Inclusive Prekindergarten Classrooms in a New Era: Exploring the Perspectives of Teachers in the United States

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to share the results of a qualitative research study designed to shed light on the perspectives of inclusive prekindergarten classroom teachers in the United States. This study used surveys, interviews, and classroom observations to explore understandings of recently adopted learning standards and accountability reforms, as well as perceptions of the benefits and challenges of today's inclusive prekindergarten settings. Data revealed four primary themes: early childhood teachers in inclusive prekindergarten settings value collaboration; they believe inclusive settings have the potential to benefit all children; inclusive prekindergarten teachers are facing significant new challenges; and, they need additional resources to address the challenges and realize the benefits. Building on these data, the authors provide an argument for the field of early childhood education in the United States to help build the capacity of inclusive prekindergarten settings to meet existing challenges and new demands.

Key Words: prekindergarten classrooms, inclusion, children with disabilities, early childhood education, teachers' perspectives, inclusive settings, collaboration, preschool students, United States of America

Introduction

For over 35 years, the inclusion of young children with disabilities in general education settings has been a dominant topic for consideration in the field of early childhood education. Researchers and practitioners have long been concerned with issues of access and equity in regard to high quality early childhood education for all children, including those with disabilities. The reauthorization of federal legislation in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) mandated that young children with disabilities in the United States receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE also mandates that young children with disabilities have the opportunity to attend the same early childhood programs as their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible. The civil rights legislation in the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2009 (ADAAA) also prohibited discrimination against individuals with disabilities and guaranteed equal opportunities in all areas of public life, including daycare centers.

Best practices in early childhood education point to the potential benefits of inclusion for young children (Mogharreban & Bruns, 2009; Soukakou, Winton, West, Sideris, & Rucker, 2015). Research suggests that early education programs can positively influence both school participation and outcomes for children with disabilities (Phillips & Meloy, 2012). However, the inclusion of children with disabilities can take many different forms. As a result, questions persist regarding the precise meaning of inclusion in early childhood settings as well as its potential implications for policy, practice, and outcomes (DEC/NAEYC Position Statement, 2009). In an effort to further define inclusion and better identify the key components of high quality inclusive preschool programs in the U.S., the Council for Exceptional Children Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) issued a joint statement in 2009. According to the DEC/NAEYC joint position statement, inclusion is defined as the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The DEC/NAEYC joint statement also states that the desired results of inclusive experiences for young children and their families should include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning that fosters their full potential (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

Merging the fields of early childhood education and early childhood special education in ways that fully reflect the intent of the 2009 DEC/NAEYC position statement presents a range of challenges for inclusive prekindergarten

settings in the U.S. According to Darragh (2007), a primary challenge is the ongoing lack of an organizing framework for teaching practices, curriculum, and environmental design. As a result, many early childhood educators find themselves struggling to create high quality inclusive prekindergarten classroom settings that effectively serve all children (Salend, 2008). Additionally, there are critical differences in how early childhood stakeholders (e.g., general education teachers, special education teachers, families, administrators, related service providers, etc.) conceptualize the most effective delivery of services to children (Frankel, Gold, & Ajodhia-Andrews, 2010).

Although individual states vary in their provision of inclusive prekindergarten programs, the guiding principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act encourage such programs to become viable and welcome settings for young children with disabilities (Darragh, 2007). Since what is considered an appropriate level of supports and services can vary considerably in inclusive prekindergarten classrooms in the U.S., each child is provided with an Individualized Education Program (IEP). For children with disabilities, this IEP stipulates the types and frequency of related and/or special education services as well as placement in either a half-day, full-day, 12-month, or in-state residential special education program (New York State Education Department, 2003). In keeping with the core principles of federal legislation within the Individuals with Disability Education Act, an interdisciplinary team makes decisions about the most appropriate educational program for young children with disabilities, delivers a continuum of services, and nurtures and strengthens effective partnerships with families (Friend & Cook, 2010). Embedded within such collaborative efforts are a range of teaching models whereby special education teachers and general education teachers work together to provide appropriate supports and services (Magiera, Simmons, Marotta, & Battaglia, 2005).

Entering a New Era in Early Childhood Education

The field of early childhood education in the U.S. is entering an era where accountability for young children's outcomes is high and resources for professional support are low (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). Also confronting early childhood teachers in this new era are recently adopted early learning standards that in some states include a Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core and stipulate what all preschool children should know and be able to do. The implementation of new learning standards and accountability reforms in early childhood education is creating a new set of challenges for teachers (Brown, 2011), particularly those working in inclusive prekindergarten settings.

