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Parents' Perspectives of Their Typically Developing or Special Needs Child's Inclusive

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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2024

Abstract

Parents' Perspectives of Their Typically Developing or Special Needs Child's Inclusive Preschool Classroom

by

Barbara Holmes

MA, Grand Valley State University, 2010

BS, Grand Valley State University, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

The problem that was the focus of this study is that many parents, both children who are typically developing and those who have special needs, are unsure of the benefits of inclusive preschool classrooms. This study is important because it enhanced understanding of how parents make informed decisions about what is educationally best for their children and how they interpret the challenges and benefits of inclusive education for their children. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom regarding benefits and limitations they may see, and reflected four research questions that guided this study. The conceptual framework of familiarity bias as described by Fox and Levav informed interview questions asked of nine parents of both typically developing children and children who have special needs. This study found multiple benefits and few limitations for all students in the inclusive classroom. The research also suggested that parents had a positive view of the inclusive classroom and its effect on their children. Based on this study, it is important to expand the availability of inclusive classrooms and ensure staff development is available to help teachers prepare to meet the needs of students in this type of classroom. This study contributes to an understanding of what is important to embed in future inclusive classrooms. Positive social change will result from this study when inclusive preschool classrooms are widely available, providing mutually supportive social and academic growth for all students.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The focus of this study was on the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom regarding benefits and limitations they see in inclusive preschool. This study was needed because some parents still insist on a segregated model of education, specifically when they feel a student with special needs behaviors may limit the time a teacher has to focus on their child, and so negatively affect their child's success (Sira et al., 2018). The U.S. Congress passed PL-94-142 Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 which mandated free, appropriate education for all children, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education (2015) indicated that this mandate extends to students at the preschool level. The knowledge gained from this helped researchers understand why children with special needs are underrepresented in the general education classroom (Lawrence et al., 2016). This study contributed to positive social change in that it highlighted the importance of parents, as stakeholders, in implementing practices in the inclusive classroom. In this chapter, I will present background information about the topic, the study's problem, purpose, research questions, and the conceptual framework of the study. I will also describe the nature of the study and provide a description of limitations that may affect transferability.

Background

Before the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) reauthorization, children with disabilities were put into classrooms separate from their typically developing peers (Lee et al., 2015). Subsequent to IDEA, all students must be educated in

the least restrictive environment (LRE), as described by Lawrence et al. (2016). According to Lawrence et al., LRE is consistent with guidelines offered by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, in that exposure to peer models is necessary for children with disabilities to build their social-emotional and language skills.

Parent support is a key factor when implementing inclusion at the preschool level (Lalvani, 2015). Lalvani (2015) found that parents felt inadequately informed about the district's use of inclusive practices. Sira et al. (2018) suggested that understanding perspectives of parents of children with disabilities and parents of typically developing children may reveal parents' understanding of the benefits and limitation of inclusive classrooms and may inform administrators and teachers of the challenges parents perceive that may limit their acceptance of special needs inclusion.

Although parents' attitudes towards inclusion have been documented at the elementary school level (Yu, 2021), no study has yet examined the attitudes of parents of preschool children with disabilities and parents of typically developing preschoolers (Sira et al., 2018). The shift to providing inclusive classrooms for preschool children and the limited literature that focuses on parent perspectives is the gap that this study addressed.

Problem Statement

The problem that was the focus of this study was that many parents of children who are typically developing and parents of children who have special needs are unsure of the benefits of inclusive preschool classrooms. Francisco et al. (2020) argued that more research should be done to gain information on inclusion's effectiveness for students with and without disabilities. Mawene and Bal (2018) pointed out that more

research is needed to determine how parents evaluate childcare options for their children. Paseka and Schwab (2020), in a survey of German parents of students in an early childhood inclusive classroom, found that even these parents were unsure of the benefits of inclusive education for their children. Yu and Park (2020) stated that future research is needed to examine what experiences affect parents' and children's attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Paseka and Schwab (2020) recommended that future studies about inclusive education include more about parent perspectives. In addition, Mawene and Bal (2018) suggested that future studies should examine inclusion from a broader context, including the point of view of parents.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom regarding benefits and limitations they may see in inclusive preschool. I followed a basic qualitative design using interviews. According to Caelli et al. (2003), this design is appropriate when the purpose is to explore perspectives of persons familiar with the phenomenon under study. The phenomenon under study in this paper was parents' perspectives of the benefits and limitations of preschool inclusion of children with special needs.

Research Questions

Four research questions (RQs) guided this study:

- RQ1: What do parents of typically developing students see as the benefits of an early childhood inclusive classroom?

- RQ2: What do parents of typically developing students see as the limitations of an early childhood inclusive classroom?
- RQ3: What do parents of students with special needs see as the benefits of an early childhood inclusive classroom?
- RQ4: What do parents of students with special needs see as the limitations of an early childhood inclusive classroom?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study included the theory of familiarity bias as described by Fox and Levav (2000). According to Fox and Levav, a person's familiarity with a subject affects their view of the subject. Previously, Park and Lessig (1981) suggested that the level of a decision maker's knowledge of a topic affects perceptions. According to Du and Budescu (2021), the more a person knows about a topic the more precise their decisions will be. Familiarity bias is logically connected to my study problem and purpose because parents' familiarity with their own children (both typically developing and special-needs children) may affect their perspectives regarding inclusion and its benefits and limitations in the early childhood inclusive classroom. I will describe the application of this theory to this study in more detail in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

To address the research questions in this study, I used a basic qualitative design using interviews. According to Caelli et al. (2003), this design is appropriate when the purpose is to explore perspectives of persons familiar with the phenomenon under study.

The phenomenon under study in this paper was parents' perspectives of the benefits and limitations of preschool inclusion of children with special needs.

I interviewed nine parents who had children ages 3 to 5 participating in an early childhood inclusive classroom. Six of those parents had both children who are typically developing and children with special needs, two had students who were typically developing, and two had students with special needs. The research site followed an inclusive model where all students, regardless of ability or disability, are in one classroom. As families moved in and out of the program, it was unclear if their enrollment or disenrollment choice was affected by their perspective of benefits or limitations of the inclusive nature of the program. Within the research site some families focused solely on the benefits of the inclusion model while others worried about the limitations.

Definitions

I used the terms defined below in this study:

- *Inclusive classroom*: An inclusive classroom is a classroom in which students who may or may not have an identified disability are enrolled, taught in the same classroom with any necessary supports (Phillips, 2021).
- *Special needs students*: A student who demonstrates needs that are not typical for children of the same age (Solone et al., 2020) .
- *Typically developing students*: Students with no documented disabilities who share developmental characteristics of the majority of same age peers (Noggle & Stites, 2018).

Assumptions

The first assumption in this study was that parents were honest when they volunteered to be interviewed for this study about their child's status as typically developing or identified as having a special need. I did not question parents' characterization of their child, but I recognize that parents may distort their child's status. This was a necessary assumption for this study because research questions were student-ability specific. The second assumption for this study was that the parents interviewed in this study were representative of parents who participate in inclusive programs generally. In a study that relies on volunteers, those who volunteer may be different in some way from those who choose not to volunteer, but I had no way of knowing if or how any differences manifest in the volunteers might have affected study results.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study encompassed perspectives of parents of children enrolled in an inclusive preschool program in the midwestern United States. This study was delimited to include parents of preschool students aged 3 to 5, both special needs students and typically developing students, who were enrolled in an inclusive classroom at the research site. Excluded from this study were parents of children younger than 3 enrolled at the research site, and parents who were known by me on either a personal or professional level. These delimitations may affect transferability to other sites that may enroll students of different groups than those described here.

