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### Preschool Inclusion Practices: The Effects on Communication, Language, and Peer Relationship Development

Renee Bartos

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**Preschool Inclusion Practices: The Effects on Communication, Language, and Peer  
Relationship Development**

by

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A Starred Paper

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Master of Science in

Early Childhood Special Education

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Inclusive classrooms give children with disabilities the opportunity to learn and develop with their same-aged peers within a general education classroom. According to Rhoad-Drogalis and Justice (2020), more than half (66% according to IDEA in 2021) of preschool-aged children with disabilities were placed in inclusive classrooms for a partial to full school day; this is twice the number reported since 2005, according to data collected from the U. S Department of Education in 2005, only 33% of children with disabilities were placed in inclusive preschool settings (Hilbert, 2014). Despite a large number of children being placed in inclusive classrooms, there are limited studies on the benefits/drawbacks of inclusive preschool practices on children with disabilities and their typically developing peers. Preschool inclusive practices have received less research attention than elementary and higher education, according to a study looking at the relationship between inclusive preschool classes and children's achievement (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2020). Rhoad-Drogalis and Justice (2020) found through a systematic literature review that there were few adverse effects of inclusion on typically developing elementary aged children. Specifically, they reported approximately 23% of children have positive effects from inclusive practices, whereas 58% had neutral effects and nine percent had negative effects (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2020).

### **Background of the Study**

A professional understanding of inclusion from a future special educator may define inclusion as giving students with disabilities the opportunity to learn alongside their same-aged typically developing peers. Researchers in the field found that inclusion refers to the elimination of all separate special education placements for all individuals and beginning their placement

full-time in general education with the provision of appropriate special education support in the classroom (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016). This statement examines the idea that if proper special education services and support were provided, children with disabilities will have opportunities to exclusively learn alongside typically developing peers. Buli-Holmberg and Jeyaprabhan's study's findings and discussion demonstrated that interaction in inclusive classrooms is crucial for fostering mastery in learning among children with disabilities. While these services may not be readily available in all preschool classrooms, there are policies and regulations in place to ensure that students receive the most appropriate or "least restrictive" learning environment.

Inclusive preschool environments emerged following the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 2004. Through this reauthorization the importance and purpose were emphasized. Children with disabilities should be educated in their least restrictive environment- of free and appropriate public education (FAPE) was reaffirmed (Hansen et al., 2014).

### **Overview of Least Restrictive Environment**

In 1975, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EHA) was initially started by Congress (IDEA, 2023). Prior to the authorization of EHA, children with disabilities were not given the right to receive education. In 1990, with additional protections added, the EHA was reauthorized into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2023). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) passed federal legislation that ensures children with disabilities have the opportunity to learn alongside their typically developing, same-aged peers (Soukakou et al., 2014). These children have the right to receive specialized services in their

least restrictive environment. According to IDEA (n.d.), children with disabilities should be educated in general classes to the *maximum extent appropriate* or *least restrictive environment*. It is the responsibility of the child's educational team to decide what *least restrictive* means for each student. These decisions will be made during Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) meetings with the student's level of service stated within their IEP (Iris Center, n.d.). When contemplating placement within the least restrictive environment, the IEP team should consider five factors: the individualized student's needs, how their placement will benefit the student, whether the student's inclusion will be a negative or positive effect on peers, the student's ability to progress academically and possible accommodations/modifications that may be utilized for the student (Iris Center, n.d.).

### **Theoretical Background**

The theoretical background of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory is prominent in understanding how a child develops. Vygotsky largely believed that effective social interactions play a role in a child's ability to learn and asserts that the adolescent initially acquires knowledge through interactions with other people, and later assimilates this knowledge by incorporating personal values (Topçiu & Myftiu, 2015). According to Hong et al. (2020, p. 49), "Children learn concepts and skills through interactions with other members of society, especially with people more competent than themselves including parents, teachers, and peers." Inclusion is built on the basis of same-aged peers learning and working alongside each other in a controlled environment. Gupta et al. backs up these findings in their own study when stating, "Research suggests, however, that children who have multiple interactions with peers and adults throughout early childhood show a marked improvement across multiple areas" (Gupta et al., 2014, p. 38).



Vygotsky's theory suggests that children with disabilities would benefit from learning alongside their typically developing peers because they may pick up skills through them. Based upon these explanations of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, it can be deduced that children with disabilities who are not given the opportunity to interact with same-age children may not meet the same developmental goals as their peers (Hong et al., 2020).

### **Importance of the Topic**

In a field that continues to grow and evolve there is a need for continued research on early childhood inclusive practices. Professional and public opinions on inclusion continue to change as it becomes more prevalent, however, there still is a need for continued research on its effects. Specifically, its effects on all students within the inclusive classroom, both typically and non-typically developing peers. There is a need for cumulative information regarding inclusive preschool practices, specifically in regard to language skills, peer relationships and social emotional skills. There are more developed studies in elementary inclusive practices and older, yet preschools' practices are lacking in number of studies (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2020). An understanding of high-quality preschool inclusive practices is beneficial in understanding the benefits or potential drawbacks of early intervention (Sainato et al., 2015) The question can then be asked, do young children with disabilities who are given the access to effective inclusive preschool practices excel later compared to peers not given the opportunity?

### **Research Questions**

1. How are preschool children's social-emotional skills impacted when placed in inclusive classrooms?

- a. How are typically developing preschool children's social-emotional skills impacted when placed in inclusive classrooms?
  - b. How are preschool children with disabilities' social-emotional skills impacted when placed in inclusive classrooms?
2. How do students in inclusive preschool classrooms with disabilities develop language skills from their typically developing peers?
  3. What are long-term outcomes for all children placed in inclusive preschool classrooms?