With a national education policy calling for increased accountability, early childhood teachers in inclusive prekindergarten settings in the U.S. are being confronted with the challenge of integrating new learning standards and accountability reforms with developmentally appropriate practices for children with and without disabilities. Research suggests that while teachers generally support the idea of including children with disabilities in early childhood settings, they often struggle with or lack the necessary skills for adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of children with disabilities while simultaneously providing a high quality program for children without special needs (Silverman, Hong, & Trepanier-Street, 2010).

Evidence suggests that the characteristics of teachers and the broad diversity (i.e., racial/ethnic, socioeconomic status, language, disability, etc.) of the children in early childhood settings is closely connected to quality (Sanders & Downer, 2012), and a high quality education plays a critical role in supporting all children in achieving a range of academic, language, and social competencies (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007). However, much less is understood about what constitutes the necessary practices to achieve such quality in today's inclusive prekindergarten settings in the U.S. In order to more fully explore the vision presented in the DEC/NAEYC joint position statement (2009) and fill a gap in the literature, this study examines inclusive prekindergarten practices through the unique perspectives of general education and special education teachers.

Project Overview

This study was conducted during the 2014–2015 school year with the following goals: (1) to examine the perspectives of general education and special education teachers working in inclusive prekindergarten settings in the U.S. on recently adopted early learning standards and accountability reforms; and (2) explore what general education and special education teachers perceive as some of the benefits and challenges of today's inclusive prekindergarten classrooms in the U.S. This article describes this one-year study conducted using surveys, interviews, and classroom observations of general education and special education teachers working in eight inclusive prekindergarten classrooms in a small city in New York State. This study can be considered exemplary for its innovative practices in connection with the broader goal of examining the unique perspectives of early childhood general education and special education teachers. Responding to our claim that there is an inadequate examination within the field of early childhood education of inclusive prekindergarten settings in the U.S. in a new era of standards and accountability reforms, this study utilizes qualitative data to broaden and deepen our understandings.

Setting

This study took place in eight inclusive prekindergarten classrooms operated by two different early childhood agencies (Agency A and Agency B) in a small city in Central New York State. Each classroom was identified by New York State Education Department as a "Special Class in an Integrated Setting." A special class in an integrated setting is a prekindergarten class that is designed to integrate approximately ten "typically developing" children with six to eight children identified as "a preschooler with a disability" (New York State Education Department, 2003).

All of the classrooms included in this study utilized a co-teaching model (one general education teacher and one special education teacher) to serve children 3–5 years of age, with and without disabilities, in half-day program sessions. Each classroom is designed to serve between 16–18 children when fully enrolled. The staffing consists of a general education teacher, a special education teacher, and a classroom aide. Based on individual children's IEPs, related service providers may also be present, including occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech language pathologists, and paraprofessionals.

Agency A

Agency A operates four inclusive prekindergarten classrooms. Three of the classrooms each serve up to 18 students aged 3–4 years through the following enrollment options: a prekindergarten through a local school district at no cost; the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) at no cost; or, a private pay monthly tuition. The fourth classroom serves up to 14 children (age 3) through either the CPSE or private pay tuition options. In this agency, approximately 70% of the children are White, 20% are Black, 5% are Asian, and 5% are Hispanic. The number of children meeting the criteria for free/ reduced lunch based on family income is approximately 45%. Between 8–10 children in each classroom are classified by their school district's Committee on Preschool Special Education as a "Preschooler with a Disability" and receive special education and/ or related services as part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Agency B

Agency B operates four inclusive prekindergarten classrooms in partnership with a local Head Start program. Each of the four inclusive prekindergarten classrooms serves approximately 16 children. Approximately 10 of these children are enrolled through Head Start or a local school district's Universal Prekindergarten Program (UPK) at no cost. Six other children in each inclusive

prekindergarten classroom are enrolled through their school district's CPSE at no cost. The children enrolled in these inclusive classrooms are from diverse backgrounds. The overall demographic breakdown for the children served by this agency is as follows: 3% Asian, 24% African American, 3% Latino or Hispanic, 1% Native American, 46% White, 23% Mixed Race.

Methods

This study was approved and monitored by the university's Internal Review Board. It explored the perspectives of general education teachers and special education teachers in the U.S. of the benefits and challenges working in eight inclusive prekindergarten classrooms across two agencies to develop a rich database of 14 surveys (of 7 general education and 7 special education teachers), 16 semi-structured interviews, and 16 unstructured classroom observations. Surveys and interviews were conducted using purposeful sampling. Based on Merriam's (1998) definition, this purposeful sampling assumed that if these researchers wanted to better understand the perspectives of early childhood teachers and early childhood special education teachers working in inclusive prekindergarten classrooms, we needed to select individuals from whom the most could be learned.

