

**Supporting Cross-Program Collaboration to Enhance Inclusion Practices**

**in Early Childhood Settings**

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Collaboration between staff members is an essential component of any organization's success, and the field of education is no exception. Collaboration is a tool that allows members of a staff to grow and develop together, creating a culture of support, encouraging connection and conversation, and ultimately enhancing student success and increasing positive outcomes for the organization as a whole. However, successful collaboration does not just happen naturally. Creating an environment that fosters successful collaboration requires specialized knowledge, planning, and organization, as well as willingness, enthusiasm, and focus from all participants. Even further, to create true opportunities for reaching the highest potential of shared knowledge, collaboration requires connection outside of immediate circles within a staff. This is especially true in the realm of Early Childhood Education, where several diverse programs are often housed together. This project was created to extend collaborative opportunities beyond program specific collaborative sessions, particularly from blended programs to self-contained programs and vice-versa, in order to support teachers in enhancing their knowledge and implementation of inclusion practices.

### **Core Question**

Our building is home to a variety of programs that service children from a wide variety of backgrounds, presenting with a wide variety of skills and needs. We are an early childhood center within a public school district in the western suburbs of Chicago. The majority of our classrooms are housed within our building, but we also have four classrooms located within two elementary schools in the district. Our population is composed of students ranging in ages from three to five years old. We have four self-contained classrooms, 12 half-day blended classrooms,

10 full day blended classrooms, three half day blended bilingual classrooms, and two full day blended bilingual classrooms. Our blended classrooms are considered “general education classrooms” that service students from a variety of qualifying sources, including the Preschool for All or Preschool for All Expansion grant, Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act for our students with Individualized Education Plans, and our Tuition Based Program. In all of these classes combined, we service over 400 students, 52% of whom are students with Individualized Education Plans, either full IEPs or speech-only IEPs. Further, 57% of our students come from low-income families. 49.8% of students are Hispanic, 15.5% of students are white, 21.7% of students are Black, 8.3% of students are Asian, and 4.3% of students are two or more races (Student Enrollment Summary Report, 2021). Per the Preschool for All grant that is a qualifier for a large majority of our students, our blended classrooms must consist of at least 30% students with IEPs to support inclusion of students in the least restrictive environment.

Improving outcomes for all students will require a shift in collaboration from collaborating within circles composed of teachers within the same program, to working with teachers across programs. Therefore, the question that stands and is the focus of this research study is: How can we support teachers in creating collaborative opportunities across programs to enhance knowledge and implementation of inclusion practices?

### **Rationale**

Within our program, there are several informal groups or circles of teachers who work together to plan, share knowledge and resources, and support each other in many ways. However, these circles historically have only existed within homogeneous programs. Blended teachers worked with blended teachers and self-contained teachers worked with self-contained teachers. While it can be argued that all of our teachers are certified as special-education teachers

in the early childhood setting and do carry some degree of knowledge of all programs, not all of the knowledge and practices needed for blended or self-contained programs are used consistently at all times depending on the demographic makeup of any particular group of students in any given year. Therefore, connection across programs can help “flex the muscles” so to speak of the skills that are not being used consistently. For this reason, this study focused on classroom teachers that represented multiple programs we house in our building.

Teachers often hear the word “inclusion” and see it as a place where students go to participate in the general education environment. It might be perceived as “inclusion time” or “the inclusion room”. This is often the attitude that is seen within our building. When teachers in blended settings see students with IEP’s on their class lists, their initial response is to consider the workload that comes along with adding the student to their caseload, the added paperwork and meetings to be scheduled, the increase in data to collect and how they will go about collecting that data, rather than confidence that they will have the knowledge and support to meet the child’s needs within their classroom environment.

