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**The Implementation of Least-Restrictive Environments
in Public Preschool Settings:
Challenges for Early Childhood Administrators**

by

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Chapter I

Introduction

This starred paper will examine least-restrictive environments within public preschool programs enrolling three to five-year-old children. The main focus of this paper will explore least-restrictive environments through the lens of the Early Childhood Administrator. There will be three areas of research in this starred paper: (1) defining least-restrictive environments (LRE) in early childhood settings, (2) the challenges to its implementation, and (3) the administrative skill set that most effectively supports least-restrictive environments in public preschool programs.

Least-restrictive environments are defined through the Individuals with Disabilities Act of Public Law (94-142) enacted by then-President Gerald Ford on November 29, 1975. The law guaranteed access to free appropriate public education (FAPE) in a least-restrictive environment (LRE) to every child with a disability (United States Department of Education, 2017). Beginning in 1986, a least-restrictive environment must be provided for all children receiving special education services, starting at 3 years of age, through the Individuals with Disabilities Act (United States Department of Education, 2017). Administrators of preschool programs significantly influence a child's placement in an LRE (Steed et al., 2023).

Background of the Study

The United Nations, in 2005 (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2006), stated that children with disabilities should be fully included in preschool settings. The United Nations says that inclusion in regular education programs provides a lifetime of learning and supports each child's sense of belonging.

Additionally, the United Nations states that implementing inclusion practices in preschool settings provides equitable education and speaks to valuing diversity (Lundqvist, 2021). The placement of children in an LRE provides an opportunity for optimal development. It is one of

the ethical responsibilities of an early childhood program administrator (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011).

Early childhood administrators also provide high-quality programs for all children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011). They influence how inclusion practices are implemented, and resources are allocated (Odom et al., 2001). When children with special needs are learning alongside children who are typically developing, multiple goals for all children can be supported (Odom, 2000). Creating access, inviting participation, and supporting students and staff through implementing inclusion practices requires a varied and sophisticated approach for the early childhood administrator (Barton & Smith, 2015; (Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2014).

Rationale for the Study

In November 1975, Public Law (PL) 94-142 provided that all children with disabilities ages birth through twenty-one years must have the opportunity to have their education plan “include a statement of the specific educational services to be provided, to the extent to which a (such) child will be able to participate in a regular educational program” (United States Department of Education, 2017, p. 4). The law goes on to state that children who are accessing special education services are to be educated with children who are not handicapped (20 U.S.C. 1412 (a)). The placement of children accessing early intervention services in a public preschool program requires placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE), as stated in Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (United States Department of Education, 2017).

In 2021, the Office of Special Education (OSEP) reported that 53 percent of preschoolers who received early intervention services were placed in an LRE (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The implementation of inclusion practices defines not only the placement of children in physical preschool classrooms but also the community of learners within that classroom setting, thus creating a sense of belonging, an opportunity to build friendships with

peers and to support development across domains (Odom et al., 2011). Inclusion practices, according to Odom et al. (2011), have replaced previous special education terms such as preschool mainstreaming and integrated special education.

Each public school district, in the United States, can make decisions about how to implement preschool inclusion practices, so that the preschool program aligns with federal guidelines, state statutes, funding guidance, and school district policies. Program administrators make decisions about implementing inclusion practices in public preschool programs. An administrator's primary responsibility is to promote a program's mission. Additionally, an administrator is tasked with developing and implementing program policies and procedures. Program administrators provide the necessary resources to ensure that all children, including those with special needs, can benefit from a public preschool program (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011).

Research Questions

- What are the least-restrictive environment practices in public preschool settings?
- What administrative challenges exist in the implementation of least-restrictive environments in public preschool settings?
- What are the primary duties and responsibilities of early childhood administrators to best serve all children placed in least-restrictive environments?

Literature Search Description

Research for this starred paper was obtained from St. Cloud State University, Google Scholar, the Minnesota Department of Education, the Division of Early Childhood, the Office of Special Education, and the Minnesota Office of the Revisor. Key search terms and phrases used are collaboration in early childhood, early childhood administrator, early childhood administrator code of ethics, Division of Early Childhood, inclusion model, inclusion practices, Individuals with Disabilities Act, least-restrictive environments, Minnesota Early Indicators of

Progress, preschool, history of preschools, preschool inclusion, preschool models, and preschool programming. The major themes of this research include early childhood administrative training and least-restrictive environments in early childhood settings.

