Family Group Conferencing in Inclusive Preschool Classrooms During Distance Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this pilot study is to understand the impact of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) on the collaboration among general education and special education teachers, teachers' attitudes toward family outreach and perceived outcomes of preschool students with and without disabilities enrolled in inclusive classrooms during distance learning. FGC is an evidence-based model that aims to increase family engagement in a child's academic growth by enhancing the quantity and quality of teacher-parent interaction. Six special education teachers and six general education preschool teachers from six inclusive preschool classrooms participated in the study. Teachers received training on how to work collaboratively to

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develop shared goals and support to parents during the COVID-19 global pandemic. This study positively impacted the relationships between the general education and special education teacher pairs at each school. Teachers reported improved outcomes for students with and without disabilities. Implications include using FGC to build co-teachers relationship and reimagining the traditional parent-teacher conference to involve parents.

Keywords: inclusion, collaboration, family engagement, preschool teachers, distance learning, special education

Introduction

The global pandemic and distance learning changed the way teachers and parents collaborate together for student success. Distance learning was unsuitable for young children and students with disabilities and provided a heavy burden on parents (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). Soltero-Gonzales and Gillanders (2021) found that Latinx families from under-resourced neighborhoods experienced insecurities at home due to reduced family incomes resulting from one parent having to quit work and take over the responsibilities of at-home child care. However, Soltero-Gonzales and Gillanders (2021) discovered that even with these challenges, parents effectively assumed the responsibility for their children's education. When children became frustrated with completing school-based activities at home, the parents integrated those activities into a variety of experiential play activities to keep the children engaged in learning (Soltero-Gonzales & Gillanders, 2021).

The pandemic also hindered parent, children, and teacher relationships for preschool families' first introduction to school, where parent and teacher roles had to be reevaluated (Anderson Søe et al., 2022). At the same time, students with disabilities experienced a loss of services when the school closures occurred in March 2020 (Barnett et al., 2021). Similar to the recommendations for all early education practices (Division of Early Childhood, 2014), two critical pieces of educating students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic were professional development and family involvement (Tremmel et al., 2020). Special education teachers also encountered barriers during distance learning such as adapting materials and monitoring progress (Supratiwi et al., 2021).

This pilot study used a Family Group Conferencing (FGC) model to engage in professional development for inclusive classroom preschool teachers. FGC is an evidence-based model that aims to increase family engagement in a child's academic growth by enhancing the quantity and quality of teacher-parent interaction. FGC provides

teachers and families with a two-way, regular system of engagement in which teachers work with groups of families to ensure they have the strategies needed to help their children with and without disabilities meet appropriate learning objectives. In this study, teachers and parents engaged in planned shared activities during distance learning, providing equitable access to parents for participation. FGC also provided alternative, meaningful ways for teachers to engage in family-centered practices.

Family-Centered Practices

Family-centered practices provides families the capacity to strengthen their ability to promote their child's development and learning (Dunst, 2002). Family-centered practices where schools and families partner as decision makers to improve children's academic achievement began to demonstrate powerful positive outcomes for all children in the early 1980s with the Harvard Family Project. In 1997, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) formally recognized family participation in decision making activities in its policy statement. By 2014, the Recommended Practices for Division of Early Childhood (DEC) encompassed having family involvement in choices to strengthen child, parent, and family development.

A recent meta-analysis on family-centered practices reconfirmed significant and positive academic achievements and behaviors for children when the families and schools work together (Smith et al., 2020). They found that family-centered practices also improved social behavioral competencies and mental health. Further, parents from different race and ethnic backgrounds demonstrated the same positive improvements. On the other hand, school involvement for parents of color from under-resourced neighborhoods may look different. Based on experiences of families of color from under-resourced neighborhoods, their involvement includes helping their child navigate barriers in schools and assist in social mobility (Auerbach, 2007).