However, inclusion is not a place or a time, nor does it have to be seen as “additional work” when the right supports are in place. Inclusion is a practice that involves connection between self-contained and general education programs, beginning with their teachers. Without collaboration between these programs, continuous support, content and knowledge sharing, and effective intervention implementation cannot be achieved, ultimately limiting support for the students. Addressing this lack of collaboration by building connections across programs through opportunities for shared planning, training, and communication supports creating inclusive environments that meet the individualized needs of all students most effectively and support their rights to participate in the least restrictive environment. As discussed by Hargreaves, in recent

years, there has been a substantial shift in the teacher knowledge required to support students with diverse needs. The changing experiences and learning styles in students have created an increased need for teachers to alter their practices and engage in individualization in ways they never have before (2000). This is true of students and teachers in any program, further justifying the need for teachers to connect with those across programs and share knowledge and resources they may not have themselves or with which they may not have yet gained experience, but others have. The attitudes and mindsets developed by teachers towards practices of inclusion are also influenced by whether or not they have opportunities to share lived experiences and problem solve individual needs with teachers who have the expertise or knowledge that one might be lacking. Hargreaves discusses that teachers who are not able to collaborate and connect with others in this way experience significantly more feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and lack of competence, which ultimately affects students, particularly those with special needs, by impacting the teacher's relationship with those students (2000).

Current research shows that implementing inclusion practices in all aspects of early education, including physical environment, instructional practices, and so on, greatly support overall classroom community, and when considering teachers as an essential aspect of the environment, adequate teacher knowledge is essential to student success (Slutsky & Pistorova, 2012). As stated by The National Association for the Education of Young Children, "Strong and consistent collaboration among educators, early interventionists, and family members is necessary for high-quality inclusion (NPDCI 2009). Therefore, effective strategies for teaming and collaboration are essential," (Spence, Miller, Rosa, Santos, Bentley, 2021, pp. 3-4). The Inclusive Schools Network states that, "Inclusion for early childhood programs supports the right of all children, regardless of abilities, to participate actively in natural settings within their

communities,” (Inclusive Schools Network, 2021). Therefore, teachers must have the knowledge to be able to create environments that allow for this level of natural participation.

Arthur Himmelman states, “Collaborating is a relationship in which each organization wants to help its partners become the best that they can be at what they do,” (2002, p. 3) This is essential to support teachers in enhancing every component of their practice, including inclusion practices. As discussed by Leiberman and Miller, establishing opportunities for teachers to problem solve through lived experiences helps teachers to “build the capacity and collective will to move forward the equity agenda of their schools and districts and enhance the learning and achievement of all students,” (2011, p. 16). Studies have shown that allowing teachers to focus their collaboration on the needs of their students and their own experiences with students, their mindsets and attitudes about inclusion became more positive, increasing teachers’ beliefs that all students can learn by providing teachers themselves with the support they need to be successful as well (Leiberman & Miller, 2011).

There is a growing body of research that supports the need for collaboration in general among teachers in order to enhance not only overall teaching practice, but ultimately increase positive and successful student learning outcomes. In a study by Cynthia Compton that focused on including teacher voices on their needs related to collaboration and professional development, the most requested option in terms of professional development was the opportunity to connect with other teachers (Compton, 2010). As discussed by Hargreaves, historically, teachers have been “isolated people”, often working in terms of their own classroom and their own students’ needs in isolation. Teacher isolation has led to feelings of incompetence, inability to increase knowledge and skills related to practice, and inconsistency between classrooms and student outcomes (Hargreaves, 2000). Carter and Curtis state, “The organizational culture of early

childhood programs must counter the dominant culture's messages of 'survival of the fittest' and 'everyone for themselves'," (2010, p. 204).

Over time, as collaborative practices have been more widely researched and studies on staff cultures have gained increased traction, it has become more clear that opportunities for collaboration not only support student outcomes, but increase overall job satisfaction for teachers, create cultures of connection and support, and lead to long-term implementation of strategies and program improvement (Hargreaves, 2000). In terms of inclusion, as the needs of students have changed, opportunities for collaboration have allowed for the creation of consistency for students across programs and assisted in creating environments and cultures in which the overall goals of the programs are adopted by all staff members, creating more inclusive environments where it is believed that all students can learn and grow (Hargreaves, 2000).

One of the most significant advancements that often occurs as a result of collaboration between teachers is the long-term commitment to change and implementation of new practices. As discussed by Guskey, when teachers discuss what has worked for them personally, other teachers are more likely to respond positively to the suggestions given because they know that they are effective. Guskey states, "They believe it works because they have seen it work, and that experience shapes their attitudes and beliefs," (2002, p. 383). Leiberman and Miller state, "The starting point for professional learning is best located in schools and classrooms where teachers work and where they can define and solve real problems of practice," (2011, p. 19). In terms of teacher growth and learning, opportunities for collaboration among teachers are more likely to foster permanent change in practice as they focus on teacher-chosen needs, rather than what they

are told by others are areas for improvement, or as Guskey states, “‘working on’ rather than ‘working with’ teachers,” (2002, p. 389).

