

Measuring the quality of inclusive practices: Findings from the inclusive classroom profile pilot ^[1]

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Press Release

A pilot study in 51 N.C. classrooms shows the effectiveness of a new measure in assessing the quality of practices in inclusive preschools. Not only is the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP) a reliable instrument, researchers say it also reveals the types of inclusive settings that may be best serving preschoolers with disabilities.

"Inclusion encourages active participation and a sense of belonging and membership for all children, with and without disabilities, who learn and develop in the same classroom," explained the study's lead author Elena P. Soukakou, senior lecturer at the University of Roehampton in London. "This is an important aim of early childhood education."

Soukakou explained that research already exists that can help programs to enhance the quality of their inclusive settings.

"We know that specialized instructional techniques and the use of assistive technology will support the development and learning of young children with disabilities in inclusive settings," Soukakou said. "We also know that a range of factors--such as program standards, professional development, and resources--are likely to affect the quality of inclusive classrooms."

Federal and state laws and policies mandate inclusion for young children with disabilities. However, a 2014 report from the Office of Special Education Programs informed Congress that less than two-thirds of all preschool children with disabilities who were served under the provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act were enrolled for some amount of time in regular early childhood settings.

"Children with disabilities should have the option of receiving their specialized services in the same settings as their typically developing peers, instead of in isolated classrooms," said co-author Pamela J. Winton, chair of the National Early Childhood Inclusion Institute. "But teachers may feel unsupported and unprepared to serve some children adequately."

Winton, a senior scientist at UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG), explained that in order for inclusion to succeed, administrators, specialists, teachers, and families must actively collaborate to meet the needs of children with disabilities. "And studies show that when we do it right, inclusion benefits all children--those with and without disabilities."

Given the legislative support for inclusion and the research behind it, Winton said it is surprising that little is known about the implementation of quality practices that support the learning and development of young children with disabilities in real-world early childhood settings.

"Especially given the current context, in which improving the quality of early childhood programs serving high needs children has become a national education priority," Winton said. "The Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Program and other reform efforts are challenging states to develop systems for rating, monitoring, and improving early learning and development programs to serve each and every child."

Winton said that thanks to the ICP, which Soukakou developed as part of her dissertation study at Oxford University, researchers now can capture important information about what's happening on the ground.

Each of the instrument's 12 items elicits ratings of research-backed practices to see how much a program's staff adapts the classroom's environment, activities, and instructional support in ways that encourage the active participation of each child with disabilities. Soukakou trained experienced raters who then took the ICP to inclusive preschools serving 2-5 year-olds in 46 counties across North Carolina, where the raters used the measure to observe classrooms in which one or more children had an identified disability.

"The study showed that the ICP rating scale is measuring what it was designed to measure in a reliable and accurate way," Soukakou said, adding that the study found part of the ICP's effectiveness is its ability to differentiate between the levels of quality in various types of

inclusive classrooms.

"Head Start and public pre-k settings significantly outscored the licensed child care programs," she said. "Developmental day programs scored highest of all."

In North Carolina, developmental day programs are certified to provide specialized services to children with identified disabilities, include at least one staff member who holds certification or licensure issued from the state's Department of Public Instruction, and meet teacher-child ratio requirements.

Co-author Tracey West, an investigator at FPG, said better quality of inclusive practices at Head Start, public pre-k, and developmental day settings could be a result of child care programs never having had a direct mandate or mission associated with serving children with disabilities.

"Nor have they had systematic technical assistance related to serving children with disabilities, which has been more widely available historically to the other programs," said West, who delivers training on the ICP through FPG's Professional Development Center (PDC@FPG).

West will present the study's findings while leading two special sessions at this year's National Early Childhood Inclusion Institute, and participants will have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with practices that the ICP assesses and hear other important updates.

Soukakou said the upcoming sessions will also provide opportunities for participants to explore and discuss how the tool might support their own work.

"The most meaningful purpose of any classroom quality assessment system is to support teaching and practice," Soukakou said. "My hope is that the ICP will not only help people in assessing the quality of implemented inclusive practices, but also in identifying areas for improvement and developing relevant action plans to support the needs of all the diverse learners included in early childhood classrooms."

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