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Family and Professional Priorities for Inclusive Early Childhood Settings

Jennifer J. Hurley

University of Vermont, Burlington

Eva M. Horn

University of Kansas, Lawrence

The purpose of this study was to provide information about what characteristics from the variety of inclusive early childhood programs are most valued and least valued by families and professionals. Participants were 10 family members of young children with disabilities being served in inclusive programs and 10 early childhood professionals working in inclusive programs. A combination of Q-sort and qualitative research techniques were used. Participants generated one general factor viewpoint concerning what characteristics of inclusive early childhood programs are the most and least valuable. Interviews provided qualitative clarification concerning why participants did or did not value certain program characteristics and information about participants' beliefs concerning inclusive early childhood programs.

Keywords: *early childhood; inclusion; family perceptions; early childhood special education*

Early childhood professionals, policy makers, researchers, and families of young children have worked for more than 30 years to promote high-quality early education for young children in inclusive early childhood programs (cf. Bricker, 1978). Researchers have published extensive information on effective preschool inclusive practices (for reviews, see Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009; Guralnick, 2001; Odom et al., 2004). Through reauthorizations of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act in combination with changing societal values that places high importance on opportunities for development and learning and a sense of belonging for all children, early childhood inclusion has gained widespread legal, moral, and empirical support. However, even with the existing legal, moral, and empirical foundations, early childhood educators face multiple challenges with the implementation of high-quality inclusive early childhood practices.

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)—the two primary professional organizations for the early childhood field—recently developed a joint position statement on early childhood inclusion (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). The position statement was not intended to be used as a set of criteria to test if a program is inclusive or not but rather to describe three overarching qualities that define high-quality early childhood

Authors' Note: Please address correspondence to Jennifer Hurley, University of Vermont, Department of Education, 537 Waterman Building, 85 South Prospect Street, Burlington, VT 05405-0160; e-mail: jennifer.hurley@uvm.edu.

inclusive programs. The critical qualities or features are as follows: access to programs, active participation by children and families, and systems-level supports to ensure children and families' successful access and participation.

Inclusive early childhood programs are complex social systems with diverse policies, practices, and characteristics (Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009; Odom et al., 1996). The methods used to implement inclusive programming for young children vary greatly across communities (e.g., Buysse, Skinner, & Grant, 2001; Odom et al., 1999). With respect to the three key features presented by the joint position statement of the DEC and the NAEYC (2009), implementation of even one key feature can substantially vary from one program to another. The degree to which program personnel address the DEC and NAEYC's key component of access, for example, can vary on dimensions such as the ratio of children with disabilities to children without developmental delays, the amount of time that children with disabilities spend with peers without developmental delays, and the types of professionals who provide the services (e.g., early childhood education teachers, early childhood special education teachers, physical therapists; Guralnick, 2005; Odom et al., 1999). Program personnel may also vary in the way in which they implement the key component of system support. That is, variations from program to program can be seen in (a) the level of support and training provided for practitioners, (b) the degree to which collaboration among family members and professionals is facilitated, (c) the child:teacher ratios provided, (d) the types of adaptations and modifications provided in classrooms, and (e) the enrollment criteria enacted (e.g., only children with mild or moderate disabilities are eligible for enrollment in some programs; Hanson et al., 2001). Differences in systems support can also be noted in program philosophy and personnel beliefs about inclusion and children with disabilities. Finally, variability in implementation of the key component of participation is noted because children with disabilities who are enrolled in inclusive programs have experiences that differ on the extent to which they are involved in routine classroom activities and participate in the general education curriculum and model used for the provision of related services (e.g., services integrated into existing classroom activities, "pullout therapies" delivered outside classrooms).

Because of this variability in level of implementation of the three key components of high-quality inclusive early childhood education, families and professionals have, at times, had to make the difficult choices of noninclusive placements as a result of not finding inclusive options with a range of favored program characteristics. For example, Hanson and colleagues (2001) examined what program characteristics influenced families and professionals' decisions about children's placements in inclusive or segregated settings. Determining what program characteristics are the most and least valued by families and professionals is an important line of inquiry to inform our understanding of what constitutes high-quality early childhood inclusive programs. Furthermore, when assessing the quality of early childhood inclusive programs, many researchers have used general measures of program quality, as opposed to assessing the specific quality of the program, with attention to the characteristics inherent in inclusive programs; as such, an investigation of the valued characteristics of inclusive early education programs is warranted (cf. Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009).

