

More the same than different: What we can learn from including children with disabilities in mainstream early childhood programs

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Including young children with disabilities and developmental delays can seem a daunting prospect to early childhood educators and carers. This is particularly so if we think of such children as having qualitatively different needs from children without disabilities and as requiring specialist management and teaching strategies that mainstream educators and carers do not possess. But is this the case?

To address this question, we need to examine the principles of best practice that have been found to be most effective in working with such children. When we compare these principles and those that inform practice with children who do not have disabilities, we find that these are more the same than different. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that working with children with disabilities actually sharpens our understanding of how all children learn and of the conditions that promote their learning.

This realisation demands that we reconsider the images that we hold of children with disabilities. Children with disabilities should be viewed as part of the wide range of children that early childhood educators and carers must provide for. While specialist support is often needed, early childhood staff have many more of the skills necessary to meet the needs of children with disabilities than they may give themselves credit for.

Introduction

Including young children with disabilities and developmental delays can seem a daunting prospect to early childhood educators and carers. This is particularly so if we think of such children as having qualitatively different needs from children without disabilities and as requiring specialist management and teaching strategies that mainstream educators and carers do not possess. But is this the case?

To address this question, we need to identify the principles of best practice that have been found to be most effective in working with such children, and compare them with principles that inform practice in mainstream early childhood settings. As we shall see, when we compare these two sets of principles, we find that they are more the same than different. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that working with children with disabilities actually sharpens our understanding of how *all* children learn and of the conditions that promote their learning.

This suggests that we need to rethink the way that we deliver services to children with and without developmental disabilities. The current system comprises separate mainstream and specialist early childhood services. Children with developmental disabilities and families receive support from specialist early childhood intervention services, with the additional option of inclusion in mainstream early childhood care

and education programs. The rationale for such inclusion experiences will not be explored in detail here, beyond noting that there are four sets of arguments that are commonly put forward as the basis for including children with disabilities in mainstream programs: legal, moral, rational, and empirical (Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse, and Wesley, 1998; Bricker, 1995). Regarding the empirical argument, recent reviews (Guralnick, 2001a; Mallory, 1998) suggest that, while there is clear evidence to demonstrate the benefits of inclusion for children both with and without disabilities, successful inclusion is not easy to achieve: we still have not implemented everything we know and are still struggling to find ways to 'reallocate existing resources and generate new ones to assure access to specialists, materials, and time necessary for inclusive and integrated curricula' (Mallory, 1998). In addition, the goal of universal access to inclusive programs is far from being realized, and there is not yet a widespread understanding among professionals and the general public of the possibilities of such programs (Guralnick, 2001b).

Despite this, Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse and Wesley (1998) argue that we should persist in our efforts to make early childhood programs more inclusive:

'In our opinion, placement in inclusive settings should be a goal for all children with disabilities. The legal, moral, rational, and empirical arguments provide a consistent and compelling foundation which supports this position. However, we temper our recommendation with the caveat that inclusive settings also should be of high quality, able to address the special needs of children, and consistent with parent goals and priorities.' (p. 36)

The arguments to be explored in this paper are that the quality of early childhood programs can be improved in the process of helping them address the special needs of children more effectively, and that all children would benefit from closer links between specialist and mainstream early childhood services.

We will begin by exploring what we know about how to work effectively with young children with disabilities, and comparing these strategies with recommended practices for working with children without disabilities.

Working effectively with young children with developmental disabilities

There is evidence of an increasing convergence toward what Lieber, Schwatz, Sandall, Horn and Wolery (1999) have called 'a compatible philosophy of instruction' between the early childhood and early childhood intervention fields. This evidence comes from studies of naturalistic approaches to teaching, effective ways of working with multiply disabled children, parent-child and teacher-child interactions, and longitudinal studies of preschool curricula for at-risk children.

Naturalistic teaching approaches: Kaiser and her colleagues in the Milieu Teaching Group at Vanderbilt University (Kaiser and Hester, 1996) have been exploring how children with developmental problems such as autism can be supported to learn and use new functional language in everyday conversations. They have developed and tested an enhanced milieu teaching approach, which they describe as 'a hybrid, naturalistic language intervention that combines environmental arrangement, variants of incidental teaching, and responsive interaction strategies'.