Inclusion of Students with and without Disabilities

Based on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, all students with disabilities should be educated alongside their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible. Students receiving special education services have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that specifies their present levels of academic performance, annual goals, and special education services (IDEA Sec. 300.320). The equity action plan from the U.S. Department of Education supports

access, equity, and justice and supporting students with disabilities. Students with disabilities have favorable outcomes when educated in an inclusive classroom (Gee et al., 2020). However, students with disabilities in under-resourced schools are more likely to be educated in segregated classrooms (Clampit, n.d.; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

In a joint position statement in 2009, the DEC and the National Association for Education of Young Children recommend improving inclusion of students with varying types of disabilities. Key personnel facilitate the inclusion of students in preschool classrooms (Lieber et al., 2000) such as the general education and special education teacher. An important factor to the success of students in inclusive classrooms is the collaboration between the general education and special education teachers (Solone et al., 2020). Conversely, Smith et al. (2015) recognized that one of the most common challenges in establishing inclusion is the lack of communication and collaboration among the service providers and families.

To promote the collaboration between general education and special education teachers, Robinson and Buly (2007) recommend teachers to engage in dialogue and co-teach together. Co-teachers need to understand their roles and responsibilities to have successful collaboration (Friend et al., 2010). Preschool teachers who have prior experiences with disabilities and inclusion felt better prepared to work in environments for students with and without disabilities (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Kwon et al., 2017). To move toward more inclusive practices, preschool teachers need to understand their role in inclusive classrooms and require more training to increase comfort levels of inclusive practices (Bryant, 2018; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). In addition, collaboration is improved for co-teachers in inclusive settings when there is additional training and time to plan together (Scruggs et al., 2007).

Family Group Conferencing

FGC is a model used in social work, where the social worker, the client, and the client's families agree on common goals (Connolly, 2006). WestEd, which is a nonprofit agency that promotes equity and learning for children, modified and designed FGC to replace the traditional school conferencing activities that take place twice a school year (WestEd, 2012). FGC was adapted using parent involvement and learning from home (Epstein et al. (2019). The teachers and families learn from each other and the families learn strategies to assist children at home with their learning objectives from the teachers.

FGC was adapted to provide time for teachers and parents to work together on common goals and to increase family-centered practices. Traditionally, school parent-teacher conferences at the research sites occur once in the fall and once in the spring term. FGC is a method where families gather as a group with the teachers for 75 minutes in the fall. During the late fall, each family engaged in an individual 30-minute student conference appointment with the teachers. During the spring, the families met with the teachers twice as a group. FGC has not been studied in inclusive preschool classrooms with students with and without disabilities.

Family-school and teacher-teacher communications have typically occurred in-person. Recently, Poole et al. (2022) promoted the use of "tele-intervention" video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom®, Google Hangout, Microsoft Teams) as a beneficial and natural delivery model for providing coaching services to early intervention caregivers. This modality is especially supportive for families who have chronically ill family members, reside in large cities with traffic challenges or rural locations, or have nontraditional working hours. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all FGC meetings for this study were conducted using Zoom® video conferencing. The pandemic also exacerbated racial and socio-economic inequities (Fortuna et al., 2020).

The purpose of the pilot study is to understand the impact of FGC between the preschool inclusive classroom teacher pairs working with students with and without disabilities. The preschool teachers taught in inclusive classrooms from under-resourced schools via distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study focused on the research gap between the collaboration of co-teachers using FGC in inclusive preschool classrooms from under-resourced schools during distance learning. This pilot study included three research questions:

RQ1: How does FGC impact teachers' attitudes and practices relate to family outreach?

RQ2: How does FGC impact classroom practice, including collaboration among special and general education teachers?

RQ3: How does FGC impact perceived child outcomes?

Methods

Six teaching pair teams comprised of one special education and one general education teacher working together in an inclusive preschool classroom participated in this pilot study. The teaching pairs were from six different public schools in a large urban Southern California school

district. All schools were located in under-resourced neighborhoods serving families from racially diverse and ethnic backgrounds. The special education teachers were recruited from a group of early childhood special education teachers who previously participated in a U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) teacher preparation grant. The purpose of the grant was to recruit, prepare, and place 60 early childhood special education teachers to work in inclusive preschool classrooms using family-centered practices.

