

The SEIT Opportunity

Judith S. Bloch

Variety Child Learning Center
Syosset, NY

Inclusion is no longer a preference, a choice, or a bias. It is the law of the land (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] Amendments of 1997, P. L. 105-17). Today, the issue for educators is not whether to include a preschooler with a disability but, instead, who to include and how to best do this work. How is the teacher to manage an inclusionary class with limited resources, training, or experience? Can an effective curriculum and increased teacher skills transform or at least modify and improve life in the classroom?

This article focuses on the rationale and approach of SEIT (Special Education Itinerant Teacher¹), a publicly funded program that addresses some of the identified obstacles to effective preschool inclusion. Practical interventions to help teachers to fulfill their responsibilities in dealing with the classified child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and, at the same time, meet the needs of the other children in the group will be presented. Making the program appropriate for all the children in the class is complicated when the needs of a few are so specific and require individual attention. How can this requirement be reconciled with a concern for all of the other children in the class?

NEW PRIORITIES FOR EARLY CARE EDUCATORS

Reports from the field continue to underscore the value and importance of a child's early development, experiences, and relationships. A study requested by the U.S. Department of Education and completed in 2000 discusses the significance of the early years and its relationship to a child's education. It states: "What is now known about the potential of the early years, and of the promise of high-quality preschool programs to help realize that potential for all children, stands in stark contrast to practice in many—perhaps most—early childhood settings" (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000, p. 10). Knitzer

Jeanne Ginsberg, Supervisor of the SEIT program at Variety Child Learning Center, made useful contributions to this paper.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Judith S. Bloch, Variety Child Learning Center, 47 Humphrey Drive, Syosset, New York 11791; e-mail: jsbvpsw@aol.com.

¹ SEIT means "an approved program provided by a certified special education teacher on an itinerant basis in accordance with the regulations of the [State Education Department] commissioner, at a site determined by the board, including but not limited to an approved licensed pre-kindergarten or Head Start program; the child's home; a hospital; a state facility; or a child care location..." (New York State Consolidated Laws, September 2000, p. 36).

(2001) reports that “many young children are not developing the emotional skills that they will need to succeed in school and be productive members of society” (p. 3). Social–emotional competence, or the ability to get along with others and to appreciate their perspective, is of great value at all ages. Learning to do this starts early. It is particularly important for the classified child who is often the least favorite choice of classmates and the one who often needs help in order to acquire social skills that may avert conflict and disappointment and lead to making friends (Bloch, 1999).

A growing number of children who are not classified also appear to have difficulties with social–emotional development, placing them at risk for later problems and for poor cognitive, social, and behavioral outcomes (Knitzer, 2001). Mood disorders (too angry, anxious, sad, fearful), attachment or attention problems, acting out, and behavior problems have created additional concerns and stressors for early childhood educators who are struggling to meet their responsibilities.

THE SEIT MODEL

The SEIT program is a good idea that works. It was created in New York State as a result of IDEA, a federal entitlement program for children with developmental disabilities. SEIT gives a classified child an opportunity to learn and benefit from placement in a typical setting.

Part of the rationale for SEIT, and inclusion, is the advantage created for the classified child who can now share experiences with the typical child who usually is more socially competent. At the same time, there are an increased number of unclassified children with social–emotional or relationship problems who are struggling to achieve and maintain the qualities required for social competence. These children, too, may be at risk for later cognitive, social, and behavioral difficulties and, therefore, may also benefit from the presence of SEIT services when they are provided in a particular way.

THE “ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE”

Such a perspective requires both teachers (special education and regular) to see the classified child in his or her environment. Both assessment and intervention are considered in this light. Bronfenbrenner’s early work on the ecological system (1979), the more recent work by Odom and Diamond (1998), and *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) emphasize the importance of paying attention to the child’s contextual setting. Young children learn best through their interactions with people in their natural environment and exposure to ongoing appropriate activities.

In this ecological model, the SEIT teacher will not be seen tutoring the classified child in an isolated corner of the classroom, and the child will not be “missing” because the child and itinerant (SEIT) teacher are away for a private lesson. Instead, the itinerant teacher is present but perhaps not so

distinguishable because she blends in as simply another teacher in the classroom, working within the context of the natural setting as she provides remediation to meet the child's IEP. Her interventions are potent because they are embedded within the context of everyday classroom activities.

The ecological perspective does not only apply to the classified child within the context of the classroom. It involves the SEIT teacher as well. With her interventions more visible and overt, and her extended presence in the classroom, she represents an "outside" element in the environment. This may not always be welcomed. However, at the very least, her arrival on the scene upsets the balance of the ecosystem in the classroom, even if only temporarily, and this may prompt restructuring that may be more effective.