Limitations

Because the study was conducted during or following school disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, parents' perspectives of the inclusive preschool program may have been affected by those disruptions and by the lack of vaccinations available for children in the target age range. Special needs students may have been affected by pre-existing medical conditions, concern for which during the pandemic may have affected parental responses. Another limitation is the possibility of research bias. I have worked in an inclusive program in the past and have my own opinions about the benefits and limitations of such programs. I am also currently the foster parent of an infant with special needs. I guarded against the intrusion of my own perspectives in data collection and analysis by following the principles of reflexivity described by Subramani (2019). According to Subramani, it is important in a reflective approach to remain aware of the choices made at each phase of research including what you wear, how you fix your hair, and the words you use. Reflecting on the process made me aware of the factors that influenced my research. I was continually aware of the factors that influence my research, and I reflected on how they affected this study (see Subramani, 2019**).**

Significance

This study is significant in that exploring parents' perspective about inclusion in preschool settings helps teachers and administrators understand parents' concerns regarding inclusion and can help them maximize the benefits parents attach to inclusion. By resolving concerns and amplifying benefits, administrators may guide parents to embrace inclusion of all children in preschool classrooms. Reis et al. (2022) confirmed

that children who have contact with peers with special needs at an early age have more positive attitudes surrounding individuals with special needs than do children who do not have this experience.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom regarding benefits and limitations they may see in inclusive preschool. Paseka and Schwab (2020) stated that future studies should be done to include more parent perspectives. The problem that was addressed was that many parents of children who are typically developing and parents of children who have special needs are unsure of the benefits of inclusive preschool classrooms. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom regarding benefits and limitations they may see in inclusive preschool. Four research questions guided this study, about limitations and about benefits, reported individually by parents of typically developing children and by parents of children with special needs. A basic qualitative study with interviews was described, along with the study's framework of familiarity bias, as described by Fox and Levav (2000). Chapter 2 presents current literature relevant to this study, along with a detailed explanation of the theory of familiarity bias.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that was the focus of this study was that many parents of children who are typically developing and parents of children who have special needs are unsure of the benefits of inclusive preschool classrooms. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom regarding benefits and limitations they may see in inclusive preschool. Francisco et al. (2020) pointed out the need to examine inclusion from a broader context than what has been done in the past. In this chapter, I describe my literature search strategy and provide a more detailed description of the theory of familiarity bias as described by Fox and Levav (2000), which formed the study's conceptual framework. I then present an in-depth literature review of concepts relevant to preschool inclusion, including the history of inclusion in the United States; the benefits of inclusion, particularly for preschool children; limitations associated with preschool inclusion; and the importance of parents' perceptions to the successful implementation of inclusive practices.

Literature Search Strategy

I used search engines both through Walden and through Google to access scholarly literature for this study. Most frequently I visited the Walden Library, where I limited my searches to peer-reviewed articles through Sage Journals, Education Source, ERIC and NCES publications. I narrowed my search to show peer-reviewed articles published in the past 5 years. The search terms I used included but were not limited to *early childhood inclusion, classroom, early childhood funding, education theories,*

exclusive early childhood classroom, familiarity bias, general education student parent concerns inclusion, inclusion, inclusion classroom, inclusive practices, intervention, parent choices in education, parent of special needs students, parent perspective of early childhood inclusion, peer interaction with special education, preschool inclusion, special education, and *teacher.* Many of these terms were used as the result of finding terms in articles that suggested fresh avenues of investigation of my topic.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was the theory of familiarity bias, as described by Fox and Levav (2000). Familiarity bias is at work when something is viewed to be beneficial based on personal knowledge (familiarity) of the subject (Fox & Levav, 2000). Fox and Levav asserted that individuals act based on the perceived value of familiar concepts and also act or neglect to act based on a perceived lack of value of unfamiliar concepts. According to Fox and Levav, when the answer to a question or solution to a problem is unknown, individuals seek the opinion of others, thereby creating familiarity by association.

Du and Budescu (2021) ascertained that familiarity affects the precision of what is evaluated. The more an individual knows about a topic the more precise their responses will be. The action of familiarity bias and precise knowledge that familiarity often provides is commonly seen in the realm of financial decision-making, in that a person typically invests in a product or industry they know, as a way to reduce the risk that is often associated with the unknown (Du & Budescu, 2021). Reece et al. (2016) agreed that people prefer taking a risk on a familiar source of uncertainty. The more people learn

about something, the more familiar they become, and their views and opinions about the topic may change based on the new information (Park & Lessig, 1977).

In addition, according to Park and Lessig (1981), the confidence that one has in their choices is directly related to their familiarity with those choices. The greater the familiarity one has with the options available (or with a single option among many), the more confident an individual feels with the decision they make (Park & Lessig, 1981). Hockey (1993) suggested when a person is familiar with a topic or setting they are more likely to share honest and deeper thoughts than if the topic or setting is unfamiliar to them. Familiarity injects bias into decision-making; Katyal and King (2011) stated that neutrality in decision-making is nearly impossible to achieve when an individual is closely connected to the topic at hand.

Familiarity bias offered an informative framework for this study because the parents I interviewed were assumed to be familiar with the program in which their child was enrolled and were able to answer questions with precision based on their experiences. At the same time, parents were assumed to be familiar with the educational and social needs of their own child, whether typically developing or a child with special needs, and to have been well informed and have deep perspectives regarding the benefits and limitations of an inclusive classroom for their child, whether their child was typically developing or had special needs. The theory of familiarity bias suggested that parents may not be neutral regarding the benefits and limitations of an inclusive classroom for children, but may have strongly held ideas based on their familiarity with their own child.

Familiarity bias informed the research questions and guided the creation of interview questions.

Literature Related to Key Concepts and Variables

In this section, I review literature on key concepts as they relate to inclusion. Historically, inclusion has been largely focused on the concept of a least restrictive environment for students with special needs (Solone et al., 2020). I also describe the benefits and limitations of the inclusive classroom, as presented in current literature. Finally, this section explores what is known about the ideas parents of preschoolers have expressed to previous researchers about the inclusive classroom.

History of Inclusion in the United States

Inclusion, in the education setting, means providing an instructional environment in which all students, who may or may not have an identified disability, are enrolled and taught in the same classroom with any necessary supports (Phillips, 2021). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education (2015) have stated that all young disabled children must have access to high quality inclusive preschool where individual support is provided to enable them to meet high expectations. Prior to the adoption of inclusive practices, students were placed in classrooms on the basis of their disability, resulting in segregation of these students from their typically developing peers. Inclusion was a focus for IDEA in 1975 when it was adopted, which changed the focus from merely accepting students with disabilities in school to meaningfully including these students in schools. The number of students receiving special education services increased from 2 million in 1990 to more than 4.6 million in

2013 (Bialka, 2017). As the number of special education students increased, so did the guidelines and requirements for educating students with a disability in the LRE (Yell et al., 1998). According to Solone et al. (2020), special education students should have the opportunity to interact and be educated with their typically developing peers without unnecessary restrictions. LRE, as part of IDEA, resulted in a push to implement inclusive schools, with the understanding that this would best meet the needs of students with disabilities (Hunt, 2011). Coviello and DeMatthews (2021) pointed out that the word "inclusion" does not appear in IDEA, which has made the implementation of inclusive practices vague and not consistent across states and school districts. Barton and Smith (2015) reported that fewer than half of special needs students 3 to 5 years old receive their special education services in the regular education classroom.

In addition, students in the private school sector do not have the same access to educational services as public school students because private schools are not required to conform to provide them. Under IDEA requirements, local education agencies are obligated to ensure that private school students with disabilities can participate in IDEA (Olson et al., 2021). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education (2015) made the point that although local education agencies are obligated to support private school children, they are not obligated to provide direct services to students. Free and appropriate public education is guaranteed to students participating in public school programing but is not guaranteed if a student is placed by their parent in a private school. The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce (*Helping Students Succeed Through the Power of School*

Choice, 2017) also stated that private schools have no obligation to meet special education requirements and stated that parents report many private schools insist they sign away their IDEA rights.