Participants

Although two teachers elected not to hand in a survey and complete demographic information, all 16 teachers participated in interviews and classroom observations. All of the general education and special education teachers were certified by the New York State Education Department in early childhood education or special education (please see chart in the Appendix for more information on the participants).

Surveys

Participants were invited to complete an anonymous survey that was designed to explore their perspectives on recently adopted early learning standards. This survey was distributed to teachers via their agency mailboxes and returned to a sealed box in a staff break room. The survey tool asked participants to rate their feelings and opinions on a variety of Likert-type scales divided into five sections: (1) knowledge of the new early learning standards; (2) level of preparation to use the standards to plan instruction; (3) ability to develop activities for a wide range of learners; (4) feelings of self-efficacy around working effectively with children with challenging behaviors; and (5) ability to work effectively as a classroom team. The surveys also asked participants two open-ended questions: (1) What strengths do you bring to your

work? and (2) What areas for growth do you have? For example, in survey tool section one, respondents were asked to rate how much they know about the new early learning standards on a scale of one to four (1 representing "a lot" and 4 representing "not at all").

Interviews

Based on Fontana & Frey's (2000) qualitative research framework, this study utilized semi-structured interviews as a means of data gathering using a "universal mode of systematic inquiry" (p. 646). Interviews aimed at eliciting teachers' perceptions of some of the benefits and challenges of inclusive prekindergarten settings. Examples of interview questions included, "What do you perceive are benefits to today's inclusive preK classrooms?" and "What do you perceive as challenges to today's inclusive preK classrooms?" Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each classroom team (one general education teacher/one special education teacher). Interviews were conducted in the classroom during the hour between the morning and afternoon class sessions. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. In reporting interview data, pseudonyms have been used for all participants.

Unstructured Classroom Observations

Sixteen unstructured classroom observations (two observations per classroom) were conducted as part of this study. Each observation lasted approximately two hours. Observations were conducted during a variety of activities such as large group time, free play, and learning centers. The primary purpose of conducting unstructured classroom observations was to gain familiarity with inclusive prekindergarten preschool teachers, classroom activities, and curricula. Considered the fundamental base of all research methods in the social sciences (Adler & Adler, 1994), these observations were employed primarily to lend meaning to the words of the persons being interviewed (Angrosino & Perez, 2000). Additionally, these observations provided an important way to establish rapport and trust with classroom staff by increasing understandings of their role, viewpoint, or perspective (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Field notes were taken during each observation of what was seen, heard, and felt during the classroom visits (Richardson, 2000). Although the unstructured classroom observations informed the lens through which we analyzed the data, observation field notes were not included in data analysis.

Analytic Procedures

Fourteen surveys were completed by participants. Survey data analysis included the tabulation of the Likert-type scales as a way to make comparisons

across participants according to the five sections of the survey: (1) knowledge of the new early learning standards; (2) level of preparation to use the standards to plan instruction; (3) ability to develop activities for a wide range of learners; (4) feelings of self-efficacy around working effectively with children with challenging behaviors; and (5) ability to work effectively as a classroom team.

Interview data involved the identification and examination of themes emerging around interview questions, which focused on teachers' knowledge of new early learning standards for instructional purposes, self-efficacy, perceptions of the benefits and challenges of inclusive prekindergarten classrooms, and classroom practices. The researchers engaged in open and axial coding of the interview data (Creswell, 1998) to achieve a rigorous data analysis process. Data credibility and trustworthiness were considered early in the process by having interviews transcribed by a non-coding assistant. Once interviews were transcribed, the researchers read, coded, and memoed the data independently to reduce persuasion or bias. Each researcher employed an inductive approach, using open coding, reading each of the interviews, and documenting themes. After independent analysis of the interview data, the researchers engaged in collaborative discussion of the themes they had developed individually. The collaborative discussions increased the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings as common, overlapping, and frequently identified themes were recognized in an effort to finalize themes. This process continued until reaching a point of "theoretical saturation," at which point additional data no longer increased understanding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This independent and then collaborative process assured a form of inter-rater reliability. Interview data analysis occurred separately from survey analysis.

Findings

Surveys

Knowledge and Use of Standards

The first section of the survey asked teachers to rate their knowledge and understanding of the Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core (New York State Standards). The majority (11/14 or 79%) of early childhood and special education teachers from across agencies indicated that they knew "some" or "little" about the Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core. Across surveys, the majority of participants (11/14 or 79%) also indicated that they were "somewhat" or "a little" prepared to use the standards to plan instruction or to assess learning.