The purpose of our study is to determine what characteristics of an inclusive early childhood programs are valued by consumers—both families of young children with disabilities

and professionals working in inclusive early childhood programs. In addition, we assessed the underlying beliefs and values that contributed to these viewpoints. Given the range of competing program characteristics that constitute inclusive early childhood programs, there is a need to consult with persons in the field, family members, and service providers to determine what possible program characteristics are the most and least valued by families and service providers. To this end, we investigated the following three questions:

Research Question 1: How many viewpoints are there among participants concerning the most and least valued characteristics of inclusive early childhood programs?

Research Question 2: Which characteristics of inclusive early childhood programs are valued by respondents?

Research Question 3: What are participants' rationales for having more or less value for inclusive early childhood program characteristics?

Method

Participants

We selected 20 participants with a purposeful sampling strategy based on their relevance to items being sorted or questions being answered (Sexton, Snyder, Wadsworth, Jardine, & Ernest, 1998). Specifically, the participants comprising the P sample (per Q-sort data) were 10 family members of young children with disabilities enrolled in inclusive early childhood classrooms and 10 professionals working in inclusive early childhood settings. The professionals had experience working in an itinerant model, a team teaching model, or an integrated activities model. The family members had experience with an itinerant model and a team teaching model. Participants' experiences with models of inclusion and other demographic information were determined with a prestudy questionnaire. We employed the inclusive model definitions proposed by Odom and colleagues (1999) and defined below.

Itinerant model. Children participate the entire program day in a classroom where less than half the children have disabilities. The classroom teacher is an early childhood teacher, and an early childhood special educator visits the classroom about once a week.

Team teaching model. Children participate the entire program day in a classroom where about half the children have disabilities and half do not. There are two full-time teachers in the classroom: one typical education early childhood teacher and one early childhood special educator.

Integrated activities model. Children are in a self-contained classroom with all children who have disabilities and an early childhood special educator. This class gets together with a classroom that has all children with typical development and an early childhood teacher for joint activities on a regular scheduled daily or weekly basis.

For family participants, we selected 9 mothers and 1 father who had 3- to 5-year-old children who qualified for early childhood special education services in an urban school district in the southern United States. None of the families' children with disabilities were "speech

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

	Professionals	Family Members
Age		
<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	39.0 (8.9)	40.7 (4.7)
Range	25–54	32–46
Sex		
Female	10	9
Male	0	1
Ethnic		
White	8	6
Latino or Hispanic	1	3
Native American	1	1
Level of education		
Some college	0	3
Bachelor's degree	6	4
Master's degree	4	1
Doctorate/JD/MD	0	2

only” or served solely on the basis of language or speech delays. As professional participants, we selected 5 early childhood special educators, 3 speech language pathologists, 1 occupational therapist, and 1 social worker who worked with 4- to 5-year-old children with disabilities in the same urban school district. Table 1 presents information on the participants’ characteristics for the two participant groups: family members and professionals.

Design

Mixed-methods analytic techniques have been recommended for examining issues related to preschool inclusion (cf. Li, Marquart, & Zercher, 2000), and we employed those methods to address our three research questions (cf. Green, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). Specifically, we used Q-sort procedures (Kerlinger, 1986) and interviews analyzed by the constant comparative method (Denzin, 1978).

Procedures

Q-sort sample items development. Sexton and colleagues (1998) noted that Q samples are sets of items or statements to be evaluated by the respondents. We employed a Q sample comprising 80 characteristics describing inclusive early childhood education programs (see appendix). The Q-sort items we used were a list of program characteristics identified by researchers in the 5-year multisite Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion (for details, see Odom et al., 1996; Odom et al., 1999). Note that individual items in the list of program characteristics do not describe all programs labeled as inclusive programs but rather are characteristics from a range of programs considered to be inclusive. For example, the following program characteristics were included in the Q sample: “Program has a full-time early childhood special educator in every classroom,” “Program has a full-time early childhood special educator housed in the child care center who rotates among classrooms,”

and “Program has an early childhood special educator who visits the center and classrooms once a week.”

