



Assessing Opportunities to Support Each Child

12 Practices for Quality Inclusion

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The newest member of Miss Dorina’s preschool classroom is Taylor, who is 3 years old and full of life. Balls, cars, and anything that makes noise are his favorite playthings. Until recently, Taylor had received early intervention services at home. He has made terrific progress since he was first diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, but he still has significant delays in receptive and expressive language and in social and emotional development.

When Taylor's parents met with Miss Dorina last week, they mentioned that because of his language delays, Taylor sometimes has difficulty interacting with adults, expressing his needs and feelings, and connecting with other children. His parents also shared that Taylor is usually interested in what other children are doing, but he finds it difficult to engage in play with his peers.

Miss Dorina counts on Miss Laura, Taylor's speech-language pathologist, for ideas about ways to support Taylor within classroom routines. Still, Miss Dorina finds herself wondering, How can I make my classroom welcoming and supportive for Taylor? How can I help Taylor to make friends and play with his classmates? And how can we all work together in ways that support Taylor and all of the other children too?

Over the past two decades, research on early childhood inclusion has enabled a greater understanding of how we can best support the learning needs of young children with identified disabilities in early childhood classrooms. Research findings on the effectiveness of high-quality inclusion, along with innovations that are generated in everyday practice, have equipped us with rich knowledge, support systems, and resources for meeting the needs of young learners (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou 2011). But how can we proactively assess opportunities to support the unique needs of a young learner like Taylor?

Assessing environments, interactions, and supports for quality inclusion

The joint position statement of the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) on early childhood inclusion states that the desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities are “a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential” (DEC/NAEYC 2009, 2). This means that our efforts

need to focus on quality experiences for *each* child (e.g., Taylor) and for *every* child (i.e., every other child in Taylor's class, as well as Taylor).

The position statement reminds us that achieving quality inclusion requires effectively using practices that support young children to access and fully participate in opportunities to learn, develop, and connect. What practices can early childhood educators use every day in their classrooms to meet the needs of each and every young learner?

In the following sections, we share a synthesis of 12 practices, drawn from extensive research, classroom application, and review, that are essential for establishing quality environments, interactions, and supports (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou 2011; Soukakou 2016). For each practice, there is a set of specific strategies that can be used in an early childhood program.

Achieving quality inclusion requires effectively using practices that support young children to access opportunities to learn, develop, and connect.

Recently, a classroom observation tool—the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP™)—was developed to support early childhood educators, specialists, administrators, professional development providers, and families to assess what is happening in the classroom and to use that information to enhance opportunities for each child—particularly for children with disabilities (Soukakou 2016). The ICP is a structured observation measure that assesses 12 inclusive practices that can support the developmental and learning needs of children with identified disabilities in early childhood programs. The ICP was conceptualized by the second author of this article; she is a researcher and trained early childhood special educator with experience in inclusive early childhood programs. The ICP's development was based on the best available research on effective classroom practices for supporting inclusion in early childhood, along with extensive research and collaboration with early childhood educators and program administrators. The ICP has been studied and used successfully in a wide range of early childhood programs (Soukakou et al. 2015).

Each item of the ICP represents a different area of practice and includes a set of quality indicators that guide users in assessing the quality of specific inclusive strategies. To conduct an ICP assessment, users need to observe a classroom's planned daily activities and routines for three hours in order to observe a wide range of classroom activities, routines, and interactions between adults and children. A short interview with the classroom teacher is also needed to gather additional information on some of the instructional strategies and supports that were observed on the day of the assessment. Information gathered using the ICP can help in assessing the extent to which inclusive practices were used in the classroom to meet the needs of a specific child with identified disabilities, while also paying attention to the active participation and engagement of all children in the classroom.

In this way, the ICP can be used as a tool to support early childhood professionals to assess and monitor the use of inclusive teaching strategies and guide instructional decisions and supports for each and every child. The authors of this article have been working together to support early childhood professionals to become familiar with the practices outlined in the ICP and to use those practices to effectively include all children in their classrooms.