Definition of Terms

Access- is the removal of physical or structural barriers, promoting multiple learning opportunities to support a child's development across developmental domains (Odom et al., 2011).

Division of Early Childhood DEC- an organization dedicated to supporting families and young children who have or are at risk for developmental delays and disabilities (Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2014).

Division of Early Childhood Practices- are empirical research-based practices and strategies from the field of early childhood special education that guide early childhood practitioners, related service providers, families, and administrators, resulting in better outcomes across developmental domains for young children (Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2014).

Early Childhood Administrators- are leaders who are placed in positions of program leadership providing services to children from birth to kindergarten age. Early childhood administrators are the program personnel who act as early childhood coordinators, coordinators, directors, and assistant directors in early childhood programs (Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2014).

Early Childhood Special Education- local public school districts in Minnesota must serve children birth to 5 years of age with disabilities, including children who have a hearing impairment, visual disability, speech or language impairment, physical disability, deaf/blind disability, or other health impairment. Early childhood special education services must be based on assessment scores and criteria. The school district develops

an Individual Education Plan or IEP to guide the child's education access and participation (Strom, 2022).

Inclusion- is a term that has replaced previous special education terms such as preschool mainstreaming and integrated special education. The term inclusion now defines not only the placement of children in physical preschool classrooms but also the community of learners within that classroom setting, creating a sense of belonging, friendships, and development across domains (Odom et al., 2011).

Individual Education Plan (IEP)- is a written document developed for each eligible child with a disability. The IEP must state how the child's disability affects the child's involvement in the general school curriculum (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)- Public Law (94-142) enacted on November 29, 1975. The law guaranteed access to free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to every child with a disability. (United States Department of Education, 2017)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)- must be provided for all children receiving special education services, starting at age 3 years through 21 years of age through the Individuals with Disabilities Act (United States Department of Education, 2017).

Office of Special Education (OSEP)- is one of two branches of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services through the United States Department of Education. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is dedicated to improving results for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities ages birth through 21 years of age by providing leadership and financial support to assist states and local districts (United States Department of Education, 2017).

Participation- in the instructional and intervention strategies to promote a

child's sense of belonging through engagement in play and learning activities (Odom et al., 2011).

Preschool- is defined as a school for children aged 3 to 5 years, supporting the development of skills across developmental domains, in preparation for the Kindergarten experience (Strom, 2022).

Special Needs- any of various difficulties, including physical, emotional, behavioral, or learning disability or impairment that causes an individual to require additional or specialized services or accommodations, including educational or community settings (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023).

Supports- the staffing, program design, and organizations providing inclusive services (Odom et al., 2011).

Chapter II: Literature Review

History of Early Childhood Education

The history of early care and education provides an important backdrop and intentional pathway for many of today's early care and education models. The models include finding value in educating infants and young children, referencing a child's experiences as a foundation for further skill building, and building relationships with adults and other children. The history of early childhood education is first documented in the middle ages in Europe, 400-1400 A.D. A child's socioeconomic status often determines the type of education, if any, a child would receive. Private tutors or a child's father often educated male children. Girls, on the other hand, were educated by their mothers. The educational curriculum was based on the roles each gender would be expected to take up during their lifetime, focusing on trades or domestic skills.

During the European Industrial Revolution, 1700-1850, young children were often not allowed to participate in a formal school experience. Instead, they were employed in the labor pool in the cities' factories and on rural farms. In 1816, an educational reformer, Friedrich Froebel organized the Universal German Educational Institute. Froebel shared his educational concepts, including the idea that all young children should have access to education (National Research Council U.S., 2015).

In 1896, John Dewey worked with a group of parents through the University of Chicago to establish a Laboratory School, the Dewey School. The Dewey School practiced educational strategies that supported a child's capabilities, interests, and habits. In addition, there was a focus on creating working relationships with others, with the view that school was a social institution.