On the basis of a series of studies of the use of enhanced milieu teaching in preschool special education classrooms, Kaiser and Hester conclude that children are best supported in their use of language by

- the availability of a conversational partner to engage with the child
- the focused attention of that partner as a basis for understanding the child's communication attempts
- the partner's active engagement with the child as indicated by coparticipation in the child's activity and talk directed to the child, and
- the partner's use of questions to elicit child talk

The way in which adults and other conversational partners relate to the child also appear to be important. Children use more language when their conversational partners

- use a responsive style of interaction in which the child's comments and other communication attempts are acknowledged
- adjust the style of their verbal interaction to fit the child's style (eg. if the child is quiet, using a soft voice and gentle prompts), and
- have an ongoing relationship with the child.

On the basis of their work, Kaiser and Hester propose a set of environmental principles to improve the communicative environments of young children with disabilities:

- *Talk to children.* Engage in conversation and make yourself available to the child as a communicative partner.
- *Ask questions.* Eliciting new information (not testing the child's knowledge) at a moderate rate encourages child talk.
- *Follow the child's lead.* Talk about what the child is interested in and what the child is doing in order to make language more functional for the child. Child talk will be more easily understood when the adult is engaged with the child in an activity.
- *Talk at a moderate rate and take turns.* Give the child a chance to talk, to initiate, and to respond in conversations.
- *Build positive relationships with children.* Ongoing relationships encourage talk and provide a basis for knowing children's interests and understanding children's idiosyncratic or unclear communication patterns.
- *Organize the schedule, the setting, and teacher role to include conversations.* Adults provide a unique context and set of supports for child talk. It is important that all adults, regardless of background, training, or role, be willing participants in conversations with children.

What is striking about these strategies is that they are those that good early childhood practitioners would use with any child. If these strategies were used

consistently and well in regular early childhood settings, *all* the children would benefit.

Curricula for young children with multiple disabilities: A similar set of principles can be found in a recent curriculum devised specifically for young children who have multiple disabilities (Klein, Chen and Haney, 2000). Their *Promoting Learning Through Active Interaction (PLAI)* curriculum is based on three critical beliefs:

- Responsive interaction with primary caregivers is the most significant factor in a child's early development.
- A caregiver's ability to observe, interpret, and respond accurately to the child's cues and behavior will enhance the child's development.
- Communication skills provide an essential foundation for all learning.

In this curriculum, caregivers and service providers facilitate the child's learning by

- carefully and systematically observing the child
- providing predictable routines
- establishing accurate interpretations and providing contingent responses to the child's cues
- building on the child's preferences and interests to motivate communication
- providing enough time for the child to respond
- making input meaningful through consistent, appropriately paced experience

Again, the principles on which this curriculum is based and the strategies recommended are immediately recognisable as those that characterise sensitive teaching of any child, albeit more consciously and deliberately applied.

Parent-child and teacher-child interactions: Further evidence of this compatibility of principles comes from studies of parent-child and teacher-child interactions. Mahoney and his colleagues have studied the interactions of parents (Mahoney et al., 1998) and of teachers (Mahoney and Wheeden, 1999) with young children with disabilities in order to identify those strategies which best promote such children's learning. In the case of mother-child interactions, they found that intervention effects on child development were unlikely to occur unless mothers modified their style of interaction with their children, and that the feature most strongly associated with children's developmental outcomes was their level of responsiveness. In the case of teacher / child interactions, they found that teacher interaction style contributed significantly to both the quality and frequency of children's engagement with their teachers, and that the children responded most positively when the teachers were responsive, supportive, and relatively non-directive.

Further insights can be gained from studying the interactions between deaf children and their parents. Although the long-term educational outcomes for deaf children have typically been very patchy, there is one group of deaf children that has consistently done well: deaf children who have deaf parents usually do not have any problems acquiring language and typically do better academically than deaf children from hearing parents.

What accounts for the difference between these two groups? The most obvious explanation is that the language used in the deaf family is sign language which the deaf child has no trouble mastering within normal limits for language development. This means that there are no delays in the child's development in other vital areas - thinking, learning and social skills - and hence no barriers to the child's subsequent academic progress.

However, there are reasons for thinking that there may be other factors that help explain why deaf children from deaf families do so well. When researchers have studied the interactions between deaf mothers and their infants and toddlers, and compared them with those between hearing mothers and their deaf children, they found that the deaf mothers used a whole range of strategies for engaging or training the child's visual capacities (Moore, Garwoli and Stewart, 1995). These appear to come quite naturally to the deaf mothers whose own experience of deafness has trained them to maximise the use of visual information. Many hearing mothers, very understandably, fail to grasp the full implications of their children's deafness and tend to persist in trying to communicate orally. Other parents understand that these strategies are futile but do not know what alternative strategies to use instead.