Childcare and preschool programs that are tax-supported must follow IDEA in the same way public schools are required to do (*Helping Students Succeed Through the Power of School Choice*, 2017). This includes Head Start and school district prekindergarten programs, for example. However, childcare and preschools that are independently funded, similar to private elementary and secondary schools, are not required to follow IDEA and may exclude children with disabilities or enroll them but not provide inclusion or supportive services (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This means that parents of children with disabilities who wish an inclusive education for their young child must seek out private childcare or preschools that welcome and accommodate their child and cannot assume all early childhood facilities do this (Olson et al., 2021). In addition, parents of typically developing children may choose to enroll their child in a center that is inclusive or may choose another center that excludes or does not accommodate children with special needs. Parents of children enrolled in private schools, including independently-funded childcare, may choose the setting for their child's education based to some extent on their understanding of the benefits of inclusion.

The Benefits of Inclusion

Inclusion has been demonstrated to benefit both typically developing students and students with special needs. In the domain of social skills, for example, Hansen et al. (2022) stated that interacting and observing positive social interaction among peers

benefits the social development of young children with disabilities. Collins et al. (2018) argued that it is a benefit for young children to develop early social skills that are modeled by their peers, and that peer models of social skills are critical for students with a disability. At the same time, Kart and Kart (2021) reported that, in the inclusion classroom, typically developing students develop good attitudes and offer support to students with disabilities, thereby improving friendship rates for both groups. Kart and Kart found that peer acceptance and ability to form friendships was higher in the inclusion classroom than in classrooms without inclusion. Parents and staff both shared the possibility of creating a sense belonging for all children if inclusion is introduced in the preschool years (Kalsudd, 2022). Kefallinou et al. (2020) found the social inclusion of all learners prepares them for life experiences.

Kart and Kart (2021) shared that in the preschool and primary years inclusion also had a positive effect on typically developing students' academic performance. Lundqvist (2021) found a program model that modifies instruction, environment, and materials to meet the individual needs of students shows positive academic gains for both typically developing students and students with special needs. Preschool children of all abilities made significantly bigger gains in language development when paired with peers with stronger language skills (Chen et al., 2020). Kefallinou et al. (2020) said an inclusive setting showed both short- and long-term academic benefits for students without disabilities. According to Kart and Kart (2021), inclusion is beneficial both academically and socially for students with disabilities, noting that students in this setting outperformed students in a more exclusive setting in both areas that teachers thought that

students benefitted from inclusive classrooms when instruction was engaging and differentiated. Francisco et al. (2020) noted, however, the need to gather more data on both the social and academic effect of inclusion on students with and without disabilities.

In the early years of inclusion, Sanacore (1996) voiced the need for collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers to meet the needs of all students. Morningstar et al. (2015) shared the benefits of having a team-teaching approach in the inclusive classroom, supporting the early understanding of inclusion needs. A special education teacher and a general education teacher work together to ensure that the needs of students with all abilities are met and optimal learning in achieved. Collaboration among teachers in the service of all students is a hallmark of good educational practice, and is supported by inclusion (Morningstar et al., 2015). Teachers shared the view that children's function level and ability to adapt to their environment played a key role in the success or failure of inclusion (PV, P.P, & Nash, 2022).

Limitations Associated With Preschool Inclusion

The initial limitation associated with inclusion, according to Francisco et al. (2020), is that because inclusion is used as a broad term, many states and schools interpret the use of inclusion differently. Zabeli and Gjelaj (2020) found that among the difficulties in the implementation of inclusive practices is the problem of determining what qualifies a student as typically developing or as having special needs. Students identified by an educational system as having special needs could have physical, social emotional, or cognitive limitations, depending on the perspective of that educational

system, and this identification might be different or lacking in a neighboring educational system; to some extent a determination of special needs depends on what the local system finds are the most significant challenges in the classroom (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020). Another problem in identifying children with and without special needs is a reliance on outdated ideas. For example, the state of Michigan released a collective action plan for education of children with special needs in 2022 that cited no research more recent than 2014 (Michigan Department of Education, 2022). According to Ydo (2020), identification of children with special needs and the definition of "typically developing" are continually being updated, but many recent policies rely on old research.

A second limitation is that inclusion may inadvertently intensify pressure for students to conform (Antoninis et al., 2020). Ainscow (2020) recognized that successful inclusion requires an understanding of social dynamics to lessen the focus on minority members of a group and prevent minority members from being defined by their differences from the group. Antoninis et al. (2020) further explained that conformity pressures may come from peers who stigmatize or label students who receive additional supports. Delivering individualized and differentiated instruction that meets the needs of all students requires much effort to alleviate the stigma that may attach itself to students (Antoninis et al., 2020). Ainscow (2020) noted that inclusion represents an effort to respond to diversity by learning to live with and respond to differences.

Another limitation associated with preschool inclusion is the need for teacher preparation in implementing an inclusive program, preparation that is often lacking (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020). Yazçayir and Gürgür (2021) stated professional development

that prepares teachers to meet the needs of special education students in the general education classroom is an important element of student success. Zabeli and Gjelaj (2020) pointed out that inadequate training hinders teachers' ability to meet the needs of both special education students typically developing students. When teachers feel unprepared or challenged by a change from what they expect in a situation, they may resist the change (Bialka, 2017). Diltz (2021) reported successful inclusion requires staff trained on inclusive education and behavior management and trained in working with students with special needs. Yu and Park (2020) reported that information in special education courses aided teacher candidates in better understanding inclusion as well as increasing the level of knowledge they had about students with disabilities which made them more comfortable in the inclusive classroom. Noggle and Stites (2018) further shared it is necessary to teach universally recognized strategies in preservice teacher programs. Bryant (2020), in interviews with preschool teachers about their perspectives of preschool inclusion, found the need for more training in inclusion, and also that teachers recognized that attitudes of both teachers and parents influence the effectiveness of inclusion.

The attitude of the teacher regarding children with special needs and inclusion of special needs students into the general education classroom can directly affect the success of students both with disabilities and without (Kalsudd, 2022). Yu and Park (2020) pointed out the effect of childhood experiences in an inclusive classroom is influenced by teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Zabeli and Gjelaj (2020) highlighted that if a teacher has a positive view of the success of inclusion it is more likely to be successful. Yu

(2019) suggested early childhood teachers need to feel that they can effectively meet the needs of children with disabilities in order to have a successful classroom.

Parents' Perceptions of Inclusion

Hilbert (2014), writing in the first part of the 21st century, noted parents of typically developing children can be hesitant to enroll their children in an inclusive classroom because of misconceptions or stigma about the negative impact inclusion may have on their children. According to Kalsudd (2022), parents today continue to be concerned about inclusion, citing the belief that class sizes are too large to meet the educational needs of both typically developing students and children with disabilities. This concern is felt by parents of both groups, but parents of children with disabilities are particularly concerned (Francisco et al., 2020). For parents to feel comfortable with the inclusion classroom it is important to make sure the special needs student is included both physically and socially (Francisco et al., 2020). Ainscow (2020) found the views of families regarding participation of all learners in general education classrooms is important to the success of inclusion programs.

Cologon (2019) found that when inclusion is working families feel it has a positive effect on both the well-being of the student and family. Simón et al. (2022) said all families found many benefits of inclusion both for students with special needs and general education students. The way families view inclusion is important, because, as Yu (2021) reported, the ideas and attitudes children have toward others, including individuals with disabilities, are shaped largely by adults in their life; this is why understanding parents' perceptions is important. Yet, Yu also revealed many parents of typically

developing children do not discuss disabilities with their children, largely because of the parents' past experience or lack of experience with people with disabilities. Babik and Gardner (2021) wrote that in the early years children form opinions about social groups and prejudices, which makes it important for parents to have a positive attitude when talking with their young children. Babik and Gardner further supported the importance of positive attitudes individuals with special needs as an important factor in promoting social inclusion.

Many times, parents of children with special needs make decisions about a preschool student's educational placement while they are still learning about their child's abilities and still learning how to be a parent (Singer et al., 2020). Singer et al. (2020) also recognized that as parents learn to support their disabled children's needs, they became more confident in the extent to which inclusion might fit their child. Kalsudd (2022) found parents reported that communication with them is a key element to successful inclusion for students.