Practices that support each and every child

What follows is an overview of each of the 12 ICP practices. With each practice come essential questions for educators to ask to inspire reflection, support decision making, and inform assessment of the practice's impact. We then return to Taylor to provide more detailed examples of how each practice might be implemented to support a specific child.

Practice 1: Adaptations of space, materials, and equipment

Practice 1 involves assessing how physical space, materials, and equipment in a classroom are organized, placed, and used every day by adults and children. When adults prepare physical environments, it is important to set them up in ways that are accessible to all children. It is equally important to intentionally organize the space, materials, and equipment throughout the day to support each child's individual

and social experiences. For a child who uses a walker to move around the classroom independently, it may mean monitoring how the other children use and put away toys to support their classmate's movement from one area of the room to another.

With each practice come essential questions for educators to ask to inspire reflection, support decision making, and inform assessment of the practice's impact.

Adults can also observe the classroom and reflect on how materials and equipment are placed or adapted to support each child in independently using them. Can all children use materials and equipment independently? At the same time, adults can monitor how children use materials and can provide the necessary scaffolding to help children use the materials in meaningful ways. For a child who has difficulty with fine motor skills, such as cutting with scissors, a teacher might provide hand-over-hand assistance to help him use scissors to cut out a shape. Likewise, a teacher might need to monitor how a child attempts to use finger paint for the first time and be ready to model some options, if needed.

Practice 2: Adult involvement in peer interactions

Practice 2 involves assessing opportunities to use specific strategies to help children initiate and sustain relationships with other children. Opportunities for adult involvement can range from organizing social activities, interactions, and games to intentionally encouraging children to participate in those activities, particularly children for whom interacting socially might be challenging. For children who might have difficulty initiating or maintaining social engagements with their peers, the ICP reminds us that teachers may use more specific scaffolding strategies, such as modeling and offering verbal or nonverbal prompts to a child to help him respond to a friend. For example, during free-play time, a teacher could model how to take turns throwing and catching a ball to support a child for whom taking turns in play is difficult. Another scaffolding strategy might involve enlisting other peers to help children for whom interacting socially is challenging. For example, a teacher could pair two



children for a finger painting activity and teach a child how to help her peer engage in the activity.

Practice 3: Adults' guidance of children's free-choice activities and play

Practice 3 involves assessing how to support children's active and sustained engagement in both individual and social play activities. This may involve considering how we monitor children's selection of activities and playmates and the ways children engage in play. It may also involve individualizing supports for children who have difficulty engaging in activities. One child might need support to become engaged in an activity while another child might need adult help to engage in collaborative problem solving during social play activities with his peers.

Through sustained social interactions with children, adults can extend children's play and activities and scaffold their learning.

Monitoring how children engage in activities, showing availability during free-play time, and using specific scaffolding strategies are some specific ICP strategies that teachers can use to support active engagement in

play. For example, for a child with attention difficulties, a teacher might use a visual activity map to help the child focus more easily on each step of an art activity. For another child who is using blocks to construct an imaginary hospital, a teacher might extend the play by asking open-ended questions and helping the child form hypotheses and make connections between ideas. In both of these examples, the teacher uses strategies to meet a child's individual needs while also enabling the child to participate meaningfully in the activity of his choice. The teacher may take photographs or keep observation notes to monitor how children respond to these strategies and then adjust her planning for each child.

Practice 4: Conflict resolution

As children engage in activities and social relationships with their peers, they also learn to negotiate their differences and resolve their conflicts. Adults play an important role in supporting children in this process. What are thoughtful ways that adults can listen to children and acknowledge their perspectives, support children to communicate their feelings, and help children find alternative, appropriate ways to interact with their peers? To effectively promote conflict resolution, each of these requires strategies. As an illustration, a teacher might help a child who is nonverbal to use sign language or a communication board to talk about a conflict that

occurred. Clear rules and behavior expectations that are established and communicated consistently between adults and across routines are essential to encourage positive social behavior.