Not only is collaboration essential to fostering lasting change, it is a legitimate tool that can make growth and learning more meaningful to teachers. Guskey states, “Professional development programs are systemic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students,” (2002, p. 381). This can be achieved through focused collaborative opportunities for teachers. In many cases, professional development is provided by outside sources, chosen by administrators, and not always relevant to the immediate needs of a staff. Instead of receiving the support teachers need, they are given what others, often administrators, have determined they need, and it can seem unclear to teachers the rationale behind why a topic was chosen.

As discussed by Hargreaves, professional development is best received by participants when it is provided in contexts that are meaningful and relative to the participants, and most often, this means within learning communities composed of others with similar daily experiences. Professional development contracted from outside, unfamiliar sources, particularly by those who are not currently practicing in the field of education, can be seen by participants as disconnected or ungenthine (2000). Hargreaves states that engaging in professional development in learning communities allows teachers to process content “together in ways that have value and make sense for the school community in which they work,” ultimately leading to improved school culture and growth overall (2000, p. 165).

Collaboration as professional development also empowers teachers to take control of their own learning and growth in practice, allowing them to see the effects of their efforts in real time, which supports buy-in of the process and continued growth over time (Hargreaves, 2000).

As Guskey states, “It is well known that successful actions are reinforcing and likely to be repeated while those that are unsuccessful tend to be diminished,” (2002, p. 387). Allowing teachers time to collaborate on a regular basis consistently allows opportunities to reflect on practice, strategy implementation, and progress consistently and in real time, as opposed to a seminar or workshop where if methods are attempted and unsuccessful, there is little support to continue in the long term. Creating collaborative communities also allows for veteran teachers and newer teachers to learn from each other’s lived experiences, focusing on real problems and needs in their own classrooms. Other teachers are one of the greatest resources and wealths of knowledge available to teachers, and as stated by (Leibermann & Miller, 2011), “This kind of expertise can’t be bought,” (2011, p. 19).

Implementing successful collaboration as professional development begins by recognizing it as a practice or tool that also requires protocol and structure, as any professional development would, to maintain focus and consistency. Leibermann & Miller discuss that each learning community will function independently based on the values and needs of the individual community and the school in which it resides. Therefore, it is difficult to create one standard set of expectations or practices to ensure that collaboration is successful. However, establishing these expectations or norms at the beginning of the collaborative process can help focus the process on the actual lived needs of those involved and help to ensure more long term success (2011). Not only will having norms and expectations aid in success, but creating an overall protocol to guide collaboration will also provide great support. Determining as a group how discussions will flow, what the topics will be, how goals will be set, how progress will be monitored, and how everyone’s voices will be heard and included is essential to creating successful collaboration and fostering true and lasting growth and development for educators.

## Methodological Plan

### Methods

For this study, I worked with teachers who represented a variety of the programs we house in our school building. These teachers were chosen because of the variety of experience they hold and the knowledge they would be able to bring to bridge connections between blended and self-contained environments. Several of these teachers had also participated in informal collaborative sessions in the past and found success, but were unsure how to continue the process and focus it into something lasting. I approached each participant in person to discuss the study and its goals, as well as to request their participation. Upon agreement, these teachers completed surveys and participated in focused collaborative sessions from October to December of 2021.

These teachers completed two surveys at the beginning of the study, prior to beginning our focused collaboration sessions. The first survey, the Collaboration Survey, was a digital Google form that asked participants to reflect on their current collaborative practices within their own program as well as outside of their own program. Participants responded to 20 questions related to their current collaborative practices, their ideal collaborative practice opportunities, their thoughts on current collaborative opportunities and practices building-wide, and their preferred topics for collaborative sessions. This survey provided data that validated the need for this process, as well as topics that could be discussed during our focused sessions (See Appendix A).