Inclusion in the Preschool

Robbins et al. (2022) found most students in an inclusive preschool classroom demonstrated better social skills than did children enrolled in a more exclusive setting and exhibited a decrease in negative behaviors. McKee et al. (2022) said inclusion classrooms at the preschool level are widespread, and include private schools, and both federally and state-funded preschool programs. Kasperzak et al (2020) reported there is a lower cost associated with inclusive programs, for public schools, community education, and Head Start programs, than costs of maintaining separate programs. Despite these

benefits and incentives, parents have a hard time finding space for their child in an inclusion setting due to lack of program availability (McKee et al., 2022).

In addition, the programs that are available may not provide the best experience for all children. Muccio and Kidd (2018) said having specialized staff in the general education classroom was a huge benefit for Head Start programs, which are tax-supported, because the cost of specialized teachers can be spread between both general education and federal education funding sources. Such resources may not be available to community preschool programs; Zabeli and Gjelaj (2020) emphasized inclusion depends on both financial resources and institutional support. Coelho et al. (2019) found the quality of teacher-child interactions in the inclusive classroom often depends on the child's disability and can affect the quality of child engagement. Specifically, children with high needs were much less engaged in whole group instruction and, in fact, whole group activities negatively affected the at-risk student (Coelho et al., 2019). Lundqvist (2021) agreed child-focused strategies are beneficial for children's disabilities, and these supports and strategies should be implemented in the preschool inclusion framework. Yu and Park (2020) indicated there is a need for more support and resources to meet the instructional and behavioral needs of all students in the inclusive classroom, which suggests that these needs may not always be fully met without intentional effort.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature surrounding parents' perspectives of inclusive practices in preschools that enroll both typically developing students and students with disabilities in shared classrooms revealed several themes. First there are benefits for both typically

developing students and students with special needs, in terms of peer modeling of social interactions, peer support in academic situations, and teacher collaboration and support between general and special education teachers. Second, it is equally important to recognize the limitations associated with this type of classroom, including the broadness of the term inclusion, the pressure on all students to conform, and the attitude and preparation of teachers in the classroom. In addition, the preschool parent of a child with a disability may be still adapting to the idea of their child's unique educational needs, and the parent of a typically developing child may have little experience with people who are disabled and may not be fully aware of the differences presented by children with special needs. Given all this, the question of parents' perspective of inclusion at the preschool level was worthy of consideration, but no recent research had explored the perspectives of parents of preschool children who do or do not have a diagnosed special need regarding inclusion. In this study I explored the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom regarding benefits and limitations they noted in an inclusive preschool. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology by which I conducted this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom regarding benefits and limitations they may see in inclusive preschool. Sections in this chapter describe the research design for this study, my role as the researcher, and the method by which I conducted this study, including participant recruitment, instrumentation, and procedures, and my plan for analyzing the data. Subsequent sections address issues of trustworthiness and ethical practices.

Research Design and Rationale

Four research questions guided this study:

- RQ1: What do parents of typically developing students see as the benefits of an early childhood inclusive classroom?
- RQ2: What do parents of typically developing students see as the limitations of an early childhood inclusive classroom?
- RQ3: What do parents of students with special needs see as the benefits of an early childhood inclusive classroom?
- RQ4: What do parents of students with special needs see as the limitations of an early childhood inclusive classroom?

The central phenomenon under consideration in this study was parents' perspectives regarding inclusive classrooms for their preschool children.

I followed a basic qualitative design, as described by Caelli et al. (2003). This design supported the use of interviews as a method by which to explore a topic through

the lens of individuals who have relevant ideas or experiences to share (see Caelli et al., 2003). Alternative methods would have been less suitable in fulfilling my study's purpose. For example, observation in a basic qualitative design framework would have been ineffective because the phenomenon under study, parents' perspectives, was not observable. Similarly, document analysis would have been ineffective, because there was unlikely to be written evidence of parents' perspectives available to be analyzed. A quantitative method, such as a survey, would have permitted me to query many more parents than I could interview, and so would have provided a powerful data set, but a survey relies on preset questions developed by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2016), and so would not have helped discover the perspectives and experiences of parents. Therefore, a basic qualitative design using interviews was an appropriate method to employ in conducting this study and likely more effective than alternative designs and methods.

Role of the Researcher

My role in this study was that of an observer-participant, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), in that I was an "insider" to the group but did not contribute my own experiences or opinions. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that personal experiences affect the questions a researcher finds worth asking and aids in determining how they will find the answer. As an observer-participant, I found that some pieces of information became apparent based on my knowledge of the research site and its philosophy. It was important to participate in the observation yet not become overly involved in the activity as information was gathered (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

I have worked as a teacher at the childcare center that was the location of this study. I no longer work at this site, but I am familiar with the center philosophy and practices. Some of the parents interviewed were familiar with my previous role at the center, which helped them be more comfortable in sharing experiences and perspectives. I assured parent participants that they should in no way feel influenced by my prior role at the center, but be assured that I was interested in their experiences with inclusion. It is important for the researcher to establish connections with interview participants, to encourage engagement in the discussions and to better understand what participants share (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As recommended by Ravitch and Carl (2016), I established an atmosphere of collaboration and understanding with the participants yet remained aware of boundaries. I thoroughly explained the purpose of the study and asked participants to work with me to better understand their perspectives about inclusion in the preschool classroom, to balance power between participants and myself. In order to ensure collaborative tones, I reviewed participants' responses with them and gave them the opportunity to add to or change their responses. I provided informed consent documentation to provide reassurance that confidentiality will be maintained, and that responses would only be used for the purpose of this study.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The population that was the focus of this study was parents of preschool children. I used purposeful sampling, as described by Suri (2011), to recruit prospective participants who self-identified as the parent of a typically developing preschool child or

of a preschool child with special needs. Purposeful sampling was necessary to ensure study participants could inform the four research questions about the benefits and challenges of preschool experiences that are inclusive of children with special needs. Criteria for participation included that participants were the parent of a child aged 3 to 5, and the parent's child was at the time of the interview enrolled in or was recently disenrolled from an inclusive classroom as their primary childcare experience. Excluded were parents of children of younger than 3 and older than 5, parents whose child was not at the time of the interview or never was enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom, and parents whose child was at the time of the interview or previously enrolled in an inclusive classroom only as a supplemental childcare experience but not their primary childcare experience. Katyal and King (2011) shared that the information gained from those interviewed may be biased on their relationship with the interviewer. For this purpose, the parents interviewed were persons with whom I had no prior relationship. This study was conducted in a small (year-round population about 50,000), heavily forested county in one midwestern state in the United States; all participants resided in this county. Criteria for participation were described in participant recruitment materials and on the consent form, and eligibility was confirmed with each participant at the start of the interview.

I interviewed nine parents who had children ages 3 to 5 participating in an early childhood inclusive classroom. Five of those parents had both children who were typically developing and children with special needs, two had students who were typically developing, and two had students who had special needs. According to Saunders

et al. (2018), a small number of participants can be appropriate for an interview-based study in which informants are guided to provide rich, detailed accounts of their thoughts and experiences. Saturation was achieved in this interview group, in that, in the later interviews, no new data were forthcoming.

Participants were parents of students enrolled in a preschool program run by the study county's regional educational service agency in collaboration with five local school districts. This program receives funds from the study state's department of education. Teachers in the program hold an elementary teaching certificate along with an early childhood endorsement. The classroom assistants hold a Child Development Credential or an associate degree in child development. All classrooms have one teacher and at least one assistant to ensure a staff ratio of one adult to eight children. Students of all abilities are included in the classrooms and are supported by special education staff from the county's regional educational service agency.

