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The Full Inclusion Preschool Project:

A general Education School-Readiness Model

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Abstract

The Full Inclusion Preschool Project (FIPP) was a collaborative, State funded grant that included: four non-subsidized preschools, seven school districts, and university support. The four-year FIPP grant fully included eighty students two to five years of age with disabilities in preschools that reflected the natural proportion of children with disabilities. Interested participants were admitted to the FIPP using a zero reject strategy. The majority of students served by the FIPP were labeled autistic. The primary disability labels of the other participants in order of frequency were: developmental disability, deaf and hard of hearing, emotionally disturbed, cerebral palsy and pervasive behavior disorder. A full range of best practice inclusive strategies were provided for the participants in their preschool classrooms including peer mediation, curriculum adaptation, and integrative therapy. Other essential components included key preschool administration support, school district collaboration, teacher and parent training. One hundred percent of the participants that have graduated from FIPP have transitioned to a general education inclusive kindergarten setting.

Although a growing body of research strongly supports the efficacy of educating preschoolers in a full inclusion environment (Odom, 2000), a variety of barriers continue to persist (Kohan & Buka, 1999; Peck). Many of these obstacles appear to be related to sociopolitical issues 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 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).

Due to the absence of legislation, public school systems struggle to implement full inclusion without a public model of support (Lieber et al, 2000). The drawback to this definition for the early childhood context is that, since there was no current federal mandate for preschool until the recent legislation for the Pre-K/T-K classroom, many of these guidelines still do not apply. Generally families want to send their infants and toddlers to a center that is close to home or work. The most desirable location may not be the neighborhood school, thereby, jeopardizing the natural proportion aspect to the definition of full inclusion. What is federally mandated, however, that supports 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 school systems reporting inclusion have provided services to pre-school children with disabilities in the contexts of subsidized public and non-public settings such as: Head Start, state funded programs, private pre-schools 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. Finally, some schools have opted to place a few typical students from the community in more restrictive segregated settings.

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 (Peck et al., 1993; Fullan, 1991; Harvey et al., 1997) have identified numerous common dynamics that have led some systems to develop inclusion opportunities for pre-schoolers 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, who ranged from teachers to superintendents.

Although researchers have provided an important start to identifying factors that facilitate preschool inclusion, longitudinal information about this subject continues to be limited. This article 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 tax monies for early childhood health and education endeavors. The primary grant recipient for this project was a non-subsidized private preschool supported by the Department of Special Education at a local state university.

This article adds to the existing research by a) describing a longitudinal inclusive preschool innovation effort and outcomes at multiple non-subsidized private preschool 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.

Method

Participants

Eighty children, ages two to six, were provided inclusive preschool opportunities during the four-year project. Participants were recruited for the project by FIPP and preschool staff dissemination efforts through: school districts, parent advocacy groups, regional center, preschool newsletters, and word of mouth. Funding constraints and maintaining natural proportions of classroom compositions resulted in a waiting list of potential participants. As openings were available, each applicant was accepted into the program. As a result there was a zero reject rate for applicants as an opening occurred.

89% of the participants of the project were male, while 11% were female. The primary disability labels of the participants were as follows: 56% Autistic, 16% Developmental Disability, 12% Deaf and Hard of Hearing, 8% emotionally disturbed, 4% Cerebral Palsy, 4% Pervasive Behavior Disorder (See Table 1).

(Insert Table 1 here)

Program Needs Assessment

At the time this project was initiated, 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/director had conducted a one-year pilot study resulting in inclusive opportunities at a non-subsidized private preschool setting. The Full Inclusion Preschool Project (FIPP) was funded to expand this pilot effort to 80 participants and to expand services to 3 other non-subsidized preschools that would offer 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 successful preparation for general education kindergarten and first grade. Therefore, successful school readiness was operationally defined as transitioning from the full inclusion pre-school to general education kindergarten and first grade.

Project Implementation

The FIPP Model. The model of implementation is represented in Figure 1 as three overlapping components creating a Venn diagram. One circle represents the family component, the second is the staff/faculty, and the third indicates external agencies. The overlapping section represents the students who at the core of the project. The project was supported by three critical components: collaboration, communication, and common goals. The success of the project was predicated on the delicate balance of each of these components.

