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# Staff Perspectives on Inclusion in Early Childhood

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**Staff Perspectives on Inclusion in Early Childhood**

by

Julie Sandquist

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Science in

Early Childhood Special Education

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### **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my son, Parker, and daughter, Aften. You inspired me to work hard and push through this process so that I could be an example for you. My hope is that you will believe in yourselves and know that you can accomplish great things.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the many people who made this journey possible for me.

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I would like to thank my parents and extended family for their endless amount of prayers, support, and encouraging words.

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### **Abstract**

Inclusion of young children with disabilities in early childhood settings has become a priority for many early childhood professionals and programs. Unfortunately there continues to be a large number of programs and schools who have not yet realized the benefits of this type of programming for most young children with disabilities. In this case study, a survey research design was used to examine the perspectives of staff who work in the early childhood programs within a single school district. Overall, the staff reported benefits to students who participate in inclusive programming versus pull out or self-contained programming.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Overview

There are many ideas and opinions about how to best provide educational services to young children with special needs. Some children receive their specialized services in a classroom designed for all students with disabilities. This is often referred to as a self-contained classroom. As another service model in early childhood special education, children spend part of their time in a self-contained classroom and part of their time in a classroom designed for typically developing children. As a final service model, some children participate in a classroom that is designed for both typically developing children and children who have special needs. They may receive all of their specialized instruction in this setting or they may be pulled out of that setting for a period of time to work on specific skills. This type of service is referred to as inclusion. These kinds of specialized services are mandated in a long history of federal and state law.

In 1975, PL 94-142 was passed and titled the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This law was passed to ensure that all children with a disability could receive a free and appropriate education. The law has been revised many times and is currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). The original inclusion concept was known as mainstreaming. Children with disabilities would receive the majority of their education in a classroom designed for children with disabilities and spend a portion of their day in a general education classroom. Multiple terms were used to describe this type of programming such as preschool mainstreaming, reverse mainstreaming and integrated special education. The term inclusion replaced all of these terms in the 1990s (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011). With the passage of PL 99-457 in 1986, the practice of inclusion was formally

established and more clearly defined. Special education services were to be provided to preschool age children in what is known as their Least Restrictive Environment. This was interpreted to mean that children with disabilities should receive their education alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate (Barton & Smith, 2015).

According to the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (2009), full inclusion is the type of programming that school districts should be working to achieve.

### **Importance of the Study**

There are a variety of benefits of inclusion in the early years not only for children with disabilities but also for their typically developing peers, families, and the community. Odom et al. (2004) demonstrated that children with and without disabilities are impacted in a positive way in inclusive settings, both developmentally and behaviorally. Further, Wolery and Wilbert (1994) described a variety of benefits to individuals who participate in inclusive programs.

Children with disabilities in inclusive programs, are provided with competent models that may assist them in learning a variety of new skills. Access to typically developing, same-age peers also allows for age appropriate social and communication skills to be learned and practiced.

Opportunities to develop friendships with typically developing peers and realistic life experiences will help prepare them to live and grow in the community. Other benefits from participation in an inclusive setting include increased constructive play and increased successful interactions for children with communication disorders (Hollingsworth, Boone, & Crais, 2009). Ultimately, Taylor and Moniz-Tadeo (2012) found that children in inclusive programming have increased social emotional development as compared to their peers who participate in pull-out or self-contained classrooms.

## **Statement of the Problem**

While a variety of placement options should be explored and discussed for each individual child, the intent of the law is clear that young children with disabilities are to be removed from general early childhood settings only if they cannot achieve satisfactorily with specialized supports and services in place. Villa and Thousand (2003) explained that part of the problem is how inclusion is defined or interpreted. One of the current problems in placing students with disabilities in inclusive settings is due to how school districts interpret the special education laws. Inclusion means something different across districts, and even across programs within districts, so that inclusive programs may be organized differently. Some schools interpret inclusion to mean that students are physically present in general education settings. In other schools it means, “The active modification of content, instruction, and assessment practices so that students can successfully engage in academic experiences and learning” (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p. 20). With the passage of the law requiring that schools provide services to young children within their natural setting and the research to support it, there continues to be many programs and schools that are removing young children from their natural learning environments to deliver their special education services.

## **Study Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of my study is to compare the perspectives of staff who work with children receiving early childhood special education services and determine which type of service model is perceived as best to help children progress the most during their preschool years. My research question is, “How do IEP team members perceive young children’s progress toward IEP goals

when intervening in an inclusive preschool program versus a pullout special education program?”