I let parents know about my study by distributing flyers to parents in the community who shared information by word of mouth with other families that participated in the program. As interested parents contacted me, I emailed them a consent form. Some parents responded to the consent form by emailing "I consent" and some parents gave verbal consent to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

I conducted semi structured interviews guided by 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix). These questions were based on the study's conceptual framework and probed participants' familiarity prior to enrolling their child in preschool with inclusive

preschools, their familiarity with special needs students and with typically developing students, the experience of others whom they knew regarding inclusive preschools, and any change of opinion following their child's inclusive preschool enrollment. Question 1 and 1a established whether the participant's child was typically developing or a special needs child and permitted me to determine the lens through which each participant views the benefits (RQ1 and RQ3) and limitations (RQ2 and RQ4) of an inclusive preschool experience, which were probed in the remaining interview questions. Interview Questions 2 and 3 determined the level of familiarity parents had with special needs students and inclusive preschools before they enrolled their own child; familiarity was a key part of the study's conceptual framework. Questions 8 and 9 probed for satisfaction with teacher support for a child's social skill development and academic preparation, because those factors were described in the literature as relevant to parents. Interview Question 10, "If another parent of a typically developing [special needs] child was looking for a preschool, what would you tell them about classrooms that include both typically developing and special needs children?" concluded the interview with a summary judgment of the value of an inclusive program for children like the participant's child. As in Question 10, each question included in brackets language that enabled me to tailor the question to each parent, based on their child's characteristics and on their child's current enrollment in a preschool program.

I asked an expert with a doctorate in education to review the interview questions in light of the study's purpose and research questions. This person confirmed that the questions had power to further my study but suggested that I consider some minor

changes to wording. This person also suggested that I break some of my questions into two parts distinguishing between the children with special needs and typically developing children. These suggestions were followed.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I talked with the director who managed all five locations of the focus preschool program and asked for permission to recruit parent volunteers to participate in the interviews. The director was not comfortable distributing fliers, so they were copied and distributed in the community. I was able to get volunteers from three different centers in the county.

The flyer was very brief and explained who I was, what information I was hoping to gather for my study, and who was eligible to participate. When parents emailed me to express interest in participating in my study, I emailed them a copy of my consent form as well as a follow-up question asking if their child was typically developing or a special needs student. I scheduled parent interviews for a time that worked best in their schedule. I gave parents the opportunity to tell me a time that worked best for them.

I conducted my study by carrying out phone interviews with participants. By conducting my interviews via phone, participants were able to choose a day and time convenient to them and avoided challenges they might have with an in-person interview, such as having to find childcare to participate. I allowed 45 minutes per interview though many were completed in less time. I audio recorded my interviews, using my computer, so that I could review answers and code them accordingly. Participants were thanked for their participation and exited the study at the end of their interview session. I sent them a

transcript of our interview at the email address that they provided so that they could review it for accuracy.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis began with the organization of interview data. I reviewed each automatically created transcript while listening to its audio file, and made corrections as needed. These corrected files were emailed to each participant for their review. I used transcripts returned by participants as the raw data set. Then, to prepare the transcripts for analysis, I removed my own words and any extraneous conversation, such as comments about the weather. I removed formatting, such as line indents and blank lines, so the text of each transcript was presented in a single block of text.

Coding of the data began by separating the text of each transcript into individual thoughts. These thoughts were both single sentences and multiple sentences, but each one conveyed, as much as possible, a single idea. These thoughts were indicated on the transcript file with a hard line break, so the transcript became a presentation of individual thoughts, which were in vivo codes. I then transferred these codes to an Excel file, pasting them in Column B. Because of how I separated each thought unit with a line break, Excel automatically placed each code on its own row. I then inserted in each row of Column A the participant identifier (e.g., P1). I continued with each of the transcripts, creating in Excel a single spreadsheet that included all codes (thought units) from every transcript in Column B and all participant identifiers on every row of Column A.

With the in vivo codes identified and organized in Excel, I then began axial coding by searching for similar ideas among the in vivo codes. I determined what each

code seemed to be about and labeled that idea on the matching row in Column C. As I encountered each code, I labeled it in Column C, reusing labels as I went, so that the very large number of codes became categorized according to a far smaller number of labels. These labels were categories of data, as described by Saldaña (2021). I then used the data-sort function of Excel to move rows of codes on the spreadsheet according to their associated categories.

The final step in data analysis was to organize the resulting 14 categories of data by theme. In Column D of the spreadsheet, I inserted a theme label that described the category on a particular series of rows in relation to other categories in the data. These themes recalled the study conceptual framework as well as finding themes organically from analysis of category contents. I reused these theme labels across the various categories, assigning only five themes to all the categories and their associated codes. I then sorted the data again, this time by theme, so Column D depicted the themes that emerged from the data. I connected these themes to the study research questions so I could answer the research questions with reference to themes in the data.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is described using four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nassaji, 2020). I instituted strategies designed that established these four criteria explicitly, supporting trustworthiness throughout this study. With trustworthiness being established in the study, I presented its findings with confidence.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the extent to which research findings are believable (Nassaji, 2020). Credibility in this study was fulfilled by interviewing parents who have both knowledge and personal experiences in the area of early childhood inclusive programs. I established credibility by accurately sharing the information that was gathered from the participants interviewed as well as by asking them to verify the transcripts of interviews.

Transferability

Nassaji (2020) stated that transferability refers to the ability to apply the results of a qualitative study to different situations. I supported transferability in this study by providing detailed descriptions of the participants sought for this study, my procedures in conducting the study, and my process in analyzing the data. This provides readers with the information they need to determine the transferability of my findings to their own settings.

Dependability

Carl and Ravitch (2018) described dependability in qualitative research as the ability to conduct a study in a way that is consistent and stable. I demonstrated dependability in my research by asking my dissertation committee to review my analysis process and by making sure that my research process is both logical and clearly documented. Dependability in this study was presented through the consistency of my documentation and reviewing of the analysis process.

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research is the extent to which the data are relatively neutral and not tainted by the researcher's bias (Carl & Ravitch, 2018). I established confirmability by providing participants an opportunity to verify the transcripts of interviews. I also included in my research detailed steps of my data analysis.

Ethical Procedures

I received approval to conduct my study (11-21-23-0740318) from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The rights of all participants were protected by keeping their identity confidential. Written or verbal consent was obtained from each participant before an interview was conducted. At any time during the study participants had the right to withdraw if they wish.

All files associated with this study will be protected from misuse. Digital files will be saved on my personal computer and paper files will be stored in the file cabinet in my home office. All files and data will be kept for 5 years following the conclusion of this study. After 5 years all paper files will be shredded, and digital files will be wiped from my personal computer using the eraser tool.

Summary

In summary, this qualitative study explored the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom. I researched perspectives of parents both what they perceive as benefits and limitations of an inclusive preschool classroom. This study was guided by four research questions about how parents of both typically developing

preschool students and of preschool students with special needs regard the benefits and the limitations of an early childhood inclusive classroom. My role as the researcher in this study was that of the observer participant. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling from an inclusive preschool program in a rural county in the midwestern United States. I interviewed nine parents of typically developing and special needs students. Interview data were analyzed using in vivo and axial coding. Results of this study are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom regarding benefits and limitations they may see in inclusive preschool. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What do parents of typically developing students see as the benefits of an early childhood inclusive classroom?
- RQ2: What do parents of typically developing students see as the limitations of an early childhood inclusive classroom?
- RQ3: What do parents of students with special needs see as the benefits of an early childhood inclusive classroom?
- RQ4: What do parents of students with special needs see as the limitations of an early childhood inclusive classroom?

This chapter describes the organizational structure of the study, including the setting and participant demographics. I describe what data was collected and how these data were analyzed. To conclude this chapter, I detail the results of the study and evidence of the trustworthiness in the findings.

Setting

The research for this study was conducted in a rural county in the midwestern United States. The county offers state funded preschool programs that include students with disabilities and those who are typically developing. Interviews were conducted in the fall of 2023, at which time nothing out of the ordinary was happening in the district. It

was reported that there was some staff turnover in the preceding year, so staff at the time of this study may not have had a lot of experience in the inclusion model.

Demographics

This study was delimited to include parents of preschool students aged 3 to 5, both special needs students and typically developing students, who were enrolled in an inclusive classroom at the research site. The research participants consisted of nine parents, including five who were parents of students with special needs, and four who were parents of typically developing students. All the participants interviewed were women. Some of the participants were parents to both special needs students and typically developing students. No other demographic information was collected.

