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Perceptions of School Leaders on Inclusion and Their Role in the Successful Development of an Inclusion Program for Preschoolers with Disabilities

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Joyce Myrie, who will forever be in my heart. Your love, support, advice, and encouragement have led me to this point and I will forever be grateful to you for the time when you were physically right by my side and also for the time you have been my guardian angel.

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Abstract

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is the administrative law that governs special education services and how students with disabilities should be educated. When students are found eligible for special education and related services, the law states that the general education classroom should be the first placement considered where students receive services. Research reveals that the state of New Jersey has traditionally been a state where students with disabilities are educated in separate classrooms and schools, and in 2021 the state was ranked the worst in the United States when it came to including students with disabilities in the general education class.

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions that public school principals and directors of community-based preschools have about the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom, and their role in developing a successful inclusive program for that preschool population. The theories that framed the research included *contingency leadership theory*, *social learning theory*, and *sociocultural theory*. A qualitative research approach was used and semistructured interviews were completed by the researcher to collect the data. The viewpoints of the school leaders facilitated further exploration into barriers to inclusion, support for inclusion, and the school leader's role as the agent for change when developing and implementing inclusive practices. This study also compared the perspectives of school leaders coming from two different types of educational settings: principals in a public school district and directors of community-based preschool programs. This research is significant because federal and state regulations mandate that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education which will help them advance and make progress, ultimately

affecting their life outcomes. Additionally, the school leader is a key player in making sure all students, especially those with special needs, are successful.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Background

This chapter provides an introduction to the research by initially addressing the background and context of the problem, followed by the research questions, research design, theoretical framework, definitions of related terms, and finally the limitations of the study.

According to the United States Department of Education, the total number of public school students from preschool to high school who received special education services during the year 2020–2021 was approximately 7.2 million, which is a 60% increase from the prior reported number in 2019 (United States Department of Education [NECS], 2022). When students receive special education services, those services are guided by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), which was previously known as the Education of Handicapped Children Act (EHA or EAHCA). The law was executed in 1975 and the premise of the law was to make sure that all students with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 received a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment if it was determined that they met the criteria for special educational services (IDEA, 1975). The objective of the law was to create an educational environment for students with disabilities that ensured they had the same access to a challenging curriculum and high expectations as the general education students (Wehmeyer et al., 2001).

As the educational needs of students with disabilities continued, the approach to educating them outlined within the law continued to change and evolve. The law was reauthorized a few times, first in 1990 with the name change to Individual Disabilities Education Act. In 1997 a second reauthorization of IDEA occurred, with the focus on improving the results of students with disabilities and their access to effective educational programming. Specifically, access to the general education curriculum and environment was part of the change in the 1997 reauthorization. The premise was to ensure students with disabilities were included and

integrated into general education classrooms and schools to the greatest extent possible, which is considered to be the least restrictive environment. However, it should not simply be a location where students are placed, but rather the guiding principle for where students with disabilities should be educated (Rueda et al., 2000).

Another reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004 concentrated on increased accountability and higher standards for teachers of special education classrooms. Teachers were required to be highly qualified, meaning demonstration of proficiency in the core content area being taught. One of the most recent changes to IDEA took place in 2015 when the law was aligned with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) formerly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This revision focused on holding the state government responsible for ensuring students with disabilities had outcomes that were positive and comparable to those of general education students (United States Department of Education, IDEA-History). The focus of this amendment was to improve IDEA by ensuring that students with disabilities had access to and received a public education that improved their performance and progress (McLaughlin, 2010).

IDEA specifies a total of 13 disabling categories for which students can be found eligible for special education services; however, in New Jersey's administrative code that governs special education services, there are 14 classifications (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 300.8). New Jersey categories include Multiple Disabilities, Intellectual Disability, Specific Learning Disability, Autism, Auditory Impairment, Deaf/Blindness, Visually Impaired, Emotional Regulation Impairment, Orthopedic Impairment, Social Maladjustment, Communication Impaired, Other Health Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Preschool Child with a Disability (NJAC, 2016). A

critical criterion for determining students eligible for special education and related services is that their disability must significantly impact their academic performance.

This research focused on preschoolers who were found eligible for special education services, among whom a large percentage received support and intervention based upon the guidelines of Part C of IDEA. Prior to children being found eligible for special education in the state of New Jersey, those between the ages of 6 months and 3 years who are experiencing challenges in the areas of communication, cognition, social and emotional skills, and physical or fine motor skills that impact their overall developmental progress are eligible to receive services through early intervention which is operated out of the Department of Health Services (New Jersey Department of Health, Early Intervention, 2022). Once children turn 3, early intervention services cease and those preschoolers who may continue to require additional educational support to make progress may be found eligible for special education services and will receive it under the disabling condition of Preschool Child with a Disability (NJAC 8:17-6.1b). Additionally, children in this same age range who have not received early intervention services and demonstrate developmental delays can receive special education services if it is deemed warranted. Consistent with the New Jersey administrative law:

> A preschool child with a disability is a child between the ages of three and five who is experiencing developmental delay, as measured by appropriate diagnostic instruments and procedures, in one or more of the areas below, and requires special education and related services. As measured by a standardized assessment or criterion-referenced measure to determine eligibility, a developmental delay shall mean a 33 percent delay in one developmental area, or a 25 percent delay in two or more developmental areas - (1) Physical, including gross motor, fine motor, and sensory (vision and hearing); (2)

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Intellectual; (3) Communication; (4) Social and emotional; and (5) Adaptive. (NJAC

6A:14-3.5c (10)

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education along with the U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services issued a cooperative policy statement to states, local educational agencies

(LEAs), schools, and public and private early childhood programs regarding the inclusion of

young children with disabilities in early childhood programs. Specifically, the focus of the

official order mandates that "all young children with disabilities should have access to inclusive

high-quality early childhood programs, where they are provided with individualized and

appropriate support in meeting high expectations" (HHS & USDOE, 2015, p. 1).

Problem Statement

Despite the research, the federal mandates, and policies issued by state agencies

indicating that preschoolers should be educated in the least restrictive environments with their

typically developing peers and benefit more when they do, data from the Office of Special

Education Programs (OSEP) reports that on a national level less than 53% of preschoolers with

disabilities receive their special education services in the general education classrooms (U.S.

Department of Education, 2021). Additionally, in urban districts, inclusion usually falls behind

the national averages. There is a "disparity in urban districts and urban public schools have a

long-standing history of failure in special education and inclusive practices" (DeMatthews &

Mawhinney, 2013, p. 3).

In addition to state agencies advocating for young children and preschoolers to be

educated in the general education classroom, a key concept of the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act is the least restrictive environment which also mandates that the general education

classroom be the first placement option when students become eligible for special education services. Specifically, the law refers to the least restrictive environment as:

> Students with disabilities shall be educated in the least restrictive environment. Each district board of education shall ensure that: 1. To the maximum extent appropriate, a student with a disability is educated with peers who are not disabled; 2. Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of a student with a disability from the student's general education class occurs only when the nature or severity of the educational disability is such that education in the student's general education class with the use of appropriate supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (New Jersey Administrative Code, 2016)

When children are found eligible for special education and related services under the disabling condition of a Preschool Child with a Disability, it is the responsibility of the school district—specifically, members of the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) team—to first consider having that preschooler receive special education services in the least restrictive environment with their typically developing nondisabled peers (NJAC 6A:14-4.2). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates that states report data regarding the educational environment in which all students with disabilities including preschoolers are being educated. The percentage criteria that are used to report the data on students with disabilities educated in the general education class include 80% or more of the day, 40% to 79% of the day, and less than 40% of the academic day (USDOE, National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). According to the 2021 report submitted to Congress on how IDEA was being executed, New Jersey along with two other states were rated the lowest as it relates to including students with disabilities in the general education classroom with their nondisabled peers. Particularly, as a

result of New Jersey having only a 44.6% inclusion rate of students with disabilities in the general education classroom more than 80% of the day, the state is considered to be the worst in the United States (USDOE, 2021).

Purpose of the Study

Considering the low inclusion rates in the state of New Jersey, the objective of this research was to explore the perceptions of public school principals and community-based preschool directors about inclusion and their role in the development of a successful inclusive program for preschool students with disabilities. This study also compared the perspectives of school leaders from these two different types of educational settings: principals in a public school district and directors of community-based preschool programs. The federal law and various state agencies have addressed the need for increased inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. These laws and mandates have put pressure on school leaders to be unbiased and proficient in meeting the needs of all students, especially those with special needs (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). However, the development of a successful inclusive program depends upon the school leader's perspective on inclusion and their dedication to creating best inclusive practices within the context of the school environment (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013).

The moral principle that was the basis for this research came from a personal as well as professional conviction that school administrators who have a positive perspective about inclusion would ensure practices and processes are in place in their school which would contribute to a successful inclusive program for preschoolers. There is a bit of research that explores preschoolers and inclusion and the influence that school administrators may have on their inclusive experience, but much of it is based on the teacher's perspective and perceptions and their influence on the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities. This research changed the

focus on building administrators since the laws and policies continue to place demands on the school instructional leaders to increase special education student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) about including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) on their role in creating a successful inclusive program at the preschool level in their respective school settings?

Research Question 3: Are there differences between school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) regarding their perception of inclusion and their role in creating successful inclusion programs at the preschool level in their respective schools?

Methodology Overview

This study used a qualitative approach, specifically narrative research, to address the research questions. Narrative research methods are not only a means "to investigate how a group feels about a certain practice or treatment, but it is the evaluating and analyzing of those accounts" (Moen, 2006, p. 60). Moen also indicated that narrative inquiry includes the process where the researcher analytically looks for common themes among the participants' responses. Principals from public schools that have preschool classes and directors of community-based preschools in an urban school district were interviewed to collect data regarding their perceptions of inclusion and their role in creating successful inclusive preschool classrooms. The benefits of

the qualitative method allowed this researcher to collect data on the participants' feelings, experiences, and opinions as well as to investigate the school leaders' explanations and understandings of their actions and how they influenced the development of a successful inclusive program for preschoolers with disabilities.

The participants were asked a series of open-ended questions using a semistructured interview method. "Semi-structured interviews are similar to structured interviews in that the topics or questions to be asked are planned in advance, but instead of using closed questions, semistructured interviews are based on open-ended questions" (Fox, 2009, p. 7). Fox also referred to using semistructured interviews in research when addressing the attitudes and thoughts of the participants. This semistructured interviewing approach provided more opportunities for the participants and researcher to engage in two-way communication and also ask follow-up questions when it was necessary, in addition to delving deeply into personal opinions, feelings, and sometimes sensitive issues.

Theoretical Framework

In light of how New Jersey is ranked when it comes to including students with disabilities in general education classes, the next two frameworks provided a functional basis for how school leaders can view the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities. The framework for this research stemmed from Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist who believed that learning is primarily a social process whereby the support and guidance of educators, parents, guardians, caregivers, and peers play a critical role in the development of higher-order thinking and psychological functions (Topciu & Myftiu, 2015). The focus of Vygotsky's thinking and research centered around how social interaction plays a key role in children's learning. Including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom alongside their typically developing peers will afford them increased opportunities to model

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behaviors, social skills, language, and communication of higher-functioning peers. Similar to Vygotsky's theory is Albert Bandura's concept of social learning theory, which served as another framework for this research. Social learning theory is grounded in the concept that people learn from interacting with others in the social arena through observation, imitation, internalizing, and modeling of more competent peers (Tadayon-Nabavi, 2012). Bandura's theory has often been connected to the behaviorist learning theories and cognitive learning theories because it also involves the similar concepts of attention, memory, and motivation (Bandura, 1977).

These theories were selected as the framework for the research because although there are noted variations when considering where preschoolers with disabilities can be educated, preschoolers with disabilities in the general education preschool classroom would have increased opportunities to engage with and model behaviors of peers who are more advanced and functioning developmentally at age expectancy. As noted in the two theories, learning occurs through observation, modeling, and imitation of higher-functioning individuals. Exploring how school leaders' perceptions about the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities as well as their role in developing successful inclusive programs will help to make connections as to how school leaders are creating the ideal conditions for positive inclusive learning to take place through increased opportunities for preschoolers to attend, and to retain and model more advanced behaviors. Inclusion is particularly suited best for the preschool classroom because of the flexibility of the implementation of the curriculum as well as the ability to respond to and teach diverse abilities through play (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

Inclusion within the early childhood preschool class can vary significantly across programs in terms of the context, structure, and philosophy of inclusion. Preschoolers with disabilities are educated in a variety of schools including private preschools, community-based

programs, Head Start programs, and public schools (Barton & Smith, 2015). The preschoolers with disabilities within the district of study have the option to receive special education services either in the public school that has a preschool program or in the community-based program that collaborates with the school district. The parent has the decision-making power as to school choice and where their child will be educated. Parents' decisions are sometimes influenced by the need for before and after care services that are only provided at the community-based preschool programs and not the public schools. One of the primary goals of the preschool experience is the development of a solid social and emotional foundation that will enhance future experiences in school and life. Lack of inclusive options at the early childhood educational level may lead to lower overall expectations for development, both academically and socially, and does not allow young children with disabilities to acquire knowledge through cooperative student learning and observation of typical peers during the critical years of child development (Odom, 2000). "The research provides support for inclusion as a strategy for improving key competencies related to later school success, and for helping children with disabilities become more fully engaged in the social life of preschool classrooms" (Lawrence et al., 2016, p. 4). Considering the noted benefits of inclusion at the preschool level, it is critical to examine the perspectives school leaders have about inclusion and what processes they put into place to develop that inclusive opportunity for preschoolers with disabilities.