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at the university and the school district levels, special education teachers who participated in the teacher preparation grant received an email with information about the study. The selection criteria included the special education teachers' work in an inclusive preschool classroom during the 2020 to 2021 school year. The inclusive classroom must be located in an under-resourced neighborhood and consisted of one special education teacher and one general education teacher that taught students with and without disabilities in the classroom all day. The special education teachers expressed interest via email and were provided informed consent from the research team. After that, the school principals received an informational email about the study. After receiving principal permission to recruit from the school site, the special education teachers' respective general education co-teacher was provided information about the study and recruited for the study. Once teacher pairs were successfully enrolled, the research team consented interested parents/caregivers of children with and without disabilities from their inclusive preschool classrooms to participate in FGC.

Participants

This study included special education teachers, their general education co-teachers, and parents/caregivers of children with and without disabilities.

Teacher Characteristics. Data on teacher demographics were self-reported by teachers at the beginning of the FGC pilot study. All 12 teachers in the FGC study were female. All but one teacher was from an underrepresented minority group, with 50% Latina, 42% Black and 8% White. Ages of the teachers varied, with over half of teachers between the ages of 40 and 59 (58%). Four teachers (34%) identified as between 20 to 39 years old. All six special education teachers had been in their current teaching positions for three years or less. General education teachers' time in their current positions varied, with two in

their positions for two years or less (33.4%), two in their positions for 19 and 21 years (33.4%), and two for 30 years (33.4%). The teacher demographics are presented in Table 1.

Parent/Caregiver Characteristics. Six schools engaged in the FGC pilot study and the number of parents/caregivers associated with each school site ranged from four to 10 family participants per school (n = 38). Over the course of the pilot study, there were 38 parents or caregivers who participated in some or all the FGC sessions. Caregivers provided demographic information on the pre-survey administered at their first session of FGC. Most parent/caregiver participants were female (82%) and identified as Latino/a/x or Hispanic (92%). All but two participants were the parent or guardian (95%) of the child, and the majority spoke Spanish at home (61%). The parent demographics are presented in Table 2.

Classroom and Child Characteristics. Data on classroom and child characteristics were self-reported by teachers and parents.

Table 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Teacher Participants at Baseline

	n	%
Gender		
Female	12	100
Male	0	0
Race/Ethnicity		
Latina/x	6	50
Black	5	42
White	1	8
Age		
20-29	2	17
30-39	2	17
40-49	3	25
50-59	4	33
60+	0	0
Prefer not to say	1	8
Teacher Role		
General Education	6	50
Special Education	6	50
Teaching Credentials		
Early Childhood Special Education	6	50
Child Development Permit	4	33
Multiple Subject	2	17
Other	3	25

The average number of students per classroom was 15.5 (*SD* = 6.2). On average, teachers reported six students (range one to 11) in their classrooms with IEPs. Teachers were asked to select from a list of disabilities that children in their classroom may have, and all (100%) indicated some of their students had speech and language impairments. Almost half (46%) of teachers said they had students with autism spectrum disorders. One teacher reported having a student with intellectual disabilities or a hearing impairment. One teacher reported having a student with Down Syndrome and another teacher had a student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Of the students receiving special education services, more than half of the students received speech therapy (66%). Ten parents indicated their child did not receive any special education related services.

Procedures

The FGC pilot study was intended to be in-person, however, due to the unexpected pandemic, all programming was modified for virtual delivery. The content was adjusted to meet the needs of teachers and families during this time. All materials were translated into Spanish and, if needed, teachers were provided translators. FGC included a Parent Group Meeting (75 minutes) in early Fall Semester and an Individual Parent Session (30 minutes) in the late Fall. After the

Table 2
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Parent Participants at Baseline

	n	%
Gender		
Female	31	82
Male	7	18
Race/Ethnicity		
Latina/x	35	92
Black	4	11
White	0	0
Other	1	3
Language Spoken at Home		
Spanish	23	61
English	15	40
Relation to Child		
Parent or Guardian	36	95
Grandparent	1	3
Aunt/Uncle	1	3

Winter break, parents received their second Parent Group Meeting (75 minutes) and in the Spring received their third Parent Group Meeting (75 minutes).