Data Collection

I conducted semi structured interviews over the phone with each of the nine participants, following the procedures described in Chapter 3. Participants were given the opportunity to choose the time of their interview to ensure that they had the time to answer questions. I was in a private office and each participant was given the opportunity to locate themselves in a private space if they felt necessary. Each interview ranged from 15 to 30 minutes, and each was recorded using Audacity audio recording software on a private laptop. A couple of the participants needed further probing to confidently answer the initial questions. Each participant chose a time that was convenient for them, and phone and recording tools worked smoothly, so no variations from the planned procedures or unusual circumstances were noted during data collection.

Data Analysis

To analyze the interview data, I listened to each recording and transcribed them by listening and writing. I explored transcription software but experienced multiple inaccuracies in the tested transcriptions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft word document. I read through each document to ensure accuracy and then sent them to participants to check for accuracy. Once the documents were checked for accuracy and began the coding process. There were no requests for changes. I began my first coding cycle using in vivo codes. I derived 176 codes from the transcripts.

Codes were then organized into 14 categories: academic benefits, academic limitations, medical needs, parent concern, parent knowledge, parent satisfaction, peer relationships, social- emotional benefits, social-emotional limitations, staff knowledge, student accommodations, student needs, student support, and teacher support. Categories were further organized into five themes. These themes were benefits and limitations to student learning, benefits and limitations based on student specific needs, benefits and limitations of peer connections, benefits and limitations of teacher input in the inclusive classroom, and parent understanding of inclusion. Academic benefits, academic limitations, peer relationships, staff knowledge, and student accommodations were categories associated with theme of benefits and limitations to student learning. Student needs were associated with benefits and limitations based on student specific needs. Social emotional benefits and social emotional limitations were connected to the benefits and limitations of peer connections. Teacher support was connected to the benefits and limitations of teacher input in the inclusive classroom. Parent concern, parent knowledge,

parent satisfaction and student support were connected to parent understanding of inclusion. The themes were then associated with research questions in this way: Research questions 1,2,3, and 4 were all addressed using data from the five themes. This was an unexpected outcome but it reflected the fact that many of the participants had children who were typically developing and also children with special needs. They were able to answer with distinctly different perspectives for children in both research groups, typically developing and children of special needs. The relationship among categories, themes, and research questions is illustrated in Figure 1.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility I accurately shared the information that was gathered from the participants interviewed as well as by asking them to verify the transcripts of interviews. I interviewed participants who had both knowledge and experience in an early childhood inclusive program. Transferability in this study is supported by the descriptions of the participants sought for this study, my procedures in conducting the study, and my process in analyzing the data. In addition, confirmability was established by providing participants an opportunity to verify the transcripts of interviews.

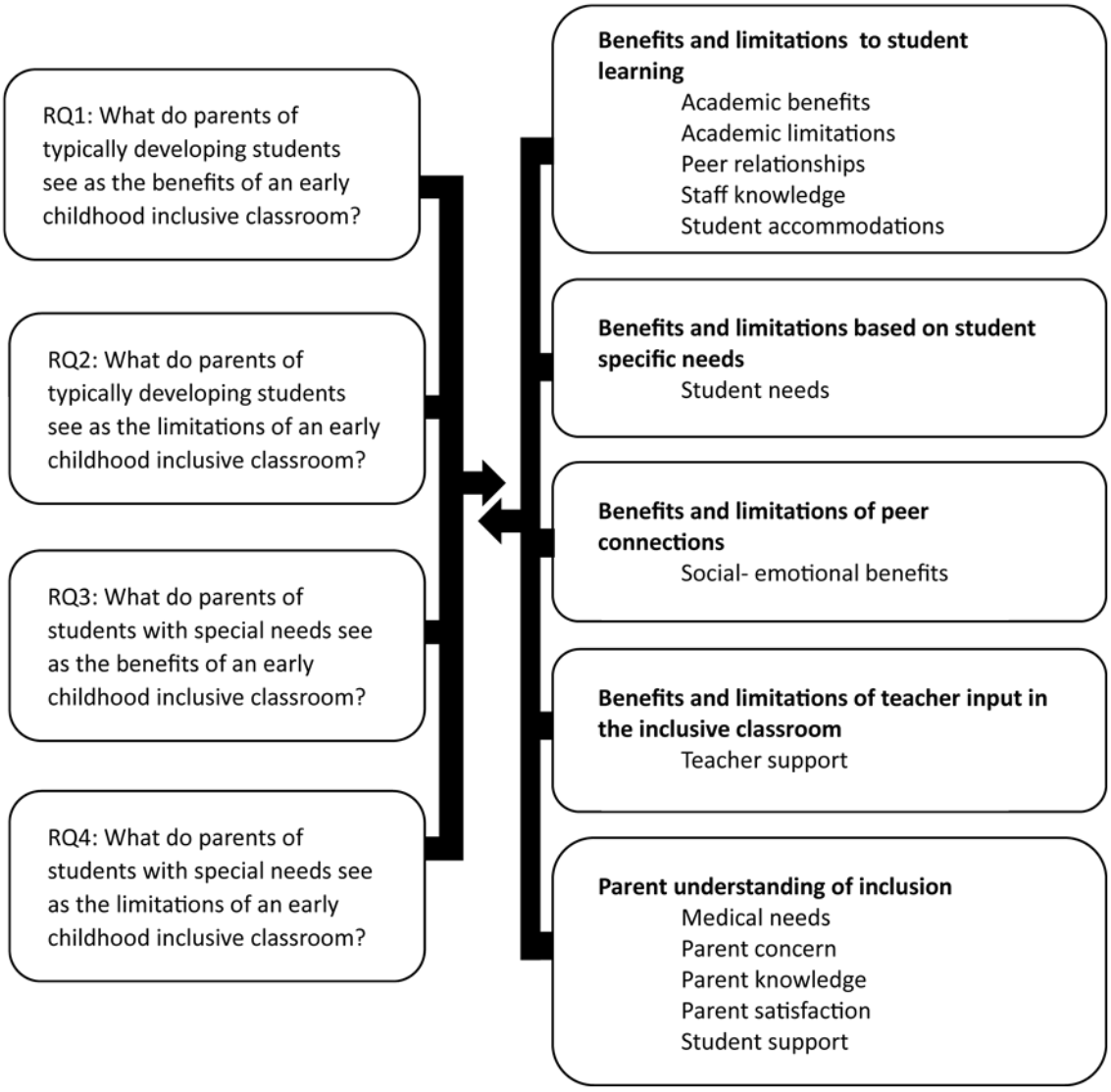
Results

Preliminary Findings

Many participants shared that they had little to no background knowledge of the inclusion program before their child entered the program. In response to the question

Figure 1.

Research Questions with Associated Themes and Categories



"before starting the Building Bridges preschool program, how familiar were you with special needs children" responses included "I have family members with special needs," "only my child," and "a moderate amount through foster care." Most of the knowledge

that parents described about children with special needs came from personal experience with their own child.

Another important finding not associated with the research questions but that affected how the data were analyzed is that six of the nine parents had a child or were close friends with a family who had a child who was typically developing and also a child who had special needs. When I began recruiting participants, I expected participating parents to have personal experience only with typically developing children or only with children with special needs. The research questions reflected this expectation. The fact that two thirds of parents interviewed were familiar with inclusive situations in their own lives meant my intention to find contrasts in perspective among parents of different children based on familiarity bias was unsupported. This contributed to a crossover in responses from various parents that will be reflected in the results for each research question, presented below.