Maria Montessori, in 1907, stated that all children exposed to natural and normal daily living experiences demonstrate the ability to internalize information presented in their environment and as an "aid to life" (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2013, p.147). Dr. Montessori believed

that education begins at birth and that preschool children learn differently than adults. She believed that the physical classroom environment and learning materials children use through their educational experiences are vital components in the learning trajectory. (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2013).

Harriet Merrill Johnson, in the 1920s, outlined her philosophy of a nursery school through a document titled, 'The Working Hypothesis of a Nursery School'. Johnson defined the experiences children should have while enrolled in a nursery school. The following list contains a portion of her philosophy when working with young children in a nursery school.

- "Children need to explore and experiment, to create and to understand".
- "Play materials serve as tools for their expression".
- "Dramatic play is the child's way of organizing experience".
- "Play schemes are a vehicle for constructive social relations".
- "A child can comprehend readily when his experience is kept real and simple".
- "Trips for children need to be planned toward continuity and relevance of the experience" (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2013, p. 302).
- Nursery school teachers should exchange ideas for practices, program standards, facility setup, and record keeping (Yonemuray, 2017).

Head Start began to deliver preschool programming in 1965. Preschool children, ages 3 to 5 years of age, whose families' income is at 180 percent of the federal poverty guidelines or below can enroll in a Head Start preschool program. The components of Head Start include the educational component, support in social services, health services, parent involvement, and parental career development. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Head Start educational component began to include enrollment for children with defined disabilities (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2013).

School district preschools are guided by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) criteria. The NAEYC criteria for preschool programs view the quality of relationships between children and adults in the classroom as vital to positive child outcomes. The NAEYC criteria guide preschool programs to focus on the delivery of curriculum and activities that are age-appropriate lend themselves to differentiation, and allow for curriculum modifications and adaptations, by qualified teachers. (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2005).

Current Preschool Models

Current preschool program models offer multiple approaches and settings informed by research and the field's historical context. Preschool models, including private preschools, Montessori-inspired, Head Start, school district preschools, and childcare programs have adopted historical preschool philosophies in current approaches in working with young children (Fuligni et al., 2009).

These philosophical approaches include the 1907 Montessori-inspired preschools founded in the work of Maria Montessori. She believed that education began at birth and that preschool children learn differently than adults. Dr. Montessori believed all children should be exposed to natural and normal daily living experiences. She also believed that children could internalize their experiences and use this information as an “aid to life” (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2013, p.147). More than 500 Montessori preschools are offered in public school settings in the United States (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023).

Head Start and other comprehensive family preschool models are based on the widely enrolled United States Project Head Start. This project began to deliver high-quality early childhood experiences and comprehensive family support in 1965. Preschool children, ages 3 to 5 years of age, whose families' income is at 180 percent of the federal poverty guidelines or below. There are currently 900,000 children enrolled in Head Start (Encyclopedia Britannica,

2023). The comprehensive child and family education program includes the child's educational component, with programming for children with special needs. In addition, Head Start also offers social services, child nutrition, and child health services for enrolled children and their parents (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2013).

School district preschool models offer varied access, academic standards, program standards, tuition structures, and eligibility requirements. In the fall of 2009, 43 states and the District of Columbia offered school district preschool programs (Sanchez & Nadworny, 2017). The availability of school district preschool programs and service delivery models within programs could limit access for some children (Barnett et al., 2010).

High-Quality Preschool Settings

The 2005 NAEYC position paper identified critical quality components for educational programs that serve children 3 to 5 years of age. The components of a quality preschool program include the following guidance:

- Relationships that support both the child's and adult's feelings of belonging.
- Curriculum that promotes learning and growth across a child's developmental domains (Odom et al., 2011)
- Teaching approaches that support the learning goals of each child (Odom et al., 2011)
- Assessment of a child's progress, allowing for adjustments to a child's learning goals.
- Health policies that promote the optimal health of each child.
- Teachers whose educational qualifications can support the needs of all children
- Connection to the child's family, with a focus on the goals defined by the family, within the context of their culture (Odom et al., 2011)
- Appropriate physical environments

- Leadership and management that implement policies and procedures to support staff, families, and all enrolled children

One and a half million children are served in publicly funded preschool programs (Sanchez & Nadworny, 2017). This number reflects over 44 percent of all 3 to 5 year old children in the United States (“Pre-Primary Enrollment Statistics Among Three- and Four-Year-Olds,” 2020). The quality of the preschool experience varies from program to program (Sanchez & Nadworny, 2017). Research validates that high-quality preschools lead to positive outcomes for children. (Barton & Smith, 2015; Lundqvist, 2021; New America, 2017; Steed et al., 2021; Zaslow et al., 2010). Moreover, all children will benefit from the learning experiences in high-quality preschool programs (Steed et al., 2023).