### **Literature Review Overview**

The organization of this review of the literature on inclusion of young children with disabilities will cover several major indexes and databases, websites, prominent authors, and professional journals representing the field. Prominent authors that were referenced in this research includes Case-Smith, Gupta, Hansen, Hanson, Justice and Rhoald-Drogalis. The *Journal of Early Intervention* aided in providing scholarly articles, studies, and reports to compile research on the effects of inclusion. The *Journal of Early Intervention* is a peer-reviewed research journal that releases issues quarterly pertaining to young children with disabilities. The majority of studies that have been included were completed on a national level. It seemed prudent to include studies nationally, as these are more likely to align with educational practices within the United States. Additional journals that were utilized in the literature review were found through the SAGE online journal database. This literature review focused on eight primary themes: sociocultural theories and policies, inclusion: benefits and drawbacks, social-emotional skills, language skills, communication and peer relationships and interactions. Primary

key words used when searching through indexes and databases are detailed below in the list of definitions.

### **Definitions**

Developmental Delay (Developmental delay, 2022). A developmental delay refers to a delay in speech and language, motor skills, self-help, play, social skills, and problem solving. This delay means that a child is developing one of these skills slower than their peers may be.

Early Intervention (*What is “early Intervention” and is my child eligible?*, 2018). Early intervention refers to the specialized services that are created for infants and young children with possible developmental delays or disabilities. These services may include access to speech, occupational, and/or physical therapy as well as resources for the family.

Inclusive (Inclusion) Classroom (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2020). An inclusive classroom refers to a classroom where children with disabilities are able to learn and receive education alongside their typically developing peers.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2022). (*About IDEA*) is a “law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children.”

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Iris Center, n.d.). LRE is directly related to IDEA. Within IDEA, a Least Restrictive Environment states that children with disabilities should spend the “maximum time appropriate” with their same-aged peers within the general education classroom.

Peer Relationships (Greater Good Science Center, 2022). Peer relationships refer to the relationships that are built between a child and their peers. Specifically, how positive peer relationships may influence peer acceptance, companionship, validation, and support.

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky) (Hong et al., 2020). Sociocultural Theory was first defined by Lev Vygotsky. This theory stated that, “children learn concepts and skills through interactions with other members of society, especially with people more competent than themselves including parents, teachers, and peers.”

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). Social Emotional Learning refers to the skills that are learned by individuals to build healthy development and relationships. Social emotional skills are learned beginning at birth and continue to develop through adulthood.

## **Chapter II: Review of Literature**

This review examines the role of inclusive preschool classroom and how this early intervention setting may benefit both children with and without disabilities. The effects of inclusion will be examined through studies centered around the development of communication, language, and peer interaction skills in both children with and without disabilities. The differing definitions of inclusion will be examined, as well as their apparent benefits or drawbacks as examined by professionals in the field. Research findings examine the rise in inclusion and whether educators and professionals believe these practices to be beneficial or not. Despite the continued debate about the potential impact of inclusive settings on child outcomes, the early childhood experience has changed for children with disabilities with an increasing trend for young children with disabilities to be educated alongside typically developing peers whenever possible.

### **Inclusion**

Inclusion is the act of educating both disabled and non-disabled children of similar age levels together in a general education classroom setting (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2020). For the purpose of this starred paper, there will be a focus primarily on inclusive preschool classes and their early intervention practices. Inclusive preschool settings do not just include the child's placement, but factor in "classroom participation, development of relationships with peers and provision of specialized learning opportunities for children with disabilities (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2020, p. 83). Acknowledging the experiences of both children and families in inclusive settings aids in the development of best practices for inclusivity. Obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the viewpoints of parents whose children are participating in inclusive

programs is important in ensuring the overall efficacy of the inclusion philosophy (Hilbert, 2014). Additionally, licensed professionals who are educated on inclusive best-practices are able to create classrooms where all students may build growth on their social-emotional skills, peer-relationship development, communication and/or academics.

### ***Teacher's Perspectives on Inclusion***

“Teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion are important as they have the primary responsibility of implementing inclusive education” (Kraska & Boyle, 2014, p. 228). The role of a teacher is vital to the development of all children. According to Robinson and Myck-Wayne, a crucial aspect of achieving a successful and socially inclusive education is providing teachers with training that enables them to focus on applying tactics that are beneficial to monitoring the growth of all students involved in their class. General education teachers hold concerns regarding teaching children with disabilities, such as a lack of training, planning time, and resources; therefore, it is crucial to conduct research demonstrating the inclusion model's positive impact on academic achievement and social interaction among children with disabilities (Robinson & Myck-Wayne, 2016).

Despite the current emphasis on promoting inclusivity, it is evident that educational authorities have not adequately prioritized the implementation of effective planning strategies (Forbes, 2007). General educators who do not have the proper training in inclusive practices may not see the same benefits that are listed in the following sections. According to Bryant (2018), it is crucial for school districts to incorporate comprehensive training programs that encompass a deep understanding of children's disabilities, as well as effective tactics for managing classroom

dynamics and implementing behavior interventions. Without access to reasonable training, resources and paraprofessionals, inclusive practices will not be done effectively (Byrant, 2018).

In a survey conducted by Zakai-Mashiach et al. (2021), they found that educators who have undergone full instruction on cultivating social interaction and group participation among students, as well as adapting environments and curricula to accommodate individual needs, may have been equipped to facilitate the natural desire of typically developing students to engage with their peers with disabilities. However, there is a continued need for appropriate and thorough training on inclusive best practices for preschool general educators. There exists an argument that in order to achieve successful implementation of inclusive education, it is imperative to make special education courses mandatory and incorporate practical courses focused on special education into teacher training programs (Kraska & Boyle, 2014).

### ***Potential Drawbacks of Inclusion***

In addition to concerns around educator training and resources, parents have expressed worry that children without disabilities may not receive the same attention or care as their disabled peers (Gupta et al., 2014). Parents of children with less severe disabilities are included in those families who feel their child may not receive the appropriate level of care/attention. Research has indicated that parents of children with disabilities had a decreased inclination towards endorsing an inclusive program catering to children with profound disabilities, such as autism and behavior disorders (Hilbert, 2014).