COLLABORATION: THE ESSENTIAL PROCESS

Seeing things through the "ecological lens" changes the role of the SEIT teacher in a variety of ways. It requires that direct service to the classified child be provided in full view; this alone is sufficiently powerful to indirectly affect all the children. This dual approach is most effective when the SEIT teacher and the preschool classroom teacher become collaborators in the typical setting. Ideally, and together, they identify and focus on priority and functional instructional objectives for the classified child. They blend their efforts, designing interventions to satisfy the IEP and, at the same time, benefit the entire classroom group (Sadler, 2003). A particular "mind set" is required on the part of the SEIT teacher for this to occur. At the simplest and paradoxically most profound level, the SEIT teacher sees herself as a "guest" in a "host" setting rather than as an "expert" brought in to fix a failing situation. She needs to be invited in to participate beyond the direct services she provides to the classified child. She needs also to control any tendencies to act out the "rescue fantasy"—to protect "her child" from an "unsympathetic" or "incompetent" classroom teacher.

PLANNING AN INTERVENTION

SEIT was prescribed for 3-year-old Martin, enrolled in a good nursery school. Before receiving SEIT services, Martin was having difficulty behaving and was making trouble in his classroom. He could not pay attention, was easily distracted (especially during the extended and structured class lessons), and appeared unable to process much of the information presented. His inability to attend for more than 5 minutes, especially during story time, and his periodic disruptive behavior were creating a great deal of stress and distress in the classroom. His behavior and the negative attention it evoked were threatening his relationship with his teachers, who were beginning to dislike him. His classmates were already avoiding him, afraid that they might be pushed or hurt.

Sheila, the senior classroom teacher with many years of experience, was a gentle, caring, and patient person; however, her approach and curriculum

were worrisome. Circle time was usually too long. She expected the children to sit quietly and be “good listeners” while she read long stories in a monotone. There was little animation on her part. Her ability to involve the children and promote interactive competence was weak. She rarely used creative teaching strategies that ignited interest.

The SEIT teacher’s task, to identify and develop interventions for Martin, was in many ways less of a challenge and easier to formulate than her concern about the best way to approach Sheila in order to suggest certain changes. The SEIT teacher knew that the success and effectiveness of any proposed interventions would depend on her approach and the quality of their relationship. Since they had not worked together before and did not have a relationship, and the classroom teacher was older and more experienced, the SEIT teacher could not proceed too quickly. An important study on consultation as an approach to improve the quality of inclusive early childhood programs (Wesley, Buysse, & Skinner, 2001) highlights the lack of consensus regarding the goals of consultation. Should the focus be on the consultee, the child, or the program?

MARTIN AND HIS IEP

After a few days with Martin, the SEIT teacher decided that it was time to intervene directly with Sheila. On balance, this was a good nursery school that had a lot to offer Martin. Sheila was a conscientious teacher who used age-appropriate play materials, maintained an attractive classroom, and had made great efforts to include Martin in activities.

At an important initial meeting, the two teachers agreed upon a period of observation to be followed by a meeting to “compare notes.” The collaboration process was thereby initiated by providing a systematic method of observing and collecting information about Martin’s current level of functioning. Most important, assessment became the shared responsibility of Martin’s two primary classroom caregivers: the classroom teacher and the SEIT teacher, as each used her best observation and judgment skills separately to rate Martin on his performance.

The assessment process went well and moved the two teachers toward a beginning working relationship. Once the assessment process was completed, the timing was right for the SEIT teacher to suggest that, to satisfy Martin’s IEP (which had instructional objectives in the area of social–emotional development), an intervention would be designed that could improve his relationship with adults and peers and help “contain” him. Sheila collaborated with the SEIT teacher to formulate a simple plan. Sheila would seat Martin next to her, make eye contact with him and smile before she spoke to him, and then talk directly to him: “Good morning, Martin. I am so glad to have you join our circle.” At the same time, she would increase her direct interaction with all the other children and welcome them to the circle. In this way, she would model appropriate interactions, help Martin connect words to

intent and emotions, demonstrate more overtly how to approach another person, and thereby help Martin learn how to do this.

The strategy turned out to be successful, and Martin had a “good day” which was followed by other “good days.” However, the process for Sheila went beyond the work with Martin; she began to see herself in a more active role both as an assessor and intervener. She became more of a “performer” who would make more frequent use of visual and verbal cues to engage all of the children more effectively. Circle time became a good mix of quiet and active listening and movement. Ongoing meetings between the two teachers led to later interventions that dealt with the social–emotional needs of the children. By dealing with conflicts as they happened and modeling interventions, all the children were helped. They learned to control their feelings and behaviors, life skills necessary for their education and social–emotional development (Goleman, 1995).