Differentiation

Three survey questions asked teachers to rate how prepared they were to meet children's needs. All of the teachers across roles and agencies (14/14 or 100%) indicated that they were "well" (10/14 or 71%) or "somewhat" prepared (4/14 or 29%) to develop activities for a wide range of learners. The survey also included an open-ended question that asked participants what they considered to be their own strengths and/or what they considered themselves "good at." Responses included meeting diverse children's needs, differentiating, assessing needs, and making accommodations and modifying lessons for various levels.

Behavior

According to the Likert section of the survey, the teachers (14/14 or 100%) indicated they were "confident" in their abilities to deal with challenging behaviors. Participants rated their level of preparedness as either "well prepared" (9/14 or 64%) or "somewhat prepared" (5/14 or 36%). On the open-ended questions at the end of the survey, participants were asked to list specific challenges and future topics for trainings. Several survey participants (6/14 or 43%) listed student behaviors as either their greatest challenge or as a topic for future professional development training. Other responses included assessment, technology, nutrition, finance, art, and autism.

Team Work

Survey results indicated that 11 (79%) of the teachers stated they were "well prepared" to work effectively as a team, while the remainder (3/14 or 21%) were "somewhat prepared." At the end of the survey, participants were also asked to list their strengths. Perceived strengths such as communication and patience were noted by 6/14 or 43% of participants. Additional perceived strengths identified by participants included: team player, good planner, high expectations, hard worker, reliable, and remaining calm.

Interviews

At the conclusion of the interview analysis, four primary themes emerged. The themes and supporting quotes are documented below.

Theme One: Teachers in Inclusive Prekindergarten Settings Value Collaboration

Across interviews, participants characterized a prevailing benefit of inclusive prekindergarten classrooms as providing teachers with both formal and informal opportunities to work collaboratively. For many participants, a primary benefit of collaborating with another teacher was the opportunity to share ideas, particularly for instructional planning. As one general education

teacher, Mark, remarked, "We are able to share ideas, especially in planning... Like she would have ideas, and I would say, 'You know, I didn't think of it, that's pretty good, and here's what I would do,' and she would agree with that and [we would] compromise." Diane, a special education teacher, noted, "We plan for every week together so we know what books we are going to read for circle time, what art projects we are going to do, and what we are going to do for small groups. So we know what we are going to do from week to week... and that really helps a lot." For other participants, opportunities for collaboration between general education and special education also supported effective teamwork. Sarah, a special education teacher, described,

> The more we work together, we know each other's looks and comments. We know when someone is getting a little flustered or irritated; we are like, ok guys, and we step in. We are trying to get that emotional bond in a way that we are able to know when people need help more easily instead of them having to say it.

This sentiment was echoed by Joanne, a general education teacher, when she shared, "I think our team works well as a whole. We are on the same page. We are comfortable enough to voice what's working well and what's not so there is no tension or conflict."

In addition to supporting effective teamwork, the majority of participants also noted the benefit of working collaboratively with related service providers (e.g., speech–language pathologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists). For some participants, this interdisciplinary collaboration deepened their understanding of children's IEP goals, including specific interventions. Erin, a general education teacher, described,

> I think a real benefit is having the therapist be part of a weekly team meeting. We do a good job as a team meeting the special education children's goals and everybody knowing what they are. I get to ask...do they want a hug vest this amount of time or that amount of time? What is your expectation...do you want the child in his wheelchair for this amount of time or in his stander for that amount of time? What types of modifications do you want in the classroom? Do you want us to use light weights or a chewy—any of those special education adaptations or certain scissors or ways to form letters? What do you want us to work on to carry over what you are doing in therapy?

Meghan, a general education teacher, described, "I think having therapists on site and having the therapist at a weekly team meeting helps us [general education teachers] really get to know the children with special education children's goals and do a good job meeting them as a team."

For other participants, working collaboratively in an inclusive prekindergarten setting fostered new insights into teaching practices. Lori, a general education teacher, shared,

> I think these classrooms [inclusive preK] open a whole new world for teachers to actually see things I may have overlooked before, whereas now it is easy to see. I've seen when a particular therapy has helped or when my co-teacher [special ed teacher] would have a different approach for something...I think just having a typical teacher in the room, you are not as exposed to it as we are.

For many participants, this resulted in greater appreciation of the importance of parity among team members. Jackie, a special education teacher, shared, "I really try to make sure that everybody [on the interdisciplinary team] has an equal role."

Theme Two: Teachers Believe All Children Can Benefit From an Inclusive Prekindergarten Setting

Across interviews, participants described the ways in which inclusive prekindergarten classrooms can benefit children with and without disabilities. According to the vast majority of participants, a primary benefit of attending an inclusive prekindergarten setting for children with disabilities is it provides them with opportunities to learn alongside their nondisabled peers. Kristy, a special education teacher, described,

> In our classroom, children with disabilities can have role models that are more "typical," so there is someone to play with and communicate with and learn skills from. It's a nice environment for them [children with disabilities] where it is accepting, and they can build their skills without feeling like they are failing.