Q-sort procedures. The quantitative portion of our study employed Q-sort analysis techniques. The Q-sort technique allowed us to investigate participants’ opinions—especially, their perceptions of the most and least valued characteristics of inclusive early childhood programs (Carr, 1992). Analysis of Q-sort data is based on factor-analytic procedures used to empirically determine the presence and characteristics of latent (unobserved) variables that represent linear composites of several observed variables. These latent variables can be thought of as clusters of associated observed variables. The foundation of the analysis is the pattern of associations (or absence of associations) among the observed variables, which can be represented as a correlation or covariance matrix. The reproducibility and validity of factor analysis solutions are influenced by several considerations, including (a) the stability of the association matrix, (b) decisions regarding the number of latent variables identified, and (c) characteristics and the composition of the latent variables. An example of a typical R-factor analysis might be the analysis of responses on a set of items or questions on a survey, with the goal being to determine whether those items form subscales or whether responses should be treated as a single, total composite score.

Factor analysis of Q-sort data differs from the more frequently reported R-factor analysis only in the sense that the items being clustered are the participants (P) and the sample comprises the Q-sort items sorted by the respondents. The concept of the n:p ratio in R-factor analysis is directly analogous to a Q:P ratio in the Q-sort context (e.g., Baggaley, 1982). Thus, in the Q-sort technique, factor analysis is used to group participants according to their shared viewpoints (Kerlinger, 1986; Sexton et al., 1998). The number of viewpoints represented by the participants is based on standard methods for identifying the number of factors that should be extracted. These include (a) the proportion of covariance represented by successive potential factors, (b) the magnitude of associations (loadings) between observed and latent variables, and (c) the number of observed variables that are strongly associated with potential latent variables (e.g., Velicer & Fava, 1998). In the last step, scores on the viewpoints are computed (as standardized factor scores) for each (Q) statement.

Q-sort process. Participants completed the sorting task in a location of their choice (e.g., homes, preschools, conference rooms). Research assistants asked participants to sort the statements about possible program characteristics, which were printed onto index cards, into separate groupings from least to most valued, with statements in the middle representing intermediate degrees of value. Respondents were instructed to place a fixed number of program characteristics into the 11 piles, with piles on the extreme ends containing fewer cards and with piles in the middle containing more, thereby creating a forced distribution as recommended by Kerlinger (1986). The following is a portion of the script read to participants:

I am interested in what characteristics of an inclusive early childhood program people value the most and least. When I say program, I mean the program provided by the school district that includes two important aspects, the environment and the people supporting your child. Environment addresses the classroom(s)/setting(s) in which your child participates and the

variety of activities and materials available. People addresses the full educational team in these settings including families, teachers (i.e., early childhood and early childhood special educator), peers, specialists (e.g., speech, OT, PT) and other adults involved on a regular basis with the program and children. When I say an inclusive early childhood educational program I mean programs, which enroll both children with and without disabilities. Here are the cards that you will sort according to which characteristics of an inclusive early childhood education program you value the most to those you value the least. All cards must be placed in one of the 11 piles with those on the left representing the most valued characteristics and those on the far right the least valued characteristics. Remember, however, you can only place the number of statements in each pile as indicated by the number on the pile placeholder card.

A complete copy of the script can be obtained from the first author. Note that participants were asked to sort the statements about inclusive program characteristics according to what they valued most to least, not according to what they had the most and least experience with. After completing the sort procedure, each participant had 11 groups of statements. We assigned a Q score of 0 to 10 based on locations of statements, with 0 being the least valued. These Q scores were used for subsequent statistical analysis (Kerlinger, 1986).