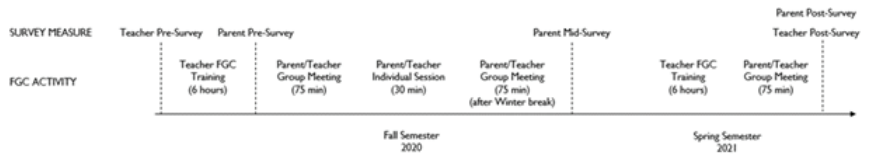
To implement FGC, teachers received 12 hours of FGC training via Zoom® throughout the 2020 to 2021 school year with the FGC consultant. The consultant has a background in administration, teacher leadership, and student-focused coaching. Each teacher received four 3-hour trainings. During the Fall Semester, a consultant trained the teachers and researchers for six total hours prior to the first meeting with parents. The initial training included an overview of the model and detailed lesson planning time for implementation to ensure teachers were well equipped to launch FGC without investing additional time for preparation. During the Spring Semester, teachers and researchers received six hours of training to prepare for their third, and final, meeting with parents. In addition to FGC training, each teaching pair received one-on-one coaching with the FGC consultant prior to implementing their second FGC session with families and thereafter. All participating teachers were compensated for their training time. See Figure 1 for the FGC pilot study timeline.

The general education and special education preschool teachers co-planned and instructed their students' parents together for all FGC meetings. For each of the three FGC Parent Group Meetings, the general format included teachers sharing classroom academic skills data regarding the expected end-of-year goal and current progress of all children in their classroom using de-identified data on a particular skill such as recognizing numbers or letter-sound correspondence. Each family received a report that displayed their own child's current progress on that same foundational skill to allow parents to compare where their child was relative to the class and evaluate it over time.

Throughout all FGC Parent Group Meetings, the teacher pairs decided the shared goals for the FGC meeting and shared activities for parents to complete at home that addressed the specific goals and academic skills (e.g., literacy skills, social emotional skills). The

Figure 1

FGC Pilot Study Timeline



activities varied by classroom based on the participation and feedback of the parents and coach. Families were centered in this process by building capacity to promote their child's development and learning (Dunst, 2002) by the sharing of activities as a group, role playing, and discussion of the activities. All Parent Group Meetings included teachers and parents sharing increased high expectations for preschool students with and without disabilities.

Measures

Online survey measures were administered to teachers and parents at different points during the pilot study. Teachers received pre- and post-surveys at two time points. The pre-survey was administered before the first FGC meeting, and the post-survey was administered after the third FGC meeting with parents in the Spring Semester. The pre-survey had 35 items (including demographics and classroom specific items) and took approximately 10 minutes to complete, and the post-survey had 33 items and averaged seven minutes finish. Participating families and teachers were provided $20 gift card incentives each time they completed a survey for the study.

The teacher survey items aligned with the overarching goals of the FGC intervention which included increasing collaboration among co-teachers and increasing alignment and school involvement between parents and teachers. In addition, items focused on increasing parent-child interactions around key parenting practices, such as setting goals, ways to supplement classroom learning at home, and supporting families in acquiring services. These tools include the Head Start FACES national study, specifically the family engagement portion of FACES (2014 wave of data collection) and the ECLS-K. Items were developed or selected based on their relevance to the study goals and reflect key areas of family engagement, perceptions of interactions, collaboration with their co-teachers and the potential impact of FGC. For example, teachers were asked to rate the extent they agreed with the following statement: FGC will help me/has helped me collaborate with my co-teacher to support inclusive opportunities for children with and without disabilities.

Analysis

Teacher survey data were collected online and analyzed using SPSS statistical software. All 12 teachers completed pre- and post-surveys during the FGC study. Descriptive analyses were conducted and average scores were calculated to assess change on survey items over time.

Results

Overall, the effects of FGC during distance learning on teachers and parents of preschool children with and without disabilities were overwhelmingly positive from teachers' perspectives. In addition, teachers reported increased collaboration with their co-teaching partner. As a result of participating in the study, teacher participants also reported learning new skills to apply to their classrooms and observing improved student academic performance.

Research Question 1: Teachers' Attitudes on Family Outreach

On the pre-survey, teachers were asked to reflect on the school at which they teach and provide an assessment for their interactions and communication with parents. Overall, 100% of teachers felt supported by their school to conduct outreach with families (50% 'strongly agree' and 50% 'agree'), but there was some uncertainty on whether the school provides workshops in a student's home language (16.7% 'don't know'). Teachers felt they communicated respectfully with family members of children with special needs (92% 'strongly agree') and valued the cultures and background of the children and families in their classrooms (83% 'strongly agree'). One in four teachers (75% 'strongly agree') said they encourage parents to make decisions about their children's education and care. Teachers also reported improvements in communication with parents.