Another special education teacher, Jackie, remarked, "[For the children with special needs,] it's giving them opportunities to learn from and interact with children who are typically developing, and it's giving their families a sense that their children are successful in a community-based program, which is wonderful." A general education teacher, Mark, noted the benefit of attending an early childhood setting that mirrors the broader society. He shared, "I mean this [inclusive preK classroom] is really just a precursor for life. It is a good thing because you are going to have to deal with different populations and different people as adults."

Other participants highlighted the opportunity for children without disabilities to develop a greater acceptance of children with different abilities as a benefit. Kristy, a special education teacher, shared, "I feel that they [children without disabilities] learn about people with disabilities so they understand

more, and they are going to be more compassionate people." This sentiment was echoed by Beth, a general education teacher, "I mean, how many children know about children with disabilities if you aren't around them or if they haven't had that exposure." Holly, a special education teacher, remarked, "For the children who come in 'typically developing,' I've heard many of the parents say that they've chosen this program because they want their children at a very early age to be familiar with people with different abilities, and they value that." Jean, a general education teacher, described the benefit: "Just to teach them [children without disabilities] tolerance and acceptance and to expose them to all different types of children." A special education teacher, Amanda, added, "Just exposure to children with a variety of needs...so I think they are taught a lot of compassion and empathy." Another special education teacher, Hannah, shared,

> Just last week we hade a student who can't walk who was standing in his mobile stander and doing a puzzle, and another child stood right across from him and cheered him on and clapped for him, and it was right there he realized that some children need more assistance than others. We talk about it at circle time. Not everybody needs a squishy toy, not everybody wears glasses, so we know not everybody needs the same thing. If I need a bandage on my hand, it doesn't mean that you need a bandage on your hand. We all need what we need, and fair doesn't mean that we need the same thing.

The vast majority of participants also described inclusive prekindergarten classrooms as a possible "win-win" for all children. Kristy, a special education teacher, described, "When it [inclusive preK] is done in a correct way with appropriate ratios, I think it is great because children can learn about disabilities as well as the children with disabilities can have role models."

Theme Three: Teachers Note Significant Challenges in Today's Inclusive Prekindergarten Settings

In spite of the potential benefits of today's inclusive prekindergarten classrooms, participants also noted significant challenges. Across interviews, both general education and special education teachers described a substantial challenge coming from increasing numbers of "typically developing" children that are experiencing difficulties with development. Mark, a general education teacher, remarked, "I think what's hard is that I can see typical children that have a lot of special needs themselves. So it is challenging because now I have five out of my ten Head Start children that really have special needs as well." The challenge of not having enough strong role models in an inclusive prekindergarten classroom was echoed by Lori, a special education teacher, when she

remarked, "We just really need more role models." Another special education teacher, Amanda, described,

> That's probably our biggest challenge. Even though we have six children identified with special needs, there is a much greater number of [Head Start] children with special needs in the classroom. So we don't have a good population of role models for our kids. Sometime the HS kids are just as needy as our children [those receiving special education services]. So that's hard to balance that to make sure that I am working with my students when I'm trying to help with behavioral needs with the other kids, too.

Across interviews, participants also described the increasing challenges they are confronting in working with increasing numbers of young children with aggressive behaviors. Meghan, a general education teacher, described, "So we were really hopeful that this particular child would settle down, but clearly he did not, and it escalated to the point where he is kind of out of control." Her co-teacher, Holly, a special education teacher, added, "If you look back in November, there were days when he was biting himself 6, 7, 8 times."

For some participants, the challenge of working with increasing numbers of children with aggressive behaviors is exacerbated by the time they spend dealing with the safety issues that often then arise. Beth, a special education teacher, described,

> I feel like sometimes we reward bad behavior because we give them the attention, and then those students that are not showing bad behavior, that are doing exactly what we ask of them, we have to push them aside to address the behaviors because of the safety concerns. So we can't ignore it, but we are not giving every child the education that they deserve.

Kristy, a special education teacher, remarked,

> There are students who are in our tuition or UPK programs, and they are picking up some of the challenging behaviors of their peers, and then they are missing out on a lot. We are not able to attend to the UPK and tuition students because so many children with disabilities need one-on-one support.

Participants also described the additional challenge of recent shifts in ratio toward higher numbers of children with disabilities and lower numbers of children without disabilities within a classroom. Jackie, a special education teacher, described,

> Over the years, my classroom has become much more heavily weighted with children with Autism. So I think I have nine students with disabilities, and seven of my students are somewhere on the Autism Spectrum...

