



# Me, Too!

## Inside Preschool Inclusion

The Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion

### Toward a better understanding of inclusion

Since 1991, United States law has required public school systems to provide free, appropriate educational services to preschool-aged children with disabilities, beginning at age three. During the 1990s, great efforts have been made to address “appropriate” by including children with disabilities in classroom settings with typically developing peers. Although the benefits of inclusion have been well documented, school administrators, teachers, service providers and families have faced numerous challenges to successfully establishing inclusive programs. An article by researchers with the Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion presents the issues that interfere with the understanding and implementation of inclusion.

*“...inclusion is influenced by a dynamic set of factors operating inside and outside the classroom.”*

**Absence of a standard definition.** Differing views and opinions about inclusion hinder communication across school systems, agencies, professionals and families. Establishing a standard definition that incorporates the viewpoints of all participants in the process might assist policymakers in making informed decisions about inclusion.

**Insufficient research of typical settings.** The majority of the research of inclusion has been conducted in model, university-based settings with lower teacher-student ratios and more children with disabilities than in most community childcare and preschool programs. Conducting research in settings more typical of the “real world” may provide additional information that could possibly improve the implementation of inclusion.

**Underestimating the role of culture.** Although many preschool and childcare programs serve multicultural communities, research has not adequately addressed the issues of cultural diversity in inclusive settings. Family cultural practices and native languages can create unique challenges to incorporating children with disabilities. Conducting research that examines the cultural context may further promote greater understanding and better implementation.

**Lack of a multi-dimensional “big picture” approach to research.** Most research has addressed one aspect of the inclusion process at a time. However, inclusion is influenced by a wide range of factors operating inside and outside the classroom. The learning environment itself is significantly shaped by the relationships among administrators, teachers and other professionals, families and children. A better understanding of the connections among all participants and the educational policies that affect them is essential to the process of effectively implementing inclusion.

### **About ECRII**

The Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion (ECRII) is a national research project funded by the U.S. Department of Education for a five-year period to study the inclusion of preschool children with disabilities in settings with typically developing children. The goal of ECRII is to identify factors that help inclusion work, factors that hinder inclusion, and strategies that may support the inclusion of young children with disabilities in classrooms and communities. This comprehensive study of preschool inclusion is being done by researchers at five universities in different regions of the country: San Francisco State University, the University of Maryland, the University of North Carolina, the University of Washington, and Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.

### **About this brief**

Information provided comes from an in-depth look at inclusion in 16 preschool programs across the country. The programs studied represent urban, suburban, and rural communities, culturally diverse adult and child participants, and many different ways of including young children with disabilities in typical settings. ECRII researchers have tried to describe and learn about inclusion from the viewpoint of the people most involved in it--children with and without disabilities, families, teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Data collection included interviews, classroom observations and analysis of relevant documents.

**This ECRII brief may be freely reproduced and disseminated, provided appropriate reference is given.**

### **Brief source**

Odom, S. L., Peck, C. A., Hanson, M. J., Beckman, P. J., Kaiser, A. P., Lieber, J., Brown, W. H., Horn, E. M., & Schwartz, I. S. (1996). Inclusion at the preschool level: an ecological systems analysis. *Social Policy Report*, 10, 18-30.

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