The second survey, the Inclusion Survey, was a digital Google form with questions based on the “Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion” created by the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI). The goal of our collaborative sessions would be to bridge the gap in connection between self-contained and

blended teachers in order to support implementation of inclusion practices, so I asked the teachers to reflect on their current practices of inclusion within their own classroom and then in our program overall. This survey included 20 indicators from the “Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion” (NCPMI, 2020). Participants were asked to evaluate, in their opinion, whether or not our program and their practice exemplified these indicators. This would help to gauge any pre-existing attitudes or beliefs held by the group, as well as target areas for focus questions for our collaborative sessions. The indicators were chosen to represent each overall section of the NCPMI inclusion elements, as well as represent a variety of possible topics or issues related to practices of inclusion.

After completing the surveys, we scheduled our first focused collaborative session. These sessions would serve as the treatment for addressing the need for structured collaborative time for teachers across programs as well as discussion and knowledge sharing between teachers to support knowledge on the implementation of inclusion practices. During our first session, we worked to create a set of group norms that would help create a space that was safe, respectful, and allowed participants to “speak their truth”, which became a running motto of our sessions. We also discussed the protocol we would be using during our sessions to ensure focus would be maintained and goals could be achieved. We utilized a protocol that was based on the Critical Friends protocol, adapted by David Baron from the School Reform Initiative. This protocol was chosen for its intentionality in narrowing down a topic, providing honest and meaningful feedback to others, creating actionable steps moving forward, and providing opportunities for continuous reflection. Since our group was very small, and we do not have formal training on the protocol, we adapted the protocol to meet our group’s specific needs and dynamic.

A notes sheet was created based on the steps of the protocol and would be used to document our discussions. This sheet had several components that reflected the steps of the protocol (see Appendix C). Each session would address each of these components in the discussion, as well as set the focus and date of the next session. This allowed for consistency in implementation of the treatment and its structure, but flexibility was also maintained in that we were able to adjust or alter the conversation or topic based on the needs of the teachers participating.

At the end of the treatment process, all participants were given a reflection survey (See Appendix D). This survey asked participants to assess their thoughts on collaboration based on their participation in this treatment process. They responded to eight questions and offered thoughts on what was effective about the sessions, what was not effective, what they would change, how their collaborative practices or connections may have changed in the process, and how their beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion practices as well as their knowledge of inclusion practices have changed as a result of participating in these sessions.

This process was designed to be intentionally responsive to the individual needs of the teachers participating in the project. Research shows that more significant growth in knowledge and practice occurs when the focus of learning is meaningful and directly applicable to the practice and experiences of those participating (Guskey, 2002). Therefore, the overall topic of the project, the surveys given, the protocol used, were all chosen intentionally to meet the individual needs of those involved in order to provide the most meaningful experience and most opportunities for enhancing knowledge and practice. This process was also chosen to provide as much flexibility as possible to meet the changing needs of participants. This created an additional element of reflection that would allow participants to carry the discussion over

multiple sessions. The process was designed to ensure that not only would we be increasing collaborative opportunities, but that we would be creating a process that could be sustained over time, allowing for continuous growth and sustained collaborative relationships.

## **Data**

At the time the initial surveys were given, we had nine teachers who agreed to participate in the project for its duration. After the initial surveys were given, as a result of a variety of obstacles and barriers to participation that arose, three teachers were no longer able to participate. Ultimately, we had two self-contained teachers, three full-full day blended teachers, and one half-day, blended, bilingual teacher. The baseline survey data reflects the responses of the initial nine participants.

The results of the initial Collaboration Survey provided baseline data that showed a clear need for changes in the way our program supports teachers in collaborating not only with those outside of their own program, but collaborating at all. In terms of formal collaborative opportunities, defined as scheduled times with a set topic to be discussed, a majority of participants at 66.7% responded saying they collaborate with those in their own program on a monthly basis. However, more than half of participants at 55.5% said they never formally collaborate with those outside of their program. Those that do collaborate formally with those outside of their own program (44.4%) do so rarely, monthly or bi-monthly at most. In terms of informal collaboration, defined as unplanned conversations, “drop-in” visits, “quick questions”, etc., occurred more frequently for those within the same program, but the majority of respondents still indicated that these connections occurred weekly or bi-weekly at most. Across programs, one-third of participants indicated informally collaborating with teachers “as needed”, “not usually”, or “1-2 times per semester”.