Furthermore, the fear that general education teachers will not understand the needs of students with more profound disabilities exists among families. According to self-reports from school-age children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), inclusive educational

settings may not consistently offer the most favorable sensory and social environments for these children to have beneficial, interpersonal encounters and well manage the overall pressures of classroom settings (Zakai-Mashiach et al., 2021). Moreover, in inclusive preschool settings, the atmosphere of the environment is typically tracked by educators in the classroom and/or the child's parents. This limits the child's ability to state additional sensory needs that may be needed in their inclusive classroom.

In a survey conducted by Barton and Smith (2015), Participants were asked to identify and clarify the obstacles to preschool inclusion within their program, neighborhood, or state, while also proposing potential remedies. The challenges encompassed "lack of specialized training, lack of communication and collaboration, belief about typical settings and approaches to instruction and curriculum" (Barton & Smith, 2015). The primary approach adopted to address these problems involved fostering regular contact and collaboration among special education staff within school districts, personal in typical early childhood (EC) programs within districts, and personnel in community programs (Barton & Smith, 2015). Conversely, in a study conducted by Rafferty and Griffin (2005), participants included parents of children both with and without impairments, as well as teachers from an inclusive early childhood program. The study revealed that both parents of children with and without impairments, as well as their teachers, held a positive perception towards inclusion and acknowledged its advantageous impact on children with and without disabilities (Rafferty & Griffin, 2005).

### ***Benefits of Inclusion***

Inclusive practices prioritize thoughts and beliefs that aim to enhance the recognition of diversity in personal growth, promote equitable opportunities, and cultivate a shared sense of



belonging within an integrated community (Guralknick, 1999). The implementation of inclusive education provides fair and high-quality educational opportunities, as well as promote optimal development during early childhood (Olusanya et al., 2022). The majority of students with disabilities who are enrolled in schools that actively promote inclusion tend to receive increased social support and develop stronger and more permanent friendships (Hanish et al., 2021). Additionally, interaction between children with and without disabilities can promote peer acceptance, mentoring, and tutoring, thus providing children with the opportunity to learn from their same-aged typically developing peers (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban, 2016).

Based on prior studies, inclusion, despite a child's level of needs, has been found to have a favorable impact on their development (Kuutti et al., 2021). Several studies examining the impacts of inclusion generally provide evidence that young children with disabilities may experience social benefits from being placed in inclusive settings, as they have more opportunities to interact and play with socially competent peers. However, it is important to note that these children also face a relatively high risk of being rejected by their peers (Buysse et al., 2002). The practices to implement to avoid possible peer rejection will be further discussed in Chapter III.

### **Social Emotional Development**

Social-emotional development serves as the fundamental basis upon which typical methods of learning and development take place (Briggs, 2012). Numerous early childhood programs regard social-emotional development and its corresponding abilities as vital elements of the preschool curriculum (Kennedy, 2019). The framework and foundation of social-emotional skills can heavily impact skills in the other domains of development; specifically, in

communication/language, cognitive and adaptive skills (Case-Smith, 2013, p. 395). Social-emotional skills include, but are not limited to “problem solving, taking turns, empathy, decision-making, and relationship building” (Askeland, 2019, p. 4). A recent academic study on school preparation reached the conclusion that several children who begin kindergarten lacking the necessary social and emotional abilities frequently encounter persistent behavioral, intellectual, and social difficulties that may endure into adulthood (Buysse et al., 2002). It should be acknowledged that the mere integration of children with disabilities into classrooms alongside their non-disabled peers does not guarantee the acquisition of social skills or the establishment of successful reciprocal relationships (Case-Smith, 2013).

### **Communication and Language Skills**

Children who experience delays in language development may lack the necessary linguistic abilities to engage in meaningful relationships with their peers. Consequently, they may miss out on crucial opportunities to interact with their peers, which in turn hinders their ability to further develop their language skills through these interactions (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2012). In a study conducted by Stanton-Chapman et al., they determined it is imperative for preschool educators to actively facilitate the development of social communication abilities among all children within their classrooms.

Characteristics of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) include communication impairments and restrictive, repetitive behaviors and interests. Hansen et al., state how effective early intervention can prevent students with disabilities from remaining socially isolated from their peers (Hansen et al., 2014). Moreover, it is imperative for educators to deliver structured guidance and deliberate occasions for children to actively participate in

constructive social exchanges among their peers (Gauvreau, 2019). Friendship is often regarded by developmental psychologists as a gauge of a child's cognitive and language development (Buysse et al., 2002) With this knowledge, play is an opportune time to include activities to foster communication and language development.

### **Peer Relationships**

Individualized Education Program goals are separated into the five developmental domains-adaptive, personal-social, communication, motor and cognitive. These domains work together interpersonally and the progress in one domain can directly affect the others. The involvement of children with disabilities in inclusive settings allows children to obtain the “realistic and meaningful outcomes of engagement, social acceptance, and friendships” (Odom et al., 2011, p. 347). From an early age, peers have a significant role in the cultivation of skills, competencies, and the acquisition of adaptive behaviors. Peers play a significant role in the establishment of social norms and contribute to fostering a sense of belonging (Hanish et al., 2021).

In a study conducted by Buysse et al. (2002), they investigated the impact of different types of inclusive settings on the development of friendships among all preschool-aged children in inclusion. Their findings indicate that children with disabilities in daycare settings have a greater number of playmates compared to those in inclusion preschool classrooms, even when accounting for the higher proportion of children with severe disabilities in the inclusion preschool classrooms. However, further research indicated that there was a greater number of potential friends in inclusive daycare settings for all children (Buysse et al., 2002).

### ***Peer Interaction***

According to Hollingsworth and Buysse (2009), the friendships observed between children with disabilities and their peers in inclusive settings were characterized as open and friendly with a connection based on similar interest and enjoyment. Additionally, it was observed that teachers in inclusive preschool classrooms employed a greater number of active tactics to effectively facilitate the development of friendships among children with disabilities and their peers (Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009). Children diagnosed with social communication difficulties, specifically, may require methods that are more explicit, systematic, and rigorous in order to enhance their peer interactions and relationships (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2012).