What are the strategies that deaf mothers use? The major ones identified have been

- following the child's lead
- only communicating when the child can see them
- making full use of facial expressions
- making their signing more expressive
- using brief sentences with lots of repetition
- allowing the child's visual needs to determine the pace of the interaction
- commenting sequentially rather than simultaneously

What we have learned from observing deaf mothers and their infants is that they train their children in visual ways of communicating even before they begin to introduce language, that is, before they begin to sign to them. It seems, therefore, that what may give deaf children of deaf parents the edge over their counterparts from hearing families is not only that they have ready access to language (through Auslan), but that they also have been trained to use their vision to a much greater extent and are therefore primed to receive language visually. However, what is also particularly interesting about the above strategies is the emphasis on following the child's lead and allowing the child's interests and needs to determine the pace of the interaction – in other words, being responsive and non-directive.

Preschool curricula for at-risk children: Studies of preschool curricula for at-risk children provide further confirmation of the importance of responsive and non-directive approaches. Weikart (1998) reports results to age 23 years of the High/Scope Curriculum Comparison study which started in 1967. This compared three theoretically distinct approaches to early learning and development:

- The High/Scope Curriculum – independent planning, conceptual development, and problem solving
- Direct Instruction – teacher-directed academic learning
- Traditional nursery school – social development and learning through free play

Major differences between these three groups emerged slowly over the years, with no differences in academic achievement or measured intelligence during the school years being found. From age 15 onwards however, the Direct Instruction group showed much higher rates of social, emotional and behavioural problems. Weikart sees the results as showing that high quality preschool programs have a positive developmental impact, but only true if a developmentally appropriate curriculum model is used:

'Models that teach content more appropriate to later years and that use highly directive and controlling methods of preschool children are inappropriate to the overall development of the child as a healthy adult. Models that build the self-generated activities of the child and around their individual interests demonstrate long-term and positive effects on adult behavior.' (p. 237)

A recent study by Marcon (1999) adds support to these findings. She examined the differential effects of three preschool models on young children's development. The children were 4 year olds attending preschools in an inner-city district, and the preschool models were identified through cluster analysis of their teacher responses to a short self-rating scale. The models were:

- *Child-initiated classrooms*: child-development oriented teachers who facilitated learning by allowing children to actively direct the focus of their learning
- *Academically-directed classrooms*: academically-oriented teachers who preferred more direct instruction and teacher-directed learning experiences for preschoolers
- *Middle-of-the-road*: teachers whose beliefs and practices fell in between the other two opposing models by endorsing a combination approach

The language, self-help, social, motor, and adaptive development, as well as mastery of basic skills, of the children were measured at the end of their preschool year. Two key findings were:

- Children in classrooms where teachers held beliefs in a single, internally coherent theory of how young children learn and develop (whether child-initiated or academically-directed) did better on standardised measures of development than did children whose teachers attempted to blend aspects of theoretically diverse approaches
- Children's development at this age was not notably hindered by a strong academic focus, although children in child-initiated classrooms mastered more basic skills

While these findings apply to at-risk populations (that is, children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds), there have been increasing calls in more recent times for what Golbeck (2001) calls a 'child-regulated / teacher-guided'

approach to working with all children. For example, Tinworth (1997) proposes that 'the optimal role for adults in a child's learning is in the facilitation of child initiated investigation' (p. 25). Tinworth distinguishes between a child-centred approach (in which adults provide activities based on their estimation of children's interests and abilities) and a child-initiated approach (in which the children initiate activities and adults respond to their interests and stimulate them further with 'questions, ideas, and provocative experiences'). A child initiated curriculum requires adults to watch and listen sensitively, so that the child's interest and motivation can be understood and built upon (Tinworth, 1997; Malaguzzi, 1993; Edwards, 1993).

What emerges from this comparison between early childhood intervention and early childhood approaches is that the most effective ways of promoting self-sustaining learning strategies in young children are

- to provide them with as many naturally occurring learning opportunities as possible
- to pay constant attention to whatever they are paying attention to and are interested in
- to join with them in some sort of communication or interaction about this, and
- to trust their capacity to learn

In short, we should be seeking to empower children (Moore, 2000). These strategies are, in fact, developmentally appropriate practices that one would use with every child, and which, with various adaptations, are appropriate for children with disabilities as well.

Adaptations needed by children with disabilities

The evidence considered so far suggests that the strategies that work best for children with disabilities have much in common with those that are effective with children who do not have disabilities. This does not mean that the strategies can be implemented in exactly the same way with both groups of children. As we have seen already with deaf children, some adaptations are often needed for children with disabilities. However, when we examine the kinds of adaptations that are recommended, the underlying commonalities are more apparent than the differences. Two recent statements about ways of working effectively with children with disabilities (Klein, Chen and Haney, 2000; Wolery, 2000) illustrate this point.

According to Klein, Chen and Haney (2000), children with severe and multiple disabilities learn best when adults

- provide them with predictable routines
- establish accurate interpretations and provide contingent responses to the child's cues
- build on the child's preferences and interests to motivate communication
- provide enough time for the child to respond, and
- make input meaningful through consistent, appropriately paced experience

According to the latest version of recommended practices for early childhood intervention / early childhood special education put out by the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Early Childhood (Wolery, 2000), the role of adults in interacting with children is

- to design environments to promote children's safety, active engagement, learning, participation, and membership
- to individualize and adapt practices for each child based on ongoing data to meet children's changing needs
- to use systematic procedures within and across environments, activities, and routines to promote children's learning and participation

While these two sets of practices have been derived from work with young children with disabilities, they could just as well apply to any young child. Indeed, if they were applied in mainstream early childhood settings, all children would benefit.

Implications

These findings demand that we reconsider the images that we hold of children with disabilities, and suggest that children with disabilities should be viewed as part of the wide range of children that early childhood educators and carers must provide for.

This is not the way that we have always viewed such children. We can distinguish three stages in the evolution of attitudes to and programming for children with developmental disabilities and delays:

- They have unique needs which require specialist help
- They have many needs in common with other children, plus some unique needs of their own (Fox, Hanline, Vail and Galant, 1994; Wolery, Strain and Bailey, 1992)
- They have the same needs as other children, but need some more purposeful adaptations of their environments for these to be met

There are subtle but important distinctions between these three views.

This paper has presented evidence for this last way of viewing these children. This suggests that we should regard children with disabilities as being children first of all, and as having the same general needs as other children. However, to meet these needs, we will sometime have to modify their social and physical environments. What is interesting is that it increasingly appears that the core strategies that are effective with all children are also effective with children with developmental disabilities.

One important implication of this conclusion is that early childhood staff may have many more of the skills necessary to meet the needs of children with disabilities than they give themselves credit for. They know how to care for young children, how young children learn, and how to provide environments and experiences that will best promote their learning.

However, we should not push this too far or we may lose sight of the fact that children with disabilities do not always learn as easily as other children and cannot always participate fully in mainstream early childhood activities without some help. One of the big dangers of inclusion is that children with disabilities are placed in mainstream settings with no appropriate modifications of the environment, thereby failing to benefit from the learning opportunities and being effectively isolated. As Mallory (1998) points out,

'If we are to treat young children with disabilities as equals in early childhood classrooms, it may often be necessary to treat them differently. Inclusion does not mean providing identical educational experiences to all children present in a particular environment. In this sense, an inclusive curriculum is a form of affirmative action. Rather than being blind to young children's developmental differences, we are obligated to consciously seek out those differences and respect their meaning as a basis for the design of effective curricula.' (p. 215).

But this applies to all children. Which is why the more effectively an early childhood setting caters for the range of children it has already, the more easily it will accommodate children with developmental disabilities (or children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, or children from disadvantaged backgrounds).

The truth is that children with disabilities are not necessarily the ones whom early childhood staff find most challenging. As shown in a study by Susan Janko and colleagues (1997), any child who for whatever reason fails to learn classroom routines or to become an independent learner is a challenge. True inclusiveness can only be achieved when it is understood that program goals apply to all children equally. This is what Janko et al. (1997) found to be true in the inclusive classrooms they studied:

'When teachers perceived all children as needing to learn certain skills to get along in school settings and as capable of learning those skills within social and learning activities in the classroom, the children seemed to be afforded increased opportunities to learn important lessons in normalized, rather than specialized ways. And the process of learning seemed easier and more enjoyable for the children and teachers alike.' (p. 296)

Towards a synthesis of regular and specialist early childhood services

As has been demonstrated, the strategies that early childhood interventionists have found to be effective for young children with developmental delays and disabilities increasingly resemble those that early childhood carers and educators have found to be effective with all children.

At the same time as this view has been emerging, approaches to the care and education of young children without disabilities have increasingly reflected some of the principles upon which early childhood intervention services are based, eg. respect for diversity (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001; New, 1993, 1998) and partnerships with parents (Favretto, 1998; Stonehouse, 2001). This shift is partly in response to challenges to traditional practices that have come from post-modern critiques (Alloway, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999) and from the debate over

developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp and Copple, 1997; Fleer, 1995).

Another sign of an increasing convergence of regular and specialist early childhood services is in the calls for them to be more strongly connected to the child's world outside the classroom or early childhood intervention program. In the field of regular early childhood education, this approach has been championed by Rebecca New (1999) and Bruce Mallory (1998). Mallory argues that the overarching goal of early education programs should be to increase young children's participation in the social contexts in which they live and learn on a daily basis. In a similar vein, New argues that we need to consider not only 'the whole child', but also what she calls 'the whole story', that is 'the nesting of discrete educational goals and objectives within conceptually and experientially rich learning opportunities that are deemed socially relevant and responsive to children's developmental characteristics' (pp. 265-266). She argues that if early childhood educators are to give children opportunities to learn culturally useful and relevant skills and understandings, then a child-centred curriculum is insufficient. What is needed is an integrated curriculum that makes 'explicit connections between learning experiences in an educational environment and children's whole lives, including their experiences both inside and *outside* the classroom' (p. 272).

In the early childhood intervention field, there has been a similar push to locate interventions within naturally occurring learning opportunities in the child's home and community life. This is partly based on the recognition that what families want for their children is functional improvement in meaningful daily activities, and partly on the realisation that children learn best when given repeated opportunities to practise meaningful skills in real life settings. The way to achieve this is to identify what skills the child needs to function more effectively in their real life environments, what strategies will promote these skills, and what naturally occurring opportunities exist in the course of daily routines for the child to practice these skills. Within early childhood settings, this approach is exemplified by the activity-based approach of Diane Bricker and colleagues (Bricker, 1998), while ways of embedding learning opportunities in family and community settings are being explored by Carl Dunst and colleagues (Bruder and Dunst, 1999; Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, and Bruder 2000).

What these innovative strategies imply is that we should broaden the way that we think about the curriculum. There is a tendency to think of the early childhood curriculum as being what mainstream early childhood programs and specialist early childhood intervention services provide. However, David, Moir and Herbert (1997) have argued that we should think more broadly than this:

'Wherever children are, they will be learning, and a curriculum of some sort will be operating, even if the adults are unaware of this fact. The curriculum is the totality of learning opportunities, which offer the skills, knowledge, concepts, and attitudes children can acquire through experience with their peers, 'knowledgeable others' and the environment.'

We should be seeking to capitalise on this full range of learning opportunities.

What can the regular and specialist early childhood fields offer each other?

This convergence of principles and practices within specialist and mainstream early childhood services suggests that the two fields have much to offer each other. For specialist early childhood intervention workers and the children / families they support, there is much to be gained from working more closely with general early childhood services:

- Early childhood carers and educators are specifically trained to work with young children whereas many specialist early childhood interventionists are not.
- Early childhood carers and educators have many of the core skills for working with young children who have developmental disabilities and delays.
- Inclusion in early childhood settings can provide young children with developmental disabilities and delays with crucial normalising exposure to non-disabled children.
- Early childhood settings also provide children with learning problems with a wider range of learning opportunities.
- Families of children with disabilities can benefit from their children attending non-specialist programs in the same way that other families do (eg. child care enables parents to work).

For general early childhood workers, there is much to be gained from working more closely with specialist early childhood intervention workers as well as from the experience of including children with developmental disabilities and delays in their programs:

- Early childhood intervention workers have specialist knowledge of the impact that disabilities can have on development, and of the strategies that can be used to ameliorate adverse effects.
- Working with children who have developmental problems or disabilities illuminates the nature of child development and learning, and therefore gives us a better understanding of how to promote all children's learning.
- Early childhood educators and carers are being encouraged to establish partnerships with parents, and can learn much from the skills that early childhood interventionists possess in working collaboratively with parents.

Conclusions

The evidence that has been presented here suggests that there are many commonalities between the practices that have been found to be most effective in working with children who have developmental disabilities and those recommended for children who have no developmental problems. The children themselves, and the underlying principles for working with them, are more the same than different. Furthermore, working with children with disabilities actually increases our understanding of how *all* children learn and of the conditions that promote their learning.

The implication is that the quality of early childhood programs can be improved in the process of helping them address the needs of children with developmental disabilities more effectively. Thus, *all* children would benefit from closer links between specialist and mainstream early childhood services. For a child with a disability or developmental problem, the early childhood setting that is most likely to provide the best environment for inclusion is the one that is already catering successfully for the diversity of children without diagnosed conditions. Correspondingly, any early childhood setting that learns how to meet the needs of children with disabilities will find that it is better able to cater effectively for all children.

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