### **Conceptual Model**

All children want to feel welcome and important. How we treat them in their educational settings will have an impact on how they feel about themselves. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs supports this concept. Maslow's hierarchy, developed by Abraham Maslow in 1943, is a way of organizing the basic needs of all people on different levels. Maslow (1943) stated that people are motivated to achieve certain needs. When one need is fulfilled a person seeks to fulfill the next one, and so on. Maslow's theory relates to this study based on the third level in the hierarchy which is a feeling of belongingness and love. At this level, students will want to feel a sense of belonging with other people in their environment (Maslow, 1943). In this level, students need to identify with a group or groups of other students and need to feel that they do fit in. By supporting students in an inclusive setting, I believe that this level will be achieved and allow the students to move on to the next level in the hierarchy.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter 1 described the variety of options that are available to children who are eligible and in need of early childhood special education services. The law currently states that special education services are to be provided to preschool age children in their Least Restrictive Environment. Barton and Smith (2015) interpreted this to mean that children with disabilities should receive their education alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. There is much research that not only supports this concept but also offers numerous examples of the benefits of inclusion. Children who have been identified as having a disability

benefit from inclusive preschool programming (Odom et al., 2004). Families of these children with disabilities, their typically developing peers, and the communities in which they live benefit as well. Unfortunately, not all districts are providing services to young children in inclusive settings. Districts are continuing to use self-contained classrooms and pull-out models as the only service options for students. The purpose of my study was to compare the perspectives of staff who work with children receiving early childhood special education services and determine which type of service model is perceived as best to help children with special needs, progress the most during their preschool years.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Overview

In this chapter, I review the research that pertains to inclusion during the early childhood years. I describe and discuss the research base that addresses the history of inclusion, the benefits, and challenges of inclusion that have been discovered over the years. In addition, I draw comparison between inclusion and self-contained services for young children with disabilities.

### History of Inclusion

Early in American history, many educators believed that students with disabilities should receive their education in programs separate from their peers. It was the perception that this was the best way for all students to receive a quality education. It was not uncommon for the general population to believe that people with disabilities should be hidden or isolated. Millions of children were not receiving an appropriate education because they had a disability (Kavale & Forness 2000). Special education in public schools was originally designed as a program separate from general education. In the mid-1960s, there began to be some discussion as to whether this type of education was appropriate (Kavale & Forness 2000).

In 1975, a federal law was passed that would begin the process for a new initiative in education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), originally known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, mandated that students with disabilities be provided with an appropriate education that is designed to meet their unique needs in the least restrictive environment. This means that, to the maximum extent appropriate, school districts must educate students with disabilities in the regular classroom with appropriate aids and supports, along with their nondisabled peers in the school they would attend if not disabled, unless a student's IEP requires some other arrangement (Wright & Wright, 1999). The original concept was known as mainstreaming. This is when students with disabilities receive the

majority of their education in a special education classroom and participate in a general education classroom for a designated part of the day. In the realm of early childhood, the original terms used such as preschool mainstreaming, reverse mainstreaming, and integrated special education were replaced by the term inclusion in the 1990s (Odom et al., 2011).

Mainstreaming and integrated special education meant that children with disabilities were to be educated to some extent, alongside their non-disabled peers. The term reverse mainstreaming was used to describe the practice of bringing non-disabled children into a special education setting. Inclusion is defined as educating students with disabilities with their peers without disabilities in a general education setting full time.

The practice of inclusion in early childhood was formally established in 1986 with the passage of PL 99-457. This public law stated that special education services would be provided to preschool age children in their least restrictive environment and that early intervention systems should be developed for infants and toddlers with disabilities. This was interpreted to mean that children with disabilities should receive their education alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate (Barton & Smith, 2015). The emphasis at this time was on service provision for young children. There was no discussion regarding the quality of the inclusive services (Odom et al., 2011).

There continues to be significant challenges with the quality and implementation of what is considered to be best practice. In fact, according to the United States Department of Education (USDOE) Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), fewer than half of children with disabilities, ages 3 to 5 years old, received their special education and the related services in a regular Early Childhood classroom in 2012 (Barton & Smith, 2015).

Moving forward, the goal of full inclusion as defined by The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is one that challenges school districts to provide learning opportunities for young children with disabilities next to their peers without disabilities.

Inclusion, as a value, supports the right of all children, regardless of their diverse abilities, to participate actively in natural settings within their communities. A natural setting is one in which the child would spend time had he or she not had a disability. Such settings include but are not limited to home and family, play groups, child care, nursery schools, Head Start programs, kindergartens, and neighborhood classrooms. (Bricker, 1995, p. 180)

### **Benefits of Inclusion in Early Childhood**

In the following paragraphs I describe the research that supports the idea and practice of inclusion during the early childhood years. The benefits that have been found not only impact children with disabilities but also their non-disabled peers, families, and the community as a whole.