The social environment in which a child exists and undergoes development holds considerable importance, particularly amongst peers. The influence of peers on children's behavior, which encompasses all aspects of their social, intellectual, moral, and emotional growth, becomes increasingly prominent inside the school setting (Hanish et al., 2021).

### ***Relationship Building***

The well-being of young children is significantly influenced by their early peer experiences, as these experiences play a crucial role in their social, emotional, and cognitive development. The establishment of peer relationships and the offer of chances for participation are fundamental to the development of every student (Kuutti et al., 2021). The absence of supportive relationships negatively impacts socio-emotional development and heightens the likelihood of behavioral issues (Kuutti et al., 2021). Additionally, these early peer interactions establish a solid groundwork for their future achievements in academic settings and other aspects of life (Hanish et al., 2021). A vital factor of cultivating friendships is establishing familiarity

and creating a space to effectively communicate with their peers (Hanish et al., 2021). Within the inclusion classroom, the most crucial aspect of the day for students is fostering friendships and peer relationships. The significance of peer relationships and the opportunity to engage in meaningful play is crucial for every student, independent of any physical, socio-emotional, verbal, or cognitive disabilities (Kuutti et al., 2021).

### **Play in Inclusive Classrooms**

Children apply play as a tool for exploring their surroundings, cultivating problem-solving abilities, and developing social competencies that still exist into adulthood (Rau, 2019). Play is an essential component within the preschool setting, as it pertains to both academic and socio-emotional development advancement. During the developmental stage of early childhood, play serves as the embedded environment in which children without disabilities acquire and enhance their language and social abilities (Rau, 2019). Additionally, numerous studies have provided evidence to support the notion that incorporating social communication services within play activities might provide positive outcomes for children with disabilities, specifically ASD (Ziegler & Morrier, 2022). According to a study conducted by Passmore and Hughes (2021), children with disabilities exhibited similar play behaviors to their non-disabled peers in an inclusive preschool environment, with no significant differences noted. However, all children did exhibit distinct interests and behaviors. Supporting play behaviors in children with disabilities can enhance their chances of being placed in inclusive school settings and expand their opportunities for participation. Additionally, it can serve as a platform for social and academic skills (Passmore & Hughes, 2021).

### ***Imitation and Modeling***

Children possess an inherent ability to monitor and learn about their surroundings, which consequently leads them to imitate or replicate behaviors they have witnessed or previously encountered (Rau, 2019). Observational learning has been applied as an instructional method that provides a number of skills to young children with disabilities, encompassing self-help and safety skills, discriminating tasks, and language skills (Garfinkle & Schwartz, 2002). To engage in observational learning, the focus child must actively observe a model and subsequently imitate the peer's behavior when faced with a similar scenario (Garfinkle & Schwartz, 2002). The initial stage proficiency of accomplishing novel play actions is the process of imitating a play action. The act of imitation holds significant value in terms of acquiring knowledge and effectively integrating into inclusive environments (Rau, 2019). Through modeling, a child without a disability is able to demonstrate proper social skills, begin relationships, and stimulate reactions from a child with disabilities (Case-Smith, 2013). Peer-mediated intervention commonly include teaching typically developing peers in the initiation and/or response to social situations with children with disabilities; this is the most utilized method to increase peer social interactions (Banda et al., 2010).

### ***Peer-Mediated Intervention***

Peer-Mediated Intervention (PMI) is defined as “a formal and sustained experience in which peers without disabilities are taught or directed by an adult to implement instructional programs, behavioral interventions, and/or facilitate social interactions in support of students with disabilities” (Travers & Carter, 2022, p. 40). In a study that listed several effective

interventions Occupational Therapists may take to encourage social-emotional development, peer-mediated intervention and play was successful (Case-Smith, 2013).

In a study conducted by Ziegler and Morrier (2022), 36 children, aged 2 to 6, within inclusive classrooms were observed. The purpose of their study was to observe how the introduction of the Buddy Game affected the communication and social interaction skills of children with and without disabilities. The Buddy Game was developed with the intention of using an organized and collaborative play activity. The Buddy Game targeted naturally arising scenarios for peer modeling and imitation, with the aim of fostering favorable social initiations, specifically social bids, from children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) towards their neurotypical developing (NTD) peers (Ziegler & Morrier, 2022).

Ziegler and Morrier (2022), found “after the implementation of the *Buddy Game*, participants with ASD in all three classrooms increased their frequency of discrete social bids toward NTD peers from an average of 1.84 at baseline to an average of 5.11” (p. 56). This increase in data can be found in Figure 1.

### **Impacts of Early Intervention and Inclusion**

A child’s first classroom is their home, with their first teacher being their caregivers. Early intervention provides caregivers the opportunity to learn about their child’s specific needs for development. As children transition towards preschool, children will learn strategies and skills to become successful amongst their peers. Positive experiences in early intervention that are continued through inclusive practices may result in lasting beneficial outcomes for both children with and without disabilities.