The contingency theory, also known as contingency leadership theory, was also used as a framework for this research. This theory developed by Fred Fiedler indicates that an individual's leadership style is dependent upon the context and the demands of the environment (Ayman et al., 1995). The significance of the contexts within this theory denotes that there are distinctive circumstances in the specific types of organizations and environments that influence the leaders'

actions and practices (Fiedler, 1974). According to contingency leadership theory, the school leader's actions are determined and driven by the context of their environment, which will ultimately play a role in future actions and decision making. That contextual factor can influence how the leader makes decisions about the development of the inclusive program for preschoolers with disabilities. This theory was also best suited for this research as it framed the research question, specifically as it relates to comparing the perspectives of school leaders coming from two different types of educational settings. This framework was also appropriate for this research as it helped to address the research questions by illustrating how effective school leadership related to the leaders' various responsibilities is contingent upon the circumstances or current challenges that may exist within the respective school and how the leaders may deal with them. Preschoolers with IEPs can receive their special education services in both of these school settings, and this research first explored how the leaders perceive the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities and then addressed the similarities or differences that exist within the context of the two different school organizations. This framework was also applied to this research as it involved the internal and external influences relevant to the activity within the schools, which influences the successful implementation of inclusive practices.

Definition of Terms

Director: The person responsible for the day-to-day operations of the preschool center.

Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE): Students with disabilities from ages 3 to 21 are entitled to a free and appropriate education at the expense of the public school district. The student's educational program must be delineated within their Individualized Education Plan or IEP (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 300.101).

General education classroom: A classroom where the majority of the students enrolled and attending are not special education students (although a small number of special education students can be enrolled in the general education class as per the special education law).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): As we know it today, it is the federal law that ensures students with disabilities eligible for special education receive a free and appropriate public education based on their specific needs. It was originally known as the Education of Handicapped Children Act, passed in 1975 (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 1400).

Inclusion: Inclusion is interchangeable with the words *mainstream* and *integrated*; however, inclusion is the preferred term and it involves supporting students with disabilities with goals, accommodations, and modifications which allow them to access the general education curriculum in the general education class. Although the term inclusion is never mentioned in IDEA and the Department of Education has not issued a definition of the word, IDEA mandates that school districts include special education students in the general education classroom environment to the greatest extent possible (Education Law Center, 2019).

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): When a student with a disability has been found eligible for special education based upon a federal or state disability category, an IEP is developed. The IEP includes the following components: the student's present level of academic achievement and functional performance, related services, modifications, accommodations, and the goals and objectives related to the student's areas of need (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 300.320).

Individualized Education Program Team (IEP team): The IEP team includes a group of people who are charged with developing, reviewing, or amending the Individualized Education Plan for students who have been found eligible for special education. Members of the IEP team

can include the parent, student, general and special education teacher, related service providers, and school district representative (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 300.321).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): LRE is a key component of IDEA, the special education law, and refers to "the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 300.114).

New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education (NJCIE): NJCIE is a New Jersey-based organization that collaborates with school districts within the state to provide training, coaching, and professional development to teachers and school administrators about inclusion and the empirically-based practices that support inclusion. NJCIE also provides resources to parents NJCIE, 2020).

Principal: A school leader who is responsible for the daily management and administrative responsibilities of a public school in grades preschool through grade 12.

Organization of the Study

Chapter I addresses the background of the problem, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the definition of terms, and presents a brief overview of the theoretical framework and the research design. The remainder of the chapters are organized as follows:

Chapter II provides a review of the pertinent literature as it relates to the principal/school leaders' role, school leader's perception of inclusion, inclusion and early childhood, and barriers

to inclusion. Additionally, the chapter includes information regarding the laws that govern special education, including the least restrictive environment.

      Chapter III addresses the methodological approach to the study.

      Chapter IV includes the collected data and a comprehensive analysis of the data.

      Chapter V is inclusive of the summary of the results/findings as they relate to the research questions, implications for future policies and practices, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

In the state of New Jersey, students with disabilities have typically been educated in separate classrooms and/or schools, and as of 2020, New Jersey had a 45% inclusion rate (Education Law Center, 2019). It is significant to assess if the perceptions and practices of school administrators have any bearing on this ongoing trend. The review of the literature included online subject area and keyword searches through Google Scholar, Google, SAGE, and ERIC related to the theoretical framework of the research, inclusion within early childhood programs, the school leader's role as an instructional leader and change agent, the school leader's perception of inclusion, and barriers to inclusion. Additional subject area searches for the literature review included state and federal special education guidelines, the least restrictive environment, and statistics on inclusion in the state. Lastly, the literature review also included exploring the citations of previously reviewed literature to search for additional sources related to the subject areas. A review of the literature revealed a lack of research that included school leaders from community-based preschool programs, and this research filled that gap.

Theoretical Framework

The contingency leadership theory was used to frame this research. This theory developed by Fred Fiedler indicates that an individual's leadership style is dependent upon the context and the demands of the environment (Ayman et al., 1995). Contingency theory analyzes the "internal adjustments of the organization (e.g., decision-making process, structure, technology, instructional techniques) as it seeks to meet the shifting demands of its external and internal environments" (Hanson, 1979, p. 110). The theory also cites contingency variables as situational variables that influence the relationship between the manager's strategies and approaches within the organizational structures and the organizational outcomes (Hanson, 1979).

Public schools and community-based preschools are two very different educational environments where preschoolers with disabilities can be included in the general education classrooms, and this research explored how the contingency variables influenced the leaders in both settings with regard to developing inclusive practices. Ultimately, the demands and the context of the organization may influence the school leaders' decision making.

The following are the basic assumptions of the contingency leadership theory that may impact the problem solving of individual leaders within an organization (Hanson, 1979). The basic assumptions of the contingency leadership theory also allude to the idea that the leader's effectiveness may be influenced by the setting that they come from as well as the following ideas:

1. Middle ground: This assumption includes the concept that there has to be some type of compromise and middle ground when considering management principles that are suitable for all types of organizations. Also included within this first assumption is the idea that every organization has exceptional qualities and should be looked at as unique entities when studying them.

2. Goals: Although an organization will have a primary goal (e.g., educating special education students in the least restrictive environments), there will always be other competing or intersecting goals that interfere with the progress of the main goal.

3. Performance: Another assumption is that the degree to which an organization's performance is determined is contingent upon both internal and external conditions and processes.

4. Approaches: A leader may have multiple approaches to managing different departments within the same organization.

5. Leadership style: Challenging situations that occur within organizations may call for varying leadership styles to address them.

6. Initiation: Administrators have to address problems, but frequently not from the beginning of the problem as there are several causes that may prompt the initiation of the problem.

7. Information: Managers/leaders/administrators are not always aware of everything that is happening in their organization.

Fiedler (1974) placed a strong emphasis on the context and setting of an organization and how that may play a role in the leader's actions and practices. The decision making of the school leaders in this research can be viewed through the lens of the contingency leadership theory. The use of this framework was connected to the researcher's anticipated differences in the perspectives and expectations of the public school principals and the directors of the community-based programs. Some factors can contribute to varied perspectives that may include the school leader's overall view of inclusion within the specific type of school, the expected level of specialized instructional support for the preschoolers with disabilities, and the total number of preschoolers with disabilities requiring support. The researcher assumed that the school administrators from the two different types of educational settings would have different perceptions of the inclusion of preschoolers, and of their roles and responsibilities in developing inclusive opportunities.

The other theoretical frameworks for this research stemmed from Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Albert Bandura's social learning theory. Bandura and Vygotsky were psychologists who both believed that a child's maximum potential is honed through observations and social interactions; however, the foundations of their theories are slightly different, as

Bandura's is behavioral and Vygotsky's is language and cognitively-based (Bandura, 1977). Nonetheless, the two theories are similar in that both theorists postulated and supported that a person's fullest capabilities happen through social interactions. Both of these theories served as the framework for this research, as they both set the foundation for how school administrators can view the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities and its benefits. In research completed on principal leadership and special education, researchers reported that "effective school principals must be stewards and coaches in the development of a school culture of inclusiveness for all grade levels" (Di Paola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 10). Additionally, a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students, especially those who require specialized instruction.

Within Lev Vygotsky's theory, culture and environment play an important role in the cognitive development of children and suggest that learning is primarily a social process whereby the support and guidance of peers, educators, parents, guardians, and caregivers play an essential part in the development of higher-order thinking and psychological functions (Topciu & Myftiu, 2015). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also focuses on some other premises, one being that children have four basic mental abilities that include attention, sensation, perception, and memory at birth. These abilities increase and mature into higher intellectual thinking and functioning levels as a result of social and cultural interactions with those who are more advanced and knowledgeable and considered to be within the zone of proximal development (McLeod, 2020).

Vygotsky referred to the zone of proximal development as the "distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in

collaboration with more capable peers" (Wertsch, 2008, p. 8). It is the zonal area where the learners grow and learn beyond their innate natural abilities by interacting with "more knowledgeable others" when the more knowledgeable other may be an adult such as a parent or teacher, but it can also refer to a child's peer (Doolittle, 1995).

Vygotsky's theory also focuses on how the social interactions of children can support and enhance the learning process, specifically as it relates to using language, and he emphasized the importance of how language plays in the development of children's cognition (Topciu & Myftiu, 2015). Vygotsky made a connection in his theory to cooperative learning, inclusive of scaffolding skill development. Specifically, the connection included the importance of the learning taking place within the sociocultural framework and the significance of social interaction occurring during instruction is referenced in the literature as social constructivism. This concept of social constructivism defines knowledge as information that students create based on the collaboration that they have with their peers in class, other students, and teachers (Idaresit Akpan et al., 2020). "Social constructivism recognizes the social aspect of learning and the use of conversation, interaction with others, and the application of knowledge as an essential aspect of learning and a means to achieving learning objectives" (Powell & Kalina, 2009, p. 244).

Bandura's concept of social learning theory is grounded in the concept that people learn from interacting with others in the social arena through observation, imitation, internalizing, and modeling of more competent peers (Grusec, 1992). The theory has often been referred to as a link between behaviorist learning theories and cognitive learning theories because it incorporates attention, memory, and motivation (David, 2015).

The overarching theme of learning theories is related to the environment, and what take place in the environment is the main dynamic for the individual's development. Bandura's theory centers around people learning by observing others around them, which he referred to as observational learning (Bandura et al., 1966). The concept of observational learning encompasses individuals developing similar behaviors based on what they witnessed and observed after a process of assimilation and imitation, especially if the behaviors were deemed to be positive or attached to a reward related to the observed behavior (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's theory also suggests that reward, influence, and self-efficacy are three components that contribute to how children's behavior is formed while stressing chances for children to observe other children succeed as a key factor in establishing that self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

The classroom environment in which preschoolers with disabilities are educated can have a significant impact on their cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and behavioral development, which can be looked at through the lens of Vygotsky's and Bandura's theories. Including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom alongside their typically developing peers will afford them increased opportunities to observe and model behaviors, social skills, language, and communication of higher-functioning peers who are functioning developmentally at age expectancy.

Principal/School Leader's Role

The focus of this study explored the perceptions of school administrators from public schools and privately run publicly funded community-based preschools on inclusion and their role in developing a successful inclusive program at the preschool level. A public school principal in the state of New Jersey must have certain educational credentials as per the New Jersey Department of Education. The DOE mandates that all principals must meet one of the following degree requirements: "a master's degree in educational leadership, curriculum, and

instruction, or leadership/management; a master's degree and completion of a post-masters program that leads to a certificate of advanced study in educational administration and supervision; or a master's degree and completion of a post-masters program of 30 semester-hour credits in educational administration/supervision" (NJDOE, 2023, School Administrator Certification). Additionally, the NJDOE denotes that to be public school administrators, all candidates must complete 300 internship hours in educational leadership, pass the School Leaders Licensure Assessment praxis exam, and apply for a certificate of eligibility before they can become eligible to work in the capacity of a principal or vice principal in a school from preschool to 12th grade (NJDOE, 2023).

Directors of community-based preschool centers also have requirements that have been established by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families. If the director has a master's degree in a child- or business-related field, the individual is not required to have work experience, but if the director has a bachelor's degree, the individual must have 1 year of experience as a manager or supervisor (New Jersey Department of Children and Families, 2017). The community-based directors who participated in this study also have the requirement to meet monthly with the early childhood executive administration of the school district where the research took place. The public school district in this research did not have enough classroom space to educate the number of preschoolers with disabilities who have IEPs, thus a large percentage of them receive their special education services in the general education classes within the community-based preschools. Therefore, exploring the experiences of both the community-based directors and public school principals was a necessary part of this research and allowed the researcher to gain valuable information and compare the data obtained from the two different school leaders.

It has long been believed that principals/school administrators are the key staff members in the school when it comes to student achievement and student success (Styron & LeMire, 2009). The role of principals, their views and perceptions, and their leadership of the school can influence the school's policies and procedures and ultimately impact student learning and placement (Hipp & Huffman, 2003). Both public school principals and directors of community-based preschools are confronted with a myriad of daily administrative and management responsibilities, and factors such as experience and perceptions can influence their decision making. Since 1975 and the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, administrators have had to make decisions as to how their schools support and instruct students with disabilities in the general education class in accordance with the law. An interview that was published in *Educational Leadership* noted: "The idea is that these inclusive schools would be restructuring so that they are supportive, nurturing communities that really meet the needs of all the children within them: rich in resources and support for both students and teachers" (O'Neil, 1994/1995, p. 7). School leaders of inclusive schools must create and continually support a clear mission for inclusivity that leads to a collective vision within the school (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998). Additionally, Barnett and Monda-Amaya stated that the conditions necessary for schools to be effective at including students with disabilities included changes in attitudes and instructional approaches, and the main person in the change process is the school principal. A review of the research also shows that the success of including students with disabilities/special needs in the general education classroom as well as having them remain in that inclusive classroom setting is contingent upon whether or not school leaders encourage and nurture favorable attitudes towards inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). This qualitative narrative research and the interview questions prompted discussions and an exploration of the

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experiences of public school principals and community-based preschool directors with preschoolers with disabilities in inclusive settings and their development in helping to create a successful inclusion program. The related literature showed that principals who have more positive experiences with students with disabilities and increased exposure to and knowledge of concepts related to special education have a more positive outlook about inclusion, and are more likely to ensure students are placed in less restrictive environments (Praisner, 2003).