Interview procedures. Before the Q-sorting process, we informed participants that they would be interviewed about their decisions. After completing the Q-sorting process, research assistants interviewed respondents and asked participants why they had more or less value for the program characteristics sorted on the extreme ends of the continuum. Specifically, they questioned the respondents about 12 program characteristics—6 items from the two most valued groupings and 6 items from the two least valued groupings. Interviewers only affirmed their understanding of responses or addressed participants' requests for clarification. Interviews took about 30 minutes to complete and were audio taped and later transcribed verbatim. A copy of the interview script can be obtained from the first author. Following the sort procedure, all participants completed a survey for basic demographic information: age, gender, ethnic group, and highest level of education.

Analytic Approach

Q-sort analysis. The purpose of our Q-sort process was to cluster participants into groups based on similar viewpoints regarding the statements about possible characteristics of inclusive early childhood programs. As in previous studies, we analyzed aggregated participant data for families and professionals to determine if they shared similar values regarding inclusive program characteristics (e.g., Nicholson & Cushman, 2000; Sexton et al., 1998; Snyder, 1998). We employed the following steps to analyze the Q-sort information. First, we used principal component analysis with varimax rotation for factor extraction, as recommended by McKeown and Thomas (1988). We employed the criteria recommended by McKeown and Thomas for determining if a viewpoint was associated "well enough" to be reliably identified (extracted). These criteria included (a) visual inspection of the scree plot (Cattell, 1966; Dennis, 1986; Sexton et al., 1998), (b) eigenvalue greater than 2 (McKeown & Thomas, 1988), (c) at least 4 members with similar viewpoints (Dennis, 1986; Sexton et al., 1998), and (d) members with factor loadings of at least .40 (Dennis, 1986; Fantuzzo et al., 2001; Sexton et al., 1998).

Second, we generated a factor array for each viewpoint. Factor arrays are sets of factor scores with one factor score assigned to each program characteristic. Program characteristics with higher factor scores tended to be more valued, whereas lower scores implied less value among respondents for a particular viewpoint. For each viewpoint on the program, the program characteristics with high factor scores (z scores of ≥ 1.3) and low factor scores (z scores of ≤ -1.3) were examined for patterns in the responses that were more or less valued by respondents.

Interview analysis. We used interviews to clarify and expand participants' viewpoints generated by the Q-sort technique (Green et al., 1989). We employed the constant comparative method to reduce data and generate summary rationale quotes (Denzin, 1978). Data reduction involved focusing on portions of the interviews during which participants were questioned about the program characteristics that were most (z score of ≥ 1.3) and least valued (z score of ≤ -1.3) by members of a particular viewpoint. Data reduction involved a team of seven researchers. After transcriptions were reviewed and compiled into a master list, the research team employed the following three-step review process. First, individual researchers noted patterns and thematic categories within the master lists of quotes. Second, individual researchers reviewed the lists of quotes that explained why particular characteristics were more or less valued, and they selected quotes that they believed best captured the sentiment of the other respondents who were members of a particular viewpoint. Third, researchers met together as a group to discuss the selected quotes and, through a consensus process, determined which quotes should be used as summary rationale quotes for participants' perceptions (i.e., highly valued or not highly valued) for inclusive early childhood program characteristics.

Results

Research Question 1

How many viewpoints are there among participants concerning the most and least valued characteristics of inclusive early childhood programs?

One general factor solution was generated in which 16 of the 20 participants had membership in the factor (i.e., a factor loading of .40 or greater). Factor rotation was not relevant, because only one salient grouping was identified. Of these 16 participants, 7 were family members and 9 were professionals. The general factor solution accounted for 39% of the total participant variance and had an eigenvalue of 7.69. A second potential factor was not extracted, because it accounted for only an additional 8% of the total variance accounted for, with an eigenvalue of 1.75. Four participants were not strongly associated with the single-factor solution, as evidenced by their having loadings of less than .40 on the general factor solution.

Research Question 2

Which characteristics of inclusive early childhood programs are valued by respondents?