Social development is often an area of concern for many children with disabilities. An opinion paper by Hollingsworth, Boone, and Crais (2009) explained that children with special needs who participate in inclusive settings have larger numbers of playmates, increased social interactions, and increased likelihood of having at least one friend. An exploratory study by Bruns and Mogharreban (2007) looked at the beliefs and practices of Head Start and Pre-K professionals regarding inclusion. The study indicated that appropriate early educational and social experiences are key determinants to academic readiness and social and emotional skill development. Providing appropriate social skill opportunities can be difficult without access to typically developing peers who can serve as role models in this area of development. According to Vakil, Welton, O'Connor, and Kline (2009), "Early childhood educators who include all

children promote a climate that increases sensitivity and acceptance of diversity while decreasing teasing and bullying based upon physical or ability differences” (p. 326). Odom et al. (2011), suggested in a review of research literature that typically developing children and children with disabilities will benefit from inclusive settings. Active engagement in classroom activities, friendship development and a positive effect on the knowledge and attitude about disabilities for the typically developing children are some of the benefits.

In addition to improved social development, research has shown improvements in the academic skills and overall development of children with disabilities who participate in inclusive programming. A descriptive analysis by Hundert, Mahoney, Mundy, and Vernon (1998) compared developmental and social gains of children with severe disabilities who received their services in either a segregated preschool or an inclusive preschool. Hundert et al. (1998) found that children with severe disabilities who participated in inclusive preschool programs appeared to score higher on standardized measures of development than similar children who were enrolled in traditional special education settings such as a self-contained program. The study by Bruns and Mogharreban (2007) found that teachers believe inclusive programming promotes optimal developmental gains for young children with disabilities and positive social gains for typically developing children. Odom et al. (2011) argued in a research review article that quality inclusion was found to have a positive effect on children’s cognitive, communication and motor skill development. .

### **Challenges to Preschool Inclusion**

,conducted a national online survey to identify challenges for preschool inclusion and potential solutions to the challenges identified (Barton & Smith, 2015). Hundreds of early

childhood and special education administrators and practitioners participated in the survey. According to the survey results, staff attitudes and beliefs were one of the main challenges to developing and implementing quality inclusive preschool programming. There were a variety of concerns identified in this survey. Lack of communication or collaboration between general education and special education staff and programs, staff preparedness for providing high-quality services, and lack of understanding of the facts about preschool inclusion were some of the top concerns. Further, policies and procedures was the subsequent category identified most by the participants as a challenge to inclusion. These general policies pertained to early care and education, policies related to program quality, funding for personnel, transportation to and from program sites and differing curriculum between district and non-district programs. The majority of these challenges were reported to exist at the local or state level (Barton & Smith, 2015). The final challenge identified most frequently in this survey was in regard to financial and professional resources. The respondents identified a lack of available spots for children in community programs and the lack of transportation for the typically developing children as a concern. In addition, access to itinerate services such as speech and language services, occupational therapy and physical therapy, was identified as a concern (Barton & Smith, 2015).

Mogharreban and Bruns (2009) confirmed these findings in an opinion article by suggesting that time and funding for professional development is critical for high quality inclusion. In addition, policy-makers and administrators have reported that the cost of inclusion and how to use funds to support inclusion are common challenges (Odom, 2000). Odom (2000) further identified other policy challenges as related to program standards, financial issues and personnel and staffing.

In regard to professional development, Bruns and Mogharreban (2007) explained in an exploratory study that early childhood special educators must have the knowledge to not only conduct assessments, implement interventions and use behavior strategies, but must also understand how to work with all adults involved in the inclusive environments. In addition, having the belief that all children can learn, regardless of their disability, will help ensure successful inclusive programming.

Mogharreban and Bruns (2009) suggested that the lack of shared planning time between Early Childhood teachers and Early Childhood Special Education teachers is a genuine barrier to high quality inclusion. The collaboration between staff is essential and must be supported by administration. This time allows for communication and collaboration between the staff to develop a shared vision and define staff roles to ensure the success of all children.

### **Inclusion vs. Self-Contained Service Provision**

Research comparing these two service models during the early childhood years was difficult to locate. Additional research on this topic and for this age group would be beneficial so that programs can make more informed decisions regarding best practice.

