

Technical Assistance and Professional Learning for Teaming and High-Quality Inclusion

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MAXIMIZING RESOURCES TO PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING that is high quality and moves an early childhood program to sustained implementation of a practice is a challenge Early CHOICES has been grappling with since 2014. Early CHOICES, a small state-funded project in Illinois, provides training and technical assistance to increase the number of preschoolers who have access to high-quality inclusive environments. To maximize our efforts, we use a team-based model to build on the collective knowledge of the classroom teams. The strategy helps build teaming and collaboration across the program and increases the quality of inclusive practices within the classrooms. This article describes how a collaboration between Early CHOICES and an early childhood program resulted in a yearlong professional learning series that used a team-based model for change (Bailey, McWilliam, & Winton, 1992; Winton, McWilliam, Harrison, Owens, & Bailey, 1992), integrated the program's continuous quality improvement cycle related to inclusion, and supported teaming and collaboration. The authors are the project director and full-time LRE specialist for Early CHOICES, who bring many years of collective experience supporting inclusive practices as teachers, administrators, and technical assistance providers.

Inclusion in Illinois

Inclusion has a long history in Illinois, starting in 1988 with a federal grant that focused on inclusion of students with disabilities from ages 3 to 21 called Project CHOICES (Children Have Opportunities in Inclusive Classrooms, Environments,

and Schools). In July 2014, Early CHOICES became a stand-alone project outside of the school-age (6–21) training and technical assistance projects operated through a grant awarded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to the School Association for Special Education in DuPage County using IDEA discretionary funds. Early CHOICES assists ISBE in meeting local needs by providing services throughout Illinois. The project staff is small; three full-time staff serve all 750 local education agencies that serve children ages 3–5. To maximize our capacity, we partner with other technical assistance projects serving the Illinois early childhood community, including the Illinois Support and Technical Assistance Regional Network (STARNET), Illinois Early Childhood Professional Learning, and the Early Intervention Training Program at the University of Illinois.

Early CHOICES supports inclusive practices across Illinois by targeting its work in three areas aligned with the DEC/NAEYC (2009) joint position statement on inclusion:

1. Providing technical assistance regarding organizational change at the systems level with programs to improve access for children with disabilities to learning environments with typically developing peers.
2. Supporting programs that have increased access for children with disabilities to inclusive classrooms to begin the initial implementation of high-quality inclusive practices.
3. Engaging with targeted programs through professional learning to examine their practices used in inclusive classrooms to assure the high-quality practices are reaching all children with disabilities.

Our focus in this article is on our professional learning responsibilities. Early CHOICES uses implementation science as a foundation for its work. When Illinois received technical assistance from the State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center (n.d.) from 2008–2010, the Early CHOICES project director was a member of the Illinois state leadership team. The three implementation drivers identified by Fixsen and colleagues—professional competency, leadership, and organization drivers—influence how we plan our training and technical assistance with programs to assure each program is building toward full implementation of evidence-based practices (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005).

More recently, Illinois used Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) funds to build the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) system, which included an Award of Excellence for Inclusion as part of the state program rating system. Early CHOICES worked closely in the development of the award and received additional funds to support programs in applying for it. Early CHOICES provided training to staff to use the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP) as a self-reflection tool to identify the professional learning needs and strengths of programs applying for the award of excellence. The ICP is a structured, reliable, and valid observation assessment tool designed to assess the quality of daily inclusive classroom practices that support the developmental needs of children with disabilities in early childhood settings (Soukakou, 2012; Soukakou, Winton, West, Sideris, & Rucker, 2014). The ICP is organized into 12 items that indicate high-quality inclusion: adaptations of space, materials, and equipment; adult



involvement in peer interactions; adults' guidance of children's free-choice activities and play; conflict resolution; membership; relationships between adults and children; support for communication; adaptations of group activities; transitions between activities; feedback; family-professional partnerships; and monitoring children's learning. In 2015, Early CHOICES provided funding for its staff to be trained to reliability on the ICP by certified reliability trainers from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We continue to use the ICP as a tool for two purposes: developing program staff's understanding of the practices that support children with disabilities in inclusive settings and self-reflection and goal setting related to their practices.

Early CHOICES and Professional Learning

Early CHOICES evaluates its efforts annually to be sure that its work aligns with both the literature regarding effective professional learning, which includes modeling, feedback, and ongoing coaching (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Snyder, Hemmeter, & McLaughlin, 2011), and the DEC Recommended Practices regarding inclusion of children with disabilities (Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2014). In reviewing the literature on effective professional learning, we saw a "disconnect" between the research and our practices. Early CHOICES had been offering workshops that provided a one-day opportunity for individuals to participate as teams, but in practice, most often individuals attended as single representatives of their programs. We often offered site-based professional learning; however, we wanted to increase our job-embedded professional learning with an emphasis on consultation, coaching, and facilitated collaboration among staff in all roles of the program, as defined in the literature on effective professional development (National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, 2008).