Practice 5: Membership

A key aspect of quality inclusion involves creating a classroom community in which each and every child feels welcome and has a sense of membership and belonging. This means creating an inclusive social climate in which individual differences are recognized and accepted, offering children equal opportunities to assume various roles and responsibilities in the classroom, and supporting children to make choices about themselves and the whole group. The ICP reminds us that recognizing and accepting children's individual differences requires intentionally planning activities that promote understanding and acceptance of diversity as well as using strategies in the moment to respond to children's individual differences in inclusive ways.

Daily observation of children in a classroom of diverse young learners can lead a teacher to the selection of more effective strategies.

For example, when the class is voting on an upcoming class trip, the teacher might use visual cues to help a child with a significant social and communication disorder understand the options and express her choice. Understanding the tools that build membership will bolster each teacher's ability to support quality inclusive environments and to build opportunities for any child who is new to the setting to fully participate.

Practice 6: Relationships between adults and children

One of the most consistent findings of child development research is the importance of positive, responsive, and reciprocal social interactions between adults and children. How can adults consistently observe children to learn how to be highly responsive to their interests and emotional needs and concerns? Here's one way: a teacher who notices a child expressing his fear of thunderstorms might start a conversation during which she validates his feelings, listens to his thoughts, and shows availability to sustain the

conversation. This attention to building and sustaining connections between adults and children can also support children who may be new to the classroom. Being consistently available and responsive to children's interests and concerns may be essential for a child who has experienced trauma or another challenging life circumstance.

Through sustained social interactions with children, adults can extend children's play and activities and scaffold their learning. For example, a teacher watching two children watering plants in the class's garden might join them and ask open-ended questions to build vocabulary, extend their understanding of certain ideas, and help them make connections between their actions.

Practice 7: Support for communication

Children with communication disorders can benefit from strategies that help them express their needs, communicate with their peers, and engage in classroom routines and activities. The same can be true for children who are dual language learners building their vocabulary and grammar in the language of the classroom. What strategies might a teacher use to encourage and support children's communication? This might mean that a teacher models for a child how to make a request or offers verbal prompts to help a child respond to her peer. Or a teacher might use visuals (real objects, photos) to support children's vocabulary development and to encourage all children to participate during circle time. Daily observation of children in a classroom of diverse young learners can lead a teacher to the selection of more effective strategies.

Practice 8: Adaptations of group activities

Assessing ways to adapt group activities throughout the day is essential for actively engaging and effectively supporting learning needs in a group. In what ways can a teacher adapt whole- and small-group activities to support each child's participation? Effective practices often involve adjusting the size of the group, adapting the materials of the activity, or individualizing the learning goals and strategies. For example, during story time with a small group of children, a teacher might encourage the participation of a child with a language disorder by reading an adapted book of the same story that includes less text and supplement this with concrete props on a felt board. Later, to scaffold learning, the same teacher might repeat the beginning,



middle, and end of the story, using props to support the child's understanding of the sequence of story events. Understanding the different ways a teacher can support each child's participation can help teachers differentiate their support for each child, as needed.

Practice 9: Transitions between activities

Transitions between activities and routines are an important learning context. In an early childhood program, common transitions might involve moving from a free-choice activity time to group story time. For a child with a disability, it might also involve rejoining classmates after participating in a small therapy group. Many young children find transitions challenging, as they are often required to stop doing something they enjoy, wait for the next activity, move to a different physical location, or interact with different adults and/or children. What specific strategies can be used to support transitions? Adults can assess the extent to which they use proactive strategies with the whole group, such as marking the beginning and end of activities with songs, switching lights off and on during transitions, or using a timer to remind children of upcoming activities. Adults can also use individualized

strategies for some children who have difficulty making transitions between activities. For example, a teacher might use an individualized picture schedule with a child to help him prepare for the next activity.

Practice 10: Feedback

Constructive comments about how children think, participate, and engage in different tasks are important. What type of feedback is most likely to support each child's learning? And more important, how can feedback be provided to individual children to support their motivation to learn? The nature, frequency, and ways in which adults embed different types of feedback in their interactions with children can have a significant impact on learning and emotional development. In quality inclusive classrooms, teachers focus their feedback on children's efforts rather than on children's end products. Teachers who create inclusive classrooms also adjust the form of feedback according to each child's needs. For example, a teacher might high-five all children as a form of feedback, with a specific eye toward reinforcing a child who is deaf.

