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Classrooms for Preschoolers with Disabilities

New Regulations Require Inclusion with Typical Students

In Iowa, most preschoolers with disabilities are served in classrooms that serve only children with disabilities. Such segregated classrooms do not meet federal requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 for serving preschool children to the maximum extent appropriate with their nondisabled peers.

This act requires that children with disabilities be served in the least restrictive environment possible; that is, children with disabilities should be in classrooms with children who do not have disabilities.

Research has shown that children with and without disabilities benefit from interactions with each other. Research has also shown that children with and without disabilities benefit from being in high quality preschool classrooms using evidence-based comprehensive curricula and child assessment.

To assess the quality of classrooms serving preschool children with disabilities, Iowa State University recently worked with the Iowa Department of Education to conduct a study of these classrooms. Observations showed that **inclusive** classrooms, where at least 50 percent of the children are developing typically, were higher in quality than were **self-contained** classrooms that only serve children with disabilities.



Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standard (IQPPS)	Research Finding	Recommendation
<p>1. Relationships</p>	<p>The program promotes positive relationships among all children and adults to encourage each child's sense of individual worth and belonging as part of a community, and to foster each child's ability to contribute as a responsible community member.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and maintain efforts to help each child develop social relationships with peers and adults.
<p>2. Curriculum</p>	<p>The program implements a curriculum that is consistent with its goals for children and promotes learning and development in each of the following domains: aesthetic, cognitive, emotional, language, physical, and social.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt an evidence-based comprehensive curriculum (e.g., High Scope, Creative Curriculum). • Provide the materials and equipment needed by the selected curriculum to meet the Iowa Early Learning Standards, facilitating children's development in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Physical Well-Being and Motor Development ◆ Approaches to Learning ◆ Engagement and Persistence ◆ Social and Emotional Development ◆ Communication, Language and Literacy ◆ Mathematics and Science ◆ Social Studies ◆ Creative Arts.
<p>3. Teaching</p>	<p>The program uses developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate and effective teaching approaches that enhance each child's learning and development in the context of the program's curriculum goals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement evidence based curriculum in literacy and mathematics in daily individual and group activities.
<p>4. Assessment of Child Progress</p>	<p>The program is informed by ongoing systematic, formal, and informal assessment approaches to provide information on children's learning and development. These assessments occur within the context of reciprocal communications with families and with sensitivity to the cultural contexts in which children develop. Assessment results are used to benefit children by informing sound decisions about children, teaching, and program improvement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement comprehensive assessment systems that assess all areas of learning (see Iowa Early Learning Standards above) that provide ongoing observation, evaluation, and individualization of the curriculum for each child. • Adopt evidence-based comprehensive, ongoing curriculum-based assessment tools (e.g., Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum, Child Observation Record—COR, Work Sampling).

Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standard (IQPPS)		Research Finding	Recommendation
5. Health	The program promotes the nutrition and health of all children and staff and protects them from preventable illness and injury.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preschool classrooms have the lowest scores in the area of health due to poor handwashing routines among adults and children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement consistent handwashing routines for adults and children when toileting, nose-blowing, and eating.
6. Teachers	The program employs and supports a teaching staff that has the educational qualifications, knowledge, and professional commitment necessary to promote children's learning and development and to support families' diverse needs and interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More than 85 percent of the teachers observed in preschool classrooms serving children with disabilities were licensed teachers with ECE endorsements. The majority of the public school preschool teachers had not received recent training in ECE; most of their training had been in non-ECE areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employ licensed teachers with pre-service supervised practica and student teaching in early childhood (i.e., preschool) settings. Provide support and incentives for teachers to access training opportunities (e.g., Every Child Reads) focused on identified needs in the area of early childhood education. Fund effective training and coaching responsive to identified needs at all levels of professional development. Provide ongoing funding for training in specific, evidence-based comprehensive curricula and assessment systems.
7. Families	The program establishes and maintains collaborative relationships with each child's family to foster children's development in all settings. These relationships are sensitive to family composition, language, and culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom observations and teacher reports both indicated high quality collaborative relationships with each child's family. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to support collaborative relationships with children's families.
8. Community Relationships	The program establishes relationships with and uses the resources of the children's communities to support the achievement of program goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No data were gathered for this standard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess and build effective community partnerships.
9. Physical Environment	The program provides appropriate and well-maintained indoor and outdoor physical environments, including facilities, equipment, and materials, to facilitate child and staff learning and development. To this end, a program structures a safe and healthful environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classrooms in public schools were less likely to have the indoor and outdoor facilities, equipment, and materials needed for preschool learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and assess the number, condition, and appropriateness of equipment and materials in order to meet the Iowa Early Learning Standards and the Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards (see above).
10. Leadership and Management	The program effectively implements policies, procedures, and systems in support of stable staff and strong personnel, fiscal, and program management so that all children, families and staff have high-quality experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preschool teachers reported positive organizational climate; however, some program policies interfered with providing high quality experiences (e.g., one district policy prohibited the hanging of children's artwork and literacy activities on the wall). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide time and funding for administrators to access training opportunities related to policies needed for high quality early childhood education programs.