> this year is the same as last year when more than half of my students had Autism.

Another special education teacher remarked, "The tables have turned. We used to have six children with disabilities integrated with 10 children without disabilities." Beth, a general education teacher, shared, "I think part of the problem is that, as an inclusive setting, we are askew. We have what I consider a special education class with a few typically developing children integrated. We may have ten children with disabilities with four or six children without disabilities." Garrett, a special education teacher, summed it up, "I think the challenge we face is the ratio of special needs children with UPK children is a little high, and we don't have very good models, and we have a lot of UPK kids coming in who have some pretty significant deficits."

Across interviews, participants also described growing frustration as they try to effectively meet the needs of increasingly diverse specific interventions in today's inclusive prekindergarten classrooms. Holly, a special education teacher, shared,

> Trying to accommodate all of the children's sensory protocols is very difficult. We have many children who are supposed to be on a therapeutic listening schedule. We have many children who are supposed to wear weighted vests and be spun or brushed, and it's not happening everyday because it's hard.

Other participants described struggling to prepare their students for higher expectations in today's kindergartens. Meghan, a general education teacher, described,

> I think the other issue that needs to be brought up is how we are meeting the needs of the general education population. As a general education teacher, I do not feel that we do as good of a job preparing the general education population for what they have coming for them...I do not feel we do a great job of preparing them at all. Not even close….I feel very strongly that those kids lose...failing is a strong word, but we are not doing what we can for those kids.

Participants across interviews described experiencing increased stress from attempting to implement new learning standards and accountability practices in today's inclusive prekindergarten settings. A general education teacher shared,

> When I am being assessed on how my Head Start children are doing, they [administrators] say they aren't compared to other children per se in the building, but I know they are. There is a little bit more pressure on teachers in the inclusive preK classrooms than [what] is just the typical

> preK classrooms.…It gets frustrating at times because teaching in a large or small group, I want to do what I am supposed to do for Head Start, yet I have to adapt for children with special needs, and then I feel that some of my Head Start children are in the classroom that are typical, and others have special needs themselves.

Carrie, a special education teacher, described,

> Just because of the fact that the UPK students and the standards are different. We need to get the UPK kids ready for kindergarten, whereas the children with disabilities who come in and are just three, they are not even close to being ready...it is a challenge for us to try to raise standards for the UPK children when the children are at such different levels. The biggest challenge is circle time. If kids aren't paying attention, the skills are above them...they are not necessarily going to be able to understand what is happening.

Amanda, a general education teacher, shared,

> All of the changing requirements and regulations...our outdoor time was decreased from 45 minutes to somewhere around 30 because we are trying to fit in a math component and an ELA component, where before it was a little bit of a circle time and then a story. Now we've got to embellish the story and come up with an ELA component so that it's [circle time] reaching the Common Core and basic requirements for a UPK classroom...we had to take out the entire singing component due to time constraints.

For many participants, recently adopted learning standards and accountability reforms have resulted in increasingly different roles and responsibilities for general education and special education teachers. A general education teacher, Jean, shared, "Because of all of the mandates, there is so much more to do." Another teacher remarked, "It is a challenge because now there are two teachers with two different goals, and both have to be met in order to do what they have to do. It's a real juggling act." According to Kristy, a special education teacher, with new standards and accountability reforms comes "a return to a 'yours' and 'mine' mentality due to new reforms." Amanda, a special education teacher, summed up the challenges she is facing in her inclusive prekindergarten classroom this way, "It is kind of survival mode for most of our program."

Theme Four: Teachers Need Additional Resources to Realize the Benefits of Today's Inclusive Prekindergarten Settings

Across interviews, participants highlighted an urgent need for additional resources in order to realize the benefits and address the challenges in today's

inclusive prekindergarten settings. For some participants, a primary need was an immediate influx of financial resources to hire and retain better qualified classroom staff and substitute teachers through increased compensation. One special education teacher shared,

> We [the agency] do not have the money to really pay our one-to-one aides...most of them are still receiving social services. Sometimes they have to leave [the classroom] to go to the Department of Social Services and get money for an apartment. Or everybody [in the family] is sick, and they have to go to the doctor, and nobody has a car, and they can't get there.…They would actually make more money if they worked at a grocery store, and they would not have to deal with any of the emotional and physical stress because they are getting bitten, screamed at, managing tantrums...with children that are very challenging and trying their patience.

This sentiment was echoed by Lori, a general education teacher, when she shared, "Some children with special needs need a lot of extra support, and sometimes enough hands to take care of everybody's needs is challenging… staffing on a daily basis is a challenge." Another general education teacher, Meghan, described,

> Even if the teacher has a master's degree, you have to figure, why would they work here when they can work in a public school for probably $15,000 more per year and have the summer off. So we can't keep substitutes. We had one sub who was wonderful. But she can make over $100 per day to sub for one of the school districts, or she can make $7 an hour to come sub here and get spit on and beaten up.…We are constantly in triage mode.