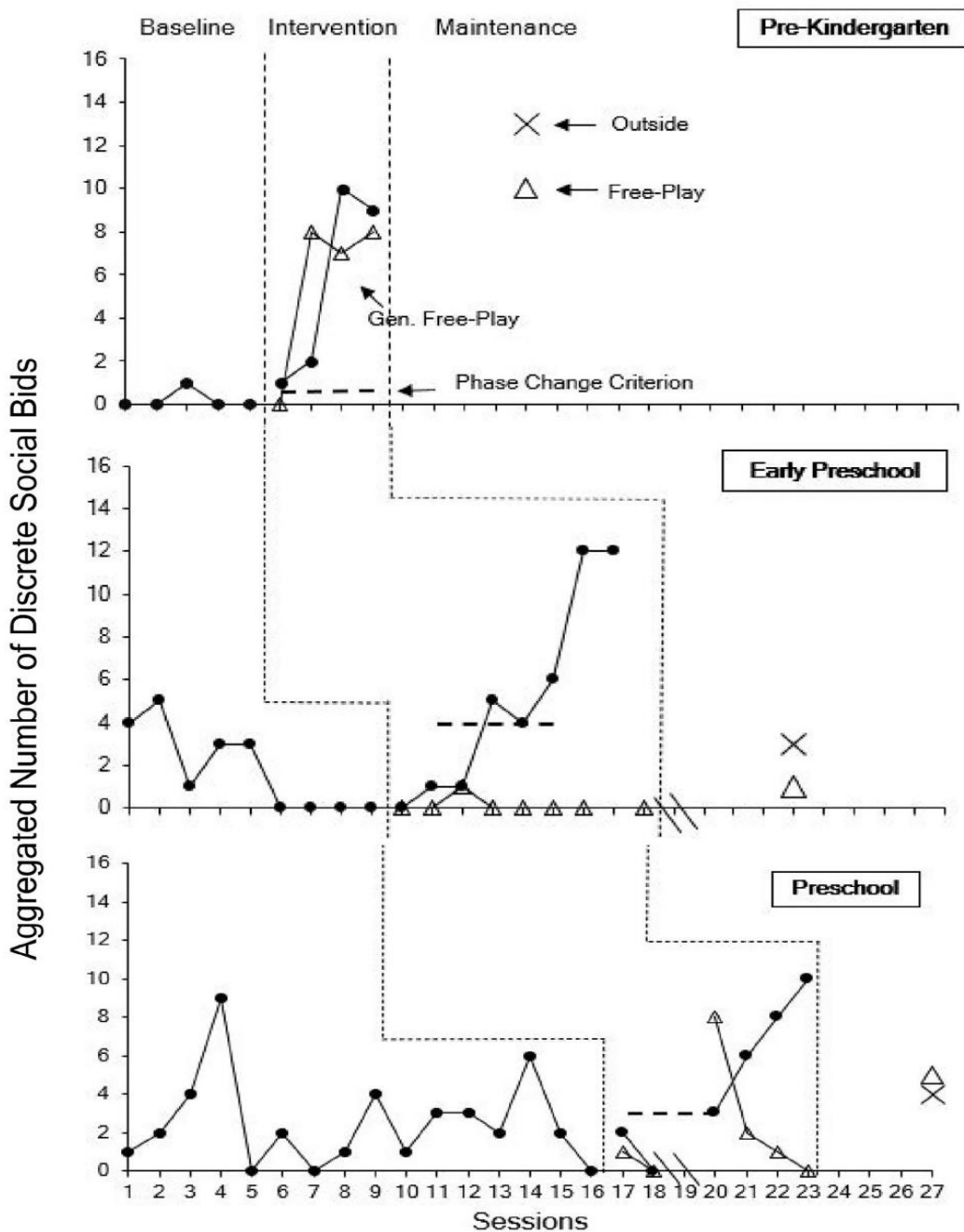
Children who have positive relationships with peers in inclusive classrooms become accustomed to play with children of varying ability levels and may carry their inclusive experiences and perspectives as they move forward into K-12 education, which represents a meaningful, long-lasting impact on our field and the children and families served within it. (Kennedy, 2019, p. 14)

Early Intervention starts by offering early identification and intervention services for children before age 5 (Olusanya et al., 2022). In the following paragraphs, the long-term effects of early intervention and inclusion on both children with and without disabilities will be observed. Specifically, the long-term effects on communication, language, and social emotional skills.



**Figure 1**

*Discrete Social Bids from kids with ASD to kids with NDT (Neurotypical development)* (Ziegler & Morrier, 2022, p. 56)



***Early Intervention Outcomes: Typically Developing Peers***

In a study conducted to find the social and academic effects of inclusion on children without disabilities, Kart and Kart (2021) found that the mere integration of children with disabilities elicits a response in typical classmates, leading to an increased understanding and development of positive attitudes towards their different counterparts (Gupta et al., 2014). Students in inclusive preschool settings that are typically developing are shown to be educated and understanding about disabilities (Odom et al., 2011). According to existing research (Odom et al., 1984), it has been found that children with typical development tend to exhibit comparable levels of developmental progress in both general and inclusive preschool settings (Odom et al., 2011). Additionally, peers are actively engaged and creating friendships in both settings as well (Odom et al., 2011).

***Language and Communication: Typically Developing Peers***

Language development is a significant milestone in early childhood representing a crucial accomplishment that not only holds intrinsic value but also serves as a fundamental basis for future learning in children (Justice et al., 2011). The findings of a recent comprehensive study on peer effects indicate that the impact of peers is particularly significant for children with lower or average levels of skill proficiency. In contrast, research shows that academically proficient students, namely those who enter preschool with advanced spoken language skills, are impacted less by the influence of their peers (Justice et al., 2011). In a study completed to observe communication skills between children with and without disabilities were instructed to initiate greetings, engaging in play, imitating others, sharing objects or experiences, taking turns in activities, asking for assistance, and making requests (Banda et al., 2010). Seventy-five percent

of the children who participated showed an increase in initiating social situations and a decrease in problem behaviors (Banda et al., 2010). Research indicates a significant correlation between the language development of children in preschool classrooms and the language abilities of their peers. This association is particularly noteworthy for children who possess lower levels of language proficiency, including those without disabilities (Chen et al., 2020).

### ***Social-Emotional Learning: Typically Developing Peers***

Children that exhibit a more advanced level of social and emotional development demonstrate a greater rate of advancement when placed in inclusion classrooms compared to segregated classrooms (Rafferty et al., 2003). In a study conducted to gauge the effects of inclusion on typically developing peers, Noggle and Stites (2018) observed improvements in social/emotional skills for all peers. Based on evidence presented in a study completed by Katz and Chard (2000), it can be inferred that typically developing children who serve as role models for their peers by exhibiting positive social-emotional skills are more prone to exhibit an elevated proficiency in these areas as well (Gupta et al., 2014). In fact, these children tend to have elevated confidence, skills of leadership and a better understanding of personal autonomy. Preschool children who possess strong social ties within their peer group and demonstrate the ability to make friendships with multiple classmates are more inclined to exhibit academic engagement upon transitioning to formal schooling, in comparison to their peers who have limited social relationships (Hanish et al., 2021).