Early CHOICES used the DEC Recommended Practices as the source of evidence on effective inclusion practices. Based on our use of a team-based model of change, where teams participate in planning for, reflecting on, and implementing new practices or programs, we particularly highlighted the Teaming and Collaboration recommended practices. We know the benefits of collaboration do not just impact adults; enhancing collaboration among staff in schools has been shown to have positive outcomes for students (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010). Therefore, Early CHOICES wanted to develop professional learning using a team-based model of change, strengthening teaming and collaboration, using the ICP as the tool to build a shared understanding of the practices that support children in inclusive settings.

Pilot Site

The Ann Reid Early Childhood Center (ARECC) in Naperville, Illinois, approached Early CHOICES about a partnership to examine its inclusive practices, and this became the perfect opportunity to implement the professional learning

series with a program. At the start of our partnership, ARECC served 469 preschool-age children, which included 157 children who qualified for the at-risk program and 135 typically developing children whose families paid tuition. Most of the 138 children with disabilities were included in the regular early childhood program, with only five being served in a separate setting. The program is richly diverse in culture and languages. As of April 2018, 170 children qualified for English language learner services, and children and their families spoke 34 languages. Students with Individual Education Programs (IEPs) at the early childhood level are educated alongside typically developing peers



Courtesy of Frank Porter
Graham Child Development
Institute

and receive the majority of their supports and services within that setting. The classroom teachers have early childhood education certification as well as endorsements in special education and English as a second language. The program has a QRIS rating of Gold, which is the highest level of quality in Illinois. In addition, the program received an award of excellence in cultural and linguistic practices, also through QRIS.

In recent years, ARECC has reduced the number of separate settings for children with disabilities, and in 2018 it had only one noninclusive classroom. The program model changed because of its commitment to inclusion as well as the districtwide goal of increasing inclusive environments for students. The program's leadership team, composed of the principal, assistant principal, and instructional

leader, sought to inform and strengthen the program's inclusive practices as they adapted its program model. Because the program had participated in the award of excellence in another focus area, the leadership team had experience in bringing staff together for an intensive, programwide inquiry (i.e., organizing staff into work groups and allocating appropriate time for team meetings). The program was already implementing high-quality, developmentally appropriate practices and had many structures in place to support teaming and collaboration, such as professional learning communities, shared planning time, and data-based decision making. These strengths of the program allowed for the collaboration to focus on capacity building around inclusion because some of the foundational aspects for using a team-based model of change were already in place.

Early CHOICES encourages programs to implement strategies that intentionally engage all stakeholders from the beginning, particularly around their vision for inclusion in their program to build team capacity and jointly solve issues related to their vision (TC2). ARECC's leadership team recognized that although most of the program had been inclusive, by reducing self-contained classrooms to one section some staff were being asked to adjust their roles to support children in inclusive classrooms rather than serving them in a separate setting. We agreed that to move forward, the program would review the vision statement to assure a shared understanding with all staff. To support active engagement, the series was designed to provide multiple opportunities for staff to participate in discussions and planning sessions with colleagues within their classroom team and beyond (TC2, TC3). For programs to support interdisciplinary teaming and for program staff to collaborate to meet the needs of children and families, all staff needed to be present during the professional learning and meetings (TC1, TC2). For this professional learning series, all 80 professionals working in the program, including teachers, paraeducators, related service staff, the program's leadership team, and the diagnostic team, were present and participated in all of the activities. In many programs, paraeducators are not provided with the same professional learning opportunities as other staff because of their contracts and/or work hours. It is significant that ARECC supports paraeducators by encouraging their growth through a professional learning community and by having them attend all dates of the series in this collaborative professional learning opportunity (TC1, TC2).

Developing a Professional Learning Series

In the process of organizational change, such as in this instance of moving toward improved inclusive opportunities and classroom practices, it is important to examine staff members' perception of the program's readiness for change and how the program could change (Eby, Adams, Russell, & Gaby, 2000). Attitudes and beliefs are often the greatest challenge to inclusion, and more specifically, a lack of communication and collaboration can be a barrier (Barton & Smith, 2015). The program leadership team and Early CHOICES took both recommended best practices for professional learning as well as the importance of attitudes and beliefs into consideration when developing the content of the series. They agreed on a professional learning series that included foundational information

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regarding inclusion, a study of the Inclusive Classroom Profile, opportunities to engage in facilitated discussions with their teams, observations in their classrooms, and action planning related to their observations. The series consisted of four days spread across the 2017–2018 school year, with dates in August, September, October, and March. To create a professional learning experience that is interactive and meaningful, Early CHOICES intentionally planned for different groupings of staff, posed guiding questions for discussion, and provided multiple modalities for reflection, including group debrief, individual reflection time, and small/large group discussions (TC1, TC2).