Holly, a special education teacher, remarked, "How about the day that my assistant and I were taking turns running out to the bathroom to throw up because we both had the stomach flu and there was no substitute"?

Other participants noted the need for additional financial resources to provide professional development. Jackie, a special education teacher, remarked,

> I try to say [to classroom staff] that every moment is a teachable moment, and we are not really here to just reprimand or to control, but we are here to guide and teach. That's a new way of thinking for many people because these people coming in, they don't have the background or training that we [lead teachers] received.

Erin, a general education teacher, described,

> Because you have people coming in and out of the classrooms. They are coming in, but maybe they have never worked a whole lot with kids

> before, so they don't know what to say and talk to kids about, especially if they don't have kids of their own.

In addition to an urgent need for an influx of financial resources to better support hiring, retaining, and training highly qualified classroom staff, participants also expressed a strong desire for increased recognition as professionals with the education system. For some participants, it was a desire for additional recognition by their school district's personnel, K–12 partners. Beth, a general education teacher, shared,

> I feel that the school district has nothing to do with anything we do here with our UPK students. Actually, I overheard a conversation with the school district building principal saying that all we do is play here and that we are not doing anything. I think there is a huge disconnect between the school district and here, and I really think it is affecting us.

Kristy, a special education teacher, noted, "We send the student portfolios we spend a year developing at the end of the school year, and one of the parents said the school district never got it. We collected all of this data, and the teacher never even got the information."

For other participants, a desire for additional acknowledgement as teaching professionals also included increased recognition and support from their program administrator. A special education teacher, Jackie, shared,

> They hired a new general education teacher, but she got absolutely no training. She just started with nothing from HR or anything to help her figure out even things like parking stickers. I feel like my time is then taken away from the classroom having to do her orientation. I don't look at that as my role. I have so many challenges just to manage my classroom. I feel like that person is frustrated, and their morale is down because they haven't had a good experience just joining the staff as a whole, let alone in the classroom...not knowing when meetings are and not knowing what their job description is.

Discussion

While data from a qualitative study with a small sample of general and special education teachers from two agencies is not generalizable, participants did highlight themes that shed light on today's inclusive prekindergarten settings in the United States. As a result, this study shares an important perspective for the field of early childhood education to consider as it seeks to provide the mandatory continuum of services stipulated in IDEA (2009), prohibits discrimination against children with disabilities, and works toward fully realizing the vision shared in the joint DEC/ NAEYC position statement on inclusion.

First, this study provides insight into the perspectives of both novice and veteran early childhood teachers on newly adopted early learning standards and accountability practices. Although the majority of participants indicated that that they had some knowledge and understanding of these new learning standards, they felt much less prepared to incorporate them into inclusive classroom practices. This finding was not a surprise since these standards had only recently been adopted at the time of this study. It is important to note, however, the ways in which a lack of available resources for professional development, training support staff, and meeting the needs of increasing numbers of children with aggressive behaviors greatly influenced teachers' attitudes and beliefs about successful implementation of standards in inclusive prekindergarten classrooms. This finding is in keeping with prior research (e.g., Newman & Mowbray, 2012) indicating that early childhood teachers, who often work outside of the K–12 school sector, have great difficulty accessing the types of resources and training necessary to promote and enhance their professional development. This study also suggests that in order to be most beneficial, these resources and professional development trainings need to be specifically targeted to inclusive prekindergarten settings. Teachers with degrees in early childhood may have some of the tools to differentiate and work collaboratively as our data suggests, but specific training in early childhood special education (ECSE) is required. Specialized certificates are now available at the graduate level; however, in 2012 only 16 states had a separate ECSE state-level teacher certification, and only 14 states had at least an add-on endorsement (Lazara, Danaher, Kraus, Goode, & Festa, 2012). The remaining states were assigning teachers with either an early childhood certification *or* a special education certification to prekindergarten inclusive settings. All of the participants in this study had either/or certifications. Administrators and principals who are specifically trained in supporting inclusive settings are also needed, as only 30 states required additional training in inclusive practices for administrators (Lazara et al., 2012).

Findings from this study also suggest that even when teachers feel well-prepared, have a positive outlook about inclusion, and are eager to work collaboratively, they can face significant challenges to creating quality learning experiences for all children. We heard from participants some of the ways in which increased paperwork, higher staff shortages, and additional numbers of children exhibiting aggressive behaviors can result in inclusive prekindergartens better meeting the needs of some children more than others. According to the U.S. Department of Education and Health and Human Services (2015), inclusive settings are most successful when they provide access to specialized supports and increase the quality of early learning experiences for *all* children.