In response to a question asking for honest thoughts on our building's overall support of collaborative practices, one participant said "there is none to speak of". Participants stated that they felt isolated and left to find their own connections with other teachers, which made being a new teacher particularly isolating. Participants also stated that any time in which teachers meet with each other on administrators' terms, the time is "overly prescribed" and lacking opportunities to "truly share/collaborate with others". The self-contained teachers who responded said they felt they were scheduled time to collaborate often, but it was often under the agenda of administrators and connection did not last or occur outside of those meetings, and no collaboration occurred with blended program teachers. While several teachers stated that they have teachers they feel comfortable connecting with, they are all within their own programs, and they find it hard to make collaborations "formal yet meaningful".

In the initial Inclusion Practice survey, the same nine participants responded. The results of this survey provided baseline data related to existing attitudes and beliefs toward inclusion practices held by the members of our group as well as provided direction for conversation and topics for our focused collaborative sessions. According to results, the areas in which individual and overall building inclusion practices were lacking were related to differentiation of instruction, writing appropriate goals for IEPs and implementing them successfully, and collaborating across programs to support student needs. In response to the indicator that states, "Self-Contained and Blended teachers share responsibility for student success across programs and collaboratively plan the implementation of services within the least restrictive environment based on individual student strengths and needs," the majority of participants either disagreed (22.2%) or strongly disagreed (55.6%) that our program and practices exemplify this indicator. One-third of participants disagreed that team-based approaches are used in responding to and

managing challenging behaviors. One-third of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that modifications are made to ensure that all students are able to access or participate in activities throughout the day in the least restrictive environment. One-third of participants disagreed that IEP goals are written effectively, support demonstration of growth over time, and are written in terms of implementation in the least restrictive environment.

### Calendar of Data Collection

<p><b>Week of October 4th, 2021</b></p>	<p><b>Initial Connection with Possible Participants</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Verbal discussion with nine possible participants. All agreed to participate.</li> <li>● Recommended to reach out to two additional teachers by participant</li> <li>● Emailed two additional possible participants, they did not reply.</li> <li>● Create email group with participants</li> <li>● Email participants to reiterate purpose of study and thank them for participation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Week of October 4th, 2021</b></p>	<p><b>Survey Development, Protocol Selection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Create draft surveys on Google Forms based on research, observations, and experience</li> <li>● Share surveys with colleague for feedback</li> <li>● Revise surveys</li> <li>● Share surveys via email with participants for completion</li> <li>● Research protocol suggested by colleague</li> <li>● Create master notes sheet based on protocol</li> <li>● Create Google Folder that will house session notes and digital resources from sessions</li> </ul>
<p><b>Week of October 11th, 2021</b></p>	<p><b>Review of Survey Results</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Organize data from survey results to plan focused sessions-time, frequency, and topics for discussion</li> <li>● Schedule first collaborative session based on survey results</li> <li>● Send calendar invite via email for first session, share link to Google Folder that will house session notes and digital resources from sessions, share description of protocol we will follow, share essential question for initial focus session.</li> <li>● One initial member no longer able to participate in project due to change in staffing</li> </ul>
<p><b>Week of October 11th, 2021</b></p>	<p><b>Initial Focus Session, with Participants</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Review protocol that will be followed in each session</li> <li>● Review notes sheet that will be used to document each session</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Create group norms that will guide behavior and expectations related to each session</li> <li>● Complete each protocol step via the discussion and notes sheet, document conversation</li> <li>● Upload all resources to the shared Google folder</li> <li>● Schedule next session, set essential question for next session, send calendar invite for next session</li> </ul>
<b>Week of October 18th, 2021</b>	<p><b>Focus Session 2, with Participants</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● One initial member no longer able to participate due to scheduling conflicts, one initial member no longer able to participate due to COVID diagnosis and quarantine leave</li> <li>● Review of group norms</li> <li>● Summary of previous session</li> <li>● Review essential question for the session</li> <li>● Complete each protocol step via the discussion and notes sheet, document conversation</li> <li>● Upload all resources to the shared Google folder</li> <li>● Schedule next session, set essential question for next session, send calendar invite for next session</li> </ul>
<b>Week of November 8th, 2021</b>	<p><b>Focus Session 3, with Participants</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Review of group norms</li> <li>● Summary of previous session</li> <li>● Review essential question for the session</li> <li>● Complete each protocol step via the discussion and notes sheet, document conversation</li> <li>● Upload all resources to the shared Google folder</li> <li>● Schedule next session, set essential question for next session</li> <li>● Forgot to send out calendar invite, Session 4 rescheduled to increase participation</li> </ul>
<b>Week of November 15th, 2021</b>	<p><b>Focus Session 4, with Participants</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Review of group norms</li> <li>● Summary of previous session</li> <li>● Review essential question for the session</li> <li>● Complete each protocol step via the discussion and notes sheet, document conversation</li> <li>● Upload all resources to the shared Google folder</li> <li>● Schedule next session, set essential question for next session, send calendar invite for next session</li> </ul>
<b>Week of December 13th, 2021</b>	<p><b>Focus Session 5, with Participants via Zoom</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Rescheduled twice due to larger scheduling conflicts</li> <li>● Prior to session, email participants to let them know of my COVID diagnosis, send Zoom link for session</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Review of group norms</li> <li>● Summary of previous session</li> <li>● Review essential question for the session</li> <li>● Complete each protocol step via the discussion and notes sheet, document conversation</li> <li>● Upload all resources to the shared Google folder</li> <li>● Sessions complete</li> <li>● Email participants to let them know of reflection survey to come</li> <li>● Draft reflection survey</li> <li>● Share with colleague for feedback</li> <li>● Revise reflection survey</li> </ul>
<b>Week of December 20th, 2021</b>	<b>Reflection Survey</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Email participants to thank them for their support in the project</li> <li>● Send link to reflection survey</li> </ul>
<b>Week of January 3rd, 2022</b>	<b>Analyze Data and Begin Write-Up</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Review results from reflection survey</li> <li>● Note changes as a result of sessions, obstacles and barriers, and major takeaways</li> <li>● Begin to organize data and research into project write-up</li> </ul>