Results for RQ1

RQ1 asked, “What do parents of typically developing students see as the benefits of an early childhood inclusive classroom?” Elements of all five themes were applied to this RQ. Key findings show that parents of typically developing students see the benefits of students learning from peers both socially and academically within the inclusive classroom. On the topic of academic benefits, P4 stated, “I think they're a huge part of academic learning. I feel like a big majority of the things that they've learned and that they know comes from school.” P8 further shared, “[A benefit of the program is] it gives examples of each for each other, kind of. So, for instance, if it's something that, say, [my

child] does know, then she can demonstrate it." P8 pointed out that "kids learn from each other a lot better than they learn from adults because, you know, we're different than them."

In addition to academic learning, parents shared the social benefits of the inclusion classroom. P1 said, "Definitely group learning. He's learned how to work with other students, not just at home with siblings or the other kids that he's around. And social skills, being away from mom and interacting with other adults." This view was shared by P8, who noted, "[One benefit], definitely, is being able to be around other kids, because with the whole COVID thing, you know, with her being born in 2020, she spent the first big chunk of her life only being around immediate family." P4 concurred:

> I think it helps, especially in [my typically developing child's] situation where if she has other kids in her class that have special needs that she knows that her brother's not alone, he's not the only one that has special needs and show her that how they're different and how they're also somewhat similar.

P6 remarked, "It wouldn't have deterred me to know that she had specials in her class. I think that that's, at that particular time, great, you know, give my kid the experience of being around not normal kids, you know."

Parents also shared the benefits of teacher support in the classroom. P3 said, "I would tell [other parents] that [the inclusive preschool] is absolutely wonderful, that the teachers are well-trained to handle all types of circumstances with kids." P8 stated, "I feel like even though [my child] does a lot more stuff that the other kids don't necessarily do, [the teachers are] still able to work with her and still keep her advancing." P2 shared, "I

just went to conferences for [my typically developing child] and [the teachers] told me right where he's at, where he's at where he should be, and what to expect. I feel very good about it."

In summary parents of typically developing children saw both academic and social benefits for the typically developing student in the inclusive classroom. Parent views included the idea that, academically, children learn better when they are learning from each other. The social benefits for typically developing children in the inclusive classroom included the ability to work with others and to understand that there are other children with special needs. Teacher support was seen as a key element in helping students to advance.

Results for RQ2

RQ2 I asked, "What do parents of typically developing students see as the limitations of an early childhood inclusive classroom?" All themes were applied to this RQ; however, very few limitations were described by the participants. P1 reported, "It's kind of held him back a little bit to where he already knew how to do those things so he's back on that level with those kids." P5 said, "If he's ready to learn, I'm not saying push him, push him, push him, but if he's asking questions and he's ready to learn, why are you stopping him from learning?" P5 also shared "I think [my child] needs to have that extra attention at school that he's not getting, because the kids with those behaviors [needs] are getting it all." No other participants reported limitations academically in the inclusive classroom, and even disavowed such limitations. For example, P2 said, "No [negatives

about having typically developing children in the class].” P3 reported, “I honestly, I don't feel like I have any limitations [with the inclusive preschool].”

To summarize, parents of typically developing children voiced that their child was held back a little to the level of special needs students. Parents in both groups worried that their child did not get the attention needed as teachers were working to meet the needs of other children in the classroom. Finally, Many participants saw no limitations at all.

Results for RQ3

RQ3 I asked, “What do parents of students with special needs see as the benefits of an early childhood inclusive classroom?” Academic benefits were identified by several parents. P9 said,

> The benefit of the program is that they did not think that [my child] was going to speak. I have seen since he started in the [inclusive preschool] program, the vocabulary he has far surpasses anything that anybody ever thought he would have.

P7 reported, “I would say they've done well [with meeting my child’s academic needs].” P6 also shared, “That preschool is specifically driven towards helping kids get ready for school, they have done that.” P9 concurred by saying “I think they're doing very well [with academic learning], given the circumstance.”

Similar to parents of typically developing students, parents of special needs students also saw significant social benefits for their child. P2 appreciated that teachers in the inclusive classroom helped children develop relationships to prevent special needs

children from being singled out: “I don't want [special needs students] singled out and that was a big fear that [my special needs child] would get picked on or teased and they [teachers] said absolutely not.” P8 noted, “Sometimes you can see you're different and sometimes you can't And I think in the long run it's it's gonna help a lot when all these kids are older.” P3 said, “Because you have special needs doesn't mean that you're not a normal person. This is supported in the inclusive classroom.”

Parents of special needs students also shared the benefit of having teacher support in the classroom. P9 said,

> Oh my gosh, [my child’s teacher is] amazing this year. Absolutely amazing. [My child] has found this little buddy and she tries to marry them up as much as [she can]. It makes him comfortable, and it makes her comfortable.

P6 reported about their child:

> She was also afraid of how things were going to go because, you know, the teachers and staff that are in the school don't have experience with special needs kids and they're all different. I was intimidated and afraid, but her specific teacher - and of course I don't know what it would have been like with any other teacher - she was fantastic.

P3 said, “So yeah, her teacher is very responsive [to social development]. If we have any problems, she gets or she gets ahold of me like right away, or she'll talk to me like before we leave.”

Data indicated that there were both academic and social benefits for special needs students in the inclusive classroom. Multiple parents mentioned the academic growth

they had seen in their special needs child. Parents also recognized the benefits their children received in the area of social development in the inclusive classroom, because students were not singled out but were included in the group. Parents also reported the responsiveness of the teacher in the classroom was key to their child's success both socially and academically in the classroom through supportive and informed practices.

Results for RQ4

RQ4 I asked, "What do parents of students with special needs see as the limitations of an early childhood inclusive classroom?" All themes were applied to this RQ, and, similar to results for RQ2, few limitations were described by these parents. P6 stated her concern that teachers had a lot that they were learning in addition to caring for her special needs daughter's specific needs, saying, "They're not only learning my daughter they're learning how to adapt and learning special needs as well as learning her specific special needs in a classroom of wild, feral children. P5 was also concerned that "At the end of the day, the teachers are frazzled. It's chaotic."

In summary, parents of special needs students saw class size and teachers being frazzled by the chaotic environment were limitations in the inclusive classroom. The strain of caring for special needs students in the inclusive classroom can require a lot of the teacher's focus and energy. Sometimes the children in the classroom can be "wild" which also takes extra on the part of the staff in the classroom.

Summary of Results

Parents of typically developing students and parents of special needs children shared far more benefits to the inclusion program than they shared limitations. The

benefits to inclusion encompassed academic development, social development, and teacher support. The limitations of inclusion included the need for teacher training in specific student needs, class sizes that were too large, and students who were more advanced were not pushed to learn more.

Summary

In summary, parents of preschool students, regardless of their children's needs, reported more benefits to the inclusion program than they saw limitations. The benefits supported students' academic and social development, which were guided by teacher support. The limitations of inclusion included a need for teacher training in specific student needs, and concern for an instructional pace that allowed students who were more advanced to continue to move forward. In Chapter 5, I offer an interpretation of these findings, based in the literature, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of parents of typically developing students and parents of students with special needs enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom regarding benefits and limitations they may see in inclusive preschool. This was a basic qualitative study, with data provided by interviews with nine parents whose children were enrolled in an inclusive preschool in the midwestern United States. Findings suggested that parents were generally satisfied with their children's academic and social preparation, regardless of their child's level of need, but some parents expressed concern about teacher inexperience with some disabling conditions and the level of teacher academic support for highly capable students.

Interpretation of Findings

A key finding in this study was that parents of typically developing students saw the benefits of students learning from peers both socially and academically within the inclusive classroom. The social and academic advancement of students was a primary focus for the participants who were interviewed for this study. These findings aligned with those of Chen et al. (2020), who also found that preschool children of all abilities made bigger gains in language development when paired with peers. Simón et al. (2022) said that all families found many benefits of the inclusion both for students with special needs and general education students. Kart and Kart (2021) reported that typically developing students develop good attitudes and offer support to students with disabilities, thereby improving friendship rates for both groups.