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Supporting Taylor: Reflection Questions and Strategies for Implementing Inclusive Practices

How can I use the environment to support each child?

Practice 1: Adaptations of space, materials, and equipment

Because Miss Dorina knows how much Taylor loves balls, she decides to use balls during circle time as part of a group language game. In this activity, each child, including Taylor, is verbally encouraged to roll a ball to a peer sitting nearby and to then greet the classmate by name. By observing Taylor's engagement in this activity over time, Miss Dorina can monitor ways to scaffold his successful participation in increasingly challenging activities.

How can I engage and support each child in routines and activities?

Practice 3: Adults' guidance of children's free-choice activities and play

During free-choice time, Taylor often enjoys playing in the block area. One morning, Miss Dorina notices that Taylor is interested in a block structure that some of his friends are building, and she helps him create a similar structure using a visual map.

Practice 8: Adaptations of group activities

Practice 9: Transitions between activities

Practice 10: Feedback

Right before the end of free-choice time, Miss Dorina gently reminds Taylor of the upcoming activities and reviews with him the classroom's picture schedule to help him prepare for music time. When Taylor starts helping to put the blocks away, Miss Dorina comments positively on his effort to help his friends clean up. She explains to the whole group how a team effort helps clear space for them to move around in their upcoming music and dance activity.

During circle time at the end of the day, Miss Dorina asks the children to reflect on their favorite activities of the day. To encourage children to express their choices, Miss Dorina asks each child to show the others the activity or game they enjoyed playing most.

How can I identify what works (and what doesn't work) to support each child?

Practice 12: Monitoring children's learning

Miss Dorina and Miss Laura (the speech-language pathologist) have scheduled regular meetings to compare observation notes, photographs, and other documentation showing how Taylor approaches new learning tasks and situations. They'll use this information to make adjustments to their strategies and supports and will share what they learn with Taylor's family.

How can I build relationships with and among the children?

Practice 2: Adult involvement in peer interactions

Practice 4: Conflict resolution

Practice 6: Relationships between adults and children

Practice 7: Support for communication

To support both Taylor and his classmates, Miss Dorina has a flexible morning greeting system. All of the children can indicate how they want to be greeted as they enter the room: with a hug, a wave, or a high five. Taylor used to select a wave every day, but he has recently been high-fiving Miss Dorina each morning.

To support Taylor in connecting with other children, Miss Dorina asks Caleb, a classmate who enjoys playing with Taylor, to help. With Miss Dorina's support, every morning after circle time Caleb helps Taylor choose which activity area he wants to play in by using a set of picture symbols. Miss Dorina stays nearby and observes as Taylor makes his choice. During free-choice time, Miss Dorina encourages Taylor to join some activities with his peers.

One morning, Miss Dorina observes Taylor engaged in a conflict with another child over some blocks they both want to use. Miss Dorina gently approaches the children, acknowledges their frustration, and invites them to share their feelings. She then offers two options from their collaboratively developed "Classroom Solutions" folder for how to share the blocks.

Later, at snack time, Miss Dorina joins Taylor and his classmate in a conversation about their earlier play with blocks. She then encourages the other children to join in to share and discuss things that happened earlier in the day.

How can I build a community that engages, reflects, and supports each unique child and family?

Practice 5: Membership

Practice 11: Family-professional partnerships

Morning meeting in Miss Dorina's class includes opportunities to welcome each child and to prepare for a successful day. As part of a greeting song, children may say hello using English, sign language, picture symbols, or Tagalog (spoken by one of Taylor's classmates) to honor differences and to build membership. Miss Dorina and Miss Laura use a digital camera to document classroom activities. Most days they send photos via email to each family with information about the activities. They find this to be an effective way to support carryover and cohesion between home and program. By checking in with Taylor's family, Miss Dorina and Miss Laura get information about what Taylor is sharing, how often, and with whom. This additional information about Taylor's progress will help his teachers make decisions about what they do in the classroom.