The current study's findings also suggest when teachers perceive that the challenges in an inclusive prekindergarten setting begin to outweigh the benefits, as they did for the participants in this study, any benefits can quickly diminish. For children with disabilities, the benefit of having role models in an inclusive setting can quickly diminish when "typically developing" peers are also experiencing difficulties with development. For children without disabilities, the benefit of being exposed to diversity can quickly diminish when a classmate exhibits highly aggressive behaviors. For teachers, the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration can quickly diminish when new standards and accountability reforms foster a "your students" and "my students" orientation. This study suggests that teachers working in today's inclusive prekindergarten settings in the U.S. may be experiencing increased frustration, decreased self-efficacy, and a heightened sensitivity around a perceived lack of professional status within the education system, all potentially contributing to higher levels of stress. It is well-documented that the attitudes and beliefs of classroom teachers greatly influence the success of inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Lastly, recent policy recommendations from the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services (2015) highlight the need for early childhood teachers in the U.S. to be of high quality, have knowledge of inclusive settings, and have positive attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. It is important to keep in mind that inclusive settings in prekindergarten are not a choice that a school or district makes in the U.S.—they are a mandate supported by federal legislation. Findings from this study suggest that inclusive prekindergarten settings are making great strides in these areas. The teachers in this study were New York State certified, had knowledge of inclusive settings, and initially shared an optimistic outlook on the potential benefits of inclusion for both children and staff. This study also suggests, however, that when levels of teacher stress and burnout increase, they can create unintended barriers to accomplishing these policy recommendations by eroding the overall quality of such settings.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Future research should examine any potential generality of these findings; it is unclear whether similar results would be found in a different inclusive early childhood program in another part of the U.S. As these results derive from self-reported data from a small sample of inclusive prekindergarten teachers, it is not certain how representative these data are of other educators. Furthermore, it is possible that the same results would not be found if participants were administered structured interviews or validated self-report measures. Additionally, it could be assumed that anonymity

reduces the potential for social desirability influences; nevertheless, surveys and interviews such as these may relay biased information that must be considered when making interpretations. Finally, this study lacks information on the families' perspectives. The inclusion of families' perspective would provide a more comprehensive view of the strengths and challenges of inclusive prekindergarten settings.

Next Steps

The participants in this study highlighted many points that warrant follow-up. Research has highlighted the importance of meeting existing challenges and new demands in a new era in early childhood education (Brown, 2011; Jalongo & Heider, 2006; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009). Therefore, it is critically important to address the challenges teachers perceive confronting them in inclusive prekindergarten settings. First, there is an urgent need to invest additional financial resources into today's inclusive prekindergarten settings (e.g., salaries, substitute teacher pay rates, benefits, etc.) in order to elevate the professional status of early childhood teachers within the education system, attract and retain highly qualified and well-trained classroom staff, and prevent teacher stress and burnout. Second, it is critically important that teachers in inclusive prekindergarten settings are provided with ongoing and more targeted professional development trainings on topics unique to such settings as they enter in a new era in early childhood education in the U.S. Next, there is an urgent need to address a growing "your students" and "my students" orientation by blending early childhood general education and special education instructional approaches and assessment practices so that they can be effectively implemented with *all* children. Lastly, it is critically important to address current challenges to creating high quality inclusive prekindergarten settings by being more mindful of class ratio and composition.

Conclusion

Inclusive educational settings that serve young children, including prekindergarten programs, hold great promise for early childhood education in the U.S. in the 21st century. As the field of early childhood education seeks to fulfill the legal rights of children with disabilities and fully realize the DEC/NAEYC (2009) vision of inclusion in the U.S., it must continue to explore the unique perspectives of inclusive prekindergarten teachers as they enter a new era and frequently revisit them to help inform future policy and practice.

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Appendix. Teachers' Educational Profiles

Position	Years in Position	Education	Highest Degree Earned
General Education	2	Master's	Inclusive Childhood Education
General Education	N/A	Master's	Childhood Education, Literacy
General Education	2	Master's	Childhood Education
General Education	4	Master's	Special Education
General Education	2	Master's	Teacher Leadership
General Education	6 Mos.	2-year degree	Early Childhood Education
General Education	8	Master's	Reading K–12
Special Education	7	Master's	Special Education
Special Education	1	4-year degree	Literacy
Special Education	10	Master's	Special Education
Special Education	4	Master's	Special Education
Special Education	4	Master's	Special Education
Special Education	4	Master's	Special Education
Special Education	28	Master's	Special Education