Another key finding was that parents saw the benefits of teacher support in the inclusive classroom. Teachers of students represented in this study provided support for students and parents as they navigated the inclusive classroom. This finding echoes those of Kalsudd (2022), who stated the attitude of the teacher regarding children with special needs, and inclusion of special needs students into the general education classroom, can directly affect the success of students both with disabilities and without. For example, in this study P6 said, “I was intimidated and afraid, but her specific, and of course I don’t know what it would have been like with any other teacher, she was fantastic.” Zabeli and Gjelaj (2020) further supported this finding, stating that if a teacher has a positive view of the success of inclusion it is more likely to be successful.

Another finding was that very few limitations were described by the participants. Literature listed several limitations yet when interviewed only one parent consistently noted concerns, though the concerns noted were supported in the literature. The finding of few limitations was surprising, considering the literature where, for example, Kalsudd (2022) noted that parents continue to be concerned about inclusion, and cited the belief of some parents that class sizes are too large to meet the educational needs of both typically developing students and children with disabilities. One parent, P5, did support what Kalsudd found, saying, “The classroom is much larger. They have, I think, 18 or 19 kids this year, whereas last year he had six to eight. And he is bringing home behaviors and words.” P5 was the only participant to point out this limitation. Literature also suggested that inclusion may inadvertently intensify pressure for students to conform (Antoninis et

al., 2020), which may be what P5 meant by their child picking up unwanted behaviors and language.

An additional key finding was that, like parents of typically developing students, parents of children with special needs saw both social and academic benefits in the inclusive classroom. Kart and Kart (2021) reported that typically developing students develop good attitudes and offer support to students with disabilities, improving social development for both groups. Robbins et al. (2022) found that students in an inclusive preschool classroom demonstrated better social skills and exhibited a decrease in negative behaviors.

The final finding is that parents of children with special needs saw minimal limitations in the inclusive classroom. One limitation was noted by P6, who said, “You wonder if there’s enough attention to keep your special needs child safe.” P6 said she had this concern before her child started the program but seemed no longer worried about safety. This concern was directly addressed in the literature, when Diltz (2021) reported that having staff trained on inclusive education and behavior management and trained in working with students with special needs was a must. P6 noted that after participating in the program, she would share with another parent, “that there are people in that classroom that know their child’s needs and are going to make sure they’re taken care of.” Yazçayir and Gürgür (2021) agreed that it is important to provide professional development that prepares teachers to meet the needs of special education students in the general education classroom.

Limitations of the Study

Nine participants were interviewed for this study, which was one fewer than intended. Despite this small number, data saturation appeared to have been achieved in that little new information was gained in the final interviews. This may have been a factor of another study limitation, that participants were all were parents of students who were enrolled in the same childcare program. Because all participants were from one program, I was unable to attract a diverse set of parents. A wider recruitment plan may have resulted in interviews that expressed more diverse points of view. Another limitation in this study was that many of the participants were parents of both typically developing students and students with special needs, which did not allow for comparison of ideas between two distinct groups.

The findings in this study connect to the framework of familiarity bias, in that all of the participants were familiar with both typically developing students and special needs students. This allowed all participants to describe, based on their understanding of students' diverse abilities and needs, the benefits of inclusive education. Most participants were unfamiliar with the concept of inclusion before their child was a part of the inclusive program. Familiarity with the needs of typically developing and special needs students enabled parents to enroll their children in an unfamiliar program and view program elements as positive.

Despite these limitations, this study provided information on what parents perceived as the benefits and limitations of the inclusive classroom. The study provides qualitative insights to parents' perceptions as well as insight as to what they see as keys

to meeting their child's needs in that classroom. Their ideas are reflected in implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Recommendations

A recommendation for future research on this topic would be to replicate this study with a larger population that includes parents without experience in parenting both typically developing and special needs students. Doing this would provide more insight into points of view that might be common in settings in which special needs students are included in a general education program, and not, as in this study, in a program that is intentionally inclusive.

Similarly, it would be instructive to interview parents whose children were enrolled in the inclusive program but then withdrew their child or did not continue their enrollment into a second school year. This would give the researcher more insight to the limitations of an inclusive classroom than were described in this study, by participants who continued their child in the program. Such a study might discover an alternative program model available to parents who rejected the Building Bridges program. It might also reveal differences in satisfaction among parents of children with specific special needs regarding an inclusive classroom and least restrictive environment in meeting their particular child's needs. Finally, such a study might uncover strong feelings against inclusion on the part of parents of typically developing children who withdrew their children from the Building Bridges program.

Another recommendation for future research would be to explore the training preschool teachers have prior to teaching in an inclusive classroom, particularly in

centers in which inclusion is part of a general education program and not part of a program designed to include special needs students in every classroom. The experiences of teachers in such general education settings that occasionally include a special needs student also would be worthy of future research. In addition, a study focused on interviewing parents to understand their own learning journey surrounding their care for their child might provide insights into what training teachers need to be ready for special needs children in the inclusive classroom. Finally, an observational study of teacher–child and teacher–parent interactions in an inclusive preschool might increase understanding of the challenges teachers encounter, and might provide more information about limitations than participants in this study described.

Implications

One implication from this study is that administrators should reduce class sizes so that students get the attention they need to succeed at all levels. Teachers may need support or guidance in addressing widely differing learning needs that may be present in the inclusive classroom. Such support may include professional development, use of teacher aides or parent volunteers, or help from instructional coaches.

In addition, the presence of what one participant characterized as “wild, feral children” – presumably of all ability levels – requires administrators to be sure teachers are trained to meet the social learning needs of children. Reduced class sizes can assist with behavior management difficulty, but training or use of peer coaching might also be helpful. One parent expressed concern for child safety, so addressing the perception that

behavior management is ineffective may help all parents feel confident in leaving their child in an inclusive classroom.

Finally, an implication arising from this study is that typically developing students and special needs students should share a classroom whenever possible. Parents in this study were almost entirely complimentary about the inclusive program. They described students of all abilities sharing and learning from other students, and said the program's positive outcomes made them glad their children were enrolled in the program. As a result of this study, more effort should be made to create additional inclusion opportunities for preschool children, and more effort made to encourage all parents to enroll their children.

Conclusion

This basic qualitative study of perspectives of nine parents of children enrolled in an inclusive preschool program provided a better understanding of what parents of typically developing children and parents of children with special needs see as important aspects of the inclusive classroom. Understanding the benefits and limitations allows administrators to implement programing that will allow students maximum growth. This study found multiple benefits and minimal limitations for both typically developing and special needs students. This research suggested that parents had an overall positive view of the inclusive classroom and its effect on their child. These results suggested that the inclusive classroom has both academic and social benefits for all students. These findings may contribute to future program development and expansion as well as informing future staff development opportunities. Typically developing students and students with

disabilities experience both social and academic benefits when participating in the inclusive classroom. This study contributes to an understanding of what is important to embed in future inclusive classrooms. Positive social change will result from this study when inclusive preschool classrooms are widely available, providing mutually supportive social and academic growth for all students.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about your child…
    a. Would you describe your child as typically developing?
    b. Do they have a special need?
2. How much experience do you have with children with special needs?
    a. Tell me more about that…
    b. Before your child started at Building Bridges preschool program how familiar were you with special needs children?
3. What did you know about the Building Bridges Preschool program before you enrolled your child?
    a. How did you find out about the Building Bridges program?
4. What are the [were the] benefits of the Building Bridges program for your child?
    a. Tell me more about that.
5. What are the [were the] limitations of the Building Bridges program for your child?
    a. Can you elaborate on that?
6. In your experience what have you found [did you find] are the positives of having typically developing and special needs children in the same classroom?
    a. Tell me a bit more…
7. What do you think are the negatives of having typically developing and special needs children in the same classroom?

    a. Tell me more about that…

8. How responsive have you found [did you find] your child's teacher is [was] in meeting your child's needs for social development?
    a. Can you give me an example?
9. How responsive have you found [did you find] your child's teacher is [was] in meeting your child's needs for academic learning?
    a. Can you think of an example of that?
10. If another parent of a typically developing [special needs] child was looking for a preschool, what would you tell them about classrooms that include both typically developing and special needs children?
    a. Tell me more about that…