Preschool Inclusion Challenges and Solutions: A National Survey
Erin E. Barton, Ph.D., Vanderbilt University
Barbara J. Smith, Ph.D., University of Colorado Denver
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Laws and Policies
For more than 35 years, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and other federal early childhood (EC) programs (e.g., Head Start) have encouraged educational services for preschool children with disabilities to be delivered in regular early childhood classrooms with typically developing peers. In fact, IDEA has a strong preference for the placement of young children with disabilities in settings with typically developing children (Musgrove, 2012). Under IDEA school districts must ensure that all children with disabilities are educated with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate (34 CFR §300.114). The "removal" of children from the regular education setting can be done only if the regular education placement is not satisfactory even with the provision of supplementary aids and services (34 CFR §300.114) and training and technical assistance for administrators and teachers (34 CFR §300.119).

Research
Additionally, decades of research have shown that high-quality early services in inclusive settings are beneficial for all young children, their families, and our communities (Guralnick, 2001; National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, 2009; Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011; Wolery & Wilbers, 1994). Positive outcomes, including social and communication skills and academic achievement, accrue to children with and without disabilities in high-quality inclusive settings (Odom et al., 2004; Strain & Bovey, 2011).

The State of Preschool Inclusion
And yet, according to reports from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), in 2012, across all states, fewer than half (i.e., 42.5%) of children with disabilities ages 3–5 years received their special education and related services in a regular EC classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Comparing 1985 data to 2012 data, the practice of providing special education and related services to children with disabilities ages 3–5 years of age in regular EC settings appears to have increased by only 5.7% (U.S. Department of Education, 1987, 2014).

Our Survey

Methods

A national survey was conducted of state and local education administrators to identify current challenges to preschool inclusion and solutions to those challenges (Barton & Smith, under review) and to compare these results to a previous study (Rose & Smith, 1993; Smith & Rose, 1993; Smith, Salisbury, & Rose, 1992). The definition of preschool inclusion was when children (age 3 – 5) with an Individual Education Program (IEP) receive their special education and related services in settings with at least 50% of peers without IEPs. The on-line survey was sent in January, 2014 to the IDEA/619 Preschool Coordinators in all 61 US states and territories. The email included a letter asking the 619 Coordinators to send the survey link to local administrators in their states or territories.

Results

Two hundred and thirty eight (238) people responded to the survey from 32 states and 1 territory. Respondents represented rural, suburban, urban and remote settings. The majority of the respondents included: school district special education preschool coordinator or child find coordinators, school district special education directors, school district early childhood administrators, State 619 Preschool Coordinators, Head Start administrators, ECSE/SpEd teachers or consultants, and State Special Education Directors. Fifty one percent (51%) (31) of US states and territories' 619 Preschool Coordinators responded to the survey. The survey asked respondents to identify and describe challenges to preschool inclusion in their program, community, or state, and to suggest solutions that they were implementing or thought would address the challenge.

See survey results on the next page….

Challenges: The challenges, ranking and percent of responses are listed below.

1. Attitudes/Beliefs (29.8%)
2. Fiscal/Contracting Policies (18.9%)
3. Approval of Private/non-public school Policies (15.5%)
4. Transportation Policies (14.7%)
5. Differing Curricula (14.7%)
6. Personnel Policies (11.3%)
7. Program Quality (10.5%)
8. Conflicting Policies between district and non-district programs (9.7%)

Examples of Solutions:

- Create a state level inclusion team for "barrier busting" that responds to local concerns
- State dissemination to districts of creative ways to provide inclusion; examples; incentives
- Provide information to districts regarding braiding funding
- Provide joint professional development activities for EC, ECSE and community providers
- Ensure support to EC programs for behavior support
- Educate local administrators about the benefits of preschool inclusion
- Create easy to read materials on the benefits of and laws related to preschool inclusion
- Establish models of high quality inclusion for people to visit
- Provide opportunities for practitioners, families, and administrators to explore concerns and benefits re: inclusion
- Arrange meetings with teachers, parents, and administrators involved in successful inclusion

- Establish a transdisciplinary inclusion team to build support for inclusive programs
- Create tuition based access to district EC programs for typically developing children from community
- Reimburse parents for transportation
- Braid funding streams
- Redistribution of staff and resources to promote inclusion
- Public awareness of the benefits of inclusion
- Collaboration and communication across communities and programs
- Require co-teaching (EC & ECSE) practica for certification
- Provide para-educators to community sites
- Create MOU's and contracts with community programs that address quality
- Provide training and coaching to community programs as well as itinerate ECSE services
- Provide state training and T/A to district and community EC programs

Comparison to 1993 Survey

A comparison of the 1993 (Smith & Rose) and 2014 results indicated that typical challenges and suggested solutions have changed very little. The major change from 1993 to 2014 is that the attitude and belief challenges moved from being the second highest rated category of challenges to the highest rated.

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