Day one consisted of an overview of inclusion research facts, data, and legal foundations drawn from the federal policy position statement on preschool inclusion (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Following an overview of the selected research facts, Early CHOICES provided guiding questions to facilitate and enhance conversations among classroom teams: What are you curious about? Does the foundational information confirm your knowledge about and/or experiences with inclusion? (TC2). To further support an understanding of inclusion at the program and classroom levels, Early CHOICES presented the “What Makes Inclusion Work?” planning tool and infographic (Early CHOICES, n.d.-c). The planning tool highlights eight aspects of early childhood programming that support inclusion: vision and attitude, professional learning, formal time to plan and reflect, administrative support, family and community partnerships, adaptations and support systems, evidence-based practices, and collaboration and teaming. Early CHOICES facilitated staff dialogue by giving reflective feedback and providing guiding questions to support the classroom teams in discussing strengths and opportunities for growth related to inclusion. These conversations provided an opportunity for those more experienced with inclusion to reflect on the program and those with less experience to learn more about inclusionary practices (TC3). Early CHOICES facilitated a debriefing in which teams could share their group’s priorities for future learning (TC2).

The second day in the series specifically explored the ICP. To provide a context for the day, Early CHOICES reviewed the defining features of inclusion (DEC/NAEYC, 2009): access, participation, and supports. Participants were encouraged to look for those features in the indicators of the ICP. To build upon the program’s collective knowledge and experiences, Early CHOICES asked the staff to take a sticky note and write down what they consider to be a feature of high-quality inclusion. They were then asked to go stand by the poster most closely related to their feature of quality (access, participation, or support). After Early CHOICES defined each indicator, a representative from each group read some highlights of what their colleagues wrote, reinforcing the learning and providing an opportunity for the staff to be confident in the knowledge they had to use as a foundation for inclusion (TC2, TC3).

Supporting Teaming and Collaboration With the ICP

To learn about the ICP, the group had multiple opportunities to engage with the 12 items. The ICP defines each of the items with indicators on a rubric

(1-inadequate, 3-minimal, 5-good, 7-excellent). Early CHOICES knows that programs need to see practices in action to develop an understanding of what they look like and how they might be used within their program. To support this within the context of Illinois, we filmed and developed a collection of videos (Early CHOICES, n.d.-a) featuring programs that had achieved the Award of Excellence for Inclusion. These videos highlight high-quality inclusive classrooms and are aligned with specific items on the ICP. To continue the interdisciplinary collaboration as well as to support staff in building team capacity, the staff worked together in several configurations to explore the material, first as classroom teams, then by discipline, then randomly (TC1, TC2). The participants were given conversation prompts to encourage engagement with each other. For example, after hearing about the first two items on the ICP, the group divided by role to discuss how their role supports these practices and what might be some aspects for future team inquiry (TC1, TC2, TC3). To make participation from all staff more likely, the groups were asked to respond in a “round robin” style, with each participant having a turn to voice his or her opinion as they went around their circle (TC3). The small groups then reported back to the larger group. The program leadership team and Early CHOICES used this information to develop the next date in the professional learning series.

At first glance, the ICP items seem “obvious” to practitioners who feel they have them in place. So, it is important that professionals discuss them and the corresponding indicators as a team to notice the nuances and the individualization of supports in the highest levels on the rubric (TC2, TC3). To support this dialogue, Early CHOICES (2017) provided a reflection tool it developed as a companion to the ICP workbook and manual. The tool has space to take notes and to document priorities for future learning related to the ICP. Early CHOICES wanted to direct participants’ attention to the details in the indicators at the higher end of the ICP rubric because focusing those details can often reveal some gaps in practices. For example, after learning about “Adults’ Guidance of Children’s Free-Choice Activities and Play,” classroom teams were prompted to discuss the following questions: How do we collect data regarding individual child interventions? How do we dedicate planning time to collaborate around data interpretation and share that information with families? (TC1, TC2, TC3, TC5)

At the conclusion, the staff developed a plan to observe in their classrooms. Early CHOICES strongly encourages programs to provide an opportunity for staff in all roles to observe because it contributes multiple perspectives of the classrooms’ strengths and areas for growth. Additionally, the subsequent discussion provides an opportunity for professional discourse among staff who typically do not have a chance to engage with their colleagues in this manner (TC2). The administration supported each classroom team by providing a substitute teacher for part of a day. Staff were prompted to be sure they observed the following for



few common themes emerged. First, staff said they had expertise in some of the areas they had identified as learning goals, but they did not have an opportunity to share it with colleagues in a formal way. Rather, the staff only briefly shared the goals in team meetings or when opportunities for modeling occurred incidentally in the classroom. Another common theme from staff was a need to communicate more frequently regarding specific strategies and techniques used by related service staff to support children in their classrooms.