How the Study was Conducted

- One hundred classrooms were randomly selected from public school, Head Start, and community programs serving preschoolers with Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs).
- On-site observations were conducted using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Revised (ECERS-R) and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Extended (ECERS-E). These two scales assess a broad range of program quality, including space, furnishings, teaching, interacting, health, safety, literacy, and math.
- Teachers were surveyed on professional background, training, and organizational climate.

Key Findings

- Inclusive preschool classrooms, which include children with disabilities in classes where more than 50 percent of the children are typically developing, were higher in quality.
- Self-contained classrooms, where the majority (50 percent or more) of the children have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) were lower in quality.
- High quality programs are found in all types of programs — public school, Head Start, and community-based early childhood programs.
- Higher quality programs involve administrators in program self-assessment and self-improvement activities that are validated by outside agencies.
- Lower quality programs reflected policies that were not supportive of children's optimal learning. Teacher's comments:
 - ◆ “Since this is a new building, we are not allowed to put things [e.g., children's artwork or literacy projects] on the wall.”
 - ◆ “We don't use balls/trikes outside because they might end up in the street.”
 - ◆ “Budget for the classroom is only \$100 per year.”

- The highest quality of education was observed in classrooms with multiple assets:
 - ◆ Licensed teachers with endorsement in Early Childhood Education/Early Childhood Special Education
 - ◆ More than 24 clock hours of training annually in Early Childhood Education/Early Childhood Special Education
 - ◆ Employee benefits (e.g., competitive salary and health benefits)
 - ◆ Evidence-based, comprehensive curricula
 - ◆ Evidence-based, comprehensive curriculum-based assessments
 - ◆ Positive organizational climate supported by informed and involved administrators
 - ◆ Inclusive classrooms

Multiple Assets Lead to High Quality

There is no single, magic bullet that ensures program quality. Building a high quality program requires strengthening as many assets as possible.

Hiring highly qualified teachers without offering competitive wages and benefits leads to high staff turnover. Programs

must have both to ensure high quality. Similarly, even highly qualified teachers need ongoing education and will require opportunities to learn about the newer evidence based curricula and assessment tools. And even the very best teachers can only implement a high quality program with the hands-on materials and equipment (e.g., blocks, puzzles, measuring cups) young children need to learn.

Conclusion

Research has shown that participation in high quality early childhood education increases children's success in school and in life. Children with and without disabilities are more alike than different and benefit from common experiences. All children should have opportunities to learn, play and interact with others, regardless of ability or disability.

Federal regulations now require that children with disabilities be served in the least restrictive environment policy (IDEA, 2004.) High quality, inclusive preschool programs ensure that all children, even those with disabilities, will enter school ready to learn at high levels.

For More Information

- <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/childcare/research/>

Iowa Department of Education Early Childhood Special Education:

- <http://www.iowa.gov/educate/content/view/643/1016/>

Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards and Iowa Early Learning Standards:

- <http://www.iowa.gov/educate/content/view/681/1016/>

IDEA

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Funding for this study was provided by the Iowa Department of Education, Bureau of Children, Family and Community Services; by Iowa State University Extension; and by the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Iowa State University.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jack M. Payne, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

File: Family Life 9, Public Policy