### **Data Analysis**

Data from the collaboration survey directly aligned with my initial impressions on the need for collaboration in our building and particularly across programs. We are missing an invaluable opportunity to utilize the wealth of knowledge we have in our building staff by not creating, supporting, and protecting opportunities for connection, conversation, knowledge sharing, and growth among teachers. Not only is this a disservice to our teachers, but it is a disservice to our students. When our teachers are not supported in growth, they can't be expected to adequately support students in growth. This is particularly true for our students with special needs and how our staff is supported in enhancing their practice in terms of inclusion practices. The initial data also supported the need for this topic of inclusion to be of primary focus in this project.

This data supported my initial impressions that teachers are not currently supported in obtaining the knowledge and skills they need to effectively support students in inclusive settings and effectively implement practices of inclusion that are considered to be high-quality. Both of these data sets indicate ineffectiveness in the implementation of practice, which leads to decreases in positive outcomes for students. These responses indicate a need for teachers to be able to access resources available to them, particularly the wealth of knowledge contained within our own teaching staff, to better support their own attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion, as well as implementation of inclusion practices in order to support better outcomes for students.

Based on the responses of our final six participants on the reflection survey, as well as the discussions held through our sessions and notes obtained, the implementation of this treatment was effective in meeting several of its goals. Through our five sessions, we were able to hold five sessions with in-depth discussions with teachers across programs on five different topics related to the implementation of inclusion practices. These topics included collaborating across programs and making connections, differentiating instruction for students in whole group and small group instruction, addressing our own feelings and beliefs towards inclusion, and writing effective goals for IEPs.

Of the six participants that ultimately engaged in the sessions, half of them established connections with teachers outside of their program from whom they regularly sought input beyond our focus sessions, stating that they would not have made these connections without the opportunity to do so through the sessions. One participant stated that they had a negative experience with administrators regarding meeting the needs of a particular student, but they were able to resolve the conflict by collaborating with a teacher in a different program with whom they attended the focus sessions to build a case and advocate for their student by sharing the

knowledge they had, creating effective and manageable solutions, and presenting them to administrators. This connection had not been formed prior to the treatment implementation, and without it the needs of a student may not have been met because of the breakdown in knowledge and lack of support one teacher had in terms of collaborating with others to share ideas and implement inclusion practices. This example demonstrates how imperative it is to be addressing the collaboration needs of teachers in order to build and expand on their knowledge and skill sets and ultimately ensure the most positive outcomes possible for students.