Teachers felt they knew more about the families and children after working with the families more closely throughout FGC. After FGC, teachers reported knowing about the culture and values of 92% (25% 'all' and 67% 'most') of the families. FGC also impacted their family-centered practices in their own classrooms. Nine out of 10 teachers said it helped them develop family-centered practices in their classrooms. Teachers also felt FGC helped create more meaningful relationships (92% 'strongly agreed') and resulted in better understanding of a child's developmental status (100% 'strongly agreed'). After participating in FGC, teachers were more often able to provide suggestions on parenting (75% 'very often') (M = 3.8, SD = 0.2) and setting goals with parents (68% 'very often') (M = 3.7, SD = 0.4). Teachers felt this program helped create more meaningful relationships with students' parents. See Table 3 for teachers' instances of parental guidance.

Table 3
Frequency of Instances of Parental Guidance

Statement	*Percent %*				*M*	*SD*
How Often Are Yiu Able To Do the Following?	*Very Often*	*Sometimes*	*Rarely*	*Never*		
Offer parents ideas or suggestions about parenting.	75.0	25.0	0	0	3.8	0.4
Provide parents the opportunity to give input on their child's needs at home.	83.3	16.7	0	0	3.8	0.2
Set goals with parents for their child.	66.7	33.3	0	0	3.7	0.4

Research Question 2: Collaboration between Teachers

One of the primary aims of the FGC pilot study was to promote collaboration between general education teachers and their special education teacher partners. Utilizing program materials, teacher pairs were encouraged to work with all parents to address the needs of the children in their classrooms regardless of disability. Overall, teachers thought FGC promoted collaboration, which increased the ability to foster inclusivity in their classrooms for all students (M = 2.7, SD = 0.6). An additional benefit was for general education teachers to learn more about special education. One special education teacher commented, "It was very beneficial – I think my co-teacher learned a lot about special education and has more respect for what I do." Overall, 92% indicated their collaboration increased and resulted in more support for inclusive opportunities for all of their students. See Table 4 for teacher perceptions on collaborative teaching.

The majority of teachers felt FGC helped them develop more family-centered and inclusive practices in their classrooms. FGC allowed for both the general education and special education preschool teachers to work with parents of children with and without disabilities (M = 2.7, SD = 0.6). It also provided them an opportunity to use assessment data in a meaningful way for their own teaching. Many of the teachers expressed

they plan to incorporate components of FGC into their classrooms after this study was over. For example, one teacher stated "FGC is a great practice to add to one's classroom. Families loved it and it allowed them to be [a] part of their student's learning. I will continue to use it in my

Table 4
Teacher Perceptions on Impact of FGC on Collaborative Teaching

Statement	*Percent %*				*M*	*SD*
As a result of implementing FGC, my co-teacher and I do the following more often, about the same, or less often.	*More Often*	*About Same*	*Less Often*	*N/A*		
Work together to propose solutions to learning or behavioral challenges of any students.	75.0	16.7	8.3	0	2.7	0.6
Engage in parent outreach together.	75.0	8.3	8.3	8.3	2.7	0.6
Actively collaborate to accomplish educational goals for all students with and without IEPs.	75.0	16.7	8.3	0	2.7	0.6
Develop IEPs with input from both of us.	58.3	16.7	8.3	16.7	2.6	0.7
Plan lessons jointly for all students, including any differentiation that may be needed from some students.	58.3	33.3	8.3	0	2.5	0.7
Work together during class time to ensure active involvement of students with IEPs.	58.3	33.3	8.3	0	2.5	0.6
Split lesson planning so that each of us focuses on a different group of students or different subjects.	50.0	41.7	8.3	0	2.4	0.6
Conduct parent conferences together.	50.0	25.0	15.7	8.3	2.4	0.8

classroom." Teachers also commented that FGC helped to "empower parents or family members in promoting student academic growth" and "provides a structure for family involvement and engagement." FGC provided teachers with the tools to help parents incorporate learning activities in their homes and FGC "helped us better inform parents [about the] preschool standards, learning goals and objectives."