Table 2 lists the most and least valued program characteristics for the 16 participants who were members of the general factor solution. The 16 members of this grouping tended

Table 2
General Factor Solution for Most and Least Valued Characteristics

<i>z</i>	Most Valued Characteristics	Summary Rational Quote
1.708	Program personnel ensure that children with disabilities are active participants in all classroom routines and activities.	“What we don’t want are our children to be in the corner and all the other children doing something.” (Itinerant ECSE teacher)
1.634	Program is a high quality early childhood program.	“That’s an umbrella because by definition I’d get lots of play and constructive discipline.” (Itinerant ECSE teacher)
1.551	Program provides accommodations and adaptations to meet the needs of individual children.	“I think if you’re going to have a child in inclusion then you should meet their needs whatever those adaptations might be physical or behavioral or whatever.” (Occupational therapist)
1.541	Program hires teachers who are open to working with children who have disabilities.	“I think children absorb how we act versus what we say, if somebody has a problem being around someone with a disability the other children would pick up on that, as well as the child with the disability” (Parent) “If you don’t want to be working with my child then it can be negative. . . . That’s just a basic expectation.” (Parent)
1.486	Program fosters collaboration among families, teachers, administrators and other professionals.	“A program that does not have collaborative goals can become very fragmented, very disjointed because there has to be mutual trust, respect among all the people working with the children.” (Speech language pathologist)
1.341	Program facilitates independence for children with disabilities.	“If you can get a child to get his drink of water or take himself to the bathroom it’s not only an accomplishment within the classroom but it’s a very big help for mom and dad at home.” (Parent)
1.336	Program has a caring staff.	“Even if they’re not particularly trained in a certain area of the child’s need if they care they’re going to find out a way to learn it and do it for the best of the child.” (Itinerant ECSE teacher)
Least Valued Characteristics		
-2.507	Program requires children with disabilities to meet a set of criteria to participate in program.	“Part of the inclusion progress is that it includes everybody and so if you set up criteria then you are not an inclusion program.” (Speech language pathologist)
-2.182	Program maintains classes with half children with disabilities and half children without disabilities.	“I think that they’re better off if they’re with more typical peers.” (Parent)
-2.106	Program expects children to spend most of their day in teacher-directed activities.	“It’s poor preschool, it’s not good quality preschool.” (Parent)
-2.072	Program only makes adaptations that are unobtrusive.	“I think it’s okay for people to be different and it’s okay for everybody to know that. The key is to teach kids to respect the differences.” (Parent)

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

<i>z</i>	Least Valued Characteristics	Summary Rational Quote
-1.824	Program only includes children with mild or moderate disabilities.	"If you're going to an inclusive program they should all be included. We've had very much success with some of our programs with children with severe disabilities being in inclusive programs." (Early childhood special educator)
-1.536	Program provides therapies for children with more significant needs outside of the classroom.	"The teachers also learn from watching the therapists at work." (Parent)
-1.526	Program has a full-time early childhood special educator in every classroom.	"The teacher in the classroom should have access to any kind of information or special training that may be necessary to assist that particular disability of that child that year but I don't think it's necessary that they have an early childhood special education degree or background." (Parent)
-1.522	Program places children with similar disabilities in the same classroom with peers who do not have disabilities.	"They need to have more exposure to a variety of different needs for the children and you don't need to group them all together." (Early childhood special educator)
-1.411	Program has adults with disabilities as employees and volunteers.	"The reason I value it less is because I haven't seen it." (Family member)

Note: The more extreme the *z* score (more negative or positive), the more the item is valued or less valued by the people in this factor. Items toward the top of the list are more or less valued (depending on which list), and items toward the bottom are closer to the middle of the distribution. ECSE = early childhood special education.

to value programs that (a) ensured the active and independent involvement of children with disabilities; (b) were considered high-quality early childhood programs in general; (c) provided accommodations and adaptations to support children's learning; (d) employed professionals open to working with children who have disabilities and ensured the collaboration among teachers, professionals, and family members; and (e) facilitated the independence of the children with disabilities. However, the 16 members of the grouping were inclined to place less value on programs that (a) established exclusion criteria for child enrollment or included only children with mild or moderate disabilities, (b) maintained classrooms with 50% of the children with disabilities as opposed to naturally occurring ratios, (c) placed children with similar disabilities in the same classroom, (d) provided only unobtrusive adaptations, (e) implemented related services outside the classroom, (f) expected children to spend most their time in teacher-directed activities, (g) ensured that every classroom has a full-time early childhood special educator, and (h) included adults with disabilities working as employees and volunteers.

Research Question 3

What are participants' rationales for having more or less value for inclusive early childhood program characteristics?

Participants' rationales for having more or less value for individual program characteristics were clarified and elaborated by respondents during interviews. For example, members valued the characteristic "Program hires teachers who are open to working with children who have disabilities." After review of participant interviews, it was discovered that several participants supported the underlying belief captured in this parent's rationale:

I think children absorb how we act versus what we say. If somebody has a problem being around someone with a disability the other children would pick up on that, as well and the child with the disability. If you don't want to be working with my child then it can be negative. . . . That's just a basic expectation.

Participants also clarified and elaborated less valued inclusive early childhood program characteristics. For example, participants had less value for the program characteristic "Program only includes children with mild or moderate disabilities." As one early childhood special educator explained, "If you're going to an inclusive program they should all be included. We've had very much success with some of our programs with children with severe disabilities being in inclusive programs." Table 2 presents a list of summary rationale quotes, one for the most and least valued inclusive early childhood program characteristics.

Discussion

With our mixed-methods approach, we determined the viewpoints of a modest sample of parents and professionals involved with inclusive early childhood programs. We followed up with interviews to clarify respondents' viewpoints and better determine their beliefs about their most and least valued views. The list of most and least valued inclusive early childhood program characteristics creates an image of early childhood programs in which most respondents viewed children as active participants working toward independence with individualized adaptations and with related services provided as a part of children's daily activities within a general education curriculum. Program personnel reported valuing natural proportions of children with and without disabilities and acceptance of children regardless of their abilities. Many of the program characteristics valued and not valued by members of the one-factor solution generated appear to be congruent with the defining features of access, meaningful participation, and system support described in the DEC and NAEYC's (2009) joint position statement on early childhood inclusion.

Program Accessibility

Access for all young children to early childhood programs, regardless of their abilities, was supported by respondents. Similarly, they did not value programs that enrolled only children with mild disabilities or required children to meet program criteria to participate (e.g., toilet training, walking). A speech language pathologist explained, "Part of the inclusion process is that it includes everybody and so if you set up criteria then you are not an inclusion program." Similarly, the notion of access may be further understood from a parent's explanation of why a 50:50 ratio was not a valued characteristic: "I think that they're

better off if they're with more typical peers." A final characteristic of accessible early childhood programs might be one in which all children and families are welcomed. Participants overwhelmingly indicated that they value caring personnel who were open to working with children who have disabilities. For example, Bruns and Moogharreban (2007) recently showed that the majority of Head Start and prekindergarten teachers believed that young children with disabilities belong in general education classrooms. This is positive news given that families and professionals indicated that this is a top priority.

Program Participation

Respondents also valued personnel who ensured that children with disabilities actively participate in classroom routines and activities. As one early childhood special educator explained, "what we don't want is our children to be in the corner and all the other children doing something." Active participation and meaningful progress in the general education curriculum for learners with disabilities has been an important component of the mandate of Individuals With Disabilities Education Act since the 1997 reauthorization. Active participation in the general education curriculum for young children can be supported by the adoption of principles of universal design for learning. When early childhood personnel implement universal design principles, they support children's active participation by providing multiple and varied teaching and learning opportunities to better promote children's engagement and meaningful participation during day-to-day classroom routines and activities (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002). However, the implementation of universal design frameworks for curriculum does not necessarily attenuate the need for early childhood practitioners to make individualized accommodations and modifications for some children (cf. Lieber, Horn, Palmer, & Fleming, 2008). For example, respondents indicated that early childhood programs should "provide accommodations and adaptations to meet the needs of individual children." In a study of preschool personnel, Bruns and Moogharreban (2007) reported that most prekindergarten and Head Start teachers believe that they are not well prepared to implement some necessary adaptations (e.g., alternative forms of communication, positioning).

Program Support

The DEC and NEAYC's (2009) position statement includes supports in the form of professional development and opportunity for collaboration as a key component of high-quality inclusive early childhood programs. For many teachers, we believe that professional development on competencies needed for adaptations and accommodations for young children with developmental delays is sorely needed to promote inclusive practices, especially for children with significant disabilities. The participants in this study indicated that it was critical for program personnel to foster collaboration among families, teachers, administrators, and other professionals. For example, an itinerant early childhood special educator explained, "Even if they're [classroom teachers] not particularly trained in a certain area of the child's need, if they care, they're going to find out a way to learn it and do it for the best of the child." Through collaboration with team members, early childhood educators have better access to needed information and competencies required to be able to meet the

individualized needs of children included in their classroom. For example, Purcell, Horn, and Palmer (2007) found that collaborative relationships were an especially important factor in being able to continue to provide inclusive preschool programs.

Surprisingly, participants did not value "Program has a full-time early childhood special educator in every classroom." One parent explained,

The teacher in the classroom should have access to any kind of information or special training that may be necessary to assist that particular disability of that child that year, but I don't think it's necessary that they have an early childhood special education degree or background.

Finally, participants in our study indicated that programs that include children with disabilities must be high-quality early childhood programs. Guralnick (2005) noted that there are major variations across community-based early childhood program quality and that high-quality programs may be difficult to find (cf. Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse, & Wesley, 1998). Whereas progress in including children with disabilities in settings once reserved for children without disabilities has been made in recent years, Guralnick (2005) argued that systematic programmatic inclusion goals for the field of early childhood education have failed to emerge.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Study

Although the majority of participants in the current study reported valuing more or less well-specified inclusive early childhood education characteristics, our study has strengths and weakness, similar to many applied investigations. Given our modest purposive sample of parents and professionals, the findings of our Q sort and follow-up interviews have limited generalizability (Kerlinger, 1986). Nevertheless, with respect to inclusive early childhood education, our systematic mixed-methods approach allowed us to examine parents and professionals' viewpoints and beliefs to glean additional information about their perspectives. A second limitation of our study may be that participants' perceptions about inclusive early childhood settings may be limited or biased by their experiences with inclusive settings before participation in the investigation. However, our study does provide us with additional information and perhaps better insight into discerning what characteristics of inclusive early childhood programs are most and least valued, and these findings may inform future efforts to promote early childhood inclusion.

Conclusions

The families and professionals who participated in our study had varied experiences with inclusive early childhood programs. Despite the variety of participant experiences with inclusive settings, one general viewpoint of the majority of respondents was generated about the most and least valued program characteristics. This list of most and least valued inclusive program characteristics may be useful as one source for the generation of enhanced inclusive education goals for the field of early childhood education. These programmatic priorities and strategies might assist policy makers and program administrators in prioritizing specific program characteristics in an effort to provide high-quality

inclusive early childhood programs to better support families and young children with and without disabilities. In general, our findings support the definition of early childhood inclusion promulgated by the DEC and the NAEYC's (2009) joint position statement. We believe that as a field, we ought to be promoting a shared vision of inclusive early childhood programs. Whereas our programs will continue to be as diverse as the children and families served, it is imperative for consumers, practitioners, and advocates to continue conversations about what constitutes high-quality inclusive early childhood education.

Appendix

Q-Sample List of 80 Possible Characteristics of Inclusive Early Childhood Programs

