students with disabilities.

Since the predominant preschool model is a public non-subsidized setting, it appears that IEP and related inclusion opportunities can be provided most successfully in these settings (Lieber, 1999). Additional research is warranted in this area of school district collaboration, including funding strategies and use of non-subsidized neighborhood preschools as an innovative inclusion environment. In addition, further longitudinal outcome studies to determine the impact of inclusion on future k – 12 LRE placements should be undertaken. This future research could compare full inclusion placement vs. segregated placement influences on school readiness and the perpetuation of full inclusion through adulthood.

It does appear that the peer mediation activities conducted throughout the day had a positive impact on the supported students' ability to initiate and respond to their typical peers. It also appears during follow up observations that FIPP graduates have no trouble with maintaining these social interactions with new classmates in their inclusive settings.

With a firm vision established for families of expectations and context for meeting those expectations, a future of full inclusion is possible for any student labeled with disabilities. The results of the FIPP effort indicate that a preschool inclusive education results in the likelihood of inclusive opportunities being offered through second grade. A number of setting events and variables that may effect predictive future inclusive placement outcomes warrant further investigation including: Student characteristics, school district collaboration, parent advocacy, student social skill development, student academic skill development, IEP format, curriculum, external staff advocacy (university), and increased preschool staffing ratios. These results appear to support the literature concerning the essential characteristics for predicting long-range inclusion (Kochanek & Buka, 1999).

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