### **Conclusion**

In the process of this study, the largest barrier we faced was access to adequate time to engage fully and meaningfully, which is an ongoing barrier to collaboration in general. We are limited in our program on non-student time, so the time that we do have is often taken up by meetings, training, and family connection required by administrators, leaving little time for teacher-directed connection and ultimately requiring some of our participants to be unable to continue engaging in the process. We also faced barriers related to COVID, where some of our participants were unable to continue participating due to quarantine. If I were to do this over, I would work closer with my administrators to create protected time to meet with our participants and create more consistency and allow more opportunity for the discussions that were so greatly needed. I would also have liked to include an observation component, in which teachers would have the ability to observe each other in their classrooms in relation to challenges or problems discussed in our sessions. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the shortage of substitutes our building is facing as well as insufficient funding to hire subs for the time needed for the observations. Had we been able to engage in these observations, I believe it would have provided

more authenticity to our discussions and invited more personal connection beyond our scheduled focused sessions.

While the need for teachers to collaborate to support student outcomes is not new and greatly supported by research, the need for teachers to simply connect with others and grow together to combat isolation is very real and still developing its legitimacy in research. I learned through this process that I perform best and learn best from others who share my experiences, and learned that I am not alone in this. There is a need for further research to support teacher connection not only for collaborative purposes to support student outcomes, but to support teacher well-being, confidence, and job satisfaction, which are also essential components for student outcomes. Through this process, I also reflected on my own views in the same way my participants did, particularly in relation to inclusion practices. I realized that at the beginning of this process, my own thoughts about inclusion have often fallen in the same realm as many of my participants, that including students with diverse needs is difficult, creates more work, and presents more challenges. However, creating these safe spaces to express these thoughts without judgment, to hear the authentic feelings of others, and to collaborate to problem solve through some of the largest challenges we face in relation to inclusion practices changed my own attitude and beliefs, which was a desired outcome of the process. Since implementing this study, I have continued to connect with teachers outside of my own program on a much more consistent basis than I ever have before because I have created relationships and levels of comfort in connection with those teachers. I feel more confident in my ability to not only implement inclusion practices effectively, but to find support in others and utilize the resource that is their wealth of knowledge. I feel that I have found a balance between connection and practice that is greatly effective not only for my practice overall, but for supporting positive student outcomes as well.

The early childhood realm of education is unique in so many ways, one of these ways being how inclusive it is of children with special needs in blended settings. Therefore, this work of collaboration across programs is more essential to our program and our children within this age range because of the extremely diverse needs we support at such an influential age. We also often have mobility of teachers between programs based on staffing needs. This work would greatly support fluidity of skills for teachers between programs and allow for more teachers to be able to be placed where they are most needed without engaging these teachers in extensive training and professional development that would ultimately take time away from more meaningful situations like collaboration with other teachers.

As a result of this work, I have communicated with the Curriculum Coordinators in our building to create a more structured, collaborative approach to our Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that we are required to engage in on a monthly basis, as this is already protected time. We are hoping in the next year to shift to utilizing a similar protocol as this project to connect with other teachers, discuss real experiences we are having in the classroom, and provide constructive, meaningful feedback to each other. Over the years, our PLCs have been inconsistent in focus, goal, and demographic in terms of program representation. This work will support an ongoing collaborative process within a protected time in our building. This will hopefully create the same positive outcomes for teachers building-wide that we had in our small-scale study and lead to improvements in practice for teachers and positive outcomes for students.

## References

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## Appendix A

### Collaboration Survey

- How often do you currently formally collaborate with teachers in your own program?
- How often do you currently informally collaborate with teachers in your own program?
- How often do you currently formally collaborate with teachers in programs other than your own?
- How often do you currently informally collaborate with teachers in programs other than your own?
- Ideally, if time and other constraints were not factors, how often would you like to engage in formal collaboration with other teachers?
- Ideally, if time and other constraints were not factors, how often would you like to engage in informal collaboration with other teachers?
- What topics do you most often collaborate with other teachers on?
- How would you rate the effectiveness of your current collaborative practices within your own program?
- How would you rate the effectiveness of your current collaborative practices with those in programs other than your own?
- How often do teachers from your program come to you for support?
- How often do teachers from other programs come to you for support?
- How do you feel when other teachers come to you for support?
- How do you feel going to other teachers for support?
- What would be your ideal structure for collaborative opportunities with other teachers?
- What do you feel are your areas of strength when it comes to inclusion practices?
- What would you like to learn more about in terms of inclusion practices?
- What are your thoughts on current building-wide practices of teacher collaboration?
- What times are most convenient for you to schedule collaborative sessions?
- What topics would you like to address initially in our focused collaborative sessions?