### ***Early Intervention Outcomes: Children with Disabilities***

“Higher expectations ultimately lead children with disabilities to achieve more, gain confidence and independence, and develop a stronger sense of self” (Gupta et al., 2014, p. 42).

The measurement of outcomes for children engaged in inclusive educational programs has been a subject of controversy, despite the evident advantages of such programs for all children (Gauvreau, 2019). In a study conducted by Hanson et al., (2001), 25 children with disabilities were observed over 5 years from the time they started at an inclusion preschool until they were in primary school. This study found after 5 years; 60% were still educated in an inclusive setting. The other 40% of children were moved to more contained environments. Children who are socially accepted and demonstrate prosocial, cooperative, and responsible behaviors within the school setting tend to attain higher levels of academic achievement later in life. Conversely, pupils who are neglected by their peers often experience lower levels of academic success and are more likely to be at risk for engaging in misconduct, displaying lower aptitude for school, and potentially dropping out of school (Hanish et al., 2021).

**Language and Communication: Children with Disabilities.** In a study conducted by Justice et al., (2014), the pragmatic language ability of children in early childhood inclusive education was observed/assessed from the fall until the spring. Pragmatic Language “is the social aspect of language that children draw on when interacting with other people. This ability includes, for example, using language to make requests of other people and to engage in turn taking” (Justice et al., 2014, p. 1723). Of the students that were assessed, 55% of them had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The study found that the impact of peer effects was shown to be least significant for children without disabilities who were surrounded by classmates with good language skills. Conversely, it was seen to be most significant for children with disabilities who were in the company of peers with relatively weak language skills. The outcome of success for children with disabilities is heavily impacted by the ability of their peers (Justice et

al., 2014). In another study that observed the peer effects on children with disabilities in inclusive settings skills, those children performed better on language testing than their peers in self-contained classrooms (Rafferty et al., 2003).

Research has indicated that those who establish social connections during their early years of education have elevated levels of prosocial conduct, enhanced proficiency in both expressive and receptive language abilities, and improved capacity in resolving conflicts (Noggle & Stites, 2018). Both children with disabilities and those without show positive development in social-communication skill acquisition when given the opportunity to interact with their peers early on (Hansen et al., 2014).

**Social-Emotional Learning: Children with Disabilities.** The possession of social competence allows students to engage with their peers in numerous styles and settings, as well as to sustain favorable connections with both peers and adults. These abilities are of utmost importance for achieving success in academic settings and beyond (Kennedy, 2019). Positive peer relationships play a crucial role in offering valuable social support and creating an environment where students can develop their skills to regulate social interactions (Zweers et al., 2021). Moreover, it is worth noting that a strong sense of self-worth has been empirically linked to mental wellness and beneficial participation in social interactions, whereas a lack of self-esteem has been found to be correlated with social isolation and signs of depression. (Zweers et al., 2021) As stated previously, children without disabilities within inclusive preschool classrooms have shown long-term effects of acceptance of their peers with disabilities (Gupta et al., 2014). Thus, students with disabilities who are given the opportunity to interact with their typically developing peers in inclusive environments are provided with more opportunities for

continued acceptance and self-esteem growth later in life. Research has indicated that children that have disabilities who are able to form friendships tend to exhibit higher levels of social interaction, engage in isolated play more sparingly, and have a greater number of peer relationships compared to their counterparts without friendships (Ferreira et al., 2017). Children with disabilities are more likely to achieve beneficial long-term outcomes when they have successful academic and social experiences (Winstead et al., 2019). Substantial social and emotional foundations have been shown to lower the achievement disparity among children by the time they start their kindergarten education, there by fostering academic accomplishments and enhancing prospects for future employment (Gupta et al., 2014).

### **Literature Review Summary**

Inclusive preschool classes and practices yield a diverse range of results, encompassing both advantages and disadvantages, for children with and without disabilities. There are a number of benefits in language acquisition, communication, and social-emotional skills for children with disabilities. Additionally, children without disabilities show greater empathy and understanding for their same-aged peers with disabilities when placed in inclusive classrooms (Gupta et al., 2014). However, children with disabilities still face the risk of peer isolation or rejection, regardless of their classroom placement (Buysse et al., 2002). The underlying theme throughout this literature review revolves around the idea that benefits of inclusion arise when children are placed inside a positive inclusive environment. The following is an overview of strategies aimed at promoting the implementation of effective inclusion practices both within and beyond the classroom.

### ***Quality Inclusive Classroom Environments***

Rosada-Castellano et al., (2022) stated that the aspects that hold us back from high-quality, full inclusion are “prejudice or stigma towards people with disabilities, lack of training in the inclusion of the educational community or physical, communicative and economic barriers” (p. 1). Studies show that there are two qualities that encourage positive student outcomes in early childhood education services; they are “(a) the quality of the curriculum and intentional teaching (e.g., planning, delivering, and evaluating instruction, facilitating positive relationships, and social-emotional development) and (b) structural aspects such as the physical environment, child–caregiver ratios, caregiver qualifications, and compensation” (Odom et al., 2011, p. 349). This statement can be true for inclusive classroom just the same. Soukakou et al. (2014) observed that specialized methods of instruction, including embedded interventions, contextual and curricular adaptations, and the implementation of assistive technology, fulfill an essential part in facilitating the growth and learning within inclusive educational environments. High-quality inclusion guarantees the active engagement and integration of children with disabilities in social interactions with both their peers and adults, fostering a sense of belonging among them (Love & Horn, 2021). High quality and positive inclusive environments can only occur when the licensed professionals and other staff within the classroom receive adequate training and have the resources and materials at their disposal.

