Early Childhood Administrator Perspectives About Preschool Inclusion: A Qualitative Interview Study

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study utilized structured interviews with 23 preschool administrators to explore their beliefs about preschool inclusion and needed resources for providing high-quality preschool inclusion. Themes emerged regarding administrators' beliefs about inclusion, including divergent understandings of inclusion as something that is either for all or for some children. Administrators placed a high value on families' preferences regarding preschool inclusion and at times focused their descriptions of inclusion on logistical aspects of placements and funding. Administrators said they needed additional money and personnel resources to provide high-quality preschool inclusion. Study findings are discussed in the context of the paucity of research on administrator perspectives regarding inclusion and implications for supporting administrators who play a key role in implementing preschool inclusion.

Preschool inclusion was first recognized as important when the Education of the Handicapped Act was passed in 1986 mandating that special education services be provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to all children starting at age of 3. The law was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 with additional language about the importance of "natural environments", encouraging personnel to consider placement of young children with disabilities in general educational and community environments (Warren et al., 2016). IDEA requires that school districts ensure that all children with disabilities, including children 3 to 5 years of age who meet their state's eligibility criteria, are educated with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate and with needed supplementary aids and services (34 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] § 300.114).

Research conducted in the 1990s and 2000s demonstrated that high quality preschool inclusion involves young children's participation in general education classrooms, access to social relationships with typical peers, and high learning expectations for all children (Odom et al., 2002; Rafferty et al., 2003). In 2009, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and National Association for the Education of Young children (NAEYC) released a position statement on preschool inclusion followed by a joint statement by the U.S. government promoting early childhood inclusion as a core value (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Research published in the 2010s to today has continued to reveal that children with and without disabilities benefit from participating in high-quality inclusive preschool (Justice et al., 2014; Odom et al., 2011; Strain & Bovey, 2011).

Even with legislation, professional guidance, and consistent research findings about the value of general education preschool environments for young children with disabilities, preschool inclusive settings remain varied in quality and accessibility (Love & Horn, 2019; Odom et al., 2011). The proportion of preschool age children served in inclusive settings has remained largely unchanged for the last forty years (Barton & Smith, 2015). Recent data as reported by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) show that fewer than 53% of preschoolers nationally receive special education services in the general education setting for a majority of the time (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

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Challenges to Preschool Inclusion

There are various challenges to preschool inclusion that may explain inconsistencies in its implementation in the U.S. A national survey of administrators identified ten barriers to preschool inclusion, such as attitudes and beliefs, fiscal policies, transportation issues, and program quality (Barton & Smith, 2015). Attitudes and beliefs were the primary reasons for a failure to provide inclusive services in preschool for young children with disabilities; specifically, administrators reported that decision-makers relied on inaccurate beliefs or interpretations of federal law when making non-inclusive placement decisions (Barton & Smith, 2015; Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009) in a research synthesis of early childhood inclusion noted how personnel's attitudes and beliefs about inclusion policies can influence how inclusion is implemented.

In general, the literature suggests that early childhood personnel hold positive views of preschool inclusion as a concept but less positive perceptions of their knowledge and skills to implement inclusion with young children with disabilities (Yu, 2019). A sparse number of studies conducted in the 1990s on early childhood administrator beliefs and attitudes suggests that they too hold positive views of inclusion in the abstract, but in practice hold beliefs that some children should be included while other children should be placed in more restrictive settings. For example, 220 early childhood administrators surveyed noted positive views about preschool inclusion while also explaining how they utilized the type of disability or intensity of support needs to make placement decisions for young children with disabilities (Eiserman et al., 1995). The influence of administrators' perceptions about barriers to preschool inclusion is important, as administrator attitudes and beliefs have the greatest influence on children's placement in either inclusive or segregated settings (Kochanek & Buka, 1999).

The Role of the Administrator in Preschool Inclusion

There is a dearth of robust and recent research on administrators' role in facilitating preschool inclusion; however, studies conducted thus far suggest that administrators play a key role given their responsibilities to manage physical space issues and the budget, hire and train personnel, provide family support, collaborate with community agencies, and lead curricular and instructional approaches used (Brotherson et al., 2001; Rous, 2004). Preschool administrators influence the initial placement of young children with disabilities while organizational structures support the continuation of inclusion for children (Purcell et al., 2007).

Administrators facilitate inclusion by establishing a shared vision that involves the inclusion of children with disabilities, ensuring that they and the teachers are skilled and comfortable working with children with disabilities, and arranging the preschool environment for access and interaction (Delaney, 2001).

Current Study

The current study sought to extend the sparse literature base regarding administrator perspectives about preschool inclusion, given their critical role in interpreting inclusion laws and policies, making placement decisions, managing the budget, and hiring and training personnel. Specifically, the present study sought to extend and update research by focusing on how preschool administrators described preschool inclusion and what administrators said they needed to provide high-quality preschool inclusion. There were two research questions guiding the study:

1. How did administrators describe preschool inclusion?
2. What did administrators say was needed to provide high-quality preschool inclusion?

Method

Research Design

This qualitative phenomenological study was part of a multimethod research project conducted in collaboration with the department of education in a Western state in the U.S. In the larger study, we used an online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a follow-up survey to explore how early childhood personnel and administrators perceived their implementation and support of high-quality inclusion in publicly funded preschool settings. The data presented in this article reflect the information gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted with 23 administrators of preschool services in the state specifically focused on administrators' definitions and descriptions of preschool inclusion.

Participants

Participants were recruited with support from the state department of education. State department representatives provided the research team with a list of educational districts within the state, which included the contact information for a representative for each district (e.g., preschool coordinator). Only administrators from districts represented in the

survey data were recruited. Initial contact by the research team was made via email, outlining the parameters of the study, nature of participation, risks and benefits to participating, and documentation of state department of education approval of the study. Participants who elected to participate were scheduled to complete the interview at a time convenient for them. A second round of recruitment emails were disseminated to administrators who did not respond to the initial email after two weeks. A second set of contacts were provided by the state team for districts that remained after the second email round. Two attempts were made to contact those individuals over three weeks, after which recruitment concluded.

The 19 of the 23 participating early childhood administrators who provided demographic information identified as female and white. They had various responsibilities, including coordination of preschool special education services for their region or district. The average number of preschoolers in the administrators' service area was 466 (range 75–2000). Administrators had worked in their current role for an average of 13 years (range 1 to 30) and in the field of education for an average of 26 years (range 12 to 54). Three administrators had family members (e.g., siblings) with a disability, and one administrator was a parent of a child with a disability.

According to the most recent state department data from 2014, preschool special education services are provided to over 8,000 children 3 to 5 years of age in all 179 school districts. Preschool special education programs in the state involve a range of options from specialized and segregated programs to inclusive preschool programs. Inclusive preschool programs in the state are defined as programs with no more than a 50/50 ratio of children with disabilities to children without disabilities and where children with disabilities receive at least 80% of their services within the general education classroom. Administrators in the current study represented 59 of the 179 (33%) school districts in the state; some administrators were in charge of preschool services across multiple districts. The authors obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through their university. Participants were not offered an incentive for completing the interview; they were given a $100 gift card for completing a post-interview member checking survey.

Interviews

The preschool administrator interviews included 23 interview questions total. Interview questions included seven background questions about the number of preschoolers served, funding streams utilized, and caseloads for personnel. Then, there were 16 questions about the administrator's understanding of and approach to preschool inclusion.

Administrator responses to seven interview questions (Supplemental Table 1) were the focus of analyses for this research project. These seven interview questions focused on administrators' definition of inclusion, how they made placement decisions, why they would place a child in a general education classroom, why they would not place a child in the general education classroom, and the opportunities they saw for improvement of preschool inclusion.

The research team developed the interview protocol. Background questions were designed to appropriately contextualize the district each administrator was serving. The second section was developed to adequately study administrators' experiences with inclusive practices, including the barriers to promoting inclusive practices. The interview then underwent an expert review by an inclusive preschool classroom coaching specialist, as well as a professor of early childhood with extensive research experience in inclusive preschool practices.

All interviews were conducted in English via Zoom by two graduate research assistants due to the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting travel restrictions. A total of 23 interviews were conducted. Interviews lasted an average of 35 min, with the longest being 54 min and the shortest being 20 min. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed by an external service verbatim. Interview transcripts were verified by one of the research team members who reviewed all interview transcripts and corrected for errors prior to data analysis.

Data Analysis

An open coding approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) followed by constant comparison analysis (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) was used to analyze administrators' responses to interview questions. The research team involved in coding included two faculty members and two doctoral students. During the initial review of transcripts, the research team divided the administrator transcripts to review; each team member reviewed four to six administrator interview responses to the five interview questions line by line and made notes on a collaborative and web-based spreadsheet. These initial notes formed the basis for development of emergent codes during the first round of open coding. For example, the note of "all children should be served in their neighborhood classroom" was repeated across several administrator responses to the interview question about how they defined inclusion. The note was translated to an emergent code of "all children are served in their neighborhood classroom." At the end of the first round of open coding, the research team met to discuss the notes and emergent codes to ensure consensus about the initial coding scheme. At this

stage, there were a total of 51 codes, with a range of 9 to 12 codes per interview question.

During the next phase of coding, a constant comparison analysis process was used to look for participant phrases that represented each code. For instance, administrator 18 said, "There are times families really advocate for a specialized program" which was identified as relating to the code "families prefer individualized supports." At the end of this second round of coding, the research team again met to debrief codes and example quotations; there were 32 codes. The 32 codes and example quotations formed the code book that was used to tabulate the occurrences of administrator statements that corresponded to each code. Administrator statements, which included short phrases or longer sentences about one concept or topic, were identified as the units of analysis.

During the third phase of coding, two members of the research team independently coded a random 20% of the administrator statements for their correspondence to particular codes in the code book. This inter-rater process resulted in total percent agreement from 80 to 90% ($M = 85.13$, $SD = 0.16$). The research team discussed the areas of agreement and disagreement in coding during phase three and came to consensus on the codes that had less agreement (e.g., differentiation between the code "more personnel" and the code "support for personnel"). Following interrater reliability, one faculty member coded the rest of the interview responses, noting the corresponding code for each administrator statement.

For the next step of the constant comparison process, the research team reviewed all coded statements and their alignment with the 32 codes; there was agreement about the alignment of statements with codes. The team then engaged in thematic analysis, looking for commonalities across codes to group codes together and develop initial themes (Creswell et al., 2003). The result of the review of the findings and discussion of themes was 14 codes that were grouped into four themes about how administrators described preschool inclusion and six codes that formed two themes related to what administrators said they needed to provide high-quality preschool inclusion.

Trustworthiness

Brantlinger and colleagues (2005) recommend various measures for conducting high-quality qualitative research that were utilized in this study. First, the interview protocol was developed to provide clear and open-ended questions for each semi-structured Zoom interview. Second, we conducted interrater reliability of the coding scheme and utilized a sufficient sample (20%) of interview responses (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). We had high interrater reliability, suggesting

consistency between coders and minimal interpretative bias (Walther et al., 2013). Further, we used a careful audit trail of the coding process and used research team debriefing to enhance researcher reflexivity (White et al., 2012).

The research team utilized member checking of synthesized analyzed data in order to validate the results through disconfirming voices and provide the opportunity for administrators to explain how their personal experiences related to the synthesized findings (Birt et al., 2016). Nineteen of the 23 administrators participated in member checking and there was agreement with all but one of the themes with corroborated examples. The theme that elicited disagreement among administrators during member checking regarded beliefs about whether or not inclusion in the general education environment is for some children and not for others; the member checking process confirmed a lack of consensus for this theme which is highlighted in the interpretation of results.

Results

RQ#1: How Administrators Described Preschool Inclusion

Coding of administrator statements about preschool inclusion resulted in four themes: (a) understanding inclusion as for all children, (b) characterizing inclusion as for some children and not for others, (c) placing a high value on families' preferences regarding preschool inclusion, and (d) describing inclusion as numbers, funding, and space.

Inclusion for all Children

There were 28 of 75 total statements (37%) that related to defining inclusion as something all children should have. Administrators who expressed this sentiment described children with disabilities as having the right to access the same general education early childhood settings with their peers and that schools should provide additional supports to ensure they learned and meaningfully interacted with peers. For example, Administrator #1 explained, "I think that it's really about just equity and programming and making sure that all children have access to the same classroom, preschool curriculum, opportunities, all those things."

Some administrators explained that full inclusion in general education classrooms was the only placement option in their district or region, for all children. For instance, Administrator #22 said, "We just strongly believe that the least restrictive environment is our classroom environments for children. And I'm just such a strong advocate for inclusion that it's kind of not a choice to do anything else."

Administrator #8 described, "We don't have any specialized classrooms for students in ages three to five. So, everybody goes to their home site, and we provide services there." Another administrator explained, "Administrators should assume there is no other option. Otherwise, there are always reasons in terms and numbers and needs for it not to happen, especially for some children."

Inclusion for Some Children and Not Others

In contrast to the statements from administrators who described the rights of children with disabilities to attend their neighborhood general education preschool, 18 of 75 administrator statements (24%) explained that some children cannot or should not be included in general education preschool settings. For instance, Administrator #13 said, "Some of our kids are so severe that they cannot have services within the classroom. I mean they just can't." Administrator #3 provided more explanatory information about why they would place a child in a segregated setting:

> "I think when it comes down to students that are requiring more intense individualized explicit instruction, for example, like autism, from a team that has more expertise and knowledge in providing evidence-based strategies, then, you know, that's the consideration. And you know, when the child is just not accessing that inclusive environment and growing in that setting. Those are reasons why we would provide services in a different placement."

Other administrators described the need to temporarily remove some children from the inclusive preschool setting for certain services. For example, Administrator #12 described, "If a student is maybe having some behavioral concerns as far as distractibility or impulsivity or just having a real difficult time staying on task, then they may choose to do some services outside the classroom where there is less distraction." Administrator #9 explained that they recommended providing services outside of the inclusive preschool setting for "speech only kiddos, just because you need to be able to hear them. Those kids will be provided their services in a quieter setting and not the general ed classroom."

Value Families' Preferences

There were 27 statements (36%) that related to the value preschool special education administrators had for families' preferences regarding inclusion. For instance, administrator #17 described, "Before we start enrollment, or if a child is entering after the school years are started, we meet with that family. And we talk to the parents to get to know them…and we get to know their needs. And they have a say in everything." Some administrators noted how families' preference for inclusion was a driver for them to have fully inclusive preschool options. For example, administrator #15 shared, "I think our families want their kids to be with their peers and to get to experience all the same joys, you know, learn how to manage conflict, just like other parents do."

There were more administrator statements about how families' input sometimes created a barrier to inclusion, from the administrator's perspective, because, for various reasons, some families did not prefer a fully inclusive setting for their child. Administrator #18 shared, "There are times families really advocate for a specialized program. And I think they just want more individualized supports for their child. And I think sometimes they have a fear, especially if it's a medically fragile child or a child that has kind of struggled." Administrator #7 continued, "I think intensity of instruction…Are my child's needs gonna be met? Is my child safe? In my career, I'm surprised between those two questions. How like 50% of our families would prefer gen ed, the other 50% self-contained. You know, it's not clear cut. It's almost a family value of what they want from the educational system." These examples were mirrored in other statements that suggested that some administrators found families' wants and needs for specialized services and supports difficult to address in inclusive preschool settings, even though IDEA is clear that supplementary aids and services should be provided in the general education setting whenever possible.

Included in this theme were also some administrator statements about how families sometimes did not prefer an inclusive preschool setting for their child with a disability because the district only offered partial day programs, for a few days a week. For example, Administrator #14 stated, "Most often we find scheduling for families can be very challenging. A number of our families need full day childcare. And while we do provide transportation for children with disabilities, for example…they can spend the three hours in our program and return to their daycare, but our school calendar sometimes is a barrier."

Inclusion as Logistics

The last way in which preschool administrators described inclusion was as a logistical issue involving the numbers of children in classrooms or as a funding issue. There were 25 statements out of the 75 total statements (33%) corresponding to this theme. These administrators focused their explanations about their approach to inclusion as a desire to create a balance between children with disabilities, children at risk for disabilities, and children without disabilities in

each classroom. An example of such a statement was from Administrator #15:

> "We really try to balance our classrooms as much as possible with kids who are typically developing, those who have some kind of identified disability, and those who have other risk factors. And then I also try to balance it a little bit between boys and girls. We have a limit of 16 kids in a class. If it's showing up that there are six kids who have IEPs in one class, I may try to find other classrooms so that those kids can learn from more typically developing peers."

Administrator #23 explained that in their district "half the classroom would have IEPs and half would not. We never have more than half and half." A few administrator statements emphasized balancing the number of children with disabilities along with children who were racially diverse, dual language learners (DLLs), or qualified for the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) due to family risk factors. These administrators stressed that they conceptualized inclusion as broader than ability. For instance, Administrator #13 stated, "Inclusion is in class with peers of all sorts and minorities, needs, and abilities. So, it's a full inclusion program with not just abilities."

Other administrators stressed the funding aspects of inclusive preschool special education when describing how they defined inclusion. For example, Administrator #11 explained that they provided the same fully inclusive opportunities across the board "so all children are provided the same services, no matter their funding source. Nobody knows who is funded by what." Some administrators stressed the blending of funding sources in a classroom. For example, Administrator #10 said, "We make our classes take Head Start, CPP tuition, and kids with IEPs. We sort of divide them up as best we can equally and place kids that way."

RQ#2: What was Needed to Provide High-Quality Preschool Inclusion

There were two themes related to what administrators said was needed to provide high-quality preschool inclusion: (a) money and space and (b) support for personnel.

Money and Space

There were 16 statements out of the 75 total administrator statements (21%) that mentioned more space or money as a need to provide high-quality preschool inclusion in their programs or districts. For example, administrator #3 stated, "I think the special ed funding is pretty crippled of what

actually we would need to implement and be able to support the program." Administrator #13 shared:

> "We already talked a lot about money, right? I mean and I have high rated programs. It takes a lot of effort for us to do that. The money is tight for them. And if you don't have tuition paying kids to help support that, that's hard….as you know, (our state) is like 48 in terms being funded for education. It is absolutely sickening. And so that trickles down into early childhood. And it goes back to honoring people that are in this field."

Administrator #22 described a particular element of the timing of funding that was problematic for them and other preschool administrators: "I think that one of my biggest challenges is taking children after the October 1 count. That is just crazy to expect us to come up with the money for their needs when we're getting no funding for that."

Regarding space, which was often related to funding, Administrator #12 said, "I think, in my situation, it's space. If I could get funding to build a brand new early childhood center, I could increase our capacity. Right now, my building max is 152. It would be great to add more classrooms and right now there aren't any rooms available at any of our elementary schools. There isn't any space for us to grow." Administrator #20 echoed multiple administrators who said that more space was needed to expand full day options for families:

> "We have working families and they perhaps work multiple jobs. So, needing to stop at 12 o'clock and come pick up their kiddos is not always the most supportive environment. Right now, each site only has one classroom that operates until 5pm. So, space is very limited."

Personnel

Other needs mentioned in 14 (19%) of preschool administrators' statements were related to personnel, including the need for more staff, additional training or professional development, and retention efforts. As an example, administrator #10 shared that being able to hire a paraeducator would be useful: "Something that would help me would just be having a para educator and then we could provide better services. I feel like I often end up doing the bare minimum and they're actually doing awesome and amazing, but I wish I could do more." Administrator #23 noted the particular challenges of finding enough personnel in rural areas: "We being a rural school district, we have difficulty

finding people who are speech language pathologists, occupational therapists. Even early childhood special educators are hard for us to find." Training for personnel came up frequently. For instance, Administrator #2 responded that they could use "some training that would address some of the preschool issues, some social emotional issues we're seeing all the time." Administrator #18 said, "I've been asking for it for years, I would love to have an early childhood coach that knows early childhood." Lastly, some preschool administrators noted that retention efforts were needed due to high turnover. As an example, administrator #1 said, **"Another big thing for me too, is just how can we find ways to retain more staff? I mean, from year to year to like, when we have a really good para of professional working with a student. How do we keep that person, you know?"**

Discussion

The attitudes of administrators about inclusion can contribute positively or negatively to the availability of a sufficient number of fully inclusive preschool options and placement of young children with disabilities in fully inclusive classrooms (Buell et al., 1999; Buysse et al., 1996). Research, mostly conducted in the 1990s, suggests early childhood professionals have positive attitudes about inclusion while also having concerns about some children being included in preschool classrooms (e.g., Dinnebeil et al., 1998). Our study confirmed that current administrator attitudes about inclusion may still include some caveats for full inclusion. Some administrators expressed concerns related to the severity of the disability and degree of the child's medical or therapeutic support needs. These administrators were more likely to describe utilizing more segregated placement for preschoolers with certain disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Previous research suggests a connection between early childhood professionals' attitudes about what children with certain disabilities need and their use of more restrictive placements (Eiserman et al., 1995). There is a similar pattern noted for administrators for older students with disabilities, with administrators believing that some children have needs that preclude their placement in a general education classroom and using more restrictive placement options for certain disabilities such as ASD (Horrocks et al., 2008; Praisnor, 2003). Our study findings contribute to the literature base by demonstrating that preschool administrators share in having an uncertain attitude toward inclusion, for some disability types.

On the other hand, an important finding of this study is the considerable number of administrators who believed in full inclusion for all children and the use of supports to ensure meaningful access and participation in the general education setting. Shifts in attitudes to view inclusion as possible for all children have likely occurred in the last thirty years following the joint DEC and NAEYC (2009) position statement on preschool inclusion. The last thirty years has also seen an increase in research demonstrating the benefits of inclusion for children with significant disabilities and for all children (Coelho et al., 2019; Holahan & Costenbader, 2000).

Lastly, discourse in the last five to ten years has couched inclusion as an equity issue, along with other diversity and equity efforts (e.g., Shaffer et al., 2022). This may explain some administrators' use of an equity lens when explaining how they believed that all children had the right to access inclusive preschool settings. This study contributes to the existing literature base by offering a contemporary and nuanced description of early childhood administrator attitudes about inclusion. These findings may be utilized to inform preservice training and professional development of early childhood personnel, especially in the cases of administrators who continue to be doubtful about including some children in general preschool settings.

Family Input into Inclusion

Participating preschool administrators appeared to highly value children's family members' input into preschool placement decisions while also recognizing that sometimes parents did not want fully inclusive preschool settings for their child. In some cases, administrators pointed to families' preferences for specialized instruction as the reason for segregated preschool settings for some children with disabilities. Some families' preferences for specialized and more restrictive services for their children with disabilities has appeared elsewhere in the literature. For instance, Kasari and colleagues (1999) found that parents of children with autism were more likely than parents of children with other disabilities to prefer separate settings for at least part of their child's day. Rafferty & Griffin (2005) found that parents had more concerns than early childhood personnel about the risks of inclusive preschool for children, especially for children with significant disabilities. Parents' worries related to insufficient teacher attention and individualization of instruction for their children with disabilities (Rafferty & Griffin, 2005).

In addition to worries about insufficient learning supports in inclusive settings, administrators in this study noted that some families declined public inclusive preschool because of the partial day schedule, suggesting that schedule options also affect families' preferences. Some parents have logistical barriers to having their child attend preschool inclusion, keeping some children from participating in inclusive early childhood education prior to kindergarten (Buysse et al.,

1998). Having full day options and offering transportation would promote preschool inclusion for more young children with disabilities.

Overall, it appeared that administrators valued families' preferences regarding their child's preschool placement. This is a positive finding, in line with recommended practices and legal requirements for administrators to use family input when making special education placement decisions (Etscheidt et al., 2022). The findings in this study about the role of families' preferences for full preschool inclusion on administrator decision-making are a reminder that it is important to address parents' fears, concerns, and logistical needs as part of a district of program's interest in promoting preschool inclusion (Sira et al., 2018).

Logistical Role of Administrators

Another way in which administrators defined inclusion in this study was to describe it as the numbers and ratios of children with disabilities in classrooms and the various types of funding they managed. It makes sense that preschool administrators would view inclusion logistically, given their roles overseeing the budget, placements, physical space, and personnel hiring and classroom assignments (Brotherson et al., 2001). Preschool administrators play an important role in the initial placement of young children with disabilities and managing the organizational structures that facilitate inclusion in an ongoing way, such as the location of particular preschool classrooms, hours in which those classrooms welcome children, and how related personnel are utilized across the system (Purcell et al., 2007).

While it is sensible for preschool administrators to acknowledge the logistical aspects of their jobs around inclusion, there is some evidence that preschool administrators who focus too much on their management responsibilities may miss opportunities to be transformational in providing high quality early childhood education to all children (Grantham-Caston & Di Carlo, 2021). Preschool administrators may need support in thinking through how to integrate the transactional aspects of their leadership roles with the transformational opportunities they have to improve preschool inclusion. Supports like a community of practice for preschool administrators in the state might help them share and engage in critical reflection regarding how to balance their management responsibilities with new ideas, processes, and reforms (Kuh, 2012).

Administrator Needs

Administrators in this study noted several resources (e.g., money, additional personnel, and professional development for teachers) that they needed in order to provide high-quality inclusive preschool. Our findings echo other research showing that preschool administrators need additional supports in order to offer fully inclusive preschool placements. Markos-Capps and Godfrey (1999) found that preschool administrators needed more staff, better training, and increased funding. A recent survey of early educators revealed that insufficient training was the top barrier to inclusion; of those surveyed, 47% reported needing more training because they did not know how to support young children with disabilities (Weglarz-Ward et al., 2019). There has been a long-standing need for increased funding to realize high-quality preschool inclusion at a large scale (Lawrence et al., 2016). This study provides additional and current data from preschool administrators to support continued investments in preschool inclusion, specifically around additional space, full day options, and increased training and retention of early childhood special educators and paraeducators.

Limitations

The present study contributes to the existing literature about administrator perspectives about preschool inclusion in a number of ways but is not without limitations. First, the study was conducted in one Western state, potentially limiting the geographical generalizability of the results to early childhood settings in other U.S. states and international contexts. Many school districts in the state utilize inclusive district preschool classrooms rather than community-based childcare sites for preschool special education placements. This characteristic may represent a unique feature of the state's preschool inclusion model that does not generalize to other states. The sample, however, included 33% of the districts in the state and represented various sizes and types of communities (e.g., urban, rural, suburban), supporting the representativeness and generalization of the findings. The second limitation of the study was that all early childhood administrators who shared their demographic information identified as White and female. Although this mirrors the early childhood field as a whole (Whitebook et al., 2018), a more diverse sample might present different views of preschool inclusion and needed supports. Lastly, data were not collected as part of this project on factors that might be related to administrators' beliefs about inclusion, such as training in special education or their previous experience with children with disabilities. Thus, it was not possible to run analyses on individual characteristics that may have influenced administrators' views of inclusion. In sum, although the present study adds to the existing literature, additional research is needed.

Future Research

More research is needed to more fully understand how administrators enact their role in facilitating preschool inclusion, addressing barriers, and the improving all children's access to and engagement in inclusive early childhood settings. Specific areas for future research include how a district's available options for full inclusion in general education preschool classrooms influence administrators' views and approach to placement of children across the range of support needs in inclusive settings. Further, it would be useful to study how a district's use of sufficient resources, including, money, space, personnel, and adequate supports for children with a range of disabilities in their early childhood settings might impact administrators' attitudes and practices around preschool inclusion. Research might analyze how peer training, demonstration preschool inclusion programs, and communities of practice affect administrators' values and use of recommended inclusion practices. Research could explore also how the initial evaluation process and subsequent placement meetings might be opportunities to provide training to professionals and educate families about IDEA requirements to consider the provision of supplementary supports and services in the general education setting first.

Conclusion

This qualitative study illuminated administrators' perspectives regarding preschool inclusion, revealing mostly positive views with some caveats. Some administrators viewed some children as not being a fit for inclusive early childhood settings and noted that family preferences for segregated settings at times posed challenges for promoting full inclusion. Administrators need additional resources in the form of funding, space, and training for personnel in order to realize high-quality preschool inclusion for young children. These specific recommendations highlight the need for an ecological approach to understanding preschool inclusion and supporting administrators who directly influence the availability of inclusive classrooms, hiring and training of personnel, and how policies and special education service delivery are carried out with young children.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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