Taylor and Moniz-Tadeo (2012) completed a quasi-experimental study over a 2 year time frame on the impact of educational environments for preschool children with developmental delays. The study analyzed the progress of two groups of preschool children with developmental delays. The first group of children received their educational services in a class with their peers with disabilities in self-contained or pull-out classroom. The second group of children received their educational services in a classroom with their peers without disabilities in an inclusive classroom. The researchers measured children's progress by administering the Brigance

Inventory of Early Development as a pretest and posttest of educational progress. The study found that there was no significant difference in the areas of academic/cognitive or daily living domains between the two groups. There was, however, a significant difference in the area of social emotional skills. The children who participated in the inclusive classroom scored much higher than their peers who participated in the self-contained classroom.

The descriptive analysis by Hundert et al. (1998) compared developmental and social gains of children with severe disabilities who received their services in either a segregated preschool or an inclusive preschool. The study was completed over the course of 1 school year. Hundert et al. (1998) found that the students with severe disabilities who were enrolled in the self-contained classrooms demonstrated fewer developmental gains than their disabled peers who participated in the inclusive classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

There is sufficient research that supports the service delivery model of inclusive programming during the early childhood years (Bruns & Mogharreban, 2007; Hollingsworth et al., 2009; Hundert et al., 1998; Odom et al., 2011; Taylor & Moniz-Tadeo, 2012; Vakil et al., 2009). Benefits have included improved social skills, improved communication skills and academic skill improvement for students with disabilities who received their special education services alongside their non-disabled peers.

In the next chapter, I review the purpose of my study to compare the perspectives of staff who work with children receiving early childhood special education services and determine which type of service model is perceived as best to help children progress the most during their

preschool years. I discuss the research design, participants, setting, data collection strategies, study procedures, and data analysis.

## **Chapter 3: Method**

### **Opening**

Growing numbers of young children are receiving early childhood special education services in the schools. These services are provided through a variety of models from self-contained classrooms to inclusive preschool programs. What type of service provision is best for young children with disabilities? As an early childhood special education teacher, I believe that the staff working with these children have valuable insight that may help answer this question. The purpose of my study was to compare the perspectives of staff who work with children that are receiving early childhood special education services. In doing so, I hope to determine which type of service model is perceived as best to help children progress the most during their preschool years.

### **Research Design**

This research study is a survey research design using an electronic survey distribution approach. The survey instrument uses open and closed survey items. This is a case study that looks at one school district, specifically the early childhood program. To develop a case study, I will gather qualitative and quantitative survey data.

### **Research Question**

The research question for this research study is as follows:

How do IEP team members perceive young children's progress toward IEP goals when intervening within an inclusive preschool program versus a pullout special education program?

### **Setting**

The school that will be participating in this research study is located in a rural city in a central region of a Midwestern state. The district is comprised of approximately 1000 staff.

The early childhood programs are located within the two primary schools in this district. The preschool program is available to children ages 3 to kindergarten entrance. A full classroom consists of 20 children usually containing 15 typically developing children and five children who have been identified as having a delay in their development. These children receive special education services through an Individualized Education Program during their preschool time. Each class consists of one general education teacher and one general education assistant. In addition, depending on the level of student need, there are also one or more special education assistants and a special education teacher who work with identified children.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study include preschool teachers, early childhood special education teachers, speech pathologists, autism consultants, instructional/program assistants, occupational therapists, adapted physical education teachers, deaf/hard of hearing teachers, and physical therapists who are employed in the previously described preschool program.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

I collected my data through the use of Survey Monkey utilizing a researcher developed survey. Using an individual with similar education, training, and experience as my survey participant, I piloted test the survey to ensure reliable and valid data collection procedures. Surveys were distributed by email link via Survey Monkey. Email reminders were sent 1 week and 2 weeks after survey was dispersed initially to encourage a high rate of survey return.

### **Data Analysis**

Numeric data items will be electronically tabulated and analyzed with descriptive statistics. Open-ended items will be analyzed for patterns in the data that to be interpreted as

themes of findings. These themes of findings were used to better explain the quantitative findings.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Overview

The purpose of my survey was to obtain educators' perspectives on service provision for young children with disabilities and determine which type of service model is perceived as best to help children progress the most during their preschool years. My survey was sent to 27 potential participants. Twenty-three of those responded to and completed my survey. The results of the research obtained through my survey are explained below and demonstrated in Table 1.

### Demographic Results

The participants in my survey research study represented a variety of roles within the preschool program. These roles included: early childhood special education teachers (n=5), speech language pathologists (n=2), preschool teachers (n=3), paraprofessional/instructional assistants/program assistants (n=8), and other educational service providers (n=5).