Research Question 3: Perceived Child Outcomes

The teacher perceived impact of FGC on children with and without disabilities was overwhelmingly positive. Based on the analysis of the teachers' pre- and post-survey data, teachers felt FGC had a positive impact on students. Almost all teachers (92%) 'strongly agreed' FGC resulted in improved academic outcomes for their students (M = 3.9, SD = 0.3). In addition, over half (58%) 'strongly agreed' FGC improved both behavioral outcomes and social outcomes (M = 3.6, SD = 0.5). See Table 5 for teacher perceptions of perceived child outcomes.

One of the key components of FGC is for increased parent engagement with their children's learning during distance learning. Teachers also learned more about how to engage parents in learning with their children outside of the classroom (from 58% on the pre-survey to 92% on the post-survey). Through FGC and the relationship building that occurred, teachers were more often able to provide suggestions and goal setting to the parents. The average score increased from pre- to post-survey, from 3.3 to 3.8, respectively. Teachers also reported being more able to set goals with parents for their child, with an increase in average score of 3.4 on the pre-survey to 3.7 on the post-survey.

Discussion

FGC was conducted during distance learning in inclusive preschool classrooms from under-resourced schools. Although distance learning was unsuitable for young children and students with disabilities and provided a heavy burden on parents (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021), parents were committed to working with their children and adapting school instruction to meet their children's needs (Soltero-Gonzales & Gillanders, 2021). The purpose of the pilot study was to understand the impact of FGC on teachers' attitudes toward family outreach, the relationships between co-teachers, and perceived student outcomes.

FGC can support inclusive preschool classrooms as well as partnerships between parents and teachers from schools located in

Table 5
Teacher Perceptions of Impact of FGC

Statement	*Percent %*				*M*	*SD*
	Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*		
Due to my experience with FGC this school year, I believe my classroom practice has changed to be more inclusive of all children.	91.7	8.3	0	0	3.9	0.3
In the past year, FGC has resulted in…						
Improved academic outcomes for the children I work with.	91.7	8.3	0	0	3.9	0.3
More meaningful relationships with parents.	91.7	8.3	0	0	3.9	0.3
A more collaborative relationship with my partner teacher.	75.0	16.7	8.3	0	3.7	0.6
Improved behavioral outcomes for the children I work with.	58.3	41.7	0	0	3.6	0.5
Improved social outcomes for the children I work with.	58.3	41.7	0	0	3.6	0.5

under-resourced neighborhoods from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. The traditional parent-teacher conference may not be an effective method to promote family-centered practices and family outreach. Similarly, a study conducted by Taylor and Kim (2020) changed the way pre-service teachers work with families outside of the traditional parent-teacher conference, which changed their confidence in working with families. By changing the traditional parent-teacher conference and using the FGC model, teachers in this pilot study felt they created more meaningful relationships with families.

As family dynamics have changed over the years, one way to involve families in early childhood education classrooms is to provide different ways for them to be involved (Knopf & Swick, 2008). During the global pandemic, family dynamics and stressors changed as families had to adjust to distance learning. Teachers also had to adjust parent involvement and teaching and learning. FGC provided a way to address some of these changes and how parents engaged their children's learning and development during distance learning.

The teachers in the study received professional development training before they implemented FGC. After receiving training, the teachers created more meaningful relationships with parents that helped them work with parents to assess the child's developmental status and more equitable ways to engage in learning. There is a need for continual professional development on how to work with families and teachers (Brown et al., 2009). FGC could advance equity and inclusion in early childhood education by preparing teachers to partner with families and teach targeted learning skills for their students with and without disabilities through continual professional development.

Through the FGC pilot study, teachers reported that the study helped their collaborative relationship between co-teacher. The co-teachers planned together to engage with all families enrolled in the study and implemented their group conferences meetings together which improved inclusive practices. Shared vision is a challenge in inclusive classrooms (Purcell et al., 2007) and general education teachers need more training to learn more about students with disabilities and inclusion (Kwon et al., 2017). The FGC pilot study also allowed for general education teachers to learn more about the special education teachers' roles and students with disabilities. One teacher in the FGC pilot study mentioned that this process led to an understanding of the special education teachers' roles.