### ***Effective Instructional Practice for Educators***

While inclusive education is considered the least restrictive environment for certain students with disabilities, the lack of effective teacher training limits the possibility of inclusive best practices for children. Rosado-Castellano et al., (2022) stated that in order for inclusion to

be effective, the inclusion strategies, “must be developed within the school culture, guided by less segregating and more humanizing pedagogical methodologies” (p. 2). Zagona et al. (2017) found that teachers who were licensed in special education and/or had taken coursework previously in special education experienced a heightened sense of readiness. Furthermore, instructors who possessed an effective team with whom they could engage in collaborative efforts exhibited favorable attitudes towards inclusive education (Zagona et al., 2017). Thus, providing professional development opportunities for teachers to expand their knowledge of inclusive best practices alongside other educators and providers could be considered beneficial.

The study conducted by Coates et al., (2020) investigates the efficacy of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs in preparing preservice teachers for successful implementation in inclusive classroom settings. The findings of their analysis indicate that it would be beneficial for the university overseeing licensure to incorporate supplementary courses pertaining to equitable and efficient inclusion into the existing program requirements (Coates et al., 2020). In addition to these additional courses, new teachers should be provided with a self-efficacy checklist regarding their inclusion classroom and provide a mentor or team to ensure efficacy and offer support.

### ***Extending Inclusion Outside of the Classroom***

While there are moments to have children with disabilities educated in more inclusive settings, studies show that those children with disabilities often “(a) have limited contact with the social world outside of home, (b) feel lonely and excluded, and (c) encounter social barriers such as bullying and discrimination” (Zakai-Mashiach et al., 2021, p. 3). Children with disabilities are more prone to encountering peer rejection at an increased frequency, which consequently



increases their likelihood of being deprived of significant social interactions with their peers. The observed occurrence could be attributed to gaps in social and play abilities between these children and their peers without disabilities, which may worsen over time with segregation of students (Kennedy, 2019). Due to this rationale, it is crucial for educators and school systems to provide resources that facilitate inclusive possibilities for families with children who have disabilities within their local community. When offering community support suggestions remember that the establishment of community support systems should be based on the strengths and priorities of the family (Park et al., 2023). As the educator and the designated case manager for the student, it is imperative to consider the student's extracurricular activities and commitments beyond the classroom setting. In light of this, it is recommended to identify and provide community programs and support services that align with the student's existing schedule, therefore fostering their independence in adaptive skills.

### ***The Inclusive Education Checklist***

Presented below is a compilation of strategies that I have designed to establish an inclusive educational setting of quality, accommodating the needs of all students. This marks the initial phase, with the potential for further refinement and expansion as additional research emerges.

- Educators should show continued want to learn and develop their skills in inclusive education.
- School districts will offer resources, materials, and proper training for all staff within the classroom, including assistant educators.

- Each individual student's sensory needs should be accounted for. Be sure to check that students are provided with fidgets, mouth chews, compressions vests, adapted seating, etc. if needed.
- Create an environment that is not overstimulating and conducive for learning. For example, limit the number of posters that may be distracting for students, refrain from wearing strong smelling perfumes/colognes and seek additional forms of lighting for calming time.
- Provide a calming space for students to go to when needed. This space could include, but is not limited to, comfortable seating, weighted blankets, fidgets, headphones, and books.
- Provide multiple forms of visuals for students. Include a large visual schedule as well as visual cue cards for different activities that students may struggle with (i.e., transitions, independent or small group work times).

### Chapter III: Results

This study is of utmost importance as it concerns the fundamental right of inclusive education for children with disabilities, ensuring their equitable access to learning opportunities alongside their typically developing classmates. Inclusion classrooms are listed as appropriate Least Restrictive Environments for some students with disabilities. It is notable that in the 2021-2022 school year, a significant number of children with disabilities, specifically those between the ages of 3 and 21, received their education inside inclusive classroom settings, amounting to 15% (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The results of this study have the capacity to provide valuable insights for parents, educators, and administrators in recognizing the impact of inclusive preschool education. Furthermore, this paper aims to explore the methods and strategies for creating high-quality inclusive educational environments.

#### Conclusions

The overall conclusions and results from the Literature Review in Chapter II will be summarized in the following sections through a question-and-answer format.

**1. How are preschool children’s social-emotional skills impacted when placed in inclusive classrooms?**

A common concern that families have had about inclusion is that children without disabilities will begin to model or imitate potential “bad” behaviors that they see children with disabilities doing. These behaviors may include hitting, biting, yelling, etc. However, there is limited evidence proving this concern (Hilbert, 2014). In fact, these children tend to have elevated confidence, skills of leadership and a better understanding of personal autonomy (Gupta et al., 2014).

Children without disabilities have proven to be helpful in modeling forms of play and other social interactions. In fact, children with disabilities who aid in modeling positive social-emotional skills tend to have a heightened development in this domain and activities that are incorporated with it (Case-Smith, 2013; Katz & Chard, 2000). There is continued evidence from Guralnick (1999), that with an understanding of disabilities, peers will adjust their engagement for their peers with disabilities. When children without disabilities engage with their peers with disabilities, they demonstrate multiple significant modifications that seem to be in response to the varying abilities of their peers (Guralnick, 1999).

Children with and without disabilities benefit heavily from peer relationship building, in fact the development of peer relationships is fundamental to success in other domains of development (Kuutti et al., 2021). Positive peer relationships have been proven to increase children with disabilities' self-esteem, thus increasing their mental health as well (Gupta et al., 2014). Children with heightened levels of self-esteem will also have heightened levels of confidence. These qualities together lead to children having a continued want to attend school and continue to participate within the classroom. Friendship has been listed as the starting point for establishing cognitive and language development/acquisition (Buysse et al., 2002).