THE NEW MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTANT

Traditionally, psychologists, psychiatrists, or social workers are seen as the consultants or providers of “mental health” input, the staff who bring the required understanding of early childhood development to the preschool setting. However, “professional roles in early education and intervention have undergone considerable transformation. . .” (Wesley et al., 2001, p. 112). Teachers with an academic background that includes course work in early childhood development and special education, experience in a self-contained or integrated preschool classroom, membership on an interdisciplinary team, and competent supervision may become qualified consultants. Preparing and designating selected teachers who can become this new kind of mental health resource will fill an educational void.

This approach proposes one solution to the growing void in providing skilled, available, and funded consultation for the social–emotional development in preschoolers. Identifying and preparing licensed master’s level special education teachers to assume this responsibility will require some shifts in training, roles, and status. Nonetheless, it is an approach that is feasible and has been implemented at Variety Child Learning Center².

This proposed new professional designation, SEIT consultant specialist, derived from a special training approach, creates a new key resource (Guralnick, 2000). The background for this proposed “new expert” satisfies requirements identified in Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (Cohen & Kaufmann, 2000) including

- knowledge of child developmental milestones (the expected characteristics and course of normal growth and development of young children and a basis for identifying atypical behavior in infants, toddlers,

² Variety Child Learning Center, formerly Variety Pre-Schooler’s Workshop, established in 1966, was in the forefront of program development for young children with learning, language, and behavior problems.

and preschoolers);

- understanding of the concepts underlying young children's social-emotional development, such as attachment and separation, and how relationships shape development; and
- ability to integrate mental health activities and philosophies in group settings.

For the host settings, the SEIT consultant specialist can become a major resource in the following ways:

- providing additional time and help from an experienced teacher that enhances the staff's understanding of young children with and without disabilities,
- creating activities and an approach that will benefit all of the children,
- helping all students while focusing on the target child,
- demonstrating teaching techniques,
- providing an opportunity for others to observe direct interventions,
- providing consult to the classroom teacher,
- taking over some classroom instruction, and
- preparing written intervention and lesson plans.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is worthwhile to integrate SEIT services and other indicated services through interventions that can be provided frequently during daily classroom routines. When SEIT is implemented successfully, it can include and promote the development of the preschooler with a disability within a typical program, help other children in the class, and help the regular education teacher acquire new skills (Wesley, 2002).

REFERENCES

- Bloch, J. S. (1999). Troubled preschoolers could make trouble later. *Early Childhood News*, 11(5), 6-15.
- Bowman, B., Donovan, M. S., & Burns, M. S. (Eds.). (2000). *Eager to learn. Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cohen, E., & Kaufmann, R. (2000, April). *Early childhood mental health consultation*. [Monograph]. Washington, DC: Center for Mental Health Services; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Guralnick, M. J. (2000). An agenda for change in early childhood inclusion. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 23(4), 213-222.
- Knitzer, J. (2001). *Building services and systems to support the healthy emotional development of young children. An action guide for policymakers* [Policy Paper]. New York: National Center for Children in Poverty. Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University.

- New York State Consolidated Laws-Education, Article 89, Students with Disabilities, September 2000, Policy 00-11, p. 36. The University of the State of New York, State Education Department.
- Odom, S. L., & Diamond, K. E. (1998). Inclusion of young children with special needs in early childhood education: The research base. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 13(1), 3-25.
- Sadler, F. H. (2003, January/February). The itinerant special education teacher in the early childhood classroom. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 35(3), 8-15.
- Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods. The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Wesley, P. W. (2002, July). Early intervention consultants in the classroom: Simple steps for building strong collaboration. *Young Children*, 57(4), 30-34.
- Wesley, P. W., Buysse, V., & Skinner, D. (2001). Early interventionists' perspectives on professional comfort as consultants. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 24(2) 112-128.

For further information, please contact Judith S. Bloch or Janice L. Friedman at
Variety Child Learning Center (VCLC)
 47 Humphrey Drive, Syosset, NY 11791
 or **call** (516) 921-7171, Ext. 2126; 800-933-8779, Ext. 2126
fax: (516) 921-8130; **e-mail:** jfriedman@vclc.org
 You can also visit the VCLC **website** at www.vclc.org

Early childhood programs for children 18-48 months needed to participate in VCLC's national Normalization Study of *The Five P's* by Judith S. Bloch
FREE materials. Teacher stipends. Parent gifts.
 For more information, please contact Janice Friedman
 by **phone** at 800-933-8779, Ext. 2126
 by **fax** at (516) 921-8130; or **e-mail** at jfriedman@vclc.org



CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR INFANT OR TODDLER?

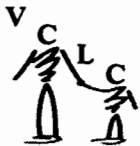
Evaluations and therapies available - No cost to families
Licensed, experienced, early childhood professionals come to you

Call Judi Zipkin, Early Intervention Supervisor (516) 921-7171, Ext. 2105

Variety Child Learning Center (VCLC)

47 Humphrey Drive, Syosset, NY 11791

www.vclc.org



Variety Child Learning Center

EI Program: Funded/regulated by DOH - NYS, Nassau/Suffolk Counties