Early CHOICES facilitated a planning call with the program leadership to debrief and use information gathered from staff to inform the fourth and final day (TC2). To provide an opportunity for collaboration across disciplines and classrooms on the final day of the series, we decided to use “coffee talks” in which program staff could focus on priority topics identified by their colleagues (TC3). To engage the staff, the program leadership team and Early CHOICES designed a brief electronic survey to determine the topics for this next day in the series and to recruit staff interested in facilitating discussions and/or sharing strategies about a topic (TC2). Staff were encouraged to think about topics that relate to the ICP and their role and to identify their strengths to share (TC2). Respondents expressed an interest in a variety of inclusive practices, including supporting engagement in free choice and group activities, facilitating communication among the children, and providing supports for children who have not attended school before.

Nine ARECC staff volunteered to facilitate 20-minute coffee talks. The staff facilitators hosted the coffee talks in their classrooms so that they could share any relevant resources they already had in place. Staff selected three coffee talks from the nine topics to attend and were able to engage with peers and hear from the facilitator (TC2). The talks provided opportunities to discuss and share strategies to address the priority areas identified by their team (TC1, TC2, TC3). Early CHOICES attended the talks to observe the process, to learn, and to take notes as needed. To build on the program’s strengths and facilitate a shared understanding, all of the conversations, strategies, and questions were documented in a shared online format with all staff (TC1, TC2, TC3). Staff comments reinforced the value of having colleagues as facilitators of professional learning; they felt it extended engagement and encouraged implementation. For example, staff said “I have not been in another classroom in a long time,” “I would love to do the same format again so I could attend all of the sessions,” and “I was thrilled to have a chance to ask a question about the new behavior intervention strategies that we started.” To finish the experience, the entire staff formed a circle and called out one practice that they were inspired to use in their classrooms (TC3).

Early CHOICES developed and distributed an anonymous electronic survey to evaluate the series. Most staff reported they wanted more time to engage collaboratively with their peers and that teaming had positive outcomes for their practices (TC1, TC2, TC3). Another theme among participants was a need for more opportunities to dive deeper into the practices within the ICP. One respondent commented:

Of course, time is always at a premium. I would have loved to spend more time observing in my classroom using the tool. Even by

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delegating different sections to various team members, it felt like I was barely able to scratch the surface in the time allotted.

Based on the responses from participants, Early CHOICES and ARECC have agreed to continue the professional learning series into a second year. The work will expand to include families more intentionally because this series did not focus enough on engaging families in collaboration. For example, the program team could use the routine-based activity planning matrix to connect with families regarding school routines and encourage their input about their children's strengths and interests (TC5). In addition, this can encourage families to share what they need to support their children at home, allowing the program to partner to meet those needs or connect the families with community resources (TC4).



Key Factors That Supported This Professional Learning Series

To develop this yearlong professional learning series, Early CHOICES staff used what we knew about using a team-based model of change and best practices in professional learning. We drew upon our collective experiences as former teachers, home visitors, and technical assistance providers trained to reliability with the ICP. We used strong, practical tools to support self-reflection, including *The Preschool Inclusion Toolbox* (Bar-

ton & Smith, 2015); "What Makes Inclusion Work" (Early CHOICES, n.d.-c), a self-reflection tool based on the ICP; and videos from high-quality classrooms (Early CHOICES, n.d.-a).

External factors created the right climate for this work and supported this endeavor and contributed to its success as well. The ICP provided us with a tool to create innovative professional learning based on its practices. At the state level, Illinois shows a commitment to inclusion in several ways: embedding inclusion in the state QRIS, developing inclusion guidance from the state board of education, and funding Early CHOICES, a project dedicated to training and technical assistance on inclusion in early childhood. At the local level, the program with which we collaborated had infrastructure in place to support professional learning and leadership strongly committed to inclusion.

Teaming and collaboration occurred among the entire staff because the administrative team and all staff members participated in all dates of the series and because the series was designed collaboratively with the administrative team to incorporate the DEC Recommended Practices to maximize opportunities for engagement.

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