### Survey Numeric Results

In Table 1, I present the survey results in table form where the survey items are listed with the corresponding percentages and frequencies. In this table, the survey item content is as follows:

1. Participation—Students with disabilities can actively participate in classroom activities with their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms.
2. Meeting Needs—Inclusion of children with disabilities hinders the capability of the general education teacher to meet the needs of general education students.
3. Academic Skills—Does inclusive programming improve academic skills?
4. Social Skills—Does inclusive programming improve social skills?
5. Language Skills—Does inclusive programming improve language skills?

6. Parent perspective–I believe parents support inclusion if their child has a disability.
7. Parent perspective I believe parents support inclusion if their child does not have a disability.
8. Disruption–General Education Teachers are concerned that students with disabilities may disrupt the education of students without disabilities.
9. Collaboration–Special education teachers and general education teachers need to collaborate in order for inclusion to be successful.
10. Friendships–I have observed friendships between students with and without disabilities in inclusive preschool settings.
11. Inclusion–I believe that inclusion is most beneficial for students with disabilities.
12. Pull out–I believe that pull out instruction is most beneficial for students with disabilities.

**Table 1. Service Provision Results by Participant Perceptions and Percentages**

Survey Item Content	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Participation	4.3% (n=1)	--	--	30.4% (n=7)	65.2% (n=15)
2. Meeting needs	60.9% (n=14)	21.7% (n=5)	8.7% (n=2)	8.7% (n=2)	--
3. Academic skills	--	4.3% (n=1)	8.7% (n=2)	30.4% (n=7)	56.5% (n=13)
4. Social skills	--	--	--	17.4% (n=4)	82.6% (n=19)
5. Language skills	--	--	--	26.1% (n=6)	73.9% (n=17)
6. Parent perspective-child with disability	--	--	--	26.1% (n=6)	73.9% (n=17)
7. Parent perspective-child without disability	--	4.3% (n=1)	8.7% (n=2)	60.9% (n=14)	26.1% (n=6)
8. Disruption	8.7% (n=2)	26.1% (n=6)	8.7% (n=2)	43.5% (n=10)	8.7% (n=2)
9. Collaboration	--	--	4.3% (n=1)	4.3% (n=1)	91.3% (n=21)
10. Friendships	--	4.3% (n=1)	4.3% (n=1)	8.7% (n=2)	82.6% (n=19)
11. Inclusion	--	--	13.0% (n=3)	17.4% (n=4)	69.6% (n=16)
12. Pull out	34.8% (n=8)	26.1% (n=6)	21.7% (n=5)	13.0% (n=3)	4.3% (n=1)

When participants were asked if students with disabilities could actively participate in activities in a general education classroom, 4.3% (n=1) strongly disagreed, 30.4% (n=7) somewhat agreed and 65.2% (n=15) strongly agreed. When asked if children with disabilities hinder the capability of the general education teacher to meet the needs of general education students, 60.9% (n=14) of participants strongly disagreed, 21.7% (n=5) somewhat disagreed, 8.7% (n=2) were neutral, and 8.7% (n=2) somewhat agreed. Participants were asked if they have observed academic skills improve in an inclusive classroom. Of the responses, 4.3% (n=1) somewhat disagreed, 8.7% (n=2) were neutral, 30.4% (n=7) somewhat agreed and 56.5% (n=13) strongly agreed. When asked if they had observed social skill improvement, 17.4% (n=4) somewhat agreed, and the other 82.6% (n=19) strongly agreed. Participants were also asked if they had observed improvement in children's language skills. Responses included 26.1% (n=6) somewhat agreed and 73.9% (n=17) strongly agreed. Participants were asked if they thought parents of children with disabilities supported inclusion. In response to this survey item, 26.1% (n=6) somewhat agreed and the other 73.9% (n=17) strongly agreed with this item. The same question was asked regarding parents of children without a disability and the responses indicated that 4.3% (n=1) somewhat disagreed, 8.7% (n=2) were neutral, 60.9% (n=14) somewhat agreed and 26.1% (n=6) strongly agreed. When asked if general education teachers were concerned that students with disabilities may disrupt the education of non-disabled students, 8.7% (n=2) strongly disagreed, 26.1% (n=6) somewhat disagreed, 8.7% (n=2) were neutral, 43.5% (n=10) somewhat agreed and 8.7% (n=2) strongly agreed. Participants were asked if special education teachers and general education teachers need to collaborate in order for inclusion to be successful. Four point three percent (n=1) were neutral, 4.3% (n=1) somewhat agreed and the

