

Preschool Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my loving family, my parents, who are no longer here, and my son, Kevin. My parents, who loved me unconditionally, would be so happy and proud of my educational career. Kevin, thank you for your continuous encouragement and support over the last four years. It has meant the world to me!

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to future educators who will impact the lives of young children with disabilities and their families until preschool inclusion is a reality in schools, districts, and communities.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined preschool teachers' perceptions of implementing inclusive practices in their classroom instruction, addressing the research question- How do preschool teachers in Tennessee perceive the implementation of inclusion practices in their classroom instruction? The results revealed five themes- fear of and initial discomfort around young children with disabilities, lack of preschool special education knowledge and skills, school and district administrator support and guidance, the importance of teacher preparation and field experiences, and continuous professional development, coaching, and collaboration. These themes are critical in preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward inclusive education. The teachers revealed their fear of and initial discomfort in interacting with young children with disabilities. They were negatively influenced by their lack of special educational background knowledge and skills. The teachers felt inclusion could succeed with district and school administrator support and guidance. Within teacher preparation programs, teachers voiced the importance of special education coursework and the connection to field experiences. In their schools, the preschool teachers expressed the urgent need for ongoing professional development, coaching, and collaboration with staff to implement an inclusive classroom. This study addressed teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and how those attitudes are reflected in their behaviors in the classroom. A teacher's attitude toward inclusion does influence the success of their inclusive classroom environment. Therefore, further research should continue to investigate factors that affect the inclusive early childhood classroom so that educators may enhance the quality of inclusive education.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Early childhood matters. Growing evidence tells us that the first five years of life, especially the first three, establish the infrastructure for future development and growth of a young child (Azevedo et al., 2009). It is a time of remarkable brain development. The developing brain changes size and shape in response to every encounter in the early years (Shonoff & Phillips, 2000). New environments, life experiences, caretakers, and relationships can all affect the wiring of complex brain circuits (Gauvain, 2008).

Within early childhood, developmental timing is essential. There are windows of time when different brain areas become relatively more sensitive to experiences (Gauvain, 2008). This stage of childhood brain development is called a critical or sensitive period (Tau & Peterson, 2010). Early childhood is a time of immense sensitivity, a time when everyday experiences, both positive and negative, result in lasting effects (Lebel et al., 2008). Developmental outcomes can be seriously impacted if young children are deprived of basic social-emotional nurturing in this developmental process (Azevedo et al., 2009). These milestones are critical because eighty percent of the brain is developed by age three, and at four years old, ninety percent of brain development is completed (Lebel et al., 2008). Ultimately, working to meet these developmental milestones is more productive and logical than trying to fix them later (Shonoff & Phillips, 2000).

Odom et al. (2011) state that preschool education programs perform an essential purpose in a child's cognitive progress and growth. Every child is unique, regardless of their cognitive, affective, or physical needs. All young children require significant opportunities to explore, evolve, develop various skills, establish a self-image, and learn at their own pace, laying a

foundation for lifelong learning (Odom et al., 2011). Early childhood programs provide preschool children with child-centered learning environments that foster developing communication, knowledge and skills, social-emotional learning, health and physical ability, creativity, and individual learning styles (Green et al., 2014). All young children thrive in high-quality programs that recognize and support their strengths, interests, and needs (Strain, 2014).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2019) states that a high-quality early childhood program promotes positive adult-child interactions and relationships, fosters interactive play opportunities, and extends children's thinking through intentional instruction on language and literacy development, mathematics, and social-emotional competencies. It is a program where every child is part of the classroom community, and the teacher focuses on cultural, developmental, and linguistic teaching approaches addressing the children's diverse learning styles and needs (NAEYC, 2019).

A high-quality early childhood program is inclusive, and inclusion is considered the best practice in early childhood education (NAEYC, 2019; Strain, 2014). Including all children in early childhood programs means that every child has worth, is valued, and is entitled to the same experiences and opportunities as those who are non-disabled. High-quality preschool classrooms with higher percentages of more capable peers are correlated with positive child outcomes for all young children (Justice et al., 2014; Strain & Bovey, 2017). These positive outcomes include substantial cognitive gain, increased communication skills, and positive social-emotional behaviors at significant levels compared to typical peers in segregated settings (Strain, 2014). Young children in inclusion programs have advanced social-emotional learning in comparison to children in pull-out models or separate settings (Gardner Taylor & Moniz-Tadeo, 2012).

Two prominent early childhood organizations, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), designed and produced a joint position statement on preschool inclusion (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). The theoretical framework identified in the DEC/NAEYC joint position statement discussed and promoted explanations to support high-quality preschool inclusion. The collaboration between DEC and NAEYC provides new opportunities at the local and state levels to engage in conversations around important issues for children with disabilities within larger EC systems (Monsen et al., 2014). Successful inclusion requires intentionality and effective collaboration (Barton & Smith, 2015). The DEC/NAEYC inclusion summary also states that *access*, *participation*, and *supports* are the defining features that can be used to identify high-quality early childhood programs. These desired outcomes would result in a sense of acceptance, membership, positive friendships, connections, knowledge, and growth to reach one's full ability every year (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). Appropriate *access*, *participation*, and *supports* ensure that all children participate in their physical and social environments (Buysse, 2011).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) is the federal law providing free appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible children with disabilities in the nation, guaranteeing special education and related services to those children. In addition, Congress reauthorized the IDEA in 2004 and most recently amended it through Public Law 114-95, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of December 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). This applies to providing special education and related services in either public or private regular early childhood or preschool programs, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and community-based childcare programs. IDEA not only supports equal learning opportunities but also requires schools explicitly to support the inclusion of children with disabilities through the

least restrictive environment (LRE), their regular education classroom, or the natural environment. The law assumes that the first placement option in consideration for a preschool child with a disability is the regular public early childhood program the child would attend if the child did not have a disability (IDEA Regulations, 34 CFR § 300.114(a)(2)). Prior to the reauthorization of IDEA, the placement of children with disabilities was usually in separated or self-contained settings away from their typically developing peers (Lee et al., 2015).

In September 2015, the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services promoted the IDEA requirements. They issued suggestions to states, local educational agencies (LEAs), schools, and public and private early childhood programs in their Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The acknowledgment of intention means that all young children with disabilities should be given entrance to inclusive, high-quality early childhood programs. Fully inclusive classroom options work for children across disability groups and levels of severity (Strain & Bovey, 2017). Barton and Smith (2015) state that early childhood research's most dependable finding is the success of a high-quality, inclusive environment for all young children. High-quality inclusion that begins at a young age and extends into the school years probably creates the best results.

Inclusion has become more frequent and is changing the outlook in early childhood special education, which centers on preschool children with disabilities. Making inclusion programs more accessible is more important than ever since the number of young children has increased under IDEA 2004 (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2012). Many researchers suggest that a well-prepared workforce is one essential factor in providing inclusive programs for children with disabilities (Stayton, 2015). With an increasing number of young children with disabilities

attending preschool classrooms, the teacher's role in inclusion classrooms (teaching all children in the regular education classroom) has become essential (Odom et al., 2011).

Preschool educators can provide all children with a high-quality, inclusive environment by using developmentally appropriate practices, including quality curriculum, content expertise, and abilities, differentiation strategies, modifications and accommodations, social-emotional support, and effective beliefs toward inclusion (Strain, 2014; Odom et al., 2011). The preschool classroom teacher is essential in fostering and implementing a thriving, inclusive environment. Cologan (2012) states that positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion are necessary to successfully implementing an inclusive classroom. Teacher attitudes are pivotal in how inclusion is manifested in classrooms and collectively throughout the school (Boyle et al., 2020). A teacher's viewpoint of disabilities can completely impact how they approach children and their expectations for children (Lalvani, 2015). For that reason, teacher attitudes significantly impact the successful implementation of inclusion practices, as their attitudes determine instruction in the classroom (Kwon et al., 2017).

Statement of the Problem

All young children want to feel welcomed and wanted (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). How children are treated in their educational settings will impact their feelings about themselves (Strain, 2014). Preschool children with disabilities can attend early childhood programs alongside their peers and children without disabilities (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). All children working and learning together assist in fostering the potential of every child.

While a continuum of placement options should be considered and reviewed for each child, the intention of the law is clear that young children with disabilities should not be separated from the regular preschool classroom only if they are unable to perform acceptably

with specialized supports and services in place (Richardson-Gibbs & Klein, 2014). It is not enough for young children with disabilities to be enrolled in preschool settings; there must be support services through adaptations and adjustments to guarantee full and active engagement of these children with their typically developing peers (Buysse, 2011). An estimated 745, 336 preschool children have disabilities or developmental delays, entitling them to obtain preschool special education services under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). LEAs are directed by federal policy to provide these services in the least restrictive environment (LRE), yet our society invests the least in this age group (Strain, 2014).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) asserts that the best practice for educating preschool children with disabilities is inclusion in the regular education program (Hilbert, 2014). A joint statement from the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2015) requested that all early childhood children with disabilities be given access to high-quality inclusion environments and equal opportunities as their non-disabled peers. Less than half of children with disabilities in the United States and fewer than one-quarter of preschool children in Tennessee are educated in fully inclusion settings with their typical peers, compared to partial inclusion classrooms or separate self-contained settings regardless of the suggestions of early childhood professionals and advocates (Boyle et al., 2020; U. S. Department of Education, 2019). Preschool children with disabilities in regular education classrooms are underrepresented because many of these children are enrolled in special education settings isolated from the regular early childhood programs their non-disabled peers will access (Lawrence et al., 2016). Inclusive learning environments in preschool are universally presented as the context for providing equal learning

opportunities for children needing additional support and as opportunities for socialization with their peers within various natural environments (Buysse, 2011).

A primary motivator behind a child's educational experience might be discerning the duties and beliefs of teachers about their accountability for child results (The National Council on Disabilities, 2018). Teacher buy-in is one of the major issues of inclusion (Bialka, 2017), which is affected by several aspects (Muccio et al., 2014). Many studies suggest that teachers' positive attitudes are a necessary catalyst for early childhood inclusion (Boyle et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2015; Monsen et al., 2014; Strain, 2014; Zabeli & Gjelij, 2020). Preschool teachers who had favorable exposure to young children with disabilities are more likely to have positive perceptions toward implementing inclusion (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2012). Mindset and behaviors are closely linked; studies reveal that both are connected to teacher success (Dunst & Bruder, 2014). Teachers' decisions are made partially on their beliefs, which result from self-respect, education, and events (Vartuli, 2005). Those perceptions are frequently unstated yet impact their attitudes, beliefs, learning environments, adult-child interactions, and choices about classroom practices (Yu & Park, 2020). Barton and Smith (2015) found that teacher attitudes and beliefs are the most consequential hurdle influencing children's access and the possibility of inclusive preschool classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

This basic qualitative study explores Tennessee preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward inclusion in the classroom.

Research Question

The following research question will guide my study:

1. How do preschool teachers in Tennessee perceive the implementation of inclusion practices in their classroom instruction?

Significance of the Study

A primary issue for many early childhood leaders is the inclusion of young children with disabilities in preschool settings. As schools and programs are striving to meet the federal mandate providing opportunities for young children with disabilities to be included in classrooms with their non-disabled peers, preschool teachers will be required to educate a more diverse group of children (Sira et al., 2018). Many school districts and schools have not yet realized the advantages of the inclusion model for young children with disabilities (Zabeli & Gjelij, 2020). Strain et al. (2011) state that early childhood programs should be ready to support all children because children with disabilities do not have to be ready to be included.

Lalvani (2015) identified a critical factor in implementing inclusive practices in early childhood- teacher buy-in. Teacher perceptions significantly impact the success of inclusion because they specifically impact instructional practices (Kwon et al., 2017). One of the obstacles to young children being educated in inclusive environments is frequently the teacher's perception that children with disabilities cannot function as well as other typically developing peers (Olson & Ruppert, 2017). Although teacher buy-in is vital to the success of implementing preschool inclusion, few investigations explore preschool teachers' attitudes toward the perceived expertise and assistance needed to include children with disabilities successfully in the classroom (Muccio et al., 2014). Even though inclusive education has instructional and behavioral benefits for all children, the availability of support is a barrier to teachers' beliefs (Barton & Smith, 2015).

Addressing the gaps in early childhood literature, this study will explore teacher perceptions of the ongoing support needed to assist children with disabilities successfully in

inclusive environments. Specifically, few researchers have examined the perceptions of preschool teachers addressing the types of support needed to create an effective inclusive environment and to teach children with diverse developmental needs (Smith et al., 2016). Further studies are required to understand how preschool teachers feel about inclusion, how they view their ability to work with all children, and what assistance is required to teach young children in their inclusive classrooms (Boyle et al., 2020).

Yu and Park (2020) state that teacher attitudes affect children's beliefs about themselves and their abilities and impact the implementation of inclusion. Despite the benefits of inclusion, teachers' beliefs and perceptions can be barriers that deter the prevalence of successful inclusive early childhood learning environments (Strain, 2014). Removing those barriers and fully including all young children in early childhood environments will assist in successfully fostering inclusion as an educational change (United States Department of Education, 2015).

Definitions of Terms

Access- Access refers to furnishing a wide range of activities and settings (adults, peers, resources) for every child by making accommodations, offering numerous ways to encourage participation for knowledge and growth, and removing physical barriers. Children can access all learning activities, opportunities, and experiences (DEC & NAEYC, 2009; Buysse, 2011).

Early Childhood Regular Education- Early childhood regular education includes part-time or full-time group program in a school, center, or home serving children from birth through age eight, including children with disabilities. This definition includes programs in childcare centers (for-profit and nonprofit), private and public prekindergarten programs, Head Start programs, family childcare, kindergartens, primary grades, and before and after-school programs in elementary school (DEC & NAEYC, 2009).

Early Childhood Special Education- Early childhood special education is the provision of customized services crafted to meet the individual needs of young children with disabilities from children from birth to five years old (Barton & Smith, 2015).

Disability and Developmental Delay- Legally defined for young children under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), disabilities include intellectual disability, hearing, speech, or language impairment, visual and orthopedic impairment, autism, and traumatic brain injury. Under IDEA, states define developmental delays as physical, cognitive, communication, social, emotional, or adaptive development (IDEA, 2004).

Inclusion- Early childhood inclusion personifies the laws, practices, and values supporting the right of every infant and young child and family, regardless of ability, to participate in activities and settings as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired outcomes of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging, community, positive social relationships, friendships, growth, and knowledge to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion used to identify high-quality early childhood programs and services are *access*, *participation*, and *supports* (DEC & NAEYC, 2009).

Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)- One of the IDEA's six guiding principles is guaranteeing a free appropriate public education and ensuring that eligible children ages 3-21 with a disability receive an individualized education that meets their needs and conforms to their IEP at no cost to the child or family (IDEA, 2004).

Instruction and Instructional Practices- Instruction and Instructional practices are intentional and organized teaching approaches or techniques for structuring children's experiences and observations to maximize the likelihood they will learn the desired behaviors (Wolery, 2012).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)- LRE requires that, to the maximum extent possible, children with disabilities will have access to the regular education curriculum, along with learning activities and routines available to their non-disabled peers. It is an interpretation of the least restrictive environment concept that all children with disabilities should receive their instruction in the regular education classroom (IDEA Regulations, 34 CFR § 300.114(a)(2)).

Participation- Participation refers to being meaningful and included in everyday life situations (natural environments), including frequent activities and daily routines of any environment where children spend time (DEC & NAEYC, 2009; Buysse, 2011).

Supports- Supports refers to the programmatic supports and/or infrastructure to engage families, teachers, and staff in promoting inclusion (DEC & NAEYC, 2009; Buysse, 2011).

Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations in this study are identified and mentioned below.

One delimitation of this study is that it includes only early childhood preschool teachers serving 3–5-year-old children in public schools in Tennessee rather than elementary teachers teaching other grades. The focus of this study will be preschool teachers.

A second delimitation is that the teachers hold both general education and special education certifications rather than only one of the certifications. Dual certification is required in the state of Tennessee for inclusive classrooms.

A third delimitation will include teachers who have taught prekindergarten for at least three years. The study will focus on experienced preschool teachers.

Organization of the Study

This doctoral applied research consisted of five chapters. In Chapter One, I introduced the study, shared the problem and purpose, stated my research question, revealed the significance

of the study, and defined essential terms. In Chapter Two, I presented my analysis of the literature on teacher attitudes toward preschool inclusion and built a conceptual framework addressing the relationship between attitude and behavior. I discussed my qualitative methodology in Chapter Three, including the research design and rationale, participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness. In Chapter Four, I discussed the findings of my study. In Chapter Five, I summarized the study, discussed the findings, reported the implications for inclusive preschool programs, and made recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last two decades, the field of early childhood education has advocated for children with and without disabilities to be served in a regular education preschool classroom. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) mandates to the maximum extent possible that young children with disabilities be educated with their nondisabled peers in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (IDEA Regulations, 34 CFR § 300.114(a)(2)). The idea of LRE moves schools from educating young children with disabilities in special education to regular education classes, from special education schools to local neighborhood schools (Odom, 2000). This vision for special education is referred to as inclusion. Inclusion has become an essential piece of the school reform initiative to improve the delivery of services to young children with disabilities by focusing on the enrollment, not placement, of children in the regular education setting (Lee et al., 2015).

With an increased number of young children (ages 3-5 years old) with disabilities attending early childhood education settings, the position of early childhood teachers in implementing inclusive education and teaching all children in the same classroom has become progressively significant (Barton & Smith, 2015). The Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association of Young Children (NAEYC) state that the defining features of inclusion that should be used to identify high-quality early childhood programs and services are *access, participation, and supports* (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). These defining features mean all children can participate fully in an early childhood program, including all classroom activities.

To address inclusive practices in preschool programs, I explored teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions in Tennessee toward inclusion in the classroom. Through this literature

review, I provided an overview of the search process, reviewed the literature on early childhood teacher perceptions of inclusion, and shared the theoretical framework addressing the relationship between teacher attitude and behavior.

Search Process

For this literature review, I utilized the Educational Research Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) online database from the University of Tennessee library, Google, ProQuest, and Google Scholar to collect academic sources published between 2005 and 2020. The following search keywords were used to identify literature addressing inclusion: *teacher attitudes, preschool inclusion, children 3-5 years with disabilities, public schools, least restrictive environment, inclusive classroom, special education, regular education, early childhood, and preschool children with disabilities*. Additional studies were disclosed in the reference lists of similar literature and retrieved for review.

The matrix method (Goldman & Schmalz, 2004) was utilized to assemble the literature into critical points. Goldman & Schmalz (2004) define a literature review as deciding which sources to review, reading, and discerning what the author/authors present, evaluating research methods, ideas, and results of each source, and finally, writing a compilation of content and analysis of the materials. An example of a matrix method used for the literature review is illustrated in Table 1 (Appendix A).

The literature review reveals that preschool teacher perceptions affect whether a classroom learning environment is favorable to inclusive education. Teachers' decisions are partly based on their attitudes, which are informed by self-esteem, educational training, and events (Vartuli, 2005). Those perceptions are frequently unstated yet impact their attitudes, beliefs, learning environments, adult-child interactions, and choices about classroom practices

(Yu & Park, 2020). Positive teacher attitudes towards inclusion are essential to successfully implementing an inclusive classroom. The literature review provides valuable information addressing possible barriers to preschool inclusion- perceptions, knowledge and skills, administrative support, teacher preparation, and ongoing professional development. Based on a review of the studies, the following themes began to emerge, and a discussion of each one will follow:

- perceptions
- knowledge and skills
- administrative support
- teacher preparation and
- professional development

Each of these themes will be addressed in the paragraphs below.

Perceptions

Attitude is critical in shaping people's behavior toward life activities and situations. Teacher attitudes and perceptions impact the successful merging and inclusion of young children with disabilities in early childhood programs, impacting teacher practice and frame of mind toward children (Barton & Smith, 2015). Student teachers report initial discomfort connecting with young children with disabilities (Rakap et al., 2017). The positive influence of prior experience with children with disabilities cannot be overstated. General teaching efficacy is related to a teacher's beliefs about a child's ability as a fixed or moldable characteristic (Bain, 2005). Preschool teachers may have positive attitudes toward the inclusion education framework and negative attitudes toward implementing inclusive programs (Hussain, 2017).

Preschool teachers discuss that inclusion provides benefits for all children but may create challenges associated with meeting the requirements of all children (Barton & Smith, 2015). Preschool teachers may need more training opportunities to learn about specific disabilities, develop positive perceptions toward children with disabilities, and enhance inclusion practices. Avramidis et al. (2000) state that the nature of the disability greatly influences teachers' attitudes. One way to improve the teachers' attitudes toward educating children with disabilities might be to increase assistance in the regular classroom (Bain, 2005). Having contact with people with disabilities, such as family members or friends, may enhance teachers' acceptance of young children with disabilities (Strain & Bovey, 2017). Rakap et al. (2017) found connections between effective teacher perceptions and successful inclusion practices. Attitudes are a significant factor in the overall success of inclusion practices, as they directly influence instruction in the classroom (Kwon et al., 2017). The positive implementation of preschool inclusion mostly relies on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and their eagerness to work with children with disabilities (Rakap et al., 2017).

Knowledge and Skills

The advancement of inclusion may be influenced unfavorably by several teacher concerns, such as negative attitudes and a lack of knowledge and skills (Bryant, 2018). More than half of the teachers in one study indicated that they lacked the knowledge and skills to work effectively with young children with disabilities (Akalin et al., 2014). Early childhood teachers specify that the attributes of young children with disabilities affected the successful inclusive classroom practices. Preschool teachers are concerned about their lack of knowledge and ability to instruct children with disabilities (Dinnebeil et al., 2006). A potential challenge to inclusive programming is that teachers in preschool programs, although they accept young children with

disabilities, have insufficient basic knowledge, specialized training, and self-esteem (Dinnebeil et al., 2006). Preschool educators also state that they do not have the refined skills necessary for managing the challenging issues of children with disabilities (Strain & Bovey, 2017). Inclusion can be effective when preschool educators are taught, proficient, and educated about the instructional strategies required to teach young children with disabilities (Guralnick et al., 2008). Teachers with positive perceptions toward educating children in inclusive classrooms are more likely to implement teaching methods related to children's IEP goals through everyday activities, design accessible settings for children with disabilities, and use intentional strategies to foster effective behavioral results (Rakap et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2016). When early childhood teachers are stressed and lack the proficiency and expertise to work productively with children, their lowered self-esteem and self-assurance might also influence teacher perceptions (Dinnebeil et al., 2006). Teachers presumably have positive perceptions and believe all children can have success in inclusive classrooms with elevated self-confidence. If preschool teachers are given the background instruction to recognize various disabilities and the professional development to apply techniques to assist children with disabilities, their attitudes and perceptions may show an eagerness to teach in inclusive settings (Barton & Smith, 2015; Estes-Jones, 2013).

Administrative Support

Early childhood teachers believe that principals lack leadership and do not have a vision for inclusion (Cox, 2013). Inclusion is successful if preschool teachers are supported and have the required resources to meet the needs of children with disabilities (Odom, 2000). Inclusion will likely succeed when school leaders and teachers act upon their inclusionary beliefs and values (Gerson, 2012). For early childhood inclusion to succeed, Akalin et al. (2014) state that preschool teachers should be supplied with support systems, including personnel (school

administrator, district, integrated services staff, teacher assistants), appropriately equipped classrooms, and ongoing teacher training programs. These supports will assist in creating effective perceptions and providing teachers with the appropriate education, abilities, and expertise required (Akalin et al., 2014).

Resilience and eagerness are crucial to a successful inclusion program, as program design can take time. The adaptability and imagination of leaders serve as catalysts for inclusion practices. The flexibility of all staff is noted as an essential ingredient in supporting inclusive practices. This resilience is noted as being critical to the success of the team. The influence of the leaders' attitudes about barriers to preschool inclusion is essential, as administrators' perceptions impact children's placement in inclusive or self-contained environments (Love & Horn, 2021). It's understandable that principals view inclusion operationally since their job responsibilities typically manage budgets, placements, personnel, classroom space, and assignments (Lawrence et al., 2016). School leaders have an essential position in the initial enrollment and placement of young children with disabilities, thus directing the managerial systems that facilitate inclusion, such as the location of preschool classrooms, school hours in which those classrooms are available for children, and how staff are funded and used across the school system (Lawrence et al., 2016). Grantham-Caston and DiCarlo (2021) state that there is evidence that early childhood leaders who concentrate more on their operational duties might miss the chances to be transformational in providing high-quality education to all children. Therefore, the management side of programs may serve as barriers and promoters of inclusion (Sira et al., 2018). Majorica-Nunez (2017) states that school leaders are frequently seen as the change agents impacting and creating a vision for inclusive practices within the school and preschool classrooms.

Teacher Preparation

A teacher's degree in early childhood education and specialized training are positively associated with their inclusion practices in the classroom (Bryant, 2018; Kwon et al., 2017). A teacher's bachelor's degree in ECE, specialized training in inclusion, and field experiences working with children with disabilities are essential factors in teachers' classroom practices and attitudes related to disability and inclusion (Bryant, 2018; Kwon et al., 2017). Inclusive practices must be specifically covered within teacher preparation programs, reinforcing the call for distinct training for regular and special education teachers (Cox, 2013; Turner, 2018). Since the literature suggests that teacher perceptions toward inclusion will foster or obstruct inclusive practices, a greater focus on training, laws, and higher education preparation programs to favorably influence the inclusion of young children with disabilities should be considered (Barton & Smith, 2015). Researchers reveal deficiencies in teachers' formal and non-formal education concerning inclusion in general (D'Amico, 2019; Sunko & Kaselj, 2020). When quality teacher preparation programs provide student teachers with the background education, abilities, and competence for implementing inclusion successfully, candidates are equipped to address the necessities of young children with disabilities, resulting in enhanced perceptions (Barton & Smith, 2015). According to Pit-ten et al. (2019), the inclusive teaching experiences during the practicum phases are significant factors for developing student teachers' self-esteem perceptions toward inclusive education. Student teachers' readiness in the form of positive self-concept beliefs and attitudes toward inclusive education is especially significant since they are accountable for the effective implementation of inclusion in the future (Ahsan & Sharma, 2018).

Professional Development

Ongoing professional development, access to integrated service providers, and coaching are needed to provide preschool teachers with the tools to support children with disabilities and those with challenging conduct (Barton & Smith, 2015). The professional development includes using inclusive practices in preschool classrooms, providing developmentally appropriate learning environments and support for children, and managing challenging student behaviors (NAEYC, 2019). When asked about support and preparation, teachers discuss the importance of collaborating with other professionals and attending in-district training (Cox, 2013). Weglarz-Ward et al. (2019) state that preschool teachers reveal that the lack of professional development is the top barrier to implementing inclusion. Almost half of the teachers interviewed communicated requests for additional professional development because they did not have the background knowledge to assist young children with disabilities (Weglarz-Ward et al., 2019).

Preschool program validity is contingent on teachers with professional responsibilities having essential education and capabilities to meet the growth and development requirements of young children with disabilities (Whitebrook et al., 2018). The preschool educators felt that training was needed on the various attributes of children, behavioral techniques, evaluation of young children with disabilities, and experience or guidance in developing and writing Individual Education Programs (IEPs) (Akalın et al., 2014). Co-teaching, models of inclusion, are one way to enable the partnering and combining of expertise between special and regular education teachers, enhancing the success of inclusion and expanding child results (Odom, 2000; Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020). Professional learning communities can also effectively share ideas and develop a shared vision for preschool programs (Fairman & Johnson, 2019; Mowery, 2020). Good communication is essential for collaboration in coaching (Chapman & Hyatt, 2011).

Coaching facilitates professional dialogue and collegial relationships through developing shared language and focusing on improving student learning opportunities. Chapman and Hyatt (2011) state the importance of having critical discussions among teachers and the "fierce" conversations that delve into teaching beliefs and strategies to assist in building and strengthening a culture of collaboration. Akalin et al. (2014) suggest establishing a professional culture for teachers to support the movement toward inclusion by establishing peer mentors, providing ongoing professional development, and observing other teachers to support their learning.

Theoretical Framework

This study explores Tennessee preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions in Tennessee toward inclusion in the classroom. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is a valuable framework for addressing relationships between attitude and behavior, which shapes an individual's behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Within the framework, Ajzen (1991) proposes that to predict a specific behavior, attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, and behavioral intention about that behavior should be considered. Azjen (2020) states that an individual's perception of how others would approve of their behavior is called a *subjective norm*. *Perceived behavioral control* is the perception of just how easy or challenging it is to perform the behavior (Azjen, 2020). Lastly, consenting to a behavior is *behavioral intention* (Azjen & Fishbein, 2000). The theory of planned behavior (TPB) predicts that the behavior is more likely to be performed if each area of the components is interdependent (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013).

Using the framework of the theory of planned behavior (TPB), behaviors in inclusion classrooms may be influenced by teacher attitudes. Specifically, the framework states that behavioral intention is directed by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control

(MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013). Attitudes consist of beliefs and emotions. Behavior is determined by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, resulting in behavioral intentions (Azjen, 1991). Teachers' attitudes concerning children with disabilities may direct their beliefs toward implementing inclusive education. In other words, the perceptions of teachers will assist in determining their behaviors in the classroom. Lalvani (2015) suggests that a preschool teacher's viewpoint of disabilities can completely impact the way they move toward their children and the assumptions they may have for them. Individual and background factors, self-efficacy beliefs, teacher attitudes, and administrator expectations can influence teacher intentions and teaching practices (Lalvani, 2015).

When studying the connection between attitudes, beliefs, and behavior, all facets of the theory of planned behavior must be followed (Ajzen, 1991). It is essential to know that the theory of planned behavior (TPB) profiles a person's beliefs: the attitudes, subjective standards or norms, and perceived behavior control influencing intentions to participate in certain behaviors. Teachers' perceptions may direct their attitudes toward implementing inclusive education. In choosing the theory of planned behavior (TPB) as a theoretical framework, I may find a connection between teachers' attitudes and their behavior displayed in inclusive classrooms. I will design semi-structured questions to elicit teachers' perceptions of implementing inclusion practices in classroom instruction. Interviews with preschool teachers may assist in identifying how they perceive the integration and inclusion of young children with disabilities and the elements contributing to implementing positive instructional practices. The basis of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) may be a helpful guide to predicting deliberate and planned behavior (Azjen, 2020).

Conclusion

This literature review examines teacher attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions toward inclusion in the classroom and how those attitudes may influence instructional teaching practices. Based on the review of the literature, the following themes emerged:

- perceptions
- knowledge and skills
- administrative support
- teacher preparation and
- professional development

The topics reveal that preschool teacher attitudes may determine if an early childhood setting favors inclusive education. Teachers' decisions are made partially on their beliefs, which result from self-respect, educational training, and events (Vartuli, 2005). Positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion are essential to successfully implementing an inclusive classroom (Barton & Smith, 2015).

The literature review provides valuable information addressing the possible challenges or barriers to preschool inclusion of perceptions, knowledge and skills, administrative support, teacher preparation, and professional development. The theoretical framework of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) addresses the relationship between attitude and behavior and how an individual's behavioral intentions are shaped. This framework may be valuable to consider during initial teacher education and post-graduate courses. Focusing on challenging teacher beliefs and developing teaching self-efficacy may improve teaching practices with young children with disabilities. Removing those obstacles and fully including children with disabilities

in preschool classrooms will assist in successfully fostering inclusion as an educational change (United States Department of Education, 2015).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This basic qualitative design study investigated preschool teachers' perceptions of implementing inclusive practices in their classroom instruction. I explored preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of those teaching in Tennessee. My research question was: How do preschool teachers in Tennessee perceive the implementation of inclusion practices in their classroom instruction? In Chapter Three, I described research methods, including the research design, study context, participant determination, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, credibility and trustworthiness, positionality statement, and summary.

Research Design and Rationale

I utilized a basic qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to answer the research question on preschool teachers' perceptions of implementing inclusive practices in their classroom instruction. The basic qualitative design seeks to understand a process, a phenomenon, or the perspectives of the people involved (Merriam, 1998). Basic qualitative design studies are today's most familiar type of qualitative research in education. Through this basic qualitative design study, I explored preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions in Tennessee toward inclusion in the classroom.

Context and Participants

Context

The twelve participants were preschool teachers teaching in elementary schools in three school districts in Tennessee. Two of the districts were rural, and one was suburban. This year, the teachers were teaching in inclusive classrooms. I verified the criteria for each teacher through the school district.

Participants

During my initial conversation, I clarified the criteria with each of the 12 preschool teachers, introduced myself, verified the information, explained a basic qualitative study and a semi-structured interview, and the agreement to participate (informed consent). The participants for my study were chosen using purposive sampling (Kelly, 2010). Purposive sampling differs from random sampling, meaning the selected respondents are most likely to provide the best information (Patton, 1990). I included purposive criteria, where I chose preschool teachers with specific prerequisites based on their position, certification, and years of teaching experience (Mason, 2002). The criteria for selecting the teachers were:

- preschool teacher in the state of Tennessee
- regular education and special education certification
- teaching prekindergarten for at least three years

I selected twelve of fifteen preschool teachers to participate in the study and verified the criteria for each preschool teacher through the school district. The criterion creates critical attributes based on the purpose of the study (Merriam, 1998). To ensure the preschool teachers' confidentiality in the study, I assigned each participant a pseudonym in Table 2 (Appendix B).

Data Collection

Instrumentation

The first step in conducting a basic qualitative design study was the completion and approval of the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board (IRB) application. This approval included the School District Authorization to Conduct Research letter, the IRB Participant letter, and the Consent for Research Participation letter. The School District Authorization to Conduct Research was sent to each superintendent/director requesting

permission to conduct research in the school district and permission to contact preschool teachers (Appendix C). After school district approval, the IRB participant letter was emailed to preschool teachers requesting to participate in the semi-structured interview in a virtual conversation via Zoom (Appendix D).

Based on my research question, I designed a semi-structured interview protocol (Kvale, 1983) to gather preschool teachers' perceptions toward implementing inclusion in their classrooms (Appendix F). The semi-structured interview is often used in qualitative and exploratory research (Allen, 2017). A semi-structured interview allowed participants to respond to questions in their own words, engage in the study, and have ample time to reflect on their answers. I created a written protocol of procedures (script) to follow, guiding the interview process, establishing ethical practices, teaching good etiquette while interviewing the participants, and providing suggestions to protect the participants (Salkind, 2010). The interview protocol (Appendix F) and semi-structured interview questions (Appendix G) were initially shared with three preschool teachers in the fall of 2022 to increase face validity. The data collection process elicited valuable teacher feedback as the questions were revised. I asked three preschool teachers to review the questions and give additional feedback to improve the process.

I contacted each participant for introductions and first requested that the Informed Consent form (Appendix E) be signed and returned to me electronically before scheduling the interview. Once received, I asked each participant for a convenient date and time for the virtual interview. With an agreed-upon date and time, I sent each participant a Zoom link for the face-to-face scheduled conversation. Each interview lasted approximately between 30-45 minutes. The participants in this study were from school districts in Tennessee and taught in preschool

classrooms. Qualitative research examines the settings or circumstances in which groups or individuals work to share a comprehensive understanding of real-life issues (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). My study was conducted in the fall of 2023.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Appendix G). Key features of the questions included:

- questions designed to answer the research question
- ask clear and concise questions
- ask one question at a time
- ask open, not closed-ended questions
- ask questions to tap into their experiences and expertise
- ask how, why, and what questions
- ask follow-up questions based on response/s
- ask to wrap up the question

I interviewed all preschool teachers who matched the pre-established criteria. The preschool teachers' interviews were held face-to-face via Zoom. I scheduled a time to speak to each preschool teacher, clarifying the required criterion, willingness to participate in the interview, and signing the required Informed Consent form (Appendix E). I used a semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam, 1988) and flexible questions that emerged from the responses. The rationale for using a semi-structured interview was to utilize a specific set of questions that might answer my research question and permit the preschool teacher's voice to be heard (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The semi-structured interview allowed for structure at the beginning of the interview. It also permitted me to ask follow-up questions or for the participants

to expand on their answers during the interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed via Zoom. Transcribing converts audio or video data to text for analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I sent the transcripts electronically to the respective participants for member checking so they could review and that the text data collected was correct and in their own words. Member checking is a method used to clarify data and correct errors to validate the answers with the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the transcripts were returned to me online, I noted any changes made by the participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of answering a research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My data analysis procedure began with the recorded and transcribed interviews. To begin analyzing the text data, I focused on my personal bias before re-reading the transcripts. I conducted this basic qualitative study to explore Tennessee preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward inclusion in the classroom.

The theoretical framework that grounded this study was the theory of planned behavior (TPB), which may find a connection between teachers' attitudes and their behavior displayed in inclusive classrooms. Tesch (1990) claims that data analysis begins with repeatedly reading all data to achieve immersion, which gathers the big picture, like reading a book or novel. After verification by the participants, I re-read each transcript and manually began to highlight and make notes in the margins. Miles and Huberman (1994) state that the data should be read word by word extracting codes by highlighting words that appear to capture essential ideas or thoughts. I then re-read the transcripts for a third time, highlighting them in a different color and adding additional notes in the margins. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the coding categories are obtained immediately from the text data in conventional content analysis. The

advantage of the conventional approach to content analysis is obtaining explicit facts from the study participants without introducing any other perspectives (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). After reading the transcripts for the third time, labels for codes emerged that reflected several critical thoughts about the teachers' experiences and beliefs. These experiences and beliefs influenced their attitudes and perceptions about preschool inclusion. Coding is reviewing and labeling notes (Seidman, 2019). The codes were sorted into categories. The emergent categories were used to organize the codes into clusters (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The clusters developed into themes that should connect to the research question, clarifying the findings. Themes describe the patterns or occurrences as the results of findings in a qualitative study. Using this line of action, I was able to analyze the semi-structured interview questions and define several themes or patterns in how the preschool teachers define inclusion, the position of the teacher in inclusion education, implementing curricula in early childhood, and some of the challenges facing teachers trying to implement inclusive practices. I printed out the transcripts, recorded notes, organized and examined the data, created initial codes, reviewed them, merged them into themes, and lastly defined them. Through the data analysis activity, I maintained honesty and truthfulness by only sharing the data stated by the study participants.

Trustworthiness

The basic qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) study began with confidentiality and Informed Consent (Appendix E), an agreement that the semi-structured interview would be recorded (using the words of the participants) and that the data was verified through member checking. Member checking is a method used to clarify data conclusions and correct errors to validate the answers and interpretations with the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish credibility, I verified data through member checking, where participants reviewed their

findings and reported any discrepancies. The participants checked for the accuracy and validity of their answers and experiences in the transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In a basic qualitative design study, researchers must authorize that the data analysis has been conducted uniformly and accurately through recording and transcribing the notes (Creswell, 2013). Credibility was established through extended engagement with the participants and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I collected data from numerous participants in multiple school districts to gain insight, checked my understanding of the findings for consistency, and established confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To create transferability or external validity, I shared the findings or evidence, painting a clear, detailed description that could be applicable in other situations or contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, I asked my committee chair to review the data to determine if the results were correct. Peer reviews assist in limiting researcher bias, allowing for multiple opinions to be shared about the data and findings of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Role of the Researcher

I approached this qualitative study, having been raised in a white, middle-class neighborhood in the suburbs by two working parents. My father was in business, and my mother was an elementary teacher. My younger brother and I were born in Florida and moved to Indiana because my father felt we would receive a better education in the North. I attended and graduated from the public school system. I identify as White, female, straight, educated, and single. My brother was diagnosed with an incurable disease at thirteen years old, and living through that experience gave me strength and independence as a young girl. Many personal and professional decisions in my life resulted from that experience and have formed the lens through which I see the world today.

After thirty years as an educator- previous preschool classroom teacher, elementary school principal, district level and nonprofit administrator pre-k to adult education, I realize that I bring my own bias and point of view to this qualitative study. Having taught, supervised, coached, and mentored new and veteran teachers, I recognize that I have high expectations concerning teachers providing access, participation, and supports to meet the individual needs of all young children and their families. Most recently, I was the West TN IDEA annual performance report (APR) support consultant for the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). In that position, I provided professional development and technical assistance to all school districts in the state's western portion. This included classroom teachers, noninstructional, and district staff primarily responsible for supporting early childhood education. To address my conscious and unconscious bias, I performed member checks, including verifying the validity and accuracy of all writing while compiling the study results.

Summary

In Chapter Three, I explained my research design and rationale. I utilized a basic qualitative design to answer the research questions. Through this basic qualitative study, I explored preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward inclusion in the classroom. I collected data through semi-structured interviews. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and reviewed by the participants. The data were analyzed through coding each interview and looking for patterns that were developed into themes. Finally, I explained how I ensured trustworthiness and stated my role and positionality as the researcher.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Through this qualitative study, I investigated preschool teachers' perceptions of implementing inclusive practices in their classroom instruction in Tennessee. I explored preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions to understand how preschool teachers feel about inclusion, how they view their capability in working with children with disabilities and/or demanding behaviors, and what assistance they require to work with all children better.

In this chapter, I discussed the findings from investigating twelve preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions in the fall of 2023. I began the findings by including the perceptions of the participants on how they defined preschool inclusion and then discussed the findings through my developed themes. The themes developed included fear of and initial discomfort around young children with disabilities, lack of preschool special education knowledge and skills, school and district administrator support and guidance, the importance of teacher preparation programs and field experiences, and continued professional development, coaching, and collaboration by conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews in Table 3 (Appendix H).

Definitions of Preschool Inclusion

All twelve preschool teachers were asked to define preschool inclusion in the semi-structured interviews to lay a foundation for understanding. Participant Shelly stated, "I define preschool inclusion as a preschool classroom with at least 50% or more students without a disability. That is the least restrictive environment for our students with disabilities." In addition, Mary shared, "To me, preschool inclusion is meeting the needs of every student to the best of our ability, whatever our structure may be, and that includes all needs." Participant Sarah affirmed,

“I think preschool inclusion is giving every child, no matter their abilities the education that they deserve.” Similarly, Hannah expressed, “I define it as children with disabilities being incorporated in a regular education classroom as much as is appropriate for each student.”

Participant Susan communicated why preschool inclusion was important in her definition,

All of the students are able to learn and grow with one another, and it just provides them with an opportunity. They don't have to be in a separate classroom, and I love that because they shouldn't have to be in a separate classroom.

Susan continued sharing, “the main idea was to focus on meeting the individual needs of each child, giving every child the education they deserve.” Participant Julie felt that “all preschool children are considered regular education students first and should be given the chance to develop and learn together.” Participant Jo stated that “children with disabilities should participate in the regular education classroom as appropriate for each child.” Karen voiced her thoughts about the definition of inclusion,

Preschool inclusion is that all children preschool age are regular education students first. So, when they come into the classroom, they're just loved and taught like, there's no difference in anybody. But we do meet their needs where they're at. To me, preschool inclusion is meeting the needs of every student to the best of our ability, whatever our structure may be, and that includes all needs. You know from every end of the spectrum, if it's just academics, if there's a learning delay, whatever the realm may be, doing everything that I can or my assistants can, whatever our resources are to include all students and meet their needs as best we can.

Fear of and Initial Discomfort Around Young Children with Disabilities

The findings from the twelve preschool participants revealed that teacher perceptions toward including young children with disabilities in regular education classrooms impact instructional practices and student outcomes. The teachers identified fear or being afraid of children, lack of knowledge, negative mindsets of others, behavior issues, and the uncertainty of inclusion as contributing factors. Participant Shelly thinks “a lot of times, teachers are just afraid. I really think it's just fear of the unknown. Just fear and lack of knowledge.”

Participant Susan had similar feelings,

That probably other people's negative attitudes towards inclusion affects you. The things that they say I mean affect your mood, but then you have to think of doing it for the kids, and they're what's most important. So, you have to block those negative words out.

Sarah disclosed,

I think the biggest thing that probably scares teachers away from this is the behavior that they think they could deal with. You know, if they don't know how to deal with it, and that falls back on like insufficient professional development, maybe, and materials.

Mary added,

That you need to have a strong good relationship with co-workers. When we first started this process, I was open to it, but I was still a little nervous. I have a good relationship with my co-workers, and we can talk, and bounce ideas off each other.

Participant Shelly continued to share that,

Teacher assistants is where we had a lot of push back. And that is an area where they really lack the training. Our teacher assistants were really lacking a lot of training that they needed going into inclusion, or just the negative mindset about what it was going to

be. So, we kind of have done some refreshers in our pyramid model, and providing extra training to them when we can and just kind of threw them in there and said, this is what's happening. So, we're going to have to figure it out. They've come a long way and we're not seeing the negativity that we were, but that was been our biggest barrier.

Hannah elaborated,

Just being open-minded and not afraid to reach out for help or research things on your own, or you know, to look for solutions when problems arise. Not being afraid of our students with disabilities because they're students. I told my children growing up this, and I tell my assistants now that all students are made the way God wants them to be made. It's our job to figure out how to work best with them and help them learn. So, I think just trying to provide support to them.

Participant Amy voiced that “our teacher assistants were lacking a lot of training that they needed going into it, or just a negative mindset about what it was going to be.” Jo thinks that “first of all, I think the willingness to try it and training resources and support.” Valerie explained the fear or uncertainty of not knowing what to do,

I would say the barriers that I'm facing this year. It kind of just goes back to this is the first year that we're doing this model. So, it's, I'm still kind of in a learning process. And I'm trying to learn. As the year goes on, I can do certain things better and improve in different things. We also at the beginning of the year we did not have a speech therapist. We were trying to kind of adapt.

Lack of Preschool Special Education Knowledge and Skills

The findings from the twelve preschool participants revealed an urgent need for ongoing training to address the required skills the position demands. The teachers identified lack of

background knowledge, lack of specific special education skills, lack of curriculum implementation, lack of training, and lack of understanding differentiation as contributing factors.

Participant Shelly stated,

That knowledge-wise, it's just kind of an understanding of student needs and how they learn best, how to accommodate them or modify instruction for them and training wise, the more the better. It doesn't matter where it comes from, a special education teacher, special education department or outside sources.

Karen felt the lack of training impacted the handling of behavioral issues. She explained

It would be nice to have more training on how to address behavior problems, like how to meet the needs when you have children with behaviors or get stressed a little easier, how to take care of them and include the rest of the class in the process. That's really a struggle.

Participant Sarah spoke about previous training,

They had the SPDG training, and that's been wonderful because it's giving us lots of ideas on how to put plans in place for certain kids. To teach every child, whether typical or atypical. It gave us methods of instruction to reach all students and knowledge of atypical and typical development.

Hannah also affirmed, "I think you need training in special education, special needs students, and behavior management because a lot of issues do not come around in just a typical general education pre-kindergarten classroom." Participant Susan specified, "you need training on students who have unique needs and ways that you can support them, because without that training, then you're not going to know how to support them." Amy agreed with Hannah, that

The role of the teacher is to use the curriculum to plan lessons and activities through the day for all students, and then make the accommodations or modifications necessary for each individual student based on their needs. That way they can learn the academic materials and the social-emotional learning at the same time.

Participant Julie addressed the understanding of differentiation skills,

I'd say one of the biggest challenges is the gap. I wish there was some way of having more. I understand differentiation, but when you've got a typical, you know, four, almost five year old that are high level, and then you come in with a delayed development. That's there needs to be some kind of solution for that cause. Somebody's going to get lost in the gap. If you're not careful.

School and District Administrator Support and Guidance

The findings from the twelve preschool participants revealed that administrative support was critical to the success of implementing inclusion this year. The teachers identified human support (teacher assistants), professional development and ongoing training, curriculum concerns, administrator support, related services staff, and open communication as contributing factors. Participant Sarah shared when it came to administrative guidance “that probably she would say lack of help with a high number of students. I think it would be better if we had a smaller number of students, resources, planning time, etc.” Hannah commented addressing the importance of administrative support,

There is a matter of resources. And that's like with a lot of the behaviors that I've noticed, especially this school year, the biggest thing is behaviors because until you are able to get behaviors worked through, you really can't learn anything. And the behavior might impede the learning of others. Supports are necessary for teachers to implement inclusion

for preschool children with disabilities. Intentional training or professional development intentional to understand what's being asked, what it looks like, what the benefits are. I think that having an opportunity for the regular and the special education teachers to work together kind of figure it all out.

Participant Mary expressed her thoughts regarding why there was a focus on inclusion this year,

The biggest support, the most helpful support is you've got to have an administration that understands. They may not fully understand, but they're backing you, that they're understanding the changes especially like this year. She continued explaining the significance of why there needed to be administrative support this year while the district was moving toward more inclusive practices. It kind of goes back to that supportive administration. You know that's something that would affect my attitude if it was the other way around and I feel like you also need that. You need to have a good relationship with parents also, all parents. The biggest thing is relationships, whether it's within the school with administration or relationships with parents so that you can have that open communication.

Participant Shelly shared the need for support from staff (integrated services staff, special education),

I think the support of your special education staff is important to understand. In my school, I understand that my two general education teachers who have inclusion classrooms don't necessarily have all the training that I do, and so I try to support them as much as I can.

Karen expressed, “we need more help in the classroom because teachers need assistance. I couldn't do it without the teacher assistants.” Sarah revealed that “probably the support of all

team members and assistance to help other teachers to plan with and administrators who provide you support, help and training.”

Susan echoed the need for teacher assistants in the classroom.

Having the teacher assistants in the classroom is absolutely needed. I couldn't do it without them. They help out so much. Having them as a support system is a blessing, and I'm thankful I have two teacher assistants.

Participant Amy revealed that “probably the only one we're facing this year is a lack of speech teachers. We don't have speech teachers.” Hannah communicated the same concern, “staffing, I think is an issue. The number of needs and people that we must help with those needs is just not enough.” Participant Jo asserted, “I'd probably say lack of help. Maybe a high number of students. I think it would be better if we had a smaller number, lack of resources, and lack of planning time, etc.” Susan lamented that “just finding the time to do the things inside of school hours is probably the hardest thing.”

Julie agreed,

The help of extra bodies in the room, but also, perhaps administrative support and training when you don't always know what the needs are going to be from year to year. You know, having the opportunity to have that voice is like saying, I'm struggling in this area. Could we get some support or help or training in this area?

Nancy asserted,

Like I said, my biggest challenge right now is just having one assistant in the room. If I had more my administration would be working on that for me. So, but between the potty training and you know the medical needs and stuff, it's hard. That is a big struggle.

Participant Angela summed up the needed support,

I would say what is needed beyond the support from your district, from your school, you know you've got to have the resources. And whether that is a good solid curriculum. That would be something that all students could benefit from, or you know, even the outside resources that you work together with- the speech services, the occupational therapist, the those that can come into the classroom and work together and in that situation.

Importance of Teacher Preparation and Field Experiences

The twelve preschool participants' findings strongly felt that field experiences in an inclusion environment would have benefitted their teaching program by making connections between coursework presentations and observing them firsthand in inclusive classrooms. The teachers identified a lack of field experiences, no special education courses, and no training on differentiation, embedded instruction, accommodations, or instructional modifications as contributing factors.

Participant Mary disclosed,

The biggest challenge for me as I said when I went through years ago and got my degree. I had maybe two special education classes my whole time. When we first started this process, I was a little nervous, not about having the students in my room, but I was nervous about meeting their needs. That's probably the biggest challenge for me sometimes, I second guess, or I'm thinking, am I doing all that I can do? I'll go bounce ideas off my co-teachers. You know that they have more experience in the special education field. And that's helpful. That's probably been the biggest challenge for me.

Hannah affirmed,

When you go from teacher preparation programs, I think it starts there. The general education teachers only had to take one special education class. You need more than that.

You need to understand why we implement things in a certain way to understand all the kids in your classroom and incorporate those needs with the needs of those in your classroom. The teachers need more opportunities for professional development. Learning opportunities like intentional learning opportunities.

Participant Susan voiced that “you feel like you do need a degree like a college degree, especially in early childhood education and then continued professional development, coaching, and collaboration.”

Karen expressed,

Maybe not knowing what to expect coming in. Having support for new teachers, understanding, you know, things are going to be different than in a typical classroom because the needs are different. You know the one thing is just being pre-kindergarten is different than a typical classroom, because the children learn through play.

Participant Angela voiced her concern over lack of background knowledge,

I'd say one of the biggest challenges is the gap. I wish there was some way of having more. I understand differentiation, but when you've got a typical, four almost five-year-old that is high level, and then you come in with a delayed development. That's why there needs to be some kind of solution for that cause. Somebody's going to get lost in the gap. If you're not careful.

Participant Nancy elaborated,

I would say the biggest challenge I have is all of my students are on a different level and finding the time to make materials and things on all of the different levels and having to do, I mean throughout the day. You're just going and going. You don't have time until the end of the day. You sit down and you're like I have to plan for tomorrow. And I have to

plan all these different activities. So, I think that's the hardest thing to plan, finding the time to plan those activities, which mainly happens on my weekends.

Valerie shared her frustration,

Maybe not knowing what to expect coming in. If you've got teachers coming in, the pre-kindergarten teachers like we've had a new teacher this year, and she's sent down from first grade. She really had no clue what she was stepping into with the inclusiveness. And she's really struggled.

Continued Professional Development, Coaching, and Collaboration

The twelve preschool participants' findings revealed that teachers and teacher assistants need ongoing professional development, first-year teacher coaching, and regular common planning time for teaming and collaborating with staff. The teachers identified a lack of training (behavioral challenges, first-year teachers, IEP documentation, attitudes or mindset, portfolios, special education strategies), common planning time for collaboration, and coaching as contributing factors. Participant Shelly shared,

One area of need is the lack of training. A lot of our regular education teachers don't have all the training they feel they need or sometimes it's a mindset. You know, I've come across that that we're their mindset is I can't do this, or it's not going work or it's just going make it harder. You know, they may have some negative thoughts about it. But I think that a lot of it boils down to just their lack of knowledge. They just don't, you know, fully understand or haven't had those experiences. So, they're not very confident in their abilities. Staff members that need a little extra help brainstorm ideas together.

Karen explained,

Training when you don't always know what the needs are going to be from year to year.

So, you know, having the opportunity to have that voice is like, you know, I'm struggling in this area. Could we get some support or help training something with this area?

Sarah felt that,

I think the biggest thing that probably scares teachers away from this is the behavior that they think they could deal with. You know, if they can't deal with it, and that falls back on like not enough training, maybe, and resources.

Participant Hannah expressed,

I think just the general feeling of being overwhelmed with just the basic things that you must do, especially in pre-kindergarten, portfolios, and IEPs. I must make sure that I'm implementing what the IEP says, and I need to work on this with this person, you get a little overwhelmed with it, which could help if you collaborate a little bit more instead of panicking, which is easier said than done. But I think you just know the natural environment of being a teacher and just want to make sure you're doing what you must do.

Valerie revealed why training was essential,

Maybe not knowing what to expect coming in. Having support for new teachers, understanding, you know, things are going to be different than in a typical classroom because the needs are different. And you know the one thing is just being pre-k is different than a typical classroom because they learn through play.

Participant Amy wanted more focused training,

Supports are required for implementation of inclusion. Like training professional development intentional ones, to understand what's being asked, what it looks like, what the benefits are, I think that having an opportunity for all teachers to work together to kind of figure out.

Julie affirmed that the position requires special education training, “I think you need training in special education, special needs students, and behavior management because a lot of issues do not come around in just a typical general education pre-k classroom.” Participant Jo summarized this theme, “I think probably the support of a team like a special education teacher, assistance to help other teachers to plan with and administrators who provide you support and the help and the training.”

Findings Through the Theoretical Framework

This study explored Tennessee preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward inclusion in the classroom. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was the theoretical framework for addressing the relationship between attitude and behavior, shaping an individual's behavioral intentions, and framed this study. Using the theory of planned behavior (TPB) as a framework, behaviors in inclusion classrooms are influenced by teacher attitudes. The teachers' perceptions about young children with disabilities may direct their attitudes toward implementing inclusive education. In other words, teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions determine their behavioral intentions in the classroom. Attitudes hold the most significant influence on teachers' intentions to implement inclusion. The subjective norm is the social pressures a person feels about participating in an activity and if others would approve- family, co-workers, school administration, or district leader. Teachers do experience social pressure from

stakeholders within the school system. Perceived behavioral control refers to the teacher's perception of the difficulty or ease of executing the action or behavior. If a teacher has high behavioral intentions, they are likely to perform the behavior. In contrast, a teacher with low behavioral intentions may not achieve the behavior.

Overall, the twelve preschool teachers in the study were positive and willing to teach in an inclusive classroom as evidenced by their statements sharing the importance of including and teaching all children. Their behavioral intentions were high, and therefore, attitudes were positive. Participant responses included:

- “To me, preschool inclusion is meeting the needs of every student to the best of our ability, whatever our structure may be, and that includes all needs.”
- “All of the students are able to learn and grow with one another, and it just provides them with an opportunity. They don't have to be in a separate classroom, and I love that because they shouldn't have to be in a separate classroom.”
- “The main idea was to focus on meeting the individual needs of each child, giving every child the education they deserve.”
- “All preschool children are considered regular education students first and should be given the opportunity to grow and learn together.”
- “Preschool inclusion is that all children preschool age are general education students first. So, when they come into the classroom, they're just loved and taught like there's no difference in anybody. But we do meet their needs where they're at. To me, preschool inclusion is meeting the needs of every student to the best of our ability, whatever our structure may be and that includes all needs. You know from every end of the spectrum, if it's just academics, if there's a learning delay whatever the realm may be, doing

everything that I can or my assistants can, whatever our resources are to include all students and meet their needs as best we can.”

This study also found that while teachers were positive about inclusion, they voiced concern or low confidence in their ability to implement inclusion without assistance and direction. The findings showed that they were willing to do the work but needed more support to perform the tasks. The interviews revealed five themes that shared their concerns: fear of and initial discomfort around young children with disabilities, lack of preschool special education knowledge and skills, school and administrator support and guidance, the importance of teacher preparation and field experiences, and continued professional development, coaching, and collaboration. The first theme was fear of and initial discomfort around young children with disabilities, which influenced teacher attitudes and behavioral intentions in the inclusive classroom.

Supporting the framework, the participant responses included:

- “A lot of times, teachers are just afraid. I really think it's just fear of the unknown. Just fear and lack of knowledge.”
- “That probably other people's negative attitudes towards inclusion affects you. The things that they say I mean affect your mood.”
- “I think the biggest thing that probably scares teachers away from this is the behavior that they think they could deal with.”
- “Not being afraid of our students with disabilities because they're students.”
- “First of all, I think the willingness to try it and training resources and support.”

The second theme was the lack of preschool special education knowledge and skills, which affected teacher attitudes and behavioral intentions in the inclusive classroom. Participant responses included:

- “It would be nice to have more training on how to address behavior problems, like how to meet the needs when you have children with behaviors or get stressed a little easier, how to take care of them and include the rest of the class in the process. That's really a struggle.”
- “I think you need training in special education, special needs students, and behavior management because a lot of issues do not come around in just a typical general education pre-kindergarten classroom.”
- “You need training on students who have unique needs and ways that you can support them.”
- “I understand differentiation, but when you've got a typical, you know, four, almost five year old that are high level, and then you come in with a delayed development. Somebody's going to get lost in the gap. If you're not careful.”
- “Intentional training or professional development intentional to understand what's being asked, what it looks like, what the benefits are.”

The third theme was school and district administrator support and guidance, which altered teacher attitudes and behavioral intentions in the inclusive classroom. Participant responses included:

- “That probably she would say lack of help with a high number of students. I think it would be better if we had a smaller number of students, resources, planning time,

- “There is a matter of resources. And that's like with a lot of the behaviors that I've noticed, especially this school year, the biggest thing is behaviors because until you are able to get behaviors worked through, you really can't learn anything.”
- “The biggest support, the most helpful support is you've got to have an administration that understands. They may not fully understand, but they're backing you, that they're understanding the changes especially like this year.”
- “It kind of goes back to that supportive administration. You know that's something that would affect my attitude if it was the other way around and I feel like you also need that.”
- “We need more help in the classroom because teachers need assistance. I couldn't do it without the teacher assistants.”
- “Probably the support of a team like a special education teacher, assistance to help other teachers to plan with and administrators who provide you support, help and training.”
- “I would say what is needed beyond the support from your district, from your school, you know you've got to have the resources.”

The fourth theme was the importance of teacher preparation and field experiences, which formed teacher attitudes and behavioral intentions in the inclusive classroom. Participant responses included:

- “The biggest challenge for me as I said when I went through years ago and got my degree. I had maybe two special education classes my whole time. When we first started this process, I was a little nervous, not about having the students in my room, but I was nervous about meeting their needs. That's probably the biggest challenge for me sometimes, I second guess, or I'm thinking, am I doing all that I can do?”

- “When you go from teacher preparation programs, I think it starts there. The general education teachers only had to take one special education class. You need more than that.”
- “I understand differentiation, but when you've got a typical, four almost five-year-old that is high level, and then you come in with a delayed development. That's why there needs to be some kind of solution for that cause. Somebody's going to get lost in the gap.”
- “If you've got teachers coming in, the pre-kindergarten teachers like we've had a new teacher this year, and she's sent down from first grade. She really had no clue what she was stepping into with the inclusiveness. And she's really struggled.”

The fifth theme was continued professional development, coaching, and collaboration, which determined teacher attitudes and behavioral intentions in the inclusive classroom.

Participant responses included:

- “So, you know, having the opportunity to have that voice is like, you know, I'm struggling in this area. Could we get some support or help training something with this area?”
- “I think just the general feeling of being overwhelmed with just the basic things that you must do, especially in pre-kindergarten, portfolios, and IEPs.”
- “Supports are a necessity for teachers implementing inclusion. Like training and professional development intentional ones, to understand what's being asked, what it looks like, what the benefits are, I think that having an opportunity for all teachers to work together to kind of figure out.”
- “I think probably the assistance of a team like a special education staff, assistance to help other teachers plan, and administrators who provide you support, help, and training.”

- “I think the biggest thing that probably scares teachers away from this is the behavior that they think they could deal with. You know, if they don't know how to deal with it, and that falls back on like insufficient professional development, maybe, and materials.”

It is essential to know that the theory of planned behavior (TPB) outlines important individual beliefs- attitudes that impact teacher's intentions to engage in specific behaviors. TPB is a useful framework for addressing the relationship between attitude and behavior, shaping teachers' behavioral intentions. The semi-structured questions elicited teachers' perceptions of implementing inclusion practices in classroom instruction. Interviews with preschool teachers assisted in identifying how they perceived the integration and inclusion of young children with disabilities in the classroom and the elements that contributed to implementing positive instructional practices.

Summary

Chapter Four highlighted the findings of semi-structured interviews with twelve Tennessee preschool teachers in multiple school districts in the fall of 2023. The study examined preschool teachers' perceptions of implementing inclusive practices in their classroom instruction, addressing the research question- How do preschool teachers in Tennessee perceive the implementation of inclusion practices in their classroom instruction? The results revealed five themes- fear of and initial discomfort around young children with disabilities, lack of preschool special education knowledge and skills, school and district administrator support and guidance, the importance of teacher preparation and field experiences, and continued professional development, coaching, and collaboration. These themes are critical in preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward inclusive education. The teachers revealed their fear of and initial discomfort in interacting with young children with disabilities. They were

negatively influenced by their lack of special educational background knowledge and skills. The teachers felt inclusion could succeed with district and school administrator support and guidance. Within teacher preparation programs, teachers voiced the importance of special education coursework and the connection to field experiences. In their individual schools, the preschool teachers expressed the urgent need for ongoing professional development, coaching, and collaboration with staff to implement an inclusive classroom.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Study

This basic qualitative design study investigated preschool teachers' perceptions toward implementing inclusive practices in their classroom instruction. I explored preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of those teaching in Tennessee. My research question was: How do preschool teachers in Tennessee perceive the implementation of inclusion practices in their classroom instruction?

In Chapter One, I introduced the problem that shaped this study, the purpose of the study, the research question leading the study, the significance of the study, definitions, and participant delimitations. Within Chapter Two, I conducted a literature review of keywords using Goldman & Schmalz's matrix method to focus on critical points. I communicated the theoretical framework, the theory of planned behavior (TPB). Chapter Three included the research design, study context, participant determination, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, credibility and trustworthiness, positionality statement, and summary. In Chapter Four, I revealed the findings of the participants, and in Chapter Five, I discussed an overview of the study, implications, and recommendations based on the findings.

Discussion of the Findings

While the existing research about preschool teacher perceptions has shown a connection among positive beliefs and capable inclusive practices, hurdles to effective inclusion continue (Barton & Smith, 2015; Muccio et al., 2014). Using semi-structured interviews as a qualitative measure, I gained greater insight and depth into teacher attitudes' underlying factors and how those perceptions affect their attitudes about inclusion. The findings from the interviews revealed

five themes- fear of and initial discomfort around young children with disabilities, lack of preschool special education knowledge and skills, school and district administrator support and guidance, the importance of teacher preparation and field experiences, and continued professional development, coaching, and collaboration.

Fear of and Initial Discomfort Around Young Children with Disabilities

Attitude matters. As an educational framework, preschool teachers may have positive but negative attitudes about implementing an inclusive program (Hussain, 2017). Kwon et al. (2017) assert that the success of inclusion practices is determined by teacher attitudes, which directly influence classroom instruction. Preschool teachers revealed an initial discomfort in interacting with young children with disabilities (Rakap et al., (2017). The preschool teachers in this study revealed that fear of young children with disabilities, lack of special education knowledge and skills because of teacher preparation or professional development, and the negative mindsets of others impact their teaching ability. Yu and Park (2020) revealed that personal experiences impact perceptions toward inclusion. Having contact with people with disabilities, such as family members or friends, may enhance teachers' acceptance of children with disabilities (Strain & Bovey, 2017). With support from administrators and specialized training, teachers can build their confidence and competence in inclusive learning environments. Several studies have established relationships among positive teacher attitudes about inclusion and successful inclusive practices (Muccio et al., 2014). Yu and Park (2020) discovered that personal experiences affect teachers' beliefs toward inclusion.

Lack of Preschool Special Education Knowledge and Skills

It cannot be overemphasized how critical it is for preschool teachers to have the basic education and abilities to work with young children with disabilities. Akalin et al. (2014) state

that over half of teachers in one study are influenced negatively by their lack of knowledge and skills. Successful preschool inclusion experiences are impacted negatively by teachers' need for knowledge and skills (Bryant, 2018). Teachers voiced in this study how important it was to work with other teachers to learn from them. Having the essential skills to work with young children with disabilities was vital to enhancing teacher practice and the success of preschool inclusion. Those skills include behavioral management strategies required to instruct very young children (Strain & Bovey, 2017). When preschool teachers are stressed and lack the proficiency and expertise to manage children productively, their decreased self-assurance and self-concept might influence teacher perceptions (Dinnebeil et al., 2006)). Rakap et al. (2017) and Smith et al. (2016) agreed that teachers would have more positive attitudes and, in all probability, implement appropriate strategies to promote behavior outcomes with the necessary background knowledge and skills.

School and District Administrator Support and Guidance

Meeting federal and state policies mandates informing teacher perceptions and procuring local, district-wide buy-in to the importance of inclusion. Stakeholder dedication to full participation is required for young children with disabilities to achieve positive social-emotional learning, literacy, language, and cognitive developmental gains. Gerson (2012) states that inclusion will likely succeed when school leaders and teachers act upon their inclusionary beliefs and values. For preschool inclusion to be successful, Akalin et al. (2014) assert that preschool teachers need to be provided with support systems, including personnel (administrator, district staff, other colleagues), appropriately equipped classrooms, and ongoing teacher training programs. The support system includes regular common planning time together as a team. Collaboration with other teachers and integrated services staff is critical to building camaraderie

within a preschool program. Many preschool administrators view inclusion logistically, focusing on their job responsibilities such as program funding, placements of students, classroom space, hiring of personnel, and managing budgets (Lawrence et al., 2016). While all of these are important to a school functioning correctly, the most essential task of the administrator is successfully meeting each child's needs. Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo (2021) disclosed that there is confirmation that early childhood principals who emphasize their logistical duties may miss chances to be transformational in providing high-quality preschool education to all children. District leaders can be the agents of change, designing an extensive organization, including the coordination of all partners and supplying a support system that expands the quality of inclusion and child outcomes (Majorica-Nunez, 2017).

Importance of Teacher Preparation and Field Experiences

Early childhood inclusion positively influences growth and development in children, and effective application relies on teacher practice (Kwon et al., 2017). Researchers reveal deficiencies in teachers' formal and non-formal training concerning inclusive education (D'Amico, 2019; Sunko & Kaselj, 2020). Educational systems must continually strive to provide equal opportunities to regular education preschool programs. With perceptions recognized in research as possible hindrances, state policies, district and school leadership methods, and professional development programs are important areas of concentration to ensure success in implementing inclusion. Successful implementation mandates a dedication to the common objective of inclusive education for staff in all positions of educational leadership (Majorica-Nunez, 2017). Working to create a shared vision between all parties is at the core of the mission of equal opportunities to improved and successful inclusion for all young children (Bryant, 2018). Turner (2018) communicated that inclusion or inclusive practices must be communicated

sufficiently in university programs, verifying an urgent need for specialized training for all teachers. According to Pit-ten et al. (2019), the inclusive teaching experiences during the practicum phases are significant factors for developing teacher candidates' self-efficacy perceptions toward inclusion. When quality programs supply student teachers with the background instruction, skills, and competence to implement inclusion successfully, teachers are able to address the requirements of young children, advancing enhanced perceptions (Barton & Smith, 2015).

Continued Professional Development, Coaching and Collaboration

The preschool teachers in this study stated that ongoing training was necessary for everyone involved in their inclusive programs. Weglarz-Ward et al. (2019) state that preschool teachers reveal that inadequate training is the top obstacle to implementing inclusive practices in the classroom. Barton and Smith (2015) affirm that ongoing training, access to integrated service providers, and coaching are essential to equipping preschool teachers with the tools to support young children and those with demanding behaviors. The preschool educators realized that training was required for behavioral strategies to prevent challenging behaviors, characteristics of young children with disabilities, assessments, and experience or guidance in developing and writing Individual Education Programs (IEPs) (Akalin et al., 2014). Several teachers mentioned the need for specific, intentional training to embed the learning goals (IEPs) into regular classroom routines and activities. Their challenge was understanding how to provide learning activities that all young children could participate in and techniques for working with all types of behavior in young children. When asked about support and preparation, teachers discuss collaborating with other professionals and attending in-district training as helpful (Cox, 2013). Visiting other classrooms, coaching, professional learning communities, and co-teaching models

are different ways to permit the coordination and combining of ideas between all teachers, refining successful inclusive practices, and improving instructional results (Odom, 2000; Zabeli & Gjelij, 2020).

Inclusion is considered a proven technique in early childhood, an ideology and practice that will persist (Strain, 2014). This study focuses on teachers' perceptions of inclusive education and how those perceptions are demonstrated in their actions. Perceptions do impact the advancement of inclusion. Consequently, additional research should continue to explore elements affecting the inclusive preschool environment so that teachers and leaders can improve the quality of inclusive education.

Discussion of Findings Through Theoretical Frame

This study explored Tennessee preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward inclusion in the classroom and was framed by the theory of planned behavior (TPB). The semi-structured interviews identified five themes that elicited teachers' perceptions of implementing inclusion practices in classroom instruction.

Looking through the lens of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) in the first theme of fear of and initial discomfort around children with disabilities, the preschool teachers' perceptions were that some teachers felt uncomfortable with young children with disabilities. This may have been because of a lack of exposure to adults or children with disabilities, physical, visual, or hearing impairment, developmental delay, speech and language, Down's syndrome, or autism. They may not have had a friend or person in their family, neighborhood, or church group who had a disability. Regardless, teacher attitudes affected their behavioral intentions in the classroom.

Focusing on the second theme of lack of preschool special education knowledge and skills, the teachers also felt it was important to collaborate with other teachers. Many of them stated that they didn't feel competent in the special education background knowledge or skills to instruct or manage behavior in young children with disabilities. Teacher perceptions were impacted by their lack of training and preparation to adapt the curriculum, accommodate or modify instruction, address IEP goals and objectives, provide differentiated activities, and understand specific types of disabilities, including typical and atypical behavior and social-emotional learning. The lack of instruction and expertise formed teacher attitudes and behavioral intentions in the inclusive classroom.

The third theme was school and district administrator support and guidance. The study's preschool teachers reported that to implement inclusion, they required classroom support from teacher assistants, connection with related services staff, open communication, much-needed training, regular common planning time, classroom resources, and support from their administrators. Not having additional staff (related services) to address the children's individual requirements, a regular time to meet regularly as a team to address children's needs, and ongoing intentional training have shaped the teachers' attitudes in this study and affected their behavioral intentions in the classroom.

The fourth theme of the importance of teacher preparation and field experiences, which has dramatically affected the teachers in this study. Most teachers were frustrated by the lack of coursework and exposure to young children with disabilities in their university courses. It was difficult to make the connection to only one or two courses, and no ability to visit, observe, volunteer, or participate in field experiences. They felt that it necessitated more professional development because they didn't have the practice of working with children in college. This

included specific learning skills of how to differentiate, provide appropriate accommodations or modifications for individual children, embed the teaching of IEP goals into everyday activities and instruction, or mentor and provide guidance for new teachers. This frustration in the preschool teachers guided their attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral intentions, as evidenced in the classroom.

The fifth and final theme was continued professional development, coaching, and collaboration. The twelve preschool teachers shared that training was imperative for them. It was stated in their interviews that they were in desperate need of specific, intentional training. It's not a "one and done" training but ongoing yearly. The hiring and training of new staff and teaching specialized skills and behavioral techniques are some of their priorities. Additional requests include all staff receiving coaching from an administrator or experienced teacher, visiting other classrooms, and having regular time to communicate and collaborate to build camaraderie. Not having these opportunities resulted in negative attitudes and behavioral intentions in the inclusive classroom.

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) profiles specific attitudes- perceptions that may impact teachers' intent to participate in certain behaviors. TPB is a valuable framework for addressing the relationship between attitude and behavior, which shapes teachers' behavioral intentions.

Implications for Educator Preparation and Practice

Early childhood teachers may feel less competent and confident in implementing inclusive practices to manage social-emotional learning. This lack of self-assurance in early childhood teachers may emanate from a lack of exposure to professional development and practice using inclusive practices within their teacher preparation programs. Educators are

usually unprepared to implement differentiation strategies, formative assessments, and observation approaches with young children with disabilities. This lack of initial career exposure and training might reduce teachers' self-efficacy when using and implementing specialized supports and instructional accommodations.

Higher education programs ensure that teacher candidates are prepared with the training and ability needed to be effective educators. Researchers reveal deficiencies in teachers' formal and non-formal preparation programs addressing inclusive practices (D'Amico, 2019; Sunko & Kaselj, 2020). Barton & Smith (2015) share the need for university systems to better prepare teachers for inclusion. If university programs provide teacher candidates with the expertise and background knowledge to implement inclusion practices successfully, teachers can better address the requirements of all children, advancing enhanced perceptions and viewpoints (Barton & Smith, 2015). The findings in this study reinforce the belief that university coursework impacts student teacher's perceptions of inclusivity.

Early childhood special education teacher programs must consider designing a model of collaboration with regular education teacher programs to align and foster a partnership between both departments. Higher education departments should cooperate offering college-level courses blending the coursework for both entities. The overlapping multiple courses within both preparation programs will provide a policy encouraging teamwork during the training of student teachers. This practice of fostering cooperation between teacher candidates can promote collaboration in the classroom. In addition to combining early childhood and early childhood special education, teacher candidates and coursework, universities, and local education agencies (LEAs) can partner together to create specific memorandums of agreement and on-the-job professional development that encourages inclusivity and teacher instructional practices. In this

model, student teachers finishing practicum courses will gain hands-on exposure in inclusive settings as compared to participation in secluded, separate teaching models.

Implications for Leadership Preparation and Practice

Leadership training programs for future district and school leaders should focus on the significance of school cultures that encourage social justice and equal access for children with disabilities (Gerson, 2012). Leadership programs must guide administrators toward a greater comprehension of inclusive practices and how they are applicable to early childhood, spotlighting the legal IDEA requirements and state assumptions. The partnerships between several higher education divisions may expand administration practices promoting attention and comprehension between early childhood special education teachers and regular education teachers, improving teacher self-confidence, and enhancing perceptions (Akalın et al., 2014).

School district leaders should endeavor to set the mindset and focus for a combined training of all staff, including integrated service providers between special and regular education departments (Odom, 2000). Focused leadership practices at the district level are vital for the successful implementation of proposals directed at advancing inclusive practices. These practices can be attained through organized education programs that intentionally blend early childhood special and regular education staff and coordinate between both departments (Zabeli & Gjelaç, 2014). The quality of teacher practices in inclusive classrooms depends on their instruction. Two key training goals are enhancing teachers' effective perceptions and using intentional strategies in day-to-day activities for all children (Muccio et al., 2014). Yu and Park (2020) highlighted a need for follow-up tasks or assignments after professional development workshops; persistent and ongoing cooperation and coaching are vital to learning inclusive practices. Additionally, Odom et al. (2011) suggest that continuous mentoring is required to equip teachers for inclusion.

Recommendations

The results introduced in this study generate suggestions for future research on Tennessee teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of preschool teachers toward inclusive education. Future research will supplement the present literature and lay the foundation for further research in Tennessee.

Recommendations for Future Research

My recommendations for further qualitative research on preschool teacher attitudes toward inclusive education inclusion are:

- to conduct a study with additional school districts in Tennessee to gather more inclusion data on attitudes and beliefs,
- to conduct a study of teachers throughout the United States to gather more diverse data on teacher perceptions, and
- to conduct a study of teachers in inclusion preschool classrooms and how to enhance the quality of inclusive programs.

Recommendations for Practice

At the state level, states continue to underinvest in early childhood and early childhood special education programs, including Tennessee. Tennessee should prioritize and fully fund both programs. There has been a well-established necessity for additional financial support to recognize high-quality preschool inclusion extensively (Lawrence et al., 2016). Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma are the only states making pre-kindergarten available to all four-year-olds. The Center for Public Education (2008) states that young children attending high-quality preschool programs are less likely to qualify for special education services or be retained in their grade, more likely to graduate from high school, go to college, and find success in their careers than

those not attending high-quality preschool programs. About half of the return on investment originates from increased earnings for children when they grow up (Council of Economic Advisors, 2015). Providing children with quality early education experiences is not only the right thing to do for America's youngest learners but also critical for strengthening our nation's economy (Council of Economic Advisors, 2015). Until Tennessee makes pre-kindergarten a priority for all young children, the impact of inclusion practices in school districts will continue to fluctuate significantly. The districts represented in this study attempt to make inclusion for all young children a prime concern.

At the university level for district and school leaders, leadership preparation programs for future school leaders and administrators must highlight the importance of school cultures promoting social justice and equitable access for all children with disabilities (Fairman & Johnson, 2019). University leadership programs must direct administrators toward understanding inclusive practices and their application to early childhood children with disabilities, emphasizing the legal IDEA requirements and state obligations (Mowery, 2020). The partnerships involving higher education departments may improve leadership practices that encourage recognition and comprehension between early childhood special education and regular education teachers, boosting self-confidence, and enhancing perceptions.

At the university level for teachers, teacher candidates' attitudes are not unchangeable; instead, they are shaped through teacher education programs and their own experiences (Bain, 2005). Early childhood and regular education programs usually offer a few courses, if any on special education, and one is usually a basic course in special education. Although the initial courses are essential in providing a general overview of IDEA law and disabilities, they do not give hands-on opportunities for teacher candidates to work with children with disabilities (Barton

& Smith, 2015). As well as the basic courses, student teachers should be offered required courses, providing them with various educational learning strategies for engaging with young children and applying them in classrooms (Akalin et al., 2014). Interactive opportunities for student teachers and courses centered on educational strategies can be offered during the same quarter or semester as field experiences in the classroom. These courses will enable student teachers to receive guidance and feedback from professors and practicum supervisors on their instructional practices (Dinnebeil et al., 2006). Teacher candidates should have opportunities to visit and observe model classrooms where experienced educators embrace the inclusion philosophy. These experiences will give teacher candidates effective implementation models of inclusive practices and positively impact their perceptions toward inclusion.

At the district level, focused leadership practices are crucial for the successful implementation of actions focused on advancing inclusive practices (Lawrence et al., 2016). Physical support services include supplies, curriculum and instructional materials, information technology (IT) equipment for assistive technology, and physical equipment (Avramidis et al., 2000). The success of inclusive practices begins with a shared vision and collaboration. This can be accomplished through structured training programs that purposefully blend early childhood special education and regular education staff to continue collaborating between entities (Cox, 2013). This collaboration can be enhanced by common planning time, professional learning communities, shared decision-making, co-teaching, and creating a standard policy or platform of knowledge and skills to prepare all teachers through state certification programs and teacher training (Fairman & Johnson, 2019; Mowery, 2020). School district leaders should endeavor to set the style and course for combining the training of teachers, staff, and all support providers within early childhood special education and regular education realms.

At the school level, leadership's guidance for ongoing training for teachers and beginning teachers plays an essential role in the continuous achievement and competence of all early childhood special education and regular education teachers. Early childhood teachers believe that principals lack leadership and do not have a vision for inclusion (Cox, 2013). Professional development is essential, and teachers should be at the center of the practice. At the classroom level, early childhood teachers can improve the instruction of children with disabilities by utilizing natural approaches, such as embedded instruction, which uses teaching strategies designed to specifically focus on the goals of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) during naturally occurring daily routines, classroom activities, and transitions (e.g., free play, circle time, learning centers, snack time, outdoor play) (Akalin et al., 2014). Studies using embedded instruction in inclusive classrooms, Rakap et al. (2017) concluded that it was successful in teaching a range of skills, pre-academic and social-emotional skills, including language, to young children with disabilities in inclusive preschool programs. In addition, they found that embedded instruction led to the generalizing of skills across environments, people, and activities and the continuation of these abilities over time (Rakap et al., 2017).

Conclusion

In summary, through this qualitative study, I investigated preschool teachers' perceptions of implementing inclusive practices in their classroom instruction. I explored preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of those teaching in Tennessee, focusing on one research question. The findings from the study resulted in five themes: fear of and initial discomfort around young children with disabilities, lack of preschool special education knowledge and skills, school and district administrator support and guidance, the importance of teacher preparation and field experiences, and continued professional development, coaching, and collaboration. The

findings also revealed that to implement inclusion in the classroom, preschool teachers require exposure to young children with disabilities, special education coursework and field experiences in their teacher preparation programs, leadership, guidance, and support from district and school administrators, ongoing intentional professional development, regular collaboration with staff, and coaching. To meet these expectations, it will take a commitment from all stakeholders (federal, state, and local) to collaborate to ensure all young children with disabilities are offered access and full participation in regular early childhood preschool programs.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

Table 1

Table 1

Results of Matrix Method in Literature Search for Present Study

Title	Author	Date	Key Points
Preschool teacher's awareness, attitudes, and challenges towards inclusive early childhood education: a qualitative study	Zabeli & Gjelij	2020	teacher attitudes, preschool inclusion, early childhood
Advancing High-Quality Preschool Inclusion: A Discussion and Recommendations for the Field	Barton & Smith	2015	inclusive classroom, preschool, teacher attitudes, children 3-5 with disabilities
Classroom Readiness for Successful Inclusion: Teacher Factors and Preschool Children's Experience with and Attitudes Toward Peers with Disabilities	Kwon, Hong & Jeon	2017	special education, preschool inclusion, least restrictive environment
Preschool Inclusion Key Findings from Research and Implications for Policy	Smith, Lawrence & Banerjee	2016	preschool children with disabilities, teacher attitudes, special education
Preparing preschool teacher candidates for inclusion: impact of two special education courses on their perspectives	Rakap & Parlak-Rakap	2017	early childhood, public schools, preschool inclusion
Inclusion for preschool Children With Disabilities: What We Know and What We Should Be Doing	Strain	2014	preschool children with disabilities, teacher attitudes, public schools
Early childhood professional culture: Social networks and beliefs among pre-kindergarten educators	Mowery	2020	least restrictive environment, early childhood inclusive classroom

APPENDIX B

Table 2

Table 2

Participant Demographics for the Present Study

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Context
Shelly	Female	Rural District
Mary	Female	Rural District
Karen	Female	Suburban District
Sarah	Female	Rural District
Hannah	Female	Rural District
Susan	Female	Rural District
Nancy	Female	Suburban District
Jo	Female	Rural District
Valerie	Female	Rural District
Amy	Female	Suburban District
Julie	Female	Suburban District
Angela	Female	Rural District

APPENDIX C

School District Authorization to Conduct Research

Dear {School District},

I hope this email finds your district having a productive school year for staff and students. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Tennessee Knoxville and in the process of conducting a basic qualitative study on preschool inclusion. The title of the research study is *Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education*. I am collecting data from preschool teachers currently teaching in inclusive classrooms. It's important to hear the voice of the classroom teacher.

My email today is to ask if you would grant permission for me to contact preschool teachers in your school district to participate in a virtual conversation via Zoom about preschool inclusion. During the interview, I will ask the teachers to discuss their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences related to the implementation of inclusion practices in your classroom instruction. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes and will be scheduled at their convenience over the next several weeks. Please know that all responses are completely private and confidential. Neither individuals nor schools will ever be identified in the results of the study.

If you grant me permission to contact preschool teachers, they will receive a participant letter requesting their participation in the interview, and an Informed consent form clarifying additional information about the study. If they choose to participate, we will schedule an interview. If they choose not to participate, that will be fine. Thank you for your time and consideration in this process.

Sincerely,

Sherry Walker | Doctoral Candidate
Educational Administration
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

School District Authorization to Conduct Research

Date:

Dear Institutional Review Board:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I give Dr. Sonya Hayes and Sherry Walker permission to conduct the research titled *Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education* at {name of school}. We have agreed to the following study procedures <insert procedures that the school has agreed to>.

This also serves as assurance that this school complies with requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research.

Sincerely,
<Name of Signatory>
<Title of Signatory>

APPENDIX D

Participant Letter

Dear {Participant},

I hope this email finds you well and having a productive school year. Your school district has shared your name with me as a preschool teacher that I might contact you to participate in an interview for a research study on preschool teacher attitudes toward inclusive education. I am collecting data from preschool teachers currently teaching in inclusive classrooms.

My email today is to ask if you would be willing to participate in a virtual conversation via Zoom about preschool inclusion. During the interview, I will ask you to discuss your thoughts, perceptions, and experiences related to the implementation of inclusion practices in your classroom instruction. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes and will be scheduled at your convenience over the next several weeks. Finally, please know that your responses are completely private and confidential. Neither individuals nor schools will ever be identified in the results of the study.

If you agree to participate in a virtual conversation, I will send you an Informed Consent form clarifying additional information about the study. Please reply to this email acknowledging that you are willing to participate, and we will schedule an interview. Thank you for your time and consideration in this process.

Sincerely,

Sherry Walker | Doctoral Candidate
Educational Administration
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

APPENDIX E

Informed Consent

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: Preschool Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education

Researcher(s): Sherry Walker, and Dr. Sonya Hayes, University of Tennessee, Knoxville,
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are a preschool teacher teaching in an inclusive classroom.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to address how preschool teachers perceive the implementation of inclusion practices in their classroom instruction.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will include one virtual interview, lasting no more than 45-60 minutes.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to electronically sign this Informed Consent form. We will then ask you to participate in a one-on-one interview with one of the researchers via ZOOM. This interview will last no more than 60 minutes.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Participating in this study is voluntary and up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision not to participate won’t affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please email Dr. Sonya Hayes at shayes22@utk.edu informing her of your intention to withdraw from the study. Any data collected prior to your withdrawal will be destroyed.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about preschool inclusion. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by securing all data on a secure server at the University. We will redact any identifiable information from the transcripts and assign a pseudonym to you as a participant. The only individuals who will have access to the data will be Dr. Sonya Hayes and Sherry Walker. All identifiable data will be kept in a secured, locked cabinet and destroyed after five years.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information to use for future research and publications. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study.

We will not share your research data with other researchers.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

You will not be paid for being a participant in this research study.

What else do I need to know?

If we learn about any new information that may change your mind about being in the study, we will tell you. If that happens, you may be asked to sign a new consent form.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Sonya Hayes, shayes22@utk.edu

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form, and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

I also understand that individual interviews will be conducted via Zoom, and these interviews will be recorded via audio and video recordings. I also understand that only the researchers will have access to these recordings. By signing this document, I agree to both audio and video recordings of my interview(s).

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

APPENDIX F

Interview Protocol

Before the interview:

Thank you again for meeting with me today and for your willingness to share your professional experiences and insights about preschool inclusion. As I stated earlier in the Informed Consent, I am asking you to participate in this basic qualitative research study because you are an experienced preschool teacher currently working in an inclusive setting. The purpose of the study is to address how preschool teachers perceive the implementation of inclusion practices in their classroom instruction. I will ask you to share your perspective and thoughts on preschool teacher attitudes, beliefs, or perceptions implementing inclusive practices in their classroom. Possible benefits of participation in the study will include having your voice heard, knowing that your opinions matter, and to inform the topic of preschool inclusion. I hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes and will be recorded via Zoom. I will protect the confidentiality of your information by removing all personal identifiers. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from data collected as part of the study. I have ten semi-structured interview questions to ask and during our conversation I may have follow-up questions based on your response/s. Before we start, do you have any questions for me?

After the interview:

Thank you for sharing your time and insights with me today by responding to the interview questions and participating in the research study. I will be sending the transcript of the interview electronically for you to review your answers and check for accuracy. Please feel free to make any changes you feel necessary to capture your voice. Thank you again.

APPENDIX G

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Interview Questions:

1. How do you define preschool inclusion?
2. What training and/or knowledge and skills are necessary to be an inclusive teacher?
3. Why is inclusive teaching important?
4. What are the benefits of inclusion in an early childhood education setting?
5. What are some of the challenges facing teachers as they try to implement inclusive practices in their classroom instruction?
6. What supports are needed for teachers to implement inclusion for preschool children with disabilities?
7. What is needed to provide high-quality preschool inclusion for all children?
8. What are the current barriers you are facing this year implementing inclusive practices?
9. What are the factors that affect the teacher's attitude towards implementation of inclusive education?
10. What are your expectations for all preschool children in the classroom?

APPENDIX H

Table 3

Table 3

Results for Themes in the Present Study

Theme	Theme Statement
Fear of and initial discomfort	Preschool teachers revealed their fear of and initial discomfort in interacting with young children with disabilities.
Lack of knowledge and skills	Teachers were negatively influenced by their lack of special education background knowledge and skills.
Administrator support	Inclusion will likely succeed with district and school administrator support and guidance.
Teacher preparation	Within teacher preparation programs, teachers voiced the importance of special education coursework and the connection to field experiences.
Professional Development	Preschool teachers expressed the urgent need for ongoing professional development, coaching and collaboration with others.

VITA

Sherry Walker was born in Florida, grew up and attended the public school system in Indiana. She attended Florida State University and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education and a Master of Education in Early Childhood Education. Sherry also attended the University of South Florida and earned certification in Educational Leadership Administration. Sherry Walker has previously held positions as preschool and elementary teacher, elementary school principal, district curriculum director, coordinator of strategic planning, executive director of school improvement, non-profit director of family and child education, professional development director and early childhood special education consultant. Sherry pursued a Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies from the University of Tennessee Knoxville to fulfill her personal and professional goals.