Setting. 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 turned over three times during the four-year project. The replacement directors were less committed to inclusion. As a result, the number of new participants decreased each year, but was made up by corresponding increases at the other project sites. The remaining three preschools, B, C, & D, have continued to offer inclusion

opportunities to new applicants with disabilities even after the conclusion of project funding. Preschool A has not maintained this practice.

The southern California county in which this project took place is a suburban community of 800 square miles. The current population exceeds three million, with an annual median family income of $71,200. Preschool A served as the central, model demonstration site for the other three early childhood centers (see Table 1). During the project period, only Preschool B & D were NAEYC accredited. Both A & C were preparing for accreditation. Only Preschool B & D were 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, but had received no formal preparation or training to do so (see Table for pre-project survey results).

Project Personnel. The Project Director and two Inclusion Specialists (IS) provided training and consultation for all preschool staff. The Project Director is a faculty member in the Department of Special Education at a nearby university. Both Inclusion Specialists have a masters and credential in Early Childhood Special Education. One specialist had extensive experience in early childhood inclusion.

All preschools followed the staff-to-child ratio mandated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Therefore, every classroom had at least two general education teachers with either early childhood education units or completed certificates.

In each classroom in which a child with a disability was fully included, an Inclusion Facilitator was hired. 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 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 either from the school districts or hired privately by the families. These services included speech and language, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and behavior support.

Personnel Duties. 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 (Inclusion Facilitators). Each IS supervised two sites.

The key responsibilities of the Inclusion Facilitators (IF) were as follows:

a. Educate, interact with, initiate to and encourage all children in the classroom;
b. use positive, proactive approaches of behavior support to reduce the likelihood of challenging behavior;
c. during snack and meal times, encourage social interaction among children;
d. assist all children with difficult tasks with the goal of enhancing independence;

e. when outside of assigned classroom, oversee the safety, security, and positive social behavior of all students anywhere on campus;
f. work collaboratively with lead teacher and other assistant teachers in planning and preparation of classroom materials and curriculum;
g. attend all required campus staff meetings;
h. assist families with information regarding the students' program (using utmost confidentiality);
i. assist students with disabilities to participate in typical classroom routines;
j. assist in peer mediated activities;
k. record necessary data for outcome measures related to grant activity; and
l. function as a team member and contribute to an atmosphere of positive rapport.

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 be perceived as a "Velcro aide" attached to a particular student (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). The purpose of this was to ensure the likelihood of independence from staff and more interdependence and socialization among the children.

Staff Training and Development. Training was delivered by either 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 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 adpatations, 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. For example, a training was conducted on visual aids. Although visual aids have been demonstrated in the literature to be a most promising practice for students with disabilities, it facilitated learning for most of the students in the childcare facilities.

Trainings were also conducted once per week by the Inclusion Specialists 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.

Lastly, daily staff training was provided by way of in-classroom immediate feedback and modeling provided by the Project Director or Inclusion Specialists. At various times throughout the day IS were scheduled to spend a range of time within each classroom to provide individualized training and support as needed by each participant and their teachers. 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, 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. When needed on an individual basis, the IS would visit the home to assist with individual training.

Financial Family Support. Grant budget provided tuition stipends to families based on need. As a result, no students were prevented from participation due to family income.

Public School District Collaboration. The Project Director met with all administrative personnel from 7 surrounding school districts to develop a collaborative effort between the

project and the students they were serving. The PD also offered consultative services to the districts to ensure seamless, consistent service coordination, program planning and implementation, and transition activities. In a few instances, a school district paid the school tuition costs on behalf of their student enrollments. In other cases, the district paid for a part-time paraprofessional.

University Collaboration. Two of the sites were set up 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.

Individualized Education Plans/IFSPS. The Inclusion Specialists drafted IEP objectives for meetings with districts. 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. Several IEP meetings were held at a FIPP preschool site.

Curriculum. In addition to following the NAEYC child-directed, developmentally appropriate model of early childhood education, 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 ???), and "floor time" (Greenspan et al. 1998). The PD also incorporated other best practices such as positive behavior support and task analysis. Several approaches have emerged for providing direct, individualized interventions for children with disabilities within the context of developmentally appropriate activities. Incidental teaching (Hart & Risley, 1975), for example, uses a series of graded prompts to develop target behaviors in child-initiated interactions between an adult and a single child. Milieu teaching (Hart & Rogers-Warren, 1978) expands incidental teaching opportunities through the addition of environmental arrangement, assessment, and adult-initiated interactions. Activity-based intervention (ABI; Bricker & Cripe, 1992) provides an overall model for incorporating specific intervention approaches such as incidental and milieu teaching into the naturally occurring activities, planned as well as child-initiated, of an inclusive preschool. These and other strategies that embed instruction within child-initiated activities have been supported by 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.