Current Inclusion Practices in Early Childhood Programs

High-quality preschools are “essential” for all children (New America, 2017; Zaslow et al., 2010), providing a foundation of skills necessary for school success (Pelatti et al., 2016, p. 830). According to the Division for Childhood (DEC) (Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2014) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), a high-quality preschool classroom is identified through key high-quality inclusion practices. These practices include a strong and consistent relationship with a child's family. The use of assessment to inform the development of a high-quality environment and the use of staff time for intentional teaming. Every effort should be made to provide the necessary resources for all children, including children with special needs, in a high-quality preschool classroom (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011; Odom et al., 2011).

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (1975) recommends the placement of children with special needs into a general education classroom, (Steed et al., 2021) participating to the fullest extent possible (Smith & Barton, 2015). IDEA recommendations impact 10 percent of all preschool children, who have a known special need (Pelatti et al., 2016). A placement for

children with special needs (Steed et al., 2021), into a general education classroom, must allow for adaptations and modifications of the curriculum and environment, as well as, access to peers (Lundqvist, 2021 & Purcell et al., 2007). The physical setting for the child in the general education classroom, can provide all children with a sense of “belonging, being valued, and having choices” (National Association for the Education of Young Children et al., 2021 & Purcell et al., 2007, p. 86).

Children with special needs have multiple academic and developmental goals (Pelatti et al., 2016). When a child with special needs is placed in a preschool classroom with inclusive model strategies, he has been placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The child is supported in both the practice and the strengthening of his skills across developmental domains. Children in high-quality preschool classrooms, using inclusive model strategies, gain higher language, academic and social skills (Zaslow et al., 2010). Enrolled children are also building skills in the social/emotional domain through peer interactions and the development of relationships (Odom, 2000). Children with special needs are positively impacted when inclusive practices (a least-restrictive environmental practice) are integrated into an LRE with typically developing children (Odom, 2000; Sandall & Schwartz, 2008; Lundqvist, 2021).

The number of children with identified special needs has been tabulated at 10 percent of all preschool children. Within that 10 percent, 33 percent of children with special needs are placed in preschool classrooms that have implemented inclusion model practices (Odom et al., 2011). The factors in the implementation of an inclusion model, an LRE practice, depend on the personnel involved, the developed and applied policies, the organizational structure, staff training, and program leadership (Purcell et al., 2007). The preschool classroom, employing inclusive model practices, not only allows a child and his family to feel part of the classroom community (Sandall & Schwartz, 2008) but also provides an appreciation of diversity (Lundqvist, 2021).

Challenges to Implementation

In an article for Young Exceptional Children, Frankel, Gold, and Andrews have listed four principles of inclusion for the preschool classroom. The principles state the following ideals.

1. All children should belong to their community, providing inclusive services.
2. Children should have access to education in the regular education system.
3. Each child's cultural experiences and beliefs shall be respected in the educational setting.
4. The approaches to learning will be developmentally appropriate (Frankel et al., 2010, p. 4).

In response to the implementation of the principles of inclusion in a preschool classroom, programs face implementation challenges.

Challenges to the success of inclusion model practices in an LRE include attitudes and beliefs around the ability to provide the services needed. The increasing number of children with challenging behaviors has become an ever-increasing barrier to the placement of children in an inclusive preschool setting (Purcell et al., 2007). The number of children presenting challenging behavior demands that staff are appropriately trained and that program-wide inclusion policies are in place (Purcell et al., 2007 & Sandall & Schwartz, 2008).

Administrators are charged with navigating the challenges of implementing inclusion model practices in a preschool classroom. The challenges include the equitable implementation of the selected curriculum, the funding to provide the needed services, and appropriate staffing patterns. Administrators are also called to advