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Teacher Leader Program 2024-2025

Research Question:

What supports are needed to create inclusive learning environments and increase growth in kindergarten classes?

Background/Rationale:

As an experienced kindergarten teacher, I have increased awareness of the factors that create student success in the vital year of a child's education. Kindergarten is no longer play-based and successful teaching goes beyond completing worksheets, but incorporates lessons that can reach all students regardless of their previous learning experiences or abilities. Each student is unique, and it can often be overwhelming to meet student needs if classrooms are overcrowded or not balanced effectively at the beginning of the school year.

For many children, kindergarten is their first experience in a structured school setting. It is a vital time for the development of social emotional regulation, learning the routines and expectations of school, and foundational skills in language arts and mathematics. Kindergarten teachers are required to take on the task of addressing the varied needs of the students in their classroom by appropriately using assessment, differentiation, and interventions to help all students towards the goal of being promoted to first grade at the end of the school year.

Under Ohio Child Find Laws, it is the duty of public school districts to identify, evaluate and provide special education services to qualified students from birth to age 21. Due to the passage of Ohio House Bill 554 in 2023 and addressing special education compliance issues, more students with diverse learning needs are being mainstreamed into general education kindergarten classes. House Bill 554 extended the age of students served under the developmental delay designation on their IEPs from 6 years old to 10 years old. This has resulted in the placement of students from public school preschools who have existing IEPs in general education settings with some supports and services. Frequently, teachers feel that these students need additional resources to be successful.

Literature Review:

The transition from early learning experiences to kindergarten is unique based on each child's participation in preschool or daycare programs, family structure and social-emotional learning. When students transition from preschool classrooms to kindergarten, meetings are held at the end of the school year to discuss each student's progress and placement for the upcoming school year.

While kindergarten teachers are not currently a part of preschool transition meetings, research suggests that there are many positive benefits to their presence during this process. Collaboration between preschool and kindergarten teachers helps to foster positive transitions for all students. In many cases, effective transition planning helps students build relationships with their new teacher and allows for preschool teachers to share important information about learning goals and areas for student growth with the kindergarten teacher. In addition, kindergarten teachers are given the opportunity to share about the routines and expectations of kindergarten with families (Yamauchi & Sousa, 2020, pg. 108-109).

As an increase of students with diverse learning needs is being reported and school districts are moving towards trying all students in general education settings first, it is important to examine the

factors that create successful inclusive educational environments. Teachers' feelings of preparedness and self-efficacy play an important role in the success of inclusive environments. When educators feel frustrated, they are less likely to feel they have been successful in meeting the learning needs of their students. Teachers' self-efficacy also depends on their amount of professional development, class sizes, and level of support (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007, pg. 123-124). In addition, when kindergarten teachers are able to collaborate with other professionals, they may feel more capable when being supported and thus, able to meet their students' learning needs utilizing a team approach (Dan, 2019). Examples of these team members include school psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and special education teachers who provide push in or pull out support for students.

Action Research:

In order to answer the research question, a survey was developed and sent to kindergarten teachers throughout a large urban school district. The questions asked were as follows:

- How many years have you taught kindergarten?
- Are you a long term substitute teacher?
- Are you currently certified to teach special education?
- How many students have you had in your classroom since the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year who have received itinerant special education services?
- Do you feel the students in your classroom who received itinerant services have been successful in a general education kindergarten setting?
- What additional supports would help you be successful in implementing an inclusive environment in your kindergarten classroom?
- What barriers do you feel currently exist that prevent successful inclusion from taking place in kindergarten classrooms?
- Do you need additional materials for differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners in your classroom? If so, how would you be able to get these materials?
- What are some ways you have tracked data to show how interventions are or are not successful with meeting the needs of your inclusion students?

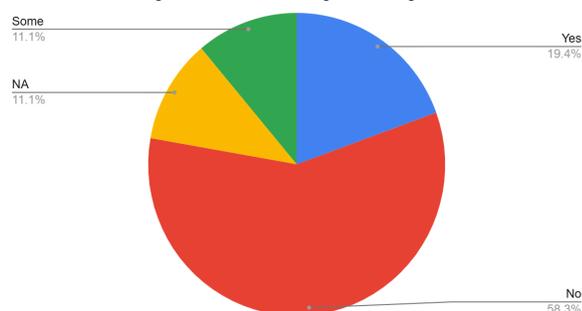
Data Analysis:

Out of 90 kindergarten teachers provided with the survey, 36 teachers submitted their responses. All of the teachers who participated answered that they were permanently in their position and not long term substitutes. Only one of the teachers who responded was currently certified in Special Education. The amount of kindergarten teaching experience ranged from 1 to 34 years, with an average amount of 17.8 years across the group of responding educators.

Several of the questions asked in the survey were designed to gauge how teachers were feeling about the implementation of itinerant services for students who were placed in general education kindergarten settings over the past two school years. Itinerant services are provided by a traveling special education teacher to meet each student's goals and required weekly times for services as defined by the student's Individualized Educational Program. A majority of the kindergarten teachers responded that they have had 1 or 2 students receiving these services. Close to 60% of the teachers who responded felt that students who were receiving itinerant services were not successful in a general education setting with the current program structure in place. In comparison, 11% of

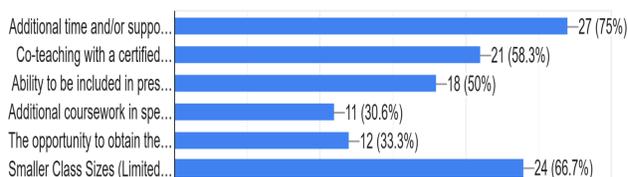
teachers felt their students achieved some success, while close to 20% of teachers felt their students with itinerant services were successful.

Do you feel the students in your classroom who received itinerant services have been successful in a general education kindergarten setting?



What additional supports would help you be successful in implementing an inclusive environment in your kindergarten classroom?

36 responses



The last portion of the survey asked teachers to identify supports that would help them be successful in implementing inclusive environments and barriers that currently are keeping them from being able to do this with fidelity. The responding teachers felt that additional time and/or support from a special education resource teacher, co-teaching with a certified special education teacher, class sizes limited to 24 students or less, and the ability to be included in preschool to kindergarten transition meetings would help them be more successful. While examining key themes in barriers to successful inclusion, several concerns were identified. The most prevalent concern was lack of services, which included no access to a classroom paraprofessional or too limited itinerant services for students with special needs. Other common answers included little to no formal special education training, large class sizes, or not enough resources or time were major barriers to fostering successful inclusion in kindergarten classrooms.

Recommendations:

Based on the data provided by surveying the experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers, as well as analyzing current research, the following recommendations are suggested:

- It is imperative that kindergarten teachers are included in the transition from public school preschools to kindergarten to help students and families be prepared for what the next steps will look academically, socially, and emotionally for the child's well-being. If not already in place, school districts should establish Kindergarten Transition Committees and ensure that kindergarten teachers have the ability to attend transition meetings for students in their home school that occur before the end of the school year to establish a rapport with families and be better prepared to meet the needs of all students.
- Additional education and partnerships need to be put in place to improve kindergarten teachers' feelings of self-efficacy and preparedness to meet the needs of their incoming and current students. School districts should mutually agree with teacher unions to contractually limit class sizes in kindergarten to 20 students or less for inclusive classrooms, provide the ability to obtain Early Childhood Special Education licensure at free or reduced cost to interested teachers, and provide opportunities to co-teach with dedicated In-Class Support or Special Education Resource Teachers. Implementing these steps would increase feelings of success and promote positive outcomes for all learners in kindergarten classes.

References:

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Hughes, M. T., & Valle-Riestra, D. M. (2007). Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers Implementing Instructional Practices for Diverse Learners. *International Journal of Special Education, 22*(2), 119-128.H

Yamauchi, L. A., & Chapman de Sousa, E. B. (2020). Early Childhood Educators' Perspectives on Early Childhood Settings and Collaborations to Promote Kindergarten Transition. *Professional Educator, 43*(1), 100-113.