School Leaders' Perceptions of Inclusion

Ironically, the word *inclusion* is never mentioned in the law, but *the least restrictive environment* is the phrasing that refers to including students in general education classrooms to the maximum extent possible. *Mainstreaming* and *integration* are also words that educators use to reference students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Shay Schumm & Vaughn, 1992). Mainstreaming was a term that was initially used when referencing school-aged students and meant placing students with disabilities into mainstream classes or schools (Odom et al., 1999). In the late 1970s, schools started to refer to the mainstreaming of preschoolers with disabilities in early childhood. Terminology shifted from mainstreaming to integration, and then in the 1990s another shift occurred and classes that had students with and without special education students were considered to be inclusive (Odom et al., 1999). Although inclusion is the preferred term, at times in the literature the terms are used interchangeably (Shay Schumm & Vaughn, 1992).

As the laws and mandates have put increased pressure on school districts to make sure students with disabilities are educated in the general education classroom, demands have been placed on school leaders to be unbiased and proficient in meeting the needs of all students, especially those requiring special education services. There are various thoughts that address how school leaders perceive the inclusion of students with disabilities. One study completed in

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2020 used a methodology that included interviewing principals regarding the components of and barriers to the inclusive leadership model as well as the levels of commitment and actions that were necessary to develop an inclusive school involving all students. The researchers found that school leaders view inclusion as a process in which it is necessary to create shared values in the areas of school culture, communication, sustainability, and leadership (Oskarsdottir et al., 2020). The study also identified the development of creating structures as a necessary component for inclusive leadership. Specifically, the school leaders noted that structure must exist when planning and implementing professional development, and must also be present within the organizational system, especially during times when flexibility is necessary.

A review of the literature as it relates to school leaders' perceptions of inclusion also finds that leaders reported that the preschoolers' disability and the delivery of special education services cannot be the only focus when it comes to inclusion, but "rather an inclusive school leadership in low-income areas of color must also take into consideration possible influential parallel forces on exclusion such as intersectionality and oppression related to racism and ableism" (DeMatthews et al., 2021, p. 20). Specifically, it is mentioned in the study that racism is a factor that may influence a school leader's decision making and may foster exclusion. Given that this current research took place in a large urban school district where approximately 70% of the student population receives free lunch, it was important to remember the different factors that influence the development of positive inclusive practices for preschoolers.

Praisner (2003) conducted a study whereby 408 elementary school principals were surveyed to research their attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities. "The findings of the study demonstrated the importance of principals' attitudes for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities (Praisner, 2003, p. 143). Furthermore, the placement of

students with disabilities was influenced by the perceptions of the elementary school principal's attitudes toward inclusion.

Results from another study asserted that despite reported benefits of inclusion for students both with and without disabilities, there are marked differences in how some members of the school community view inclusion, and the perceptions are not often seen positively (Downing et al., 1997). The findings of the study also made connections between the negative attitudes of principals and other critical members of the school, and how those perceptions proved to be the greatest and most frequent barriers to inclusion. Additional research that is a bit more current shows similar outcomes. Ball and Green (2014) claimed that school leaders play a key part when it comes to nurturing positive attitudes in the development of inclusive classrooms.

IDEA and Least Restrictive Environment

When students receive special education services, those services are guided by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) which was previously known as the Education of Handicapped Children Act (EHA or EAHCA). The law was executed in 1975 and the premise of the law was to make sure that all students with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 received a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment if it was determined that they met the criteria for special educational services (IDEA, 1975). The law was first reauthorized in 1990, which resulted in the name change to Individual Disabilities Education Act. In 1997 a second reauthorization of IDEA occurred with the focus on improving the results of students with disabilities and access to effective educational programming being in place for students with disabilities. Specifically, access to the general education curriculum and environment was part of the change and focus in the 1997 reauthorization. The premise was to ensure students with disabilities were included and integrated into general education classrooms

and schools to the greatest extent possible, which is considered to be the least restrictive environment. The reauthorization of the Individual Disabilities Education Act in 2004 concentrated on increased accountability and higher standards for teachers of special education classrooms whereby they were required to be highly qualified (IDEA, 2004).

The least restrictive environment is a key component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the special education law. It requires that to "the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (IDEA, 2004, sec 300.114). When it is appropriate, students with disabilities should be included in the general education classrooms with their peers who do not have a disability, and the extent to which students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment is a decision that is made by the IEP team. The least restrictive environment applies to all children served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and preschool children are also qualified to share in the benefits of the least restrictive environment that meets their specific needs. However, despite the specifics of the law as it relates to LRE, the statistics show that preschool children with disabilities are educated in inclusive settings less frequently than their school-aged peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Although some barriers to this inclusion have been identified, the causes for the discrepancy between preschoolers and school-aged students with disabilities continue to be unclear (Buysse et al., 1998). Despite the variation, some elements that influence the value and development of inclusive LRE programs for preschoolers include

positive attitudes as well as therapeutic and academic interventions reflective of the young

child's needs (Cross et al., 2004).

States can implement a least restrictive environment in different ways, and the results of

the legal case Oberti v. Board of Education of the borough of Clementon placed New Jersey in a

position where mainstreaming students with disabilities while being provided with

supplementary aids and services must be the premise when a student is deemed eligible for

special education (Oberti v. Board of Education, 1992). Thomas and Rapport (1998) document

what should occur if the student is not benefitting from the recommended placement.

Will the child receive some educational benefit from the selected placement? IEPs must

be designed to provide some educational benefit although there is no guarantee that

educational benefit will necessarily be incurred. However, where educational benefit is

not received, changes within the IEP may be necessary. And when necessary

amendments require that district personnel include within each IEP a statement of the

special education and related services, supplementary aids and services, and program

modifications and supports that will enable each eligible child to advance appropriately

toward attaining his or her annual goals and to be educated and participate with

nondisabled children. (p. 76)

Further research also defines the least restrictive environment as not just the location

where students with disabilities can be educated, but also a philosophy and standard that drives

the student's entire special educational program especially since all children's needs are different

(Rueda et al., 2000). Although there are no specific legal guidelines that specify when a student

can be educated in the general education setting, the least restrictive environment must meet the

educational needs of the student. New Jersey's federal law regarding special education indicates

that a multidisciplinary specialized team of educators are the decision makers as to what the eligibility category will be as well as the educational placement (NJAC 6A:14, 2016). When thinking of the least restrictive environment as the location, LRE may look different for each student depending upon the specific needs of the child and can range from the general education class, the least restrictive, and move to a more restrictive setting including a special education classroom or special education school. A special education class may be considered the least restrictive environment for a student if the educational needs of the student warrant that program (NJAC 6A:14, 2016). The least restrictive environment for most students with disabilities should be the general education classroom for most or all of the school day; for some, it should be a mixture of general and special education placement; and for a limited number, it should be a special education classroom for the majority of the school day (Taylor, 2004).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act indicates that the first consideration for placement after a student has been determined eligible for special education and related services is the general education class (IDEA, 2004). A decision to have the student remain in the general education class as a special education student should be based on several factors. As per the New Jersey Administrative Code, these factors include student's progress related to strengths and areas of need; input and reports from the parents, teachers, and related service providers which may come from speech and language specialists, physical therapists, or occupational therapists; and other pertinent applicable factors or persons (NJAC Section 6A: 14-7.5, 2016). If it is determined that the student is not making progress in the general education classroom with the supplementary aids and services as outlined in the code and the student has to be removed from general education class for any portion of the academic schedule, the IEP team must meet to review all the data, justify the need, and provide a rationale to move the student to a more

restrictive setting for the identified area (NJAC Section 6A:14-4.2, 2016). To assist students with disabilities to remain in the general education classroom and be educated with their nondisabled peers, they can be provided with supplementary aids and services as indicated below:

(a) A teacher aide may provide supplementary support to a student(s) with disabilities when the IEP team has determined that the student requires assistance in areas including, but not limited to, the following: 1. Prompting, cueing, and redirecting student participation; 2. Reinforcing personal, social, behavioral, and academic learning goals; 3. Organizing and managing materials and activities; and 4. Implementation of teacher-designed follow-up and practice activities.

(b) Supplementary services as described in (a) above shall be provided individually or in groups.

(c) The district board of education shall provide the teacher aide and the appropriate general or special education teaching staff time for consultation regularly, which shall be set forth in policies adopted by the district board of education.

(d) Consultation as a service on behalf of a student with disabilities or a group of students with disabilities may be provided by a related services provider, a teacher of students with disabilities, or a child study team member to the general education teacher and/or the teacher aide. Such consultation shall be specified in each student's IEP. The frequency and duration of the consultation (s) shall be indicated in the IEP. Consultation may include, but is not limited to, the following: 1. The development and demonstration of techniques and strategies; 2. Data collection on the effectiveness of the techniques and strategies; and 3. Development of positive behavioral supports (N.J. Administrative Code 6A:14-4.5, 2016).

As a means to remain in the general education class as the least restrictive environment, preschoolers with disabilities can also be provided with the above-mentioned supplementary aids and services, if applicable and outlined in their IEPs. Despite the assistance through supplementary aids and services, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) reports that nationally fewer than 53% of preschoolers with disabilities receive special education services in the general education setting for the majority of the time (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Consequently, understanding the contributing factors and varying influences that play a role in the development of an inclusive program for preschoolers with disabilities from a school administrator's perspective was critical to explore.

The premise of the special education law focuses on how students are entitled to receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) within the least restrictive environment, no matter what the disability (N.J.A.C. 6A: 14-4.2). Educating students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms stems from the philosophy of social justice and alleviating discrimination and any possibility of inequality (Berlach & Chambers, 2011). Although the battle for inclusive education has been centered around human rights and equality, many educators are leery about placing students with disabilities in the general education classroom for various reasons (Orr, 2009). "Parents, teachers, principals, and advocates of students with disabilities promote inclusion as a way of challenging the restrictions to access and participation" (Armstrong et al., 2011, p. 33). Research indicates that over the years, inclusion has been challenged across various educational settings and the implementation of it has been difficult (Portelli & Koneeny, 2018). Despite the apprehension and the challenges, the law mandates that the first placement consideration when students with disabilities are found eligible for special education is the general education classroom. America has had a history of not meeting the educational needs of students with

disabilities and forcing many children to be educated outside of the general education classroom and also in separate educational settings (Dudley & Burns, 2014). Inclusion rates are even lower in urban areas (Cramer, 2015).

Inclusion and Early Childhood

Although the word *inclusion* is not mentioned in IDEA, the law expects that school districts include students who have a disability and have been found eligible for special education and related services in the general education classes to the greatest extent possible, starting at the preschool level. Inclusion is defined as "providing to all students, including those with disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services with the needed supplementary aids and support services in age-appropriate classrooms in their neighborhood schools, to prepare students for productive lives as full members of society" (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996, p. 765). Similarly, Dudley and Burns (2014) described inclusion as the process of placing children with disabilities in the same classes or educational programs as their typically developing peers and providing them with the needed additional services and support. Inclusion not only expects students with disabilities to be in the general education class with typically developing peers, but also ensures the students with disabilities are actively engaged in the learning of the content, skills, and standards of the general education curriculum while being provided with the necessary instructional supports, modifications, and/or accommodations (Castillo-Rodriguez & Garro-Gil, 2015).

The New Jersey Administrative Code designates specific criteria when preschoolers with disabilities are found to be eligible for special education and related services (NJAC 6A 14, 2016). The code also indicates that the preschooler must be between the ages of 3 and 5 and must exhibit delays, as demonstrated by standardized assessments in the following developmental areas: intellectual; communication; gross motor, fine motor, and sensory; social and emotional;

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and adaptive. Specifically, the standardized assessments must show a 25% delay in one or more areas or a 33% delay in one area (NJAC 6A:14, 2016). The law refers to the preschooler as a preschool child with a disability once the preschooler has been found eligible for special education services. As with all special education students, the preschool child with a disability can also receive their special education services in the general education or a special education classroom. The inclusive opportunities for preschoolers with disabilities in New Jersey can occur in the public school, a collaborating community-based preschool provider, or some other private preschool setting; the preschooler who requires a special education class can only be educated in the public school or a separate private school. School districts are required to make sure that whatever program is needed for the preschooler to make progress is available to the student. Additionally, the New Jersey Department of Education has established outcomes for preschoolers that require districts to provide a performance report on how preschoolers with IEPs show improvement in the following areas: social and emotional skills and relationships, the attainment and development of communication and language, and the use of appropriate behaviors to meet their needs (NJDOE Indicator 7, 2023). "For many young children with disabilities in inclusive settings, engagement, social acceptance, and friendships are realistic and meaningful outcomes" (Odom et al., 2006, p. 810). Preschoolers with disabilities in inclusive classrooms are more likely to participate in peer interactions as compared to being in segregated classroom settings (Kwon et al., 2011). Though a review of the literature documented several benefits to including preschoolers with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, placing them in programs with their typically developing peers is not enough for their learning needs (Odom et al., 2011). Leaders must think and plan carefully for how to implement specialized instruction and other interventions that will help the inclusive program at the preschool level be of high

quality (Hestenes et al., 2008). Vygotsky identified the importance and benefits of educating preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom, and this research helped make connections between the school leader's perspective on inclusion and their influence on establishing positive inclusive practices for preschoolers.

In addition to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a review of the literature regarding the education of preschoolers with disabilities revealed that programs and associations connected to early childhood including Head Start and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) have suggested and supported special education services for preschoolers with disabilities be provided in the general education classroom (Barton & Smith, 2015). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education collaborated and issued a joint statement to prompt local educational agencies (LEAs) and early childhood programs to increase inclusion for preschoolers with disabilities and ensure preschoolers with disabilities have access to high-quality inclusive programs (HHS & USDOE, 2015). When attempting to assess preschool outcomes, it must be noted that inclusion can look very different for preschoolers with disabilities and can be provided in a variety of ways. The administrative code for New Jersey specifies names for the types of educational programs for which preschoolers with disabilities can receive their special education services as per their IEPs (NJAC, 2016). All of them allow for inclusive opportunities and one of them is general education with modifications and accommodations whereby the preschoolers receive the needed supplementary aids and services, modifications, accommodations, or related services but do not receive any services from a special education teacher. The code also identifies a resource program as another program, and the inclusive portion of the resource program is called an in-class support program whereby the special education teacher provides the special education

services to the preschooler with disabilities in the general education classroom and leaves after

that task is complete. One other way preschoolers with disabilities can receive inclusive services

is through a team-teaching method in which both the general and special education teachers are

in the classroom working collaboratively to educate the preschoolers with disabilities.

Barriers to Inclusion

Ensuring students with disabilities have the opportunities to be educated in classrooms

with their typically developing peers in inclusive classroom environments is a right as per the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Many factors can play a role in how preschoolers

with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive

environment. Despite the laws that protect students with disabilities and the research that shows

the benefits of inclusion, the literature proposes that barriers to inclusion may present as or be a

result of teacher and administrative discrimination against young students with disabilities

(Purdue, 2009). Purdue's research took place in New Zealand and involved three case studies of

early childhood centers. The research further revealed the underlying assumption amongst

educators that students with disabilities have such significant deficits and are "abnormal,"

therefore they require specialized instruction outside of the general education environment

(Purdue, 2009, p. 135).

The review of literature also disclosed other barriers to inclusion that were discriminatory

in nature and connected to the perception that inclusion delays and disrupts the learning of

students without disabilities as more time, money, and attention is removed from the more

deserving "normal" students (Odom, 1990). Another noteworthy barrier noted in the research

centered around school management and teachers lacking knowledge about modifying or making

accommodations to the curriculum to make sure students with disabilities are included in the

daily instruction and other classroom learning activities and opportunities (Odom et al., 2009).

While some studies revealed an increase in the academic performance of students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Kochhar et al., 2000), others questioned the effectiveness of inclusion (Sailor & Roger, 2005). The literature showed that the factors that influence students with disabilities being placed in general education classes included systemic biases, the inappropriate understanding of the least restrictive environment concept, and elements related to teachers and principals (Alghazo, 2002). The literature also revealed that school leaders play a key role in ensuring that some of the barriers do not violate the rights of students with disabilities and how inclusive practices are implemented within the school (Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013).

Summary

This chapter presented the review of the literature related to the theories that framed this research, the school leader's role in developing inclusive programs, the school leader's perception of inclusion and its influence on inclusion, inclusion and early childhood, and how barriers may influence inclusion. Additionally, Chapter II included a brief literature review about the legal concept of the least restrictive environment, which is connected to inclusion. The literature acknowledges how school leaders play a role in developing successful inclusive programs and how a negative attitude is a barrier in that development process. Inclusion has been noted to be a positive experience for early childhood students and aligns with the framework. This study explored how school leaders from public schools and community-based preschools view inclusion and their role in developing an inclusive program for preschoolers with disabilities. The next chapter addresses the methodology used for this research.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The aim and purpose of this research were to explore school leaders' perceptions of inclusion and their role in creating a successful inclusive program at the preschool level. Additionally, this research explored and compared the perceptions and roles of school leaders coming from public schools and community-based programs. The current research is laden with the examination of the perceptions and roles of teachers and how those factors may influence inclusive programs for preschoolers with IEPs, but this research examined the perspectives and roles from a school administrative perspective. This investigation was undertaken because the main concept of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasizes how students with disabilities should be educated in the least restrictive environment with their typically developing nondisabled peers. Additionally, according to the Education Law Center (2022), the state of New Jersey has typically been a state with a high percentage of students with disabilities being educated outside of the general education classroom and in separate settings.

Chapter III addresses the following areas: the methodology, the research design, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, and the researcher's positionality.

Research Questions

The following research questions steered this study:

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) about including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) on their role in creating a successful inclusive program at the preschool level in their respective school settings?

Research Question 3: Are there differences between school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) regarding their perception of inclusion and their role in creating successful inclusion programs at the preschool level in their respective schools?

Research Design

A qualitative method was the most appropriate choice for this research given that the drive behind the research was to explore the perceptions of school leaders regarding the inclusion of preschoolers. Specifically, a narrative inquiry approach was used to address the research questions. Narrative research is described as a discovery of meaning through the "telling of stories and events" that are contributed by the participants (Overcash, 2004, p. 15). Overcash (2004) also noted that the process involves methodically evaluating and analyzing the stories to determine the presence of themes. The purpose of using narrative inquiry research in education is to measure and evaluate the educator's experiences with the goal of producing pragmatic knowledge that will aid in the development of future plans and actions (Caduri, 2013).

Consequently, the benefits of using the narrative approach in this qualitative research allowed the researcher to collect data on the participant's feelings, experiences, and opinions in addition to delving into the explanations and understandings of the school leaders' actions (Rahman, 2017). "With qualitative data, one can preserve chronological flow, assess local causality, and derive fruitful explanations" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 23). The qualitative method also allowed this researcher to probe into the theories and premises as they became available and developed during the interviewing process. The stories found within the narrative

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inquiry assist with a deeper and better understanding of the phenomena that are being explored (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Using a narrative inquiry approach as part of the qualitative research helped the public school principals and community-based directors to express and share their stories/narratives as well as opportunities for their experiences to be explored and conceptualized while focusing on the research questions. "Storytelling is such an important activity because narratives help people to organize their experiences into meaningful episodes that call upon cultural modes of reasoning and representation" (Fraser, 2004, p. 185). The school administrators were studied within their natural settings, which afforded a better opportunity to understand their behavior, actions, and feelings.

Participants and Sampling

This qualitative research used a purposive sampling of school leaders from a large urban school district in New Jersey. The school district has a total student enrollment of 37, 911 from pre-k to 12th grade with a total of 6,527 special education students and 2,337 preschoolers. The website of the school district selected indicates that there are a total of 65 school administrators, 36 of whom met the criteria for this research: being a leader of a public school with at least two general education preschool classrooms that have students with disabilities with current IEPs. Preschoolers with disabilities who have IEPs can be educated in different educational settings including the district-run public pre-k classrooms, or they can attend the community-based, publicly funded but privately managed preschool sites that collaborate with the public school district. There are a total of 49 community-based preschool programs that collaborate with the public school, but only 38 of them met the criteria of having at least two general education preschool classrooms that have students with disabilities with current IEPs. As part of the collaboration, the community-based preschools are required to follow the district-run school

schedule and curriculum and the directors are required to meet with executive staff from the Office of Early Childhood every month.

All participants in this study were selected because they were part of a school district that was easily accessible to the researcher. This technique is defined as convenience sampling, which is a form of nonrandom sampling in which participants who meet specific criteria are either easily accessible, geographically close in proximity to the researcher, or available to the researcher at a particular time (Etikan et al., 2016). The researcher had the opportunity to obtain firsthand information and explore patterns regarding the research questions from participants who could possibly help with future decision making within the district that has been cited for low inclusion rates. Convenience sampling is beneficial when researchers need to collect data to expand their understanding of certain trends as well as develop theories for future research (Obilor, 2023). To avoid any sampling bias, the researcher carefully reviewed the methodology and design to ensure the process allowed for confidentiality and equal opportunities for each participant (Robinson, 2014).

Approval to start the collection of data was received from Seton Hall University Internal Review Board on November 1, 2023. Upon IRB approval from Seton Hall University (Appendix F), the researcher started the qualitative study and began by obtaining potential participants' names and email addresses from the school district's website. The public school principals and community-based directors were emailed a solicitation letter (Appendix C). The solicitation letter documented the following: purpose and nature of the research, notification that participation in the study was strictly voluntary, how participants would remain anonymous and participate in interviews with an estimated duration of 45–60 minutes; that all interviews would be audio recorded, and that all recordings would be kept in a secure location. The solicitation

letter also requested that those interested in participating in the study should contact the investigator via email. If no response was received from potential candidates 7 days after the initial email, a second email was sent. All potential candidates who agreed to be a part of the study were emailed the participant demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) for completion. The questionnaire served two purposes, to obtain demographic information and to act as a screener for participants who met the designated criteria. A criterion sample was utilized, as the principals and directors had to meet specific conditions to be a part of the research. All participants had to (1) be employed as a principal or director in the urban school district of study, (2) be in their professional role for a minimum of 2 years, and (3) have experience working with the preschool student population. Additionally, the public school principals and community-based directors were from schools with a minimum of two general education pre-k classrooms that have preschoolers with IEPs enrolled in the classroom, which allowed the school leaders to have increased opportunities to be involved with preschoolers in inclusive settings.

The school administrators (principals and directors) were able to provide the information and data needed to supply specific input and experiences regarding the research questions. The sample consisted of a total of ten administrators of preschool classes, six public school principals, and four directors of community-based preschools. The literature indicates that a minimum sample size of 12 is recommended for qualitative research (Vasileiou et al., 2018). This researcher selected ten school administrators (six public principals and four community-based preschool directors) to be interviewed as the open-ended interview questions provided the opportunity to collect rich data, and this sample size allowed for data saturation. Hennick and Kaiser (2022) indicated in their study that saturation can be reached with 9–16 interviews or 4–8 focus group discussions in qualitative studies that involve a homogeneous sample population.

Additionally, it is suggested that "saturation should be more concerned with reaching the point where further data collection becomes counterproductive, and where the "new does not necessarily add anything to the overall story or theory" (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1900).

Data Collection

As indicated in the discussion of participant selection, potential participants were emailed the letter of solicitation and once they agreed to participate in the research, they were emailed the demographic questionnaire. The completion of the questionnaire allowed the researcher to obtain demographic information (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender, highest degree level, years of experience in the district) and to ascertain specific criteria for participation in the study. The participant's demographic data is documented in Table 1 which is in Appendix A.

Before conducting the study, the researcher also went through the process of obtaining approval from the public school district's institutional review board. Participants who met the criteria and agreed to participate in the research were then emailed an informed consent (Appendix E) to be reviewed, signed, and returned via email to the primary researcher. The participants were directed to maintain a copy of the informed consent for their records. The consent form outlined the purpose and a brief summary of the research along with other specific details including the participants' right to participate or withdraw, their responsibilities, potential risks and benefits, and how confidentiality would be maintained. All signed consents were stored in the researcher's locked file cabinet. "When asked to define informed consent, researchers identified three key components: information disclosure; understanding; and a decision made voluntarily: making sure the person's aware of what we're doing, and once they're aware of it, deciding if they want to participate or not, completely voluntary, no coercion" (Xu et al., 2020, p.

4). For individuals to participate in the research, they were required to sign an informed consent and return it to the primary researcher via email.

The participants were asked a series of open-ended questions using a semistructured interview method. A semistructured interview is described as a sequence of open-ended questions initiated within specific content areas being researched that helps both the researcher and interviewee address the topic in question in detail (Muzari et al., 2022). This semistructured interviewing approach was chosen because it provided more opportunity for the participants and researcher to engage in two-way communication and also ask follow-up questions when necessary, which added to the data collection. Additionally, semistructured interviews were used as opposed to structured interviews to ensure the researcher could ask additional questions when the responses warranted supplementary information. Ruslin et al. (2022) referred to Kvale's (1996) work on semistructured interviews and how the goal of using a semistructured interview is to find out about the accounts of the interviewee's experience related to the phenomenon that is being explored. They also reported that according to Kvale, the interview process should begin with a briefing. Before the start of the interviews, this researcher ensured that each interviewee was briefed about the purpose of the research and why interviews were selected as the method, and reminded that the interview would be recorded.

Field notes were documented in a journal during the interviews. The field notes included additional information such as notes on any observed behaviors, other nonverbal communication, insights, reflective thoughts, and any other possible factors that helped to obtain insight into the responses of the participants. According to Fraser (2004), taking notes in the noted areas during the interviewing process may enhance understanding as well as influence the subsequent interpretation and assessment of the narrative. Handwritten field notes were taken in a notebook

to document additional data that included nonverbal communication, signals or cues, the researcher's impressions, time and location of the interview, and any reminders needed that correlated to specific comments made during the interview. Recording field notes is an important part of qualitative research and helps the researcher to document areas such as nonverbal behaviors taking place, the researcher's impressions and feelings, and most importantly noting the researcher's reflection of the interview and the overall process (Maharaj, 2016). Immediately after the interviews, the field notes were typed to assist with recall and any clarification that was needed.

Participants were interviewed through the use of a virtual video conference via Microsoft Teams. The invite to the scheduled meeting was only provided to the participant. All interviews were completed after school hours to minimize distractions and interruptions, and to accommodate the schedules of two participants their interviews were held on the weekend. Interviews were scheduled based on the availability of both the participant and the researcher, with the researcher being more accommodating with scheduling. When the researcher emailed one of the participants after she did not accept the invitation that participant responded in an email that she did not receive the initial invite, so the Microsoft Teams invite was sent again. As a backup to Microsoft Teams, a portable audio recorder was also used to record the interviews. Microsoft Teams was used to transcribe the recordings and participants were allowed to review copies of the transcripts to ensure reliability.

The first participant interview was conducted, recorded, and transcribed on December 6, 2023 and the last was on December 20, 2023. Before the scheduling of each interview, the researcher emailed the informed consent to each participant to sign and return and directed them to keep a copy for their records. This researcher ensured that each interviewee was briefed about

the purpose of the research, why interviews were selected as the method, and reminded that the interview was being recorded and transcribed. The participants were also reminded that they were given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. The transcription was available approximately 5 minutes after each interview was completed. They were downloaded immediately and saved on a password-protected USB flash drive kept in a locked file cabinet when not in use and in between scheduled interviews. As mandated, the flash drives will be securely maintained for the next 3 years.

Data Analysis

"Qualitative research can explore the complexity and meaning of social phenomena" (Bailey, 2008, p. 127). The research questions provided a great deal of data regarding the intricacies of the school administrator's narratives and experiences, thus several steps were taken to analyze the data. First, this researcher needed to become very familiar with the data in order to analyze it. The transcripts were read repeatedly, organized according to similarities and differences, and analyzed for specific themes and categories. This researcher used a thematic analysis method to sort through the data, and an iterative approach was also used as it was necessary to systematically read and sift through the data multiple times. Within the thematic analysis process, themes were extracted from the analysis of the data and the experiences of the participants (Sundler, 2019). The analysis involved the search for patterns of meanings that needed to be examined further to assess how the patterns could be structured into themes. Once that was complete, this researcher then created and applied brief initial codes to specific words or phrases that represented recurring themes and patterns. The transcripts and handwritten field notes also went through a coding process during this analysis process. The themes were sought out from codes after the initial codes were created. If there was a long list of codes, some were gradually brought under one set when necessary. The researcher also recorded the codes within a

book/journal to ensure accuracy and consistency. All of the data was reviewed again, which led to larger categorical themes or subcategories. Themes included Equality, Learning from Each Other, Collaboration/Communication, Teacher Experience and Ability, School Leader's Role, and Availability of Resources. This researcher utilized the In-Vivo method of coding to ensure that ideas and concepts remained as close as possible to the school administrators' and directors' own words. The use of the In-Vivo coding method ensures that the researcher uses an approach as a "means of staying true to the data" (Smith & Firth, 2011, p. 5). Additionally, during the data analysis, this researcher made decisions to include specific participant quotes as a means of enhancing the interpretation and findings. Overall, looking for the various themes and sorting the data according to themes helped to analytically address the research questions. To assist with analyzing the data more efficiently, a table with columns and rows with headings that provided a summary of the data with themes was created.

Trustworthiness/Validity and Reliability

There were several steps that the researcher took to ensure consistency and reliability. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher tested all equipment and audio prior to the start of the interviews to ensure everything was working at maximum capacity. A backup portable audio recorder was also used in addition to the interview being recorded via Microsoft Teams. The primary investigator ensured that all questions were asked at an appropriate pitch and tone to safeguard against participants not hearing or misunderstanding any questions. To ensure accuracy and validity, member checking was also practiced as the researcher consulted with the participants to clarify, restate, and summarize the participants' comments based on the transcripts. Member checking occurred after the interviews when the participants were provided with portions of their transcribed interviews to clarify comments. "Member checking is used to validate, verify, or assess the trustworthiness of qualitative results

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(Birt et al., 2016, p. 1803). The interview questions (Appendix A) were first piloted with other community-based directors, public school principals within the district of research, and two school leaders from a nearby school district who met the same criteria as the research participants, and then questions were modified slightly based on their feedback. Before the researcher initiated the research methods, the researcher worked closely with the assigned mentor and other members of the committee to review the process and forms to ensure consistency and make the necessary corrections.

Researcher's Role/Positionality Statement

In 1989, this researcher began her career as a social worker in a school-based program recruiting disengaged and at-risk teenagers from the community, schools, and detention centers for participation in a vocational and life-skills training program. Additional responsibilities included counseling, organizing and coordinating special events for youth and families, and developing transition plans for incarcerated youth who were soon to be discharged.

In 1994, this researcher continued to work as a social worker but transitioned to working in a specialized school: a state-approved special education school. The school educated and provided services to all special education students who demonstrated emotional and behavioral challenges and were determined by the IEP team to need support and services outside of their public school district. When comparing this school to the concept of the least restrictive environment within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, educating students in this type of school is considered to be the most restrictive setting due to the lack of opportunities for students to be included in the general education classroom. This researcher's responsibilities included crisis management, individual and group counseling, and leading an interdisciplinary team to determine goals and plans to successfully transition students back to their sending public school district.

This researcher became a social worker on the Child Study Team (CST) in an urban school district in 1998, which was a transition from the prior position. The position allowed this researcher to be a part of a team who helped to make decisions about special education programs for students with a variety of needs including learning and cognitive disabilities as well as health issues that impacted learning, as opposed to being on the receiving end and working with them after the special education program determination. It also allowed the researcher to observe students with IEPs being educated in inclusive classrooms. During this researcher's tenure as a CST social worker, her primary role for 3 years was working only as a preschool CST case manager and social worker and being afforded opportunities to evaluate the needs of preschoolers with disabilities for purposes of program development as well as collaborating with teachers and school leaders.

Presently, this researcher works as a special education supervisor in an urban school district. Preschoolers with disabilities make up 13% of the total special education student population within the district. Once the preschoolers are found eligible for special education services, the school district has been placing them in either inclusive or self-contained programs, but the last 2 years have shown an increase in preschoolers with disabilities being placed in self-contained special education classrooms. This study helped to explore the phenomena.

My professional roles and responsibilities as both a school social worker and a supervisor for the past 35 years have provided me with broad and in-depth experience interviewing others, taking notes on key information during the process, and ensuring confidentiality is maintained. The roles also come with some unconscious bias related to the educational placement of preschoolers with disabilities. Researcher bias and subjectivity are inevitable, but being in touch with and consciously aware of it throughout the methodological process should help to avoid

bias. The question becomes "How will I connect my different selves—individual, practitioner, and researcher?" and avoid the bias (Mehra, 2002, p. 9). The answer is to have participants review the results for accuracy and clarification as well as consulting with the assigned mentor regarding thematic coding, and maintaining a reflective communication log/journal regarding feelings.

Summary

Within Chapter III, the researcher outlined the research method used to answer the research questions. Also included in the chapter is a description of the procedure, participant selection, data collection and analysis, validity/reliability, and the researcher's role and positionality.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the purpose, research questions, participant profiles, and data collection process. Since the qualitative research model is characterized by the use of interviews to collect and analyze data, this chapter addresses the findings of the semistructured interviews conducted with school leaders from a large urban school district. This researcher interviewed a total of ten school leaders including six public school principals and four community-based preschool directors. The leaders expressed their joy and satisfaction with being able to share their opinions, overall experience with inclusion as well as experience with inclusion of preschoolers with varying disabilities, and their role in developing a successful inclusive program. The themes that surfaced and materialized from the analysis of the data included the following: Equality, Learning from Each Other, Communication and Collaboration, School Leader's Role (barriers to inclusion), Teacher Attitude and Experience, and Availability of Resources. In addition to these identified themes, one other theme that may have been worthy of exploration included parental involvement. The final chapter explores the findings further and interpreted them in connection to the research questions and theoretical framework.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the development of the interview questions included the following:

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) about including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) on their role in creating a successful inclusive program at the preschool level in their respective school settings?

Research Question 3: Are there differences between school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) regarding their perception of inclusion and their role in creating successful inclusion programs at the preschool level in their respective schools?

Participant's Profiles

This profile information is presented in Chapter III but also placed here in this chapter to serve as a quick reference for the reader when reviewing the participants' findings. The data was collected from ten school leaders who have experience as leaders totaling 131 years in an urban district and a total of 115 years of working with preschoolers in inclusive classroom settings. Six school leaders were principals of public schools and of those six, four were female and two were male. All six public school principals were former teachers before becoming school administrators. The remaining four school leaders were directors of community-based preschools and all were female. Three of the four directors worked in different capacities within the community-based preschool before becoming the director, and the other director was a speech and language specialist in another urban school district. Participants' ages ranged from 43 to 68 years old. Concerning the identification of race and ethnicity: three participants identified as White-Portuguese, three identified as African American, three identified as White-Hispanic, and one identified as just White. The highest academic degree for all of the school leaders interviewed was a master's degree. A comprehensive view of the participants' profiles can be found in Table 1 within Appendix A.

Findings/Themes

Equality

The concept of equality for all children emerged as a theme from the analysis of the data. For purposes of this study, this researcher defines equality as inclusive education that aims to build an environment that promotes equal opportunities for all students, with and without disabilities. Additionally, it is grounded in the principle that the school should be designed to endorse equal privileges for each student while simultaneously recognizing and accepting the differences that may exist and providing them with the needed support to access the curriculum or environment. Although this research produced the theme of equality, the concept of equity was not mentioned by any of the school leaders. Sometimes equality and equity are used interchangeably, but there are differences in the terms. The topic of equity in education is multifaceted and important, especially when considering students with disabilities. Educational equity is defined as the willingness and commitment to making sure that all students' needs are addressed, which may result in additional resources or the implementation of differentiated procedures and measures to address specific academic and social needs (Blankstein et al., 2016).

During the interviews, the six principals and four directors used the words "equal opportunity or same opportunity" as they discussed the definition of inclusion and their personal opinions about including preschoolers with disabilities in general education classes. One director, Gia, indicated that inclusion is the "student's rights no matter what the disability and should have the same equal rights as students without disabilities." All six principals also referred to how the preschooler's disability should not be the focus when placing them in a general education class, and they should have equal access to the curriculum and resources that are available to the general education population. Director Gabriella noted that preschoolers with

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disabilities should "be included no matter what the disability because they should have the same opportunities as the others and it is a blessing for both students." Danny the principal talked about equality from the perspective of all students having access to the same curriculum that they would need to be successful.

One principal, Serina, spoke from a personal perspective and referred to a family member who has a disability and what her role was in making sure the family member had "equal rights" in school. Serina verbalized the following: "It's about embracing students who may exhibit differences and making sure that we are bringing them into the educational world that is equal to general education students and scaffold their learning to meet their individual needs whatever they may be. It's critically important that they are included. Inclusion is wonderful. PreK students with disabilities should be incorporated into the general population as early as possible and as often as possible."

Principal Serina discussed how it was vital that her family member with a disability was in the general education class starting in preschool. Although she was not a principal and her job title in the school was different at that time, she recognized the significance of having her family member in an inclusive classroom with peers who were performing at developmentally appropriate levels. Principal Serina ended this discussion by commenting on how she knows that her strong opinions about inclusion are connected to her experience with her family member. The significance of including this principal's quote is related to the connection between the principal's personal life experience and the influence it had on her viewpoint and decisions, and this concept is reflected in a study completed by Case in 2000.

A comment from Principal Joyce expressed similar thoughts about inclusion. Principal Joyce emphasized how the equality of the provision of services in the inclusion classroom is the

responsibility of the building administrator and once that is done, all benefit. She stated, "Making sure that all students are a part of the same and equal experiences that we offer them, regardless of whether or not they've got a specified disability. We need to empower our teachers to understand why we need to keep it going and in that spirit of keeping it going, we need to refine the model and the practices that we use for inclusion. I think it's really lovely to walk into a classroom and see a classroom where you've got a whole student body of differing abilities and backgrounds, and it's enriching and it's positive."

These direct quotations from the directors and principals helped the theme of equality emerge from the data analysis. School leaders may need to ensure equity is one of the underlying goals in the successful development of the inclusive program for preschoolers with disabilities, as providing the same "equal opportunities" may still not provide the needed support and accommodations to help the student with disabilities to progress.

Learning from Each Other

Learning from each other emerged as a theme from a dual frame of reference. First, how students both with and without disabilities in the general education classroom learn from each other emerged. All of the school leaders reported how inclusion allows the general education students to learn "empathy" and the preschoolers with disabilities to learn different developmental skills. Three directors and four principals reported how they like inclusion as it "promotes language and social skills" and it is an opportunity for preschoolers with disabilities to "imitate" those skills when interacting with their "typically developing peers." The principals and directors were able to remember and enthusiastically recount specific times and events when preschoolers with disabilities learned from their peers. They also addressed how the general education students benefit and acquire knowledge as well. Specifically, one director, Denise, expressed, "Inclusion serves as a role model for children. My general education students learn

empathy, respect, and tolerance for others while my preschoolers with IEPs are learning skills that they need." Another director, Gabriella, reported, "Inclusion is a blessing for both kids because they learn from their peers. It helps with language development and learning tolerance." Two principals, Rebecca and Linda, had similar comments regarding this theme; both noted that inclusion helps preschoolers with disabilities academically, and Linda went on to report that it "definitely also improves social and emotional skills as they experience age-appropriate behaviors and language." Linda also verbalized, "All learn that everyone is different and has different needs." One other comment regarding the theme of learning from each other came from principal Serina: "They thrive and learn from each other. Kids learn how they are similar and how they may be different and how we can be accepting of that and supportive, which is important. And it helps the general education population be more accepting."

The second frame of reference about this theme that emerged is connected to how general and special education teachers learn from each other. Three principals and two directors noted how both groups of teachers have opportunities to improve teaching skills that address a variety of students' diverse needs. Principal Steven articulated how "inclusion helps to create well-rounded types of teachers that implement practices that aren't just great for special needs learners, but implement the type of practices that are great for all learners." Principal Joyce expressed the following: "There are more results with having them in an inclusion classroom with increased opportunities for peer modeling, peer socialization, and peer acceptance. Students are afforded more opportunities to witness a normalization of differences. From the teaching side, it helps teachers build their arsenal of teaching skills and strategies and their ability to differentiate instruction."

The participants' quotations in this section are representative of the identified theme, learn from each other, and they also address one of the research questions related to the directors' and principals' perspectives on the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities.

Communication/Collaboration

During the data analysis, the themes of communication and collaboration surfaced with regard to how school leaders can model their philosophy about inclusion. The participants in this research expressed the different ways that they communicate their philosophy about inclusion to special and general education teachers, support staff, and parents. The four directors also shared the importance of "collaborating with parents" when probed further and asked whether there is a difference between communication and collaboration. The questions and subquestions allowed the participants to share how their experiences fostered the themes of collaboration and communication within the process of building an inclusive environment for preschoolers with disabilities. All four directors used terms such as "parent input, parent involvement, and parent opinions" in describing collaboration with parents. Gia expressed how "communication is about the importance of supporting the preschoolers with IEPs" and how "it must be stated regularly to the teachers, teacher assistants, and the aides. As the director, it is also important to collaborate with the parents so they feel included and know that their input and opinions matter." One other director, Heidi, started to reference the differences between public schools and community-based preschools as it relates to parent involvement and visits. Heidi verbalized, "Parents have more access to visiting our preschools, which helps when we need to communicate ideas and plan and collaborate with them so they are involved in the process and training about their children with special needs." Gabriella mentioned different ways that she as the director communicates with staff and demonstrates her philosophy about inclusion including the following comments: "Make sure all staff are aware of students' needs and thoroughly read the IEPs, work as a team to

support the student. I make sure that staff are always communicating with parents to ensure skills are being taught at home."

Communication and collaboration also emerged as themes from the principal's responses, but in contrast to the directors, principals only mentioned collaboration between the general and special education teachers and other staff. The public school administrators felt strongly about communicating their beliefs about inclusion through a variety of methods to ensure school staff understood the importance of inclusion. Linda expressed that as a principal she must "make sure that all teachers are participating in inclusive activities; that they are collaborating and planning together, and providing opportunities for their students to interact while holding all to the same standards." Joyce, a principal, verbalized that there is work that needs to be done with increased communication and said, "What I see happening at this school is that we have classrooms and so we're obviously providing seats for children who are preschool disabled, but I do see that there's a lot of work that needs to be done in terms of me communicating to all of the preschool teachers and helping them to understand and know that every single one of those general education classrooms is a class that's for preschoolers that have some sort of disability or IEP."

Principal Joyce added to the theme of communication and went on to say that in addition to communication, teaching and training need to take place as there are teachers who feel like they are being punished when a preschooler with a disability is placed in their classroom. The principal also expressed how she has to be intentional in how she schedules time for certain general education teachers to collaborate with specific special education teachers, which may help with opinions about inclusion.

Principal Steven also discussed how the current collaborative practices within his school can be connected to a "legacy" that has been created, as the practices are longstanding and occur

in his absence, which is relevant to his role as a school leader and Research Question 2. He mentioned the significance of how collaboration needs to occur at all levels and with all staff members, which will help the students with disabilities to progress since all will be aware of what the students' needs are. Principal Steven reported the following:

> Collaboration starts with scheduling and making sure students are participating in activities with gen ed students; ensuring teachers are working together, especially those who have more experience with the special education population. It's awesome when it works and just to see a staff member learn from each other and grow, which sometimes results in my specialty teachers like art, music, and physical education learning from my highly trained special needs teachers. The collaboration has to occur with the support staff too. When all of this happens and there is sharing of best practices and support, it results in building a kind of leadership density and sharing of knowledge that propels everyone forward, which is powerful.

Although both principals and directors in this research spoke from the perspective that collaboration and communication are central for inclusion to be successful, the principals only addressed collaboration and communication among staff, while the directors included parents in the process as well.

School Leader's Role (Barriers to Inclusion)

The role of the school leader surfaced as a theme related to the development of a productive inclusive program for preschoolers with disabilities. Connected to the theme of the school leader's role was the theme of barriers to inclusion, as all the leaders made reference to how they could address some of the barriers. The directors and principals reported a variety of barriers that included a teacher's or school leader's negative attitude and mindset about

inclusion, a teacher's fear of the unknown, parents' fear of inclusion, biases about and fear of students with special needs, insensitive teachers, teachers without a special education background, and the lack of support from the executive department. All ten school leaders indicated that a negative attitude or mindset about inclusion is a barrier to developing and implementing a successful inclusive program for preschoolers as well as all other grade levels. Three directors and all six principals also made connections between how the school leader is responsible for addressing the barriers that exist, whether they are on a personal, school, or systemic level.

The directors expressed thoughts about the barriers to inclusion. Gabriella noted that "sometimes the negative attitudes and emotions that teachers and sometimes administration have about working with students with disabilities is a huge challenge, especially when they are not even aware of their attitudes." Denise expressed that the "biggest barrier is a negative attitude that teachers and others might show or express about children with disabilities, and trying to change them to positive attitudes. As a director, I must create activities and events for adults, parents, and staff to attend and provide the training and professional development to help eliminate the barriers." According to Heidi, "Lack of support from our organization's disabilities department and instructional coaches are two of the biggest barriers to inclusion, and I find myself advocating for increased opportunities for PD as the number of preschoolers with IEPs is increasing." Gia noted how a negative opinion about inclusion impacts the classroom and instruction of the students, and also reported that a "lack of district support, specifically a lack of training for paraprofessionals and teachers are barriers to a successful inclusive classroom and the preschool collaborative sites do not have the expertise to provide that level of support."

All school leaders indicated that the school leader plays a crucial role in the development of a successful inclusive program for preschoolers with disabilities. The public school principals and directors made comments regarding barriers and the role the school leader plays in addressing those roadblocks. The school leaders also made connections between how the school leader is responsible for addressing the barriers that exist whether they are on a personal, school, or systemic level. Joyce, a principal with 5 years of experience as a school leader, verbalized the important role the principal plays in developing a successful inclusive program at least three times during her response to the question. She offered varied strategies as to how it can be done when faced with barriers to inclusion, expressing, "Changing the mindset and negative thinking about inclusion is key, as some teachers think they have been punished when a special education student is placed in their general education classroom. Must ensure teachers understand we are here to educate all of our students, especially those who say I don't have a special education certification. It is important that leaders meet teachers where they are at, which may mean coaching and listening, scheduling PLCs, and book studies throughout the year."

Gia, a director with 25 years of experience as a director, stated, "School leaders must set an example, especially since staff will imitate behaviors and it will trickle down into the classroom and how students are taught." Director Heidi noted that "leaders play a pivotal role in the development of positive inclusive classrooms and the leader must bridge any gaps that exist." According to Principal Serina, "When a leader is communicating with teachers they should be listening carefully to make sure that there are no biases or fears that the teacher may have, as it impacts their relationships with children and their instruction. For instance, we have children in our school who are physically disabled, so I have one child who is missing an arm and the teacher struggled with how to support the child and his physical differences, especially when

helping with the toileting skills. I had to have several meetings with the teacher to support and acknowledge her fears."

Principal Steven reported, "School leaders play a huge role because number one, a major part of inclusion is about the right scheduling and principals are the keepers of that; second, school leaders promote inclusion through scheduling, advertising, and promoting successful practices. They have to talk about the successes people have so others can be inspired by the successes and benefit from that hope and inspiration."

Principal Danny verbalized, "Everything starts at the top, but you need to also have a sense of collective efficacy where everybody understands the value and importance of everything that you do. Must communicate through modeling, through the morning announcements, faculty meetings, PLC meetings, and classroom visits." The premise of Principal Danny's verbalizations focused on the role he plays as principal in leading his staff, which is associated with Research Question 2. He initially discussed how his staff has to take some responsibility for their actions by making sure they are doing all that needs to be done for the preschoolers in general education classes. But he came full circle and affirmed that he plays a major role as principal in the process of helping to create a productive preschool-inclusive program. The principal ended the discussion by addressing his slight insecurities about working with the early childhood population, as he has more experience with middle school grades and inclusion.

Principal Denise stated, "As the leader, we must help to shift mindsets when necessary and the school leader must help it to become a shared leadership, as one person cannot do it all." In contrast to all other school leaders, Principal Rebecca articulated, "though the school leader plays a role in the process of developing a successful inclusive classroom for preschoolers, the teacher's role is also important, as they are in the classroom with the students." However, she did

state that "planning and scheduling events for special education students in inclusion shows staff the importance and principals must be deliberate in their approach and make sure teachers have what they need."

These aforementioned commentaries from both directors and principals reflect the important role that the school leader plays in developing a successful inclusive program and the various ways in which school leaders can address barriers to inclusion. Some of the comments indicate that leaders can coordinate resources, provide training, build capacity, and ensure continuous improvement to help shift the mindset of the negative thinking that influences inclusion.

Teacher Attitude and Experience

During the research data analysis, the attitudes and experiences of the teachers also surfaced as a theme in the consideration of factors involved in placing preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom. All of the participants in this research expressed that the teacher's attitude toward the student with the disability affects their decision making, specifically when it comes to classroom assignments. Additionally, the school leaders described what the teacher's profiles should look like for the preschooler with a disability to be successful in the inclusive classroom. Three of the four directors acknowledged that the experience as well as the overall demeanor of the general education teacher are factors that must be taken into consideration when looking to develop a positive inclusive program for preschoolers. One director stated, "The leader must consider the teacher who is the best fit to teach preschoolers with disabilities." Heidi referred to the "teacher's capabilities and if they are a good match for children with disabilities who may experience some behavior challenges. Those factors must be considered and maybe observations should be done before placing the child in the classroom." Gabriella, who has 18 years of experience as a director, reported that "the director must find the

best-fitting/best person for the child with significant needs for the inclusion experience to be a successful one for the preschoolers with disabilities." The researcher probed more about this comment and asked the director to reveal more about the meaning of "best-fitting/best person." The director indicated that a "teacher who is a better fit for the inclusion classroom is one who is more patient, accommodating, empathic, and flexible in her interactions with students."

Teacher attitudes and experiences were also found to be themes that emerged from the responses of the public school principals. Three of the principals noted this theme. Linda stated, "Teacher experience is important and we need to look for those that are more understanding, caring, and nurturing. Sometimes their pedagogical skills may not be up to par, but sometimes the other skills are more important when working with this population and as the building leader, I can make sure that I am providing the support to improve that skill area." Principal Serina expressed, "Understanding a teacher's abilities will ensure students will get the right support. The principal must assess how the special education resource teacher and the general education teacher are marrying so that they are providing double support for the children in the inclusion classroom." Steven discussed how the academic rigor still needs to be maintained in the class even though the students may have special needs and may not be demonstrating age-appropriate skills. This principal also said that "the teacher's willingness to work with special education students is a mandatory criterion for the teacher." In summary, both the principals and directors believe that the teacher's attitude plays a significant part in the success of the placement of a preschooler with a disability in the inclusion classroom.

Resources

The theme of resources emerged from the analysis of the data. While addressing the second half of Research Question 3, the directors spoke expressively about the differences between preschools in the community-based sites and those in public schools. Three of the

directors addressed how the deficiencies in their schools in comparison to the public schools have influenced their leadership when it comes to the needs of the preschoolers with disabilities.

For example, Director Gabriella indicated that "the community-based schools are at a deficit when it comes to receiving resources and teacher training, which makes it harder for the directors to follow through with what is needed in the inclusion classroom." Director Gia verbalized, "Sometimes the student's disability is beyond what the community-based preschool can provide, as we don't always have the resources that the students with disabilities need." Heidi, a director, expressed, "My school can serve some, but not all students with disabilities because sometimes the school itself/the actual building is not best for the students and it's sometimes harder to get the resources that they need, especially after the pandemic." Director Heidi noted that "trying to obtain and retain the resources can sometimes become a goal that interferes with the main goal of instructing my preschoolers within the general education classroom." When probed further she made additional comments, indicating, "I know some of my decisions would be different if I did not have to focus on the lack of resources." Denise, another director, indicated that "as a director, the lack of resources and support is a problem with helping to develop a successful inclusion program."

Only two of the six principals commented about resources, but from a different perspective. In contrast to the director's comments, Principal Rebecca acknowledged, "Our school is very equipped and has the resources to provide for the students with disabilities and IEPs." Principal Steven discussed how his school has had the needed services and resources and has been serving the preschool population for years in the inclusive setting. Despite the differences between the directors' and principals' responses and how they viewed resources within their respective schools, it still emerged as a theme from the data analysis.

Summary

This chapter included data obtained from the completion of qualitative research. Semistructured interviews were conducted to gather the data from a total of ten school leaders (four community-based directors and six public school principals). During the data analysis, the researcher was able to obtain noteworthy themes that were linked to the school leaders' perceptions about the inclusion of preschoolers in the general education classroom and their role in developing a successful inclusive program. The participant's responses to the interview questions showed that all the school leaders had positive opinions about preschool inclusion, and a few of them noted how preschool is the best age for inclusion to begin. Their answers also revealed several benefits of inclusion for both the special education students and general education students, but also the special and general education teachers. Benefits included increased language, social skills, empathy, and acceptance for students and improved instructional strategies and specialized skills for teachers. The participants' responses also addressed the barriers to inclusion and the impact on their role as school leaders. One of the last findings from the research included the lack of resources identified as a challenge in the community-based preschools.

The next chapter addresses the interpretation of the findings as they relate to the research questions, the relationship to the theoretical frameworks, implications for future practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter includes the data analysis, which resulted in the identification of themes that contributed to the conclusions and implications of the research noted in this chapter. This last chapter documents the answers to the research questions based on the findings which were determined using the methodology outlined in Chapter III. Specifically, the findings were a result of the completion of semistructured interviews. Finally, the relationship to the theoretical frameworks, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future practice and research are also addressed within this chapter.

Summary of Study

Given the poor status of the state of New Jersey when it comes to including students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Education Law Center, 2022), this qualitative research intended to explore and delve into the perceptions of school leaders from public schools and community-based preschools about the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom, and their role as leaders in creating a successful inclusive program at the preschool level. Additionally, the purpose of this research was to investigate if there were any differences between the two types of school leaders regarding their perception of inclusion and their role in creating successful inclusion programs at the preschool level in their specific schools. This research also added to the gap noted in the literature, specifically as it relates to a review of perceptions on inclusion from an administrative perspective rather than a teacher's view.

Discussion of Findings/Relationship to Theoretical Framework and Related Research

This section addresses the interpretation of the findings and includes the answers to the three research questions that guided this study while addressing the themes that were identified

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in the analysis of the data. As indicated in Chapter IV, the data analysis resulted in the identification of the following themes: Equality, Learning from Each Other, Communication and Collaboration, School Leader's Role (barriers to inclusion), Teacher Experience and Ability, and Availability of Resources.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked what are the perceptions of school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) about including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom? One finding related to this research question suggests that the opinions and thoughts of school leaders from public schools (principals) and community-based preschools (directors) are centered around equality of education for special education students, as compared to the education that the general education students receive. All ten school leaders of different races and ages spoke passionately about inclusion and how preschoolers with disabilities, no matter what the disability, should have the same equal opportunities as their counterparts. Three school leaders reported that preschool is the optimum age for inclusion. The leaders addressed equality as it relates to having access to the same curriculum and school activities. One principal spoke from the perspective that inclusion is the right of a student with a disability. The school leaders' perceptions of inclusion are in alignment with current research. The results of a study completed in 2016 showed that a large majority of school principals held positive opinions about inclusion (Bailey & du Plessis, 2016). Additionally, that study confirmed that school leaders' demographics (e.g., age, gender) did not play a part in their perceptions of inclusion, which was also evident in this study. Inclusive education is reflective of school districts promoting educational advantages as well as access to the same school and educational resources that all children should have access to (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007).

As documented in the literature review, one of the premises of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) indicates that the first classroom placement that should be considered for students with disabilities is the general education classroom, which the law considers to be the least restrictive environment. Although none of the leaders used the actual term *least restrictive environment*, all of their opinions about where preschoolers with disabilities should be educated are reflective of what is noted in IDEA, which is in the general education class to the maximum extent possible.

The results of the research also highlighted another response to Research Question 1 which centered around the positive perceptions of school leaders—both public school principals and community-based directors—about inclusion as it relates to how special and general education students learn from each other. School leaders identified empathy and acceptance as skills that preschoolers without disabilities learn from being in the same general education classroom as preschoolers with disabilities. Inclusion can benefit all children and can help to minimize the stigma while students are learning how to interact with each other. One principal reported that the inclusive classroom helps with the "normalization of differences." The findings are supported by a study that documented the fact that since young children have yet to develop prejudices about others (which lessens the possibility of rejection), there are increased opportunities for children with disabilities to be accepted when interacting with their peers (Sucuoglu et al., 2019).

These initial findings can be linked to the review of the research identified in Chapter II as well as the theoretical framework. Directors and principals addressed how inclusion can have a positive influence on the language/communication and social and emotional development of preschoolers with disabilities. The study suggested that the inclusion of preschoolers helps them

to imitate the language and social skills of typically developing peers. The findings are in alignment with Odom's research noted in the literature review and how early childhood learning for children with disabilities occurs through cooperative interaction and observing the typically developing peer.

Additionally, the literature review identified how agencies that work closely with early childhood, specifically Head Start and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), have issued statements that support the benefits of children with disabilities being educated in the general education classroom. The school leaders' responses regarding their perception of inclusion support the statements made by the two different agencies. One of the studies completed by Downing et al. (1997) noted that although there are benefits to inclusion for students both with and without disabilities, the study also concluded that there are some stakeholders that do not view it positively. The results of my research were in contrast to Downing et al.'s (1997), as none of the participants reported any negative opinions about inclusion and its effects on any students.

One framework that guided this research was Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which focused on "children's learning and cognitive development being an apprenticeship where it occurs through guided participation in social activity with the support and stretching from interaction with other children who may guide and support understanding and skill" (Scott & Palincsar, 2013, p. 3). The other framework was Bandura's theory, which hypothesizes that people learn from interacting with others in the social arena through imitation (Bandura, 1971). Both theories served as the underlying assumption while investigating the research problem. The frameworks are relevant, as they make connections to the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities in general education classrooms. Specifically, the use of the frameworks described

how inclusion provides opportunities for children with disabilities in general education classrooms to learn from others through observation, imitation, and modeling. The findings of this study make quite a strong correlation to both frameworks, specifically how children learn from their peers while interacting with one another through observing and imitating those peers who demonstrate higher developmental skills. The participants emphasized how inclusion enables preschoolers with disabilities to imitate language and behavior from their typically developing peers.

Research Question 2

The second research question that guided this study asked what are the perceptions of school leaders (public school principals and community-based preschool directors) on their role in creating a successful inclusive program at the preschool level in their respective school settings? Overall, the findings of the study articulated that all school leaders except one principal believe that they play a significant role as school leaders in developing a successful inclusive program for preschoolers. The themes that surfaced in connection with this research question included collaboration, communication, barriers to inclusion, and teacher experience and ability. The findings line up with the related research noted in the review of literature on school leaders' role in the development of positive inclusive classrooms, as the leaders indicated that it is their responsibility to promote positive attitudes about inclusion through communication and collaboration with all (e.g., all teachers, support staff, special educators, parents) to develop a shared vision and mission of inclusion. The findings are also connected to current research which reveals that "implementing inclusive education is a major school reform and requires changes to school cultures where educational leaders are vital to building and promoting a positive school inclusive environment" (Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013, p. 1524). While principals encourage inclusive program delivery, they also facilitate staff collaboration that enriches school-wide

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inclusion and establishes an inclusive atmosphere in the school community. The comments made by school leaders (five principals and all directors) about the importance of communicating the vision of inclusion either verbally or through actions (student scheduling, professional development, book studies) along with Barnett and Monda-Amaya's (1998) research are in alignment. Their research noted that a condition for the effective inclusion of students with disabilities must include school administrators helping to change not only attitudes but also instructional approaches. The study also documented that the lead person in the change process is the principal (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998).

Although the majority of the principals and directors expressed that they play a significant role in the development of a successful inclusive classroom for preschoolers, one principal acknowledged that the teacher is the main agent considering the amount of time students with disabilities spend in the classroom. However, this idea was refuted in the literature review. Much of the current research documents how the general education teacher plays a role in the success of inclusion, but does not support the one principal's verbalization that the teacher is the main player. One study by Rouse (2008) did identify the teacher as being the core educator in the process.

This study highlighted how the school leaders connect their role of creating successful inclusive classrooms to the existence of barriers to inclusion: negative attitudes, biases, and fears about inclusion. They expressed the importance of the school leader addressing these barriers in the hopes of decreasing and eliminating the barriers to make the inclusive classroom more productive for the students. These findings are supported by current research indicating that the first step principals must tackle is negative attitudes toward inclusion to help develop a rich learning environment for all children, especially those with disabilities (Downing et al., 1997).

The other subject area that came out of this study in response to Research Question 2 and the school leader's role in creating successful inclusive classrooms for preschoolers was the concept of teacher quality and experience. The findings suggest that teachers' quality and experience influence how the school leaders go about student scheduling and assigning preschoolers with disabilities to classrooms with teachers who have certain qualities. The participants addressed how as leaders they must ensure preschoolers with disabilities are placed in classrooms with teachers who are caring, empathetic, nurturing, and not afraid to work with students with varying disabilities (including physical disabilities), which helps make the inclusive environment productive for the students. The participants also indicated that these personality traits are sometimes more important in teachers than excellent instructional skills. These findings are supported by current research indicating that attitudes are a chief factor in whether inclusion is useful and positive for students with disabilities and that it is up to the teacher to make decisions to connect and develop positive relationships with the students (Beghin, 2021).

Research Question 3

The third and final research question that guided this research was about assessing if there were any differences between the school leaders from two different types of educational school settings—public schools and community-based preschools—regarding their perceptions of inclusion and their role in creating successful inclusion programs at the preschool level in their respective schools. Responses from participants from both school settings revealed no differences in their thoughts about the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities. The differences between the leaders from community-based schools and public schools were revealed when they discussed the availability of resources.

Although equality surfaced as a response from the school leaders, surprisingly the term *equity* was not addressed in the discussion of available resources. The terms have very different meanings: *equality* means all are treated the same regardless of the differences and *equity* is defined as everyone being given what they need to succeed. The fact that no school administrator mentioned equity as a possible reason for the lack of resources correlates to a study that indicates that "practitioners of urban education do not often consider the interlocking systems of racism and classism when inquired about the implementation of classroom practices traditionally geared towards students with disabilities, such as inclusion and differentiation" (Ainscow, 2020, p. 126).

Three of the four directors expressed how the lack of resources within their schools impacts their role as school leaders in trying to develop a successful inclusive program for preschoolers with disabilities, and also affects their thoughts about how some preschoolers with disabilities are not able to receive the support they need in the community-based school. Although the community-based preschools work in partnership and collaboration with the public school district, one director made specific reference to how the public schools receive more of the district's resources than the private community-based preschools, which influences the required training and professional development. These findings could neither be supported nor refuted, as the researcher was unable to find any prior or current research comparing school leaders' experiences working with preschool inclusion in two different types of school settings.

According to the contingency leadership theory, another context used to frame this study, the school leader's actions are determined and driven by the context of their environment which may influence the leaders' thoughts, actions, and decision making. The findings of this study are somewhat supported by this framework. The lack of resources within the community-based preschool noted by one director acknowledged how it affected her thoughts about preschoolers

with disabilities being placed in community-based schools, which was different from any of the

public school principal's opinions. The findings are also aligned with the framework as they

relate to the thoughts of two other directors who noted that because of their school environment,

preschoolers with disabilities cannot fully be supported. The final alignment to the contingency

leadership theory framework is connected to how the leader's decision making may be

influenced by such areas as the setting of their workplace and the focus on goals that compete

with the organization's main goal. One director acknowledged how a competing goal of trying to

attain resources sometimes became the focus instead of evaluating how the preschoolers were

doing in the general education classroom.

Study's Limitations

Although this research contributes to the existing literature about administrators

(especially those in private community preschool settings) and viewpoints about preschool

inclusion in a variety of ways, it is not without limitations. First, the study was conducted in one

large urban school district, which limits the ability to generalize the results geographically to

cities that may be suburban or rural, or in a small urban setting. Second, given the small number

of participants, the qualitative results cannot be generalized. A third limitation may involve

possible bias within the participants' responses. Despite the limitations of the study, the findings

offer a valuable addition to the current literature on school leaders and their perceptions about

the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities, especially because school leaders from

community-based preschools were included.

Recommendations for Future Practice

The results of this research can serve as an opportunity for the actual school district to

examine the different schools where preschoolers with disabilities can be educated in the general

education classroom. The district can also review the practices that can be implemented to improve the inclusive classroom setting for preschoolers with disabilities.

First, to eliminate the directors' complaints about the lack of resources, the district-mandated collaboration between the community-based preschools and the public school district needs to be reexamined. The public school district must revisit what supports and resources should be afforded to the community-based preschools and make sure that they are similar to and on par with what the public schools receive. Resources and support can come in many forms, and a recommendation for future practice may include providing collaborative types of training and professional development for both teachers and support staff from community-based schools and public schools. These professional learning opportunities can take place on staff development days, and considering the large number of teacher participants who would be involved, it is recommended that the community-based preschools identify one or two lead teachers who would be able to attend the professional development and then turn-key it for remaining teachers and staff at their respective community-based preschools. Typically, since there are only five staff development days per school year, the collaboration between community-based preschools and public schools can occur at other times during the school year. It is recommended that each public school with preschool inclusion classrooms adopt three or four community-based preschools as their "sister schools" where additional training and collaboration can occur between the teachers and support staff from both of the schools. A study by Hernandez et al. in 2016 revealed that if a school district is flexible, fluid, and innovative when providing training and support, all teachers' needs are more likely to be met, especially those who service special needs students.

Communication and collaboration were identified as themes in this study and represent an area that needs to be improved, especially when it involves parents. "Barriers in collaboration and consequently negative outcomes for families and students can be avoided when professionals create opportunities for authentic communication with families and caregivers" (Mereoiu et al., 2016, p. 3). In addition to the two parent-teacher conferences during the school year, the school district must be very deliberate in planning alternate opportunities for parents and school staff to communicate and collaborate about needs and what can be done to improve the experience of the preschoolers with disabilities in the general education class. It is also recommended that this plan include training for all teachers in terms of how to communicate with parents in ways that are culturally sensitive and cooperative, using a strengths-based approach. Given the identification of how negative attitudes and opinions about inclusion are barriers for school leaders in the development of successful inclusive programs for preschool, the focus of communication and collaboration must include that topic. Since school leaders can bring about change in school culture, they must consistently implement inclusive strategies to eradicate negative thoughts. On a policy level, all college and university professional teacher preparation programs should make it mandatory for all students to take some special education classes or require that students receive dual certification in general and special education. Negative attitudes about inclusion of special education students in general education classrooms may be lessened and it may help with how teachers view students with disabilities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Additional research can be conducted to add to the current research about the perceptions of inclusion and how to successfully develop it. This study focused only on preschoolers with disabilities. Although this study added to the existing literature by including directors of community-based preschools, additional research can be conducted including other grade levels

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while making a comparison with other schools across the district. Future research could maintain the purpose of the study related to inclusion but make a comparison between this large urban school district and another nearby large urban district or a small urban district. Since parent involvement came up as one of the director's responses, forthcoming research could also address the attitudes and perceptions of parents of preschoolers in inclusive classrooms and their role in supporting the successful development of the program. Based on the results of this study regarding teacher's attitudes and possible influences on the inclusion of students with disabilities, a study exploring the best methods or models to provide professional development and training affecting attitudes and views about inclusive programs might be beneficial research. One other study recommended in light of these findings is a study on collaboration and communication and how they could be used to support inclusive practices and implementation.

Conclusion

The emergent findings of this research reveal that school leaders from both public schools and community-based preschools have positive attitudes overall about the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities in general education classrooms. Both leaders believe that inclusion is beneficial for preschoolers both with and without disabilities. Some of those benefits include the development of improved communication and behavioral skills for those with disabilities and knowledge about empathy and acceptance for those without disabilities. The results of the research also showed that the majority of the school leaders acknowledged that they play a vital role in the development of a successful inclusive program for preschoolers, but that barriers to inclusion influence their execution of successful practices. The main barriers were identified as negative attitudes and mindsets, fears, and biases about inclusion. The research findings disclosed how school leaders implement strategies to address the barriers to inclusion. The study's findings are in alignment with current relevant research. The study also adds to

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current literature by comparing leaders from two different educational environments where preschoolers with disabilities are educated. The final result of that comparison revealed that leaders from the two different educational settings were more alike in their thinking regarding inclusion. Both spoke favorably about the inclusion of preschoolers with disabilities. However, one major difference that surfaced when comparing their roles in developing a successful inclusion program at the preschool level in their respective schools was related to the lack of resources. The final thought was linked to how directors of community-based preschools felt that the lack of resources created a problem with forming a successful inclusive program for preschoolers with disabilities. One basic argument of this research revealed that inclusive education is meaningful for preschoolers with special needs. Therefore, school districts and executive staff of community-based preschools must reexamine the collaboration that currently exists and expand it to address the needs of all.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Role	Years as Principal or Director	Years as School Leader at a School with Preschool Inclusion	Number of Preschool Inclusion Classes	Highest Degree
Danny	44	White /Portuguese	Male	Principal	11	3	3	Masters
Steven	50	African American	Male	Principal	11	11	3	Masters
Joyce	46	White/Hispanic	Female	Principal	5	4	6	Masters
Rebecca	50	White/Portuguese	Female	Principal	7	7	3	Masters
Serina	57	Puerto Rican	Female	Principal	22	15	2	Ed.S
Linda	44	White/Portuguese	Female	Principal	2	2	6	Masters
Gia	60	African American	Female	Director	25	25	10	Masters
Heidi	57	African American	Female	Director	22	22	3	Masters
Gabriella	60	Hispanic	Female	Director	18	18	6	Masters
Denise	68	White	Female	Director	8	8	8	Masters

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What is your understanding of the term inclusion and what is your personal opinion about including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom?

2. Can you describe how you as a public school principal or community-based preschool director model your philosophy about working with and teaching preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom?

3. To what extent do you think your school (community-based preschool or public school) is able to serve preschoolers with diverse special needs in general education classrooms?

4. Does the school leader play a role in making preschoolers with disabilities included in general education programs successful and why?

5. In your specific school setting, what is your role as the school leader in the implementation of special education inclusive services for preschoolers with disabilities?

6. What do you think some of the factors are and should be when considering placing preschoolers with disabilities in the general education class?

7. What do you think are the benefits of including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education class?

8. What do you think are the biggest obstacles to including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education class and how do you as the leader of your school help to minimize and address those barriers?

9. What would be your ideal vision of how to instruct preschoolers with disabilities?

10. Are there any other comments that you would like to share or add that I may not have addressed?

Solicitation Letter

Dear Principal or Director,

My name is Cheryl Myrie and I am currently a doctoral candidate looking to obtain a doctorate in Education Leadership at Seton Hall University in South Orange, NJ within the Department of Educational Leadership Management and Policy. The research is being completed under the supervision and mentoring of Dr. Eloise Stewart from Seton Hall University. You are being sent this letter as I am looking for participants to take part in my study.

The purpose of my qualitative research is to explore the perceptions of public school principals and directors of community-based preschools on inclusion and their role in developing a successful inclusive classroom at the preschool level. These viewpoints will facilitate further exploration into barriers to inclusion, supports for inclusion, the school leader's role as the agent for change when developing and implementing inclusive practices, and best practices for inclusion in preschool settings. Additionally, the research will compare the perceptions and roles of school leaders coming from two different educational settings: public schools and community-based programs.

Public school principals and community-based preschool directors employed within the district of study will participate in interviews that should take 45-60 minutes.

Prior to the interviews, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire will serve two purposes: (1) to obtain demographic information and (2) to determine who meets the criteria for participation within the study. Once participants are decided upon, you will be asked to sign an informed consent and maintain a signed copy. The interviews will be conducted via video conference call and will occur at a date and time that are convenient for you. The interview questions will focus on the following: participants' understanding of inclusion, least restrictive environment; what is your perceived role in the implementation of special education inclusive practices for preschoolers; and benefits and obstacles to including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom.

Please be advised that your participation in this research is totally voluntary.

If you do voluntarily agree to participate in this research; your identity will be anonymous, you will be assigned a pseudonym, and the written published research will not include any participant's identifying information.

All interviews will need to be recorded with the use of a digital voice recorder. Specifically, all recordings of the interviews will be completed using a digital voice recorder. All recordings/audio files will be maintained on a password-protected USB which will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office and kept for three years as required. All research records will be securely stored and only the primary investigator and the investigator's mentor and committee members will have the right to access the data. Participants in the audio will be referred to by their assigned aliases.

Thank you very much for your consideration for participating in this research. Should you have any questions and agree to participate, please contact me as soon as possible at cheryl.myrie@student.shu.edu

Sincerely yours,

Cheryl Myrie

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D

Participant's Demographic Questionnaire

The answers to this questionnaire are needed to complete the research and thank you for participating. Please be advised that any and all identifying information will remain confidential.

1. Name: _____

    (NOTE): A pseudonym will be determined and assigned.

2. Age: _____

3. Race and ethnicity: _____

4. Gender: _____

5. Position within the school:

    Public School Principal: _____

    Community-Based Preschool Director: _____

6. How many years in total have you been in your current role

    Public School Principal: _____

    Community-Based Preschool Director: _____

7. How many years in total have you been a school principal or preschool director in a

    school with preschoolers who are included in the general education classrooms?

    _____

8. What is the total number of general education classrooms in your school that have

    preschoolers with IEPs enrolled in the classroom(s)? _____

9. What is your highest degree you have completed?

    Bachelors _____

    Masters _____

    Doctorate _____

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Title of Research Study

Perceptions of School Leaders on Inclusion and the Successful Development of an Inclusion Program for Preschool Students with Disabilities

Researcher's Affiliation

Cheryl Myrie is a Doctoral Student in the Department of Education, Leadership, Management, and Policy at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey**.**

Purpose of the Research Study:

The purpose of this research study is to explore perceptions that public school principals and community-based preschool directors have about inclusion and their role in the development of a successful inclusive program for preschool students with disabilities. This study will also compare the perspectives of school leaders coming from two different types of educational settings; the principals in a public school district as well as directors of community-based preschool programs.

Procedural Description
The procedures for this research include the following:

      1. Participants will complete a demographic profile questionnaire.

      2. Participants will participate in a semi-structured interview that will be audio recorded with an expected duration of 45-60 minutes.

      3. All interviews will occur outside of school hours at a mutually agreed-upon date and time.

Demographic Profile Questionnaire and Interview Questions Description

The demographics that will be obtained from the questionnaire include age, race, highest degree obtained, the total number of years in current role as a school principal or community-based director, and the total number of years as a principal or director in a school with preschoolers with disabilities included in the general education classroom. Some of the sample questions that will be asked during the interviews include the following:

      1. What is your understanding of the term inclusion and what is your opinion about including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education classroom?

2. To what extent do you think your school is able to serve preschoolers with diverse special needs in general education classrooms?

3. Do you think the school leader plays a role in making preschoolers with disabilities included in general education programs successful and why?

4. What do you think are some benefits to including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education class?

5. What do you think are the biggest obstacles/barriers to including preschoolers with disabilities in the general education class?

6. What would be your ideal vision of how to instruct preschoolers with disabilities in the general education class within your specific school setting?

Your Rights to Participate, say no or withdraw:

Participation in this research is strictly voluntary and participants can decide to participate or not to participate. Participants can also initially choose to participate in the research study and then at a later time, decide to opt out. Should participants choose to opt out at any time, there will be no consequences or any type of repercussions for their decisions.

Audio Recordings of Interviews:

Each participant will be asked to sign the informed consent which will acknowledge permission to be interviewed and for the interview to be audio recorded. Participants will be asked to maintain a copy of the informed consent for their records. All participants will be interviewed through the use of a virtual video conference platform via Zoom and the interview is expected to be 45-60 minutes in duration. All interviews will be audio recorded using a portable audio recorder and then transcribed verbatim using a professional transcription company. The expectation is that participants will participate in this study during the months of late October 2023 to March 2024.

Confidentiality and Privacy:

The primary investigator will uphold efforts to maintain the confidentiality of all personal information of participants. All participants will be assigned pseudonyms which will be used during the recordings of the interviews to ensure confidentiality. The identity of participants will not be revealed in the published research. The private information provided on the questionnaire will be used in the investigator's research for recruitment purposes only and will not be part of the dataset itself. Upon receiving the results of the questionnaire, any possible identifiers will be given a pseudonym by the investigator and will be identified only by that alias. The participant's email address, which may be used for contact purposes and to schedule the interview will be stored separately from the data. All information will be kept on a password-protected USB and only accessible by the primary investigator and faculty advisor via the researcher. The USB will be locked in a file cabinet in the primary investigator's office. All recorded and electronic data will be destroyed after the mandatory three years.

Potential Benefits:

There are no direct benefits for participants to participate in this study, but participants may obtain personal satisfaction from knowing that participation in a project contributed to new information and knowledge about preschoolers with disabilities.

Potential Risks:

The risks associated with this study are minimal in nature. There are no anticipated physical, psychological, financial, social or legal risks or discomforts anticipated related to your participation in this study. There is always a potential for the electronic system to be hacked, therefore there is a risk that any information shared electronically may be breached.

Sponsor:

This research is not supported by any funding agency and there is no monetary support for this research.

Data Sharing

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community, specifically the primary investigator's assigned faculty advisor in an effort to advance knowledge. Upon completion of the study, the primary investigator will again make sure any personal information that could identify the participant is removed or coded before files are shared with other researchers which will ensure that no one will be able to identify participants from the information shared.

Cost and Compensation

Participants will not be responsible for any of the costs or expenses associated with their participation in this study. There is no payment involved in the participation of this study.

Conflict of interest disclosure

The principal investigator and the faculty advisor have no financial conflicts of interest.

Alternative procedures

There are no alternative procedures.

Contact information

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this research project, you can contact the principal investigator, (Cheryl Myrie at cheryl.myrie@student.shu.edu), faculty advisor (Dr. Eloise Stewart at eloise.stewart@shu.edu) or the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board ("IRB") at (973) 761-9334 or irb@shu.edu.

Optional Elements:

Audio and/or video recordings will be performed as part of the research study. Please indicate your permission to participate in these activities by placing your initials next to each activity.

I agree   I disagree

_____ _____   The researcher may audio record the interview which is done to help with data collection and analysis. The researcher will not share these recordings with anyone outside of the assigned mentor.

I hereby consent to participate in this research study.

_____   _____
Signature of participant   **Date**

_____
Printed name of participant

_____   _____
Signature of person obtaining consent   **Date**

_____
Printed name of person obtaining consent

Appendix F

November 1, 2023
Cheryl Myrie
Seton Hall University

Re: IRB # 2024-509

Dear Cheryl,

At its Month meeting, the Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved your research proposal entitled, "Perceptions of School Leaders on Inclusion and Their Role in the Successful Development of an Inclusion Program for Preschool Students with Disabilities" as submitted. This memo serves as official notice of the aforementioned study's approval. Enclosed for your records are the stamped original Consent Form and recruitment flyer. You can make copies of these forms for your use.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol, informed consent form or study team must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

You will receive a communication from the Institutional Review Board at least 1 month prior to your expiration date requesting that you submit an Annual Progress Report to keep the study active, or a Final Review of Human Subjects Research form to close the study. In all future correspondence with the Institutional Review Board, please reference the ID# listed above.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,
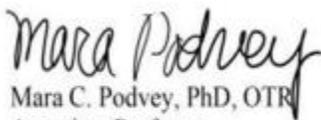
Mara C. Podvey, PhD, OTR
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