other 91.3% (n=21) strongly agreed. When asked if they have observed friendships between students with disabilities and students without disabilities in inclusive preschool settings, responses indicated that 4.3% (n=1) somewhat disagreed, 4.3% (n=1) were neutral, 8.7% (n=2) somewhat agreed and 82.6 (n=19) strongly agreed. Finally, participants were asked which type of service was most beneficial for students with disabilities. When asked if inclusion was most beneficial, 13% (n=3) were neutral, 17.4% (n=4) somewhat agreed and 69.6% (n=16) strongly agreed. In regard to pull-out instruction being most beneficial, 34.8% (n=8) strongly disagreed, 26.1% (n=6) somewhat disagreed, 21.7% (n=5) were neutral, 13.0% (n=3) somewhat agreed and 4.3% (n=1) strongly agreed.

### **Narrative Responses**

At the end of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to write additional thoughts or comments on service provision for young children with disabilities. In Chapter 5, some of the narrative responses are used to further clarify my discussion of the results. For a complete record of the raw narrative data, please refer to Appendix A.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this survey offer a wide variety of staff perceptions on service provision. Overall, the majority of the staff who participated in the survey have seen positive impacts for students who participate in inclusive preschool programming. Results of this study are discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to compare the perspectives of staff who work with children receiving early childhood special education services and determine which type of service model is perceived as best to help children progress the most during their preschool years. The findings of the study indicated that the majority of the survey participants believed inclusive programming is the best option for most children in the early childhood years.

### **Narrative Data Support for Numeric Findings**

An important component to inclusive programming is access and participation for students with disabilities (Hollingsworth et al., 2009). Ninety-five point six percent of survey participants believed that students with disabilities are able to actively participate in classroom activities with their non-disabled peers. Having this belief is important in the success of inclusive programming. If staff did not believe this was possible or thought it was too difficult, moving forward with quality programming would be difficult.

One of my main objectives for this study was to determine if team members believed that children with disabilities show improvement in their skills through inclusive programming. One hundred percent of the participants in my survey study rated improved in social skill development as the greatest benefit for children who attend an inclusive preschool program. In addition, almost all of the participants have seen friendships form between children with and without disabilities in inclusive preschool classrooms. One survey participant shared, "It allows both kids with and without disabilities to form friendships as early as preschool." The majority of participants also believed that children with disabilities showed improvement in their language skills if they received inclusive programming. Just over half of the participants believed that

academic skills improved through inclusive programming. One of the participants stated, “I have seen major growth in academic and social areas of both students with disabilities and general education students who have been in an inclusive classroom.” This information supports the importance of inclusive programming and should be used to support and encourage staff who are already providing services in this way. In addition, the information can be used to educate and inform staff and administration who may not understand the benefits of inclusive programming.

Survey participants were also asked about parent perspectives of inclusive programming. All of the participants believed that parents of children with disabilities supported inclusive programming. When asked about parents of non-disabled children, 87% of the participants believed these parents are also in support of inclusion. To continue to foster these positive beliefs, preschool staff members should be encouraged to provide frequent parent involvement opportunities in their children’s preschool classrooms. In this way, parents can be encouraged to see their children interacting and learning alongside other children who may learn differently from their own child.

One of the most important aspects of quality inclusive programming is collaboration among all staff (Barton & Smith, 2015). This concept is supported by 91.3% survey participants. Participants indicated that general education teachers are concerned that children with disabilities may disrupt the education of non-disabled children. This is where collaboration becomes imperative. Regular planning meetings between general education staff and special education staff may help ease these perceptions by planning together and proactively as to how to reduce or diminish any disruptive situations. Ninety-one point 3 percent of survey participants indicated

that collaboration and communication is an important component of inclusion. One participant shared, “Inclusive classrooms work best when general education teachers and students with disabilities have adequate ECSE teacher AND Paraprofessional support. It is equally important to have the ECSE teacher and the special education coordinator provide modeling and training to those paraprofessionals who work directly with small groups of children and/or one-on-one with children with disabilities.”

### **Implications for the Literature Base**

The findings of my study align well with the previous literature on inclusive programming. My study indicated that staff see improvement in the skills of children who received their special education services in an inclusive preschool program versus a pull-out or self-contained model. This finding is supported by studies previously published (Bruns & Mogharreban, 2007; Hollingsworth et al., 2009; Hundart et al., 1998; Odom et al., 2011; Taylor & Moniz-Tadeo, 2012; Vakil et al., 2009). My review of earlier literature indicated that one of the main challenges to quality inclusion is staff attitudes and beliefs (Barton & Smith, 2015). Fortunately for the district that participated in my survey study, staff believed that children with disabilities can access and participate in inclusive programs. My current thesis study also indicated the importance of collaboration between staff and programs. Previous studies have demonstrated that lack of communication and collaboration can make quality inclusive programming difficult to achieve (Barton & Smith, 2015).