Resources to Support Inclusive Practices and Decisions

Here are some free, online resources that can support a formative assessment process and the use of ICP practices in inclusive settings.

CONNECT Module 1: Embedded Interventions (www.connectmodules.dec-sped.org/connect-modules/learners/module-1/)

In this module, educators learn about ways to incorporate practices into daily routines to help children participate in a variety of early learning opportunities and environments. All resources are available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Mandarin, including downloadable video clips that illustrate evidence-based practices and components of inclusion. One of the videos, “Reading at Circle Time,” is described here:

This short video, in both English and Spanish, shows how Jacob’s teacher has worked with his speech-language pathologist to incorporate specific supports for his learning and participation. As you watch, you’ll see how materials have been adapted. You’ll also see how this approach is supporting both Jacob and his peers. By monitoring Jacob’s participation in the activity, his teacher will be able to gather data on how frequently he is producing his target sounds accurately and be able to work with his therapist to make adjustments.

Resources Supporting Individualization for Children Ages Birth to 5 (<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/children-disabilities/article/resources-supporting-individualization>)

This collection of resources provides information about evidence-based practices that support individualized decisions for children with and without disabilities. These practices are aligned with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework>). The resources are organized around the eight topic areas of evidence-based practices identified in the Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices (<https://www.dec-sped.org/dec-recommended-practices>). The recommended practices have been validated as having the strongest evidence base for individualizing teaching and learning opportunities for all children.

Practice 11: Family–professional partnerships

An essential characteristic of high-quality inclusion is a successful partnership between families and early childhood educators. What roles can families play in a program’s efforts to include a child with a disability? They can be partners in planning, documenting, and reflecting on effective inclusion strategies in their homes and in everyday family routines. As they do so, they contribute important information about their child’s needs and progress, as well as share ideas about supportive interventions.

Developing an intervention plan for each child can be an effective tool for monitoring a child’s progress in a more holistic manner.

Likewise, early childhood educators can support families by working closely together to reflect on documentation for the classroom, exchange perspectives, communicate on a regular basis, and support each other in meeting children’s identified goals. Imagine, for example, that a family is concerned about bringing a child who is on the autism spectrum to an upcoming family reunion. A conversation between family members and staff could lead to an effective plan, especially if the teacher is able to share detailed evidence of strategies that have helped the child engage in large-group interactions in the classroom.

Practice 12: Monitoring children’s learning

Having a system for reviewing the strategies and learning supports that are used in a child’s classroom and home enables everyone involved to assess what practices have been helpful for each child and to make adjustments as needed. How do early childhood educators know if they are meeting a child’s learning and developmental needs? Developing an intervention plan for each child that lists goals and specific strategies and interventions can be an effective tool for monitoring a child’s progress in a more holistic manner.

Regularly gathering rich information about the context and ways in which individual children respond to adult scaffolding can be an effective way to assess how each child learns, and it can help teachers adjust their

support. For example, to reflect on a nonverbal child's progress with conflict resolution, a teacher may want to create a running record that lists the different ways she has been helping the child express his perspective and feelings during instances of peer conflict. She can also highlight the strategies that seemed to help the child communicate his feelings to his peers.

Using these practices together to assess opportunities

A significant body of research indicates that these specialized instructional practices provide a strong foundation for quality inclusion (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou 2011; NPDCI 2011). By intentionally evaluating if, when, and how these practices are being used in the classroom, early childhood educators can identify opportunities to better support each child's active participation and unique learning and developmental needs. To see how the practices are woven into daily routines and interactions that support Taylor's full participation, see "Supporting Taylor: Reflection Questions and Strategies for Implementing Inclusive Practices," on pages 40–41.

Concluding thoughts

The practices described in this article are drawn from the Inclusive Classroom Profile, a new classroom observation tool designed to assess the quality of inclusive classroom practices in early childhood settings (Soukakou 2016). The article offers evidence-based insights—based on the ICP—to help educators observe, select, adjust, individualize, and revise practices to support each and every child. The resources offered in the table "Resources to Support Inclusive Practices and Decisions" (p. 42) share additional examples of how to use evidence-based practices to support all children.

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