## Appendix B

### Inclusion Practice Survey

Participants were asked to rate their thoughts regarding our program implementation of the following indicators with “Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree”

- Self-contained teachers and blended teachers share responsibility for student success across programs and collaboratively plan the implementation of services within the least restrictive environment based on individual student strengths and needs.
- Staff promote acceptance and appreciation of children's individual differences and their varying abilities, acknowledging the accomplishments and contributions of all children.
- Staff assume the competence of all families, and involve families in early care and education environment activities to the extent to which families want and are able to be involved. (include them in decision making, meetings, data collection, etc.)
- Staff foster positive and culturally responsive adult-child relationships, establish predictable routines, and intentionally teach a range of social emotional skills.
- When children engage in challenging behavior, a team-based approach is used to understand what the child is communicating, how to adapt the environment, and what social emotional skills to teach and/or strengthen.
- All service providers implement the least intrusive positive behavior supports to decrease the target behavior and increase the replacement behavior.
- Staff use various strategies to promote interactions between children without disabilities and children with disabilities.
- Staff develop, modify, and implement teaching plans that optimize the amount of time children with disabilities spend engaged in activities, such as small and large group play, and other routines, such as arrival, snack and across all domains of learning. The planned activities consider the specialized equipment, assistive technology (low and high), and materials to benefit children with disabilities.
- Staff use sign language, gestures and visual cues during activities when appropriate, and use visual, verbal and gestural cues with materials to help children with disabilities participate more independently.

- Staff integrate individual children's adaptive, augmentative communication systems into all early care and education environment routines and ensure that pictures or alternative, augmentative communication(AAC) systems are readily available to individual children at all times
- Staff develop or modify the environment, materials and instruction to ensure children can engage in curricular activities and achieve their individualized goals.
- Staff embed instruction and targeted goals into naturally occurring opportunities for learning, for example by working on language, social and fine motor skills while participating in snack time
- Staff demonstrate dispositions consistent with positive communication and collaboration, such as flexibility, coachability, and ethics, with team members to gather and share information, review data, plan, implement and embed instructional supports and adaptations for individual children.
- Staff use ongoing observation and authentic assessment practices that span all areas of development and are culturally responsive, non-biased, and in children's primary languages, to understand children's learning and development.
- Staff use formal and informal, ongoing data to make instructional and environmental adaptations for individual students
- Staff write IEP goals based on all current formal and informal assessment data
- IEP goals are written in specific, measurable terms and show evidence of increasing student progress over time
- Service providers ensure that goals are written with the least restrictive environment in mind and deliver services within the least restrictive environment.
- Staff recognize diversity in their environment including race, ethnicity, social class, gender, language, immigration and refugee and disability, and recognize the intersecting diversities of children and families in their care.
- Staff demonstrate an awareness of implicit and explicit biases as they relate to their teaching.

## Appendix C

### Session Notes Sheet

<b>Collaboration Session Notes</b>		<b>Date:</b>
<b>Purpose</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Critical Friend Conversation is intended for you to explore in-depth an essential question based on your experience</li> <li>• The conversation is intended to insure clarity of purpose, to question your own assumptions, and to develop a proposed course of action for addressing the questions.</li> </ul>		
<b>Essential Question:</b>		
<b>Objective Steps</b>		
Dilemma:	Embedded Assumptions:	
<b>Actionable Steps</b>		
Strategies:	Next Steps:	
Summary:		

## Appendix D

### Reflection Survey Questions

- What did you find most helpful about these collaborative sessions?
- What would you have changed about these collaborative sessions or what do you wish could have been different?
- Which conversation or topic did you find most helpful?
- Which conversation or topic would you have liked to have spent more time on?
- How have these sessions impacted your collaboration with others in your own program, if at all?
- How have these sessions impacted your collaboration with others in programs other than your own, if at all?
- How have these sessions differed from collaborative sessions you have had in the past?
- What additional thoughts or feedback do you have regarding these sessions?