### **Study Limitations**

There are four limitations that I have identified within my study. First, the number of participants was rather small. I sent the survey out to 27 potential participants and 23 actually

completed the survey. Considering the small sample, I was pleased with my response rate of 85%.

The second limitation to my study was that all of my participants work within one school district. Given this situation, results cannot be generalized to any other district. In addition, the small number of participants were all from the same district where one educational role such as physical therapy may have only one or two practitioners. In order to ensure confidentiality, I was unable to identify and report specific examples based on the participants' educational role as these participants' responses could otherwise be easily identified.

The third limitation was the use of a cross-sectional study design. The survey data were collected during one single point in time making it impossible to measure how the participants' perceptions may change over time. Since data collection is based on individual perceptions at only one point in time, data interpretation should be understood within these constraints.

Finally, 35% of my participants were instructional assistants/paraprofessionals/program assistants. The variety of educational levels that were represented may have biased some of the perceptions. Staff with direct day to day experience but little or no formal education are extremely important members of the team. These individuals most likely express a practical approach to thinking. This differs from those who have higher education and may be demonstrating a theoretical, pedagogical and policy driven way of thinking.

### **Next Steps in Research**

It is important for research to continue in the area of inclusive programming in early childhood settings. Some educators may believe that inclusion simply means that a child with disabilities is present in a general education setting. I believe that true inclusion is meaningful

participation in all activities within the general education setting. To avoid non-meaningful placements in general education, better targeted research to examine the specific benefits of children with and without disabilities learning together would be helpful in moving inclusive programming forward. In addition, further research could be completed to compare classrooms taught by general education teachers, special education teachers and a combination of teaching staff using a co-teaching approach to instructional delivery. While designing this type of study is challenging, even a series of small studies could demonstrate important differences. These findings would be helpful with program design for districts that are looking to make changes to their early childhood programs.

### **Conclusions**

I was pleased with the positive results of my survey in that I am such a strong believer in good quality inclusive programming. It was affirming to me that the majority of the staff believe in this as well. The small number of staff who were unsure and less supportive of inclusion may feel that way due to lack of experience or comfort level in implementing inclusive practices. Moving forward, I believe that it is important to help educate all staff as to how inclusive programming can work and how to plan for and implement this type of high quality programming that is considered to be best practice in early childhood (Odom et al., 2011). Purposeful planning and collaboration by all staff members can make this an attainable goal that will benefit all children. I believe that all children will make great gains in each area of development if early childhood programs strive for quality inclusion. This study should add to the continuing discussion of early childhood inclusion and hopefully provide additional

information for programmatic decision making within school settings—for young children both with and without disabilities.

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## Appendix A

### Raw Survey Data

<b>Please share any additional comments you have regarding service provision.</b>
I believe that inclusion is important for all students.
The benefits to all the children greatly increase when there is sufficient support staff to meet all the children's' needs. Thoughtful and mindful lesson planning.... Inclusion is key to acceptance and strengthening community.
I believe children learn within their natural environment and it helps with generalization of skills. For some specific skills, I believe pull out has some benefits and not all specific skills can be taught in the classroom.
Students with disabilities need to have the model of their same aged peers to demonstrate appropriate behavior.
I don't believe the exclusive use of one model best meets the need for all students. I think the decision needs to be made based on the needs of the student. For preschool students, inclusion is a more tolerated model than it is in upper grades and if a child is ever going to have a chance at inclusion, it has to start here. That being said, there are some students who need a smaller setting and more structure to have success and may need some "pull-out" in order to practice a skill. If a child is not able to organize in a classroom of 17 preschoolers, it is not appropriate to have him start in that setting. A self-contained setting may be more appropriate until the child is able to adjust to being at school and away from parents. I do believe however, the ultimate goal is always inclusion. If the goals can be met in an inclusive setting, it is the least restrictive way to meet those goals. The goals of the IEP should drive the setting to the degree that the child is able to meet the goals.
Having experience with both inclusion and pull out classroom situations I have come to believe inclusion for preschool seems to be best for all involved.
Inclusive classrooms work best when general education teachers and students with disabilities have adequate ECSE teacher AND Paraprofessional support. It is equally important to have the ECSE teacher and the special education coordinator provide modeling and training to those paraprofessionals who work directly with small groups of children and/or one-on-one with children with disabilities

I think it's a great for both kids with and without disabilities to be around each other in a classroom setting. It allows both kids with and without disabilities to form friendships as early as preschool. It teaches respect for others, kindness, caring and patience. It also teaches students how to interact with kids with equipment (wheel chairs, walkers, braces etc.) Its teaches kids that kids with disabilities are just like them just their bodies may work a little different, but they are still fun to talk to and play with and learn from. Kids with disabilities gain confidence when able to participate in daily activities with all their peers.