## **2. How do students in inclusive preschool classrooms with disabilities develop language skills from their typically developing peers?**

As stated in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, children, with and without disabilities, learn from observing individuals around them in their natural environment (Topçiu & Myftiu, 2015). Snack, play, and circle times are "natural" environments where educators are able to implement opportunities for communication and language development. Numerous studies have

demonstrated that individuals who form social bonds throughout their formative educational years have heightened levels of prosocial behavior, greater proficiency in expressive and receptive language skills, and improved aptitude in dispute resolution (Noggle & Stites, 2018).

Modeling and imitation are skills that have been referenced often throughout this paper and the literature review. Peer-Mediated Intervention (PMI) was shown as an example to increase children with disabilities' understanding of appropriate social interactions and the development of social-emotional skills. However, Peer-Mediated Intervention (PMI) can be utilized in acquisition of communication and language skills as well. While there were a few studies that showed how inclusion benefits children with disabilities' language acquisition, there is a continued need for research on typically developing students' role in this development in the inclusive preschool classroom.

### ***What are Long-term Outcomes for All Children Placed in Inclusive Preschool Classrooms?***

A common long-term effect of inclusive preschool for children without disabilities is their continued understanding of different disabilities. Children without disabilities have shown to have a better understanding of their peers with disabilities and will interact and incorporate them into play more later in life (Gupta et al., 2014). Children without disabilities that attended inclusive preschool classrooms and aided in modeled play have shown continued skills of leadership, confidence, and emotional regulation later in their lives (Gupta et al., 2014). These skills heighten the chance of heightened success in their academics and continued success as they one day enter the work force (Hanish et al., 2021).

Social isolation is a large concern for children with disabilities (Kennedy, 2019). Through inclusion, children with disabilities are provided the opportunity to learn and interact with their

typically developing peers. According to Ferreira et al. (2017), empirical investigations have demonstrated that children with disabilities who are capable of establishing friendships demonstrate heightened levels of social interaction, engage in solitary play less frequently, and cultivate a larger network of peer relationships in comparison to their peers who lack such friendships. Moreover, positive experience in inclusive education has proven to lower the disparity of achievement between children with and without disabilities as they enter primary school (Winstead et al., 2019).

### **Discussions and Reflections**

The following section of the paper explains the author's position on the matter at hand. The thoughts presented here are a result of combining personal and professional experiences with the information gathered from the literature review completed in Chapter II.

We are placed in environments where we naturally feel the need to interact. It is natural state of being to seek out connection, relationships, and growth alongside others. At the grocery store when we hold conversations with the workers around us, at a concert as you talk to a stranger about your favorite band and/or at the park when a child sees others playing. In my center-based classroom, I have watched as my students have gotten more comfortable with each other as the weeks progress; as a student who once would play alone began to move their toys closer and closer to their peers during choice time. I have watched these same students run eagerly outside as we play with the inclusive preschool classrooms on the playground. I observe children of all abilities interacting with one another and using their imaginations to interact in creative, sociodramatic and/or symbolic ways.

While keeping their least restrictive environments in mind, children with disabilities deserve the right to play, interact and learn alongside their typically developing peers. It is my professional opinion that children with disabilities are provided with the opportunity to play alongside their typically developing peers. For those children who are in contained classroom, they should still be provided with opportunities to enjoy the gym, outside and snack times alongside their peers. The inclusion of children with disabilities during these high social communication and child-led activities allows all peers to limit their feelings of social isolation and peer rejection. Limiting these negative feelings will increase children's development and academic success (Hanish et al., 2021).

When I am unfamiliar with a specific task, I find myself gravitating to my peers or supervisors who have had more experience in this unknown behavior or activity. I believe that children are the same and learn best through observing peers and adults in their natural environment. I have found that I often reference Vygotsky's sociocultural theory when discussing how a child develops. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory states that, "children learn concepts and skills through interactions with other members of society, especially with people more competent than themselves including parents, teachers, and peers" (Hong et al., 2020, p. 49).

While students in inclusive classrooms are shown development in these social emotional skills through peer interaction, I strongly believe that there should be social-emotional curriculum that is integrated into the classroom. While students without disabilities show an increase in level of skill when modeling social-emotional skills to their peers, there are elements that still need to be first taught and introduced. These skills include teaching emotions, calm

down strategies, forms of breathing and mindfulness activities etc. In addition to the training on a social-emotional curriculum, I strongly believe that all teachers should receive consistent and adequate teaching surrounded by special education and inclusive practices. The most common downfall for teachers with inclusion is that they felt they were not adequately trained or did not have the materials necessary to provide accommodation and support for their students (Forbes, 2007).

### **Recommendations for Research**

As inclusive education becomes more prominent in our society, there is a continued need for research and studies on its long-term outcomes for students. At the time of research for this paper, there were limited longitudinal studies that followed students who were at one time in inclusive preschool classrooms. Moreover, a number of the sources recorded data on either child with disabilities or children without disabilities rather than extensive data on all children within the classroom. Below are recommendations for furthering research on this paper's topic:

1. Observe the impact of inclusion on peer's social-emotional development through studies conducted in preschool inclusion through primary and secondary school.
2. Observe the impact of inclusion on peer's communication and language development through studies conducted in preschool inclusion through primary and secondary school.
3. Examine how children with disabilities who attended inclusion beginning in preschool fared outside of school compared to their peers who were in segregated and/or contained classrooms.



4. Collect data on development from both children with and without disabilities in the same inclusive classrooms.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

As an educator who works with preschool children with disabilities, I can acknowledge how difficult at times it is to meet the needs of all my students. However, for those teachers that have not had opportunities for effective training and/or coursework in special education, that stress can increase tenfold. Below are recommendations for licensure programs, school districts, administrators, and educators:

1. Include Special Education course requirements for any future teaching licensures.
2. Provide professional development training on proper accommodations/modifications for students of all abilities, creating a safe space for different sensory needs and lesson planning to encourage the development of language, communication, and social emotional skills between all peers.
3. Create an inclusion team within school districts who may provide resources, materials, support, and education to teachers in all classrooms.
4. Schedule weekly to monthly individual check-ins, based on individual teacher need, between educators and their inclusive trained mentor.

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