Two components that improve early childhood education include providing a space for collaboration and decision-making (Pacchiano

et al., 2019). FGC provided a space for general and special education teachers to work together to make decisions on how to create activities for parents. FGC allowed for teachers to have shared increased high expectations for all students. Another important aspect of successful collaboration and inclusion is building membership and ownership for the general education and special education teacher (Mogharreban & Bruns, 2009). Overall, the collaborative relationships between the teacher partners and between teachers and parents also improved in this pilot study, which leads toward improved inclusive practices.

Students in inclusive classrooms have more favorable outcomes (Gee et al., 2020). Parent involvement is also associated with positive child outcomes (Graue et al., 2004). However, parent involvement changed during the global pandemic and distance learning. The inequities of the pandemic on preschool education for students with and without disabilities during the school closures included attendance loss and loss of services for students with disabilities (Barnett et al., 2021), which could impact student outcomes. In this pilot study, a positive impact was noted on children's development and goal achievement. During this process, almost all teachers said FGC resulted in perceived improved academic and behavioral outcomes for their students. When preschool teachers and parents plan goals and strategies together, children met their goals and children had increased engagement (Palmer et al., 2019). FGC provided teachers opportunities to work with families to set goals and create activities to work toward achieving those goals.

Limitations

There are three limitations to consider in this pilot study. First, from the small sample size of this pilot study, it may be difficult to generalize results. However, this study shows the improvement in collaboration between co-teachers and fostered more inclusive practices for students with and without disabilities in the classrooms. The second limitation is in the recruitment sample. The sample started with the recruitment of special education teachers who participated in an OSEP teacher preparation grant and their co-teachers. Future studies should expand on the recruitment sample to better generalize the results. The last limitation is child outcomes were not directly measured. Due to the global pandemic, the preschool formal assessments were not collected. Future studies should address how to collect informal and formal child outcome data and compare student outcome data by groups.

Implications and Conclusion

The aims of the study were to understand the impact of FGC on teachers' attitudes toward family outreach, the relationships between co-teachers, and perceived student outcomes. Throughout the study, teachers developed partnerships with parents in under-resourced neighborhoods. As a result, teachers were better able to support equitable practices and work alongside the families from diverse backgrounds. Enhanced teacher-parent partnerships promote family confidence and competence and can result in increased student skills (DEC, 2014). Practical implications for stakeholders and policymakers include providing time and space to engage with families outside of the traditional parent-teacher conference.

In addition, FGC professional development and implementation provided opportunities for co-teachers to develop collaborative partnership through training which in turn, improved inclusive practices. Professional and family collaborative practices allow for joint problem solving to occur in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner (DEC, 2014). At the same time, the collaboration between co-teachers and parents improved perceived child academic and behavioral outcomes through shared increased high expectations between co-teachers and parents. Practical implications for teacher education programs and stakeholders include incorporating co-planning and FGC principles into pre-service and in-service teacher support programs which give an opportunity to develop family-centered practices and more equitable inclusive practices.

The implications for future research include examining parent engagement and perceptions of FGC during distance learning and FGC post-pandemic. Since this FGC study was conducted in Zoom®, a future study can examine the impacts of FGC when teachers are working with students in-person, and the impacts of conducting in-person teacher trainings, as well as in-person teacher and parent FGC Parent Group Meetings. Next, a future study can expand the sample of teachers. In addition, this pilot FGC study was also conducted for young children in preschool, but it is important to have a follow up study, which includes students at different stages of development from kindergarten through 12th grade or tracking students as they transition to kindergarten. Future studies can also be expanded to include more inclusive classrooms with a more robust evaluation design.

FGC is a unique approach to helping teachers and parents collaborate more effectively, especially during distance learning. Teacher participants agreed that children likely experienced important benefits

from FGC. This pilot study positively impacted the relationships between teachers and parents, and also between the general education and special education teacher pairs at each school. FGC provided a way for parents and inclusive preschool teachers from under-resourced schools to build partnerships and engage in family-centered practices during distance learning and move toward more equitable practices.

Note

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