1. Program personnel believe that inclusion is a basic right for every child.
2. Program philosophy is that inclusion is the starting point for all children.
3. Program requires children with disabilities to meet a set of criteria to participate in program.
4. Program personnel treat all children the same.
5. Program personnel avoid labeling children who have disabilities.
6. Program is the school where the child with disabilities would go to if she or he did not have a disability.
7. Program only includes children with mild or moderate disabilities.
8. Program personnel foster a sense of belonging for all children.
9. Program personnel look at families' strengths and view each family as unique.
10. Program accommodates children with behavior difficulties.
11. Program sees inclusion as one placement option for children with disabilities.
12. Program personnel believe that children with and without disabilities benefit from inclusion.
13. Program facilitates children learning from imitating each other.
14. Program helps children learn to understand and accept children with disabilities.
15. Program values "kids being kids," that is playing together, being together, just interacting.
16. Program facilitates children learning to help and support each other.
17. Program respects and uses languages of the families in the program.
18. Program reflects cultural diversity through staff, children, curriculum, and activities.
19. Program actively recruits children from diverse backgrounds.
20. Program offers families opportunities for making choices.
21. Program facilitates active family involvement.
22. Program incorporates family input in the generation of IEP goals.
23. Program offers classes in topics of interest for families (behavior management, toileting)
24. Program works well with other agencies involved with the child.
25. Program personnel believe that inclusion is the morally correct thing to do.
26. Program has adequate administrative support.
27. Program provides professional development and training for staff.
28. Program provides additional staff or volunteers as needed.
29. Program ensures that all staff has adequate training to work with all children
30. Program provides personnel with adequate time for planning.
31. Program has personnel experienced with inclusion.

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

32. Program policy is for children with disabilities to be enrolled in a class with typically developing children for the entire day.
 33. Program provides related services within the classroom routines/activities without removing the child from the classroom.
 34. Program provides related services for children with significant needs outside of classroom.
 35. Program hires teachers who are open to working with children who have disabilities.
 36. Program has naturally occurring ratios of children with and without disabilities in classes that is, one or two children with disabilities in a class.
 37. Program has a majority of children without disabilities enrolled in class.
 38. Program maintains classrooms with half children with and half children without disabilities.
 39. Program ensures children with disabilities opportunities to make friends with other children who have disabilities.
 40. Program has small classes.
 41. Program has good teacher-child ratios allowing for a lot of teacher-child contact.
 42. Program places children with similar disabilities in the same inclusive classroom.
 43. Program places children with different types of disabilities in the same classroom with peers who do not have disabilities.
 44. Program personnel ensure that children with disabilities are active participants in all classroom routines and activities.
 45. Program fosters collaboration among families, teachers, administrators, and others.
 46. Program fosters communication between professionals and families.
 47. Program ensures that adult roles/responsibilities are defined and accepted by all members.
 48. Program has adults with disabilities as employees and volunteers.
 49. Program is a high quality early childhood program.
 50. Program facilitates independence for children with disabilities.
 51. Program ensures all children are learning and making progress.
 52. Program prepares children for kindergarten.
 53. Program has high expectations for children.
 54. Program helps children learn social skills (sharing, turn taking, and how to play with others).
 55. Program has a structured learning environment and routines.
 56. Program has convenient hours.
 57. Program has an attractive environment.
 58. Program has low staff turnover.
 59. Program has a caring staff.
 60. Program helps children learn functional self-help skills (feeding, dressing, toileting).
 61. Program expects children to spend most of their day in activities of their own choosing.
 62. Program expects children to spend most of their day in teacher-directed activities.
 63. Program provides children with opportunities for independent exploration of materials.
 64. Program classrooms are well stocked with a variety of materials and activities.
 65. Program has a full-time early childhood special educator in every classroom.
 66. Program has a full-time special educator housed in program and rotating through classes.
 67. Program has an early childhood special educator who visits the classrooms once a week.
 68. Program teaches children pre-academic skills such as letters, shapes, and numbers.
 69. Program makes families feel welcome in the classroom at any time.
 70. Program gives families the opportunity to participate in the program in the way they want.
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(continued)

Appendix (continued)

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71. Program only makes adaptations that are unobtrusive.
 72. Program makes adaptations and accommodations as unobtrusive as possible to help children blend in as much as possible.
 73. Program ensures environmental accommodations are made so that all children have access to the physical environment (ramps, handrails).
 74. Program classrooms are equipped with all adaptive equipment needed (communication devices, positioning equipment, adapted toys).
 75. Program provides accommodations and adaptations to meet the needs of individual children.
 76. Program personnel focus on children's strengths.
 77. Program offers Early Childhood Special Educator services.
 78. Program offers therapies.
 79. Program helps child obtain IEP goals and objectives within the context of the classroom.
 80. Program helps child obtain IEP goals by providing one-on-one instruction.
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