Classroom Inclusion. FIPP participants were included in age-appropriate classroom and playground settings at natural proportions. {No one classroom ever had more than two students with an IEP. Preschool teachers included the participants in all activities and environments.} 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, 2000). Peer mediation was conducted in classrooms as well as all other site locations including playgrounds. This strategy was seen as one of the most critical aspects to the program.

Successful inclusion was measured by: (a) whether students were meeting their IEP objectives in this LRE, (b) parent satisfaction with the program (Weiner, 2000), and (c) whether students graduated to a fully inclusive general education kindergarten. Long term follow-up tracks students to determine whether they remain in full inclusion placements.

Results

Preschool Inclusion

Eighty students with disabilities were successfully included in age appropriate naturally proportioned preschool classes. Participants that were involved in the project over multiple years graduated each year into the next age group at their preschool with their non-disabled classmates. Due to flexibility with birthdates, 4 families elected to retain their child in the pre-k classroom for an additional year.

In addition, the FIPP inclusive preschool practices HOW??? continue at three of the four preschools that participated in the original project grant funding ended. The 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.

Transition to General Education Kindergarten (School Readiness)

During the period of the FIPP project, twenty-four of the forty-five project participants reached transition age for admittance to Kindergarten. While school readiness is generally associated with academic and social benchmarks, the project defined readiness chronologically, therefore, focusing on the actual outcome of successful placement of each student in a general education kindergarten class.

Transition IEP objectives emphasized demonstration of the skill in an age-appropriate setting with non-disabled peers. During the first year of the project two eligible students successfully entered and completed their general education kindergarten year (see Table). In the second year of the project, 17 students were eligible for Kindergarten placement, 100% successfully entered and completed their general education kindergarten. In the third year of the project, 10 students were eligible for Kindergarten placement, 100% successfully entered and completed their general education kindergarten. In the final year of the project, 15 students were eligible for Kindergarten placement, 100% successfully entered and completed their general education kindergarten (See Table 2).

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 engaged in private fund raising efforts in order to retain one of the Inclusion Specialist positions to be share with all three schools. Families also reported 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.

(Insert Table 2 here)

Transition to General Education First Grade (School Readiness)

FIPP followed student inclusion progress up to six years of age. During the project's duration, 17 students were eligible to transition to first grade. 16 of the 17 students successfully transitioned from general education kindergarten classes to first grade general education placement. One student moved to a private segregated school that markets specialized instructional and behavior programs for students with autism (See Table 3).

(Insert Table 3 here)

Discussion

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 needs. During the course of the project seven separate school districts collaborated with the inclusion efforts for their 80 students. Since the conclusion of project grant funding, all seven districts continue to work 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 outcome studies to determine the impact of inclusion on future post-preschool LRE placement should be undertaken. This future research could

compare inclusive setting placement vs. segregated setting influences on school readiness, i.e. placement in the next least restrictive environment.

The results of the FIPP effort indicate that a preschool inclusive education results in the likelihood of inclusive opportunities being offered through first grade. However, the research outcomes reported here do not determine what factors of the FIPP were critical for future inclusive success. A number of 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.

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Table 1

Site Characteristics

	Preschool A	B	C	D
Total # of Children	180	173	40	165
Total # of Classrooms	11	10	3	8
# of Children with Disabilities prior to project (w/in 10 yrs)	4	7	2	1

Table 2

Participants' Characteristics

Disability Label	*%*
autism	52
developmental disability	16
deaf/hard of hearing	12
emotionally disturbance	8
cerebral palsey	4
pervasive developmental disorder	4
seizure disorder	4
Gender	
Female	11
Male	89

Table 3

Transition to Inclusive Kindergarten

Year	# of Students	# Transitioned	%
1	17	17	100
2	10	10	100
3	5	5	100
4	12	12	100
Total	44	44	100

Table 4

Transition to Inclusive First Grade

Year	# of Students	# Successful	%
1	N/A	N/A	N/A
2	17	16	94
3	10	10	100
4	5	5	100
Total	31	30	97