Most children are able to benefit greatly from inclusion, however there are some children who need a self-contained room, at least until they can re-enter the classroom safely and to their educational benefit.

I have seen major growth in academic and social areas of both students with disabilities and general education students who have been in an inclusive classroom.

**Appendix B****Survey Items****Staff Perspectives on Service Provision for Young Children with Disabilities****Question 1:**

Students with disabilities can actively participate in classroom activities with their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

**Question 2:**

Inclusion of children with disabilities hinders the capability of the general education teacher to meet the needs of general education students.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

**Question 3:**

I have observed children's academic skills improve in an inclusive classroom.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

**Question 4:**

I have observed children's social skills improve in an inclusive classroom.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

**Question 5:**

I have observed children's language skills improve in an inclusive classroom.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

**Question 6:**

I believe parents support inclusion... If their child has a disability.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

**Question 8:**

General Education Teachers are concerned that students with disabilities may disrupt the education of students without disabilities.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

**Question 9:**

Special education teachers and general education teachers need to collaborate in order for inclusion to be successful.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

**Question 10:**

I have observed friendships between students with and without disabilities in inclusive preschool settings.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

**Question 11:**

I believe that Inclusion is most beneficial for students with disabilities.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

**Question 12:**

I believe that pull out instruction is most beneficial for students with disabilities.

Strongly Agree  
Somewhat Agree  
Neutral  
Somewhat Disagree  
Strongly Disagree

## **Appendix C**

### **Adult Consent Form**

#### Service Provision in Early Childhood

#### Implied Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study of service provision options for children receiving special education services in early childhood. You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently working in the early childhood program at ISD 911. This research project is being conducted by Julie Sandquist to satisfy the requirements of a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Special Education at St. Cloud State University.

#### Background Information and Purpose

The purpose of this study is to compare the perspectives of staff who work with children receiving early childhood special education services and determine which type of service model is perceived as best to help children progress the most during their preschool years.

#### Procedures

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete the online survey which is completely anonymous so no one will be able to identify a specific individual's form. It is important that we have as many people as possible complete and turn in this survey to compile an accurate representation.

#### Risks

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

#### Benefits

There are no benefits to the survey participants.

#### Confidentiality

Information obtained in connection with this study is confidential and will be reported as aggregated (group) results.

To prevent identification of research subjects, data will be presented in aggregate form or with no more than 1–2 descriptors presented together. Although the names of individual subjects will not be used, there is a possibility that you may be identifiable by your comments in the published research. You will have an opportunity to review the text and withdraw comments prior to publication.

#### Research Results

At your request, I am happy to provide a summary of the research results when the study is completed. Upon completion, my thesis will be placed on file at St. Cloud State University's Learning Resources Center.

#### Contact Information

If you have any additional questions please contact me, at [jsandquist@isd911.org](mailto:jsandquist@isd911.org) or my advisor, Jane Minnema, at [jeminnema@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:jeminnema@stcloudstate.edu)

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#### Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future position with the district or the relation the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

#### Acceptance to Participate

Your completion of the survey indicates that you are at least 18 years of age, you have read the information provided above, and you consent to participation in the study. If you are interested in learning the results of the survey, feel free to contact me at [jsandquist@isd911.org](mailto:jsandquist@isd911.org).

**Appendix D**  
**Email Cover Letter to Participants**

Initial Email

Dear Survey Participants,

I am in the process of completing my Master's degree at St. Cloud State University. As a part of my thesis, I am conducting research on the different ways of providing service to young children with disabilities. I would like your input on this topic to assist me in conducting my research. I'll be sending a survey out to you via email using Survey Monkey and therefore your answers will be confidential. I would appreciate your willingness to assist me by completing this survey. Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Julie Sandquist

Follow-up Email

Dear Survey Participants,

This is a follow up email regarding the survey that was sent to you via SurveyMonkey. If you have already completed the survey I thank you. If you have not yet completed the survey, would you please take a few minutes to do so by the end of the week? Thank you.

Sincerely,

Julie Sandquist