Supporting self-determination in inclusive preschool classrooms: Results from observations

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Inclusion in early childhood

- 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
- promoting opportunities for development and learning, positive social relationships and friendships, and a sense of belonging for every child

Self-determination

- The importance of promoting self-determination in children with disabilities has received increased attention over the past years.
- Self-determination involves being able to make choices, having a sense of autonomy, and being able to exert some control over one’s own life (Erwin et al., 2009; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2010).
- It is increasingly seen as a core dimension of quality of life (Shrofen & Turnbull, 2006).

Foundational skills that can support self-determination in young children

- Problem solving and choice making
- Self-regulation
- Engaging in meaningful activities

Self-regulation

- Control of one’s own behavior and emotions, use of cognitive processes, and engaging in prosocial behaviors
- Self-regulation has been linked to later academic success (Blair & Diamond, 2008)

Problem solving and choice making

- A process of selecting between alternatives based on individual preferences
- Is closely associated with autonomy; children can exercise control over their environment and begin to understand the consequences of certain choices
- Making choices was found to be related to increased social interaction, and higher levels of task persistence (Hauser-Clam et al., 1993)
Engagement

The amount of time children spend interacting with their environment in a developmentally and contextually appropriate manner (McWilliam & Casey, 2008)

Children's active and meaningful engagement is important for school success (Skinner, Kondernann, & Furrer, 2009)

Self-determination in young children

- Young children can learn many aspects of self-determination with facilitation and support by others.
- Simply growing older does not provide all the needed opportunities to secure the abilities to make choices and decisions that promote later self-determination.
- It's important to provide learning opportunities that will support the acquisition of skills needed for self-determination.

Global quality & Self-determination

- Positive climate
  - Warmth
  - Respect
  - Enjoyment

Facilitates engagement
Children are more likely to explore the environment and feel comfort.
Increases enjoyment of and excitement about learning.

Global quality & Self-determination

- Supporting choices
  - Following children's lead
  - Providing choices
  - Encouraging child responsibility and autonomy

Global quality of ECEC settings

A growing body of research points to the important role of classroom quality to enhance children’s learning.

Results from an increasing number of studies indicate that high-quality teacher-child interactions are associated with improvements in both academic and socio-emotional skills (Curby et al., 2009; Pointz et al., 2009).

Global quality & Self-determination

- Maximizing children’s interest
  - Active facilitation
  - Variety of Modalities and Materials
  - Clarity of Learning Objectives

Helps children get the most learning out of each day.
Helps children maintain interest in learning activities and regulate their behavior.
Global quality & Self-determination

- Supporting problem-solving, analysis and thinking skills
  - How and why questions
  - Connections with life experiences

Helps children to learn to solve problems and think creatively.

Research questions

- To what extent do teachers’ interactions support self-determination:
  - (a) by providing a warm, supportive climate?
  - (b) by supporting children’s choices?
  - (c) by actively facilitating child engagement and providing a variety of materials?
  - (d) supporting problem-solving, analysis, and thinking skills?

Participants

Public, private non-profit, and private for profit institutions

Inclusive classrooms: at least 1 child with an IEP

43 Teachers
Children with disabilities
Classmates

Positive Climate

Measures & Procedures

Observational rating system

- Concept Development
- Instructional Learning Formats
- Regard for student perspectives

Positive Climate

4 cycles of 20 minutes of observing, take notes on teacher’s interactions and behaviors with children as well as peer interactions

7-points scale
- Low 1-2
- Medium 3-5
- High 6-7

Interrater reliability:
- ICCs = .66-.83

Results:

Positive climate

- $M = 4.63, SD = 0.99$
- Relatively close, respectful relationships between teacher and children

Positive Climate

Low | Medium | High
Results: Regard for children’s perspectives

- $M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.03$
- Teachers encourage children’s choices and give children some responsibilities in the classroom.

Discussion

- It has been stated that young children with disabilities need systematic support to develop skills that are the precursor to developing self-determination in later years.
- It seems easier for teachers to foster a supportive environment, allow choices and facilitate engagement than providing opportunities for analysis and reasoning.

Results: Instructional learning formats

- $M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.89$
- Teachers on average actively facilitate activities that encourage children’s interest through the use of a variety of materials and help children to understand learning goals, providing support for a developmentally calibrated sense of control and autonomy.

Discussion

- These results represent a first step towards observational evidence on how teachers are interacting with children in inclusive classrooms.
- It is necessary to further test empirically whether the teacher-child interactions do indeed support the development of self-determination through long-term longitudinal research.

Results: Concept development

- $M = 1.55$, $SD = 0.56$
- Teachers rarely provide opportunities that encourage analysis and reasoning (and rarely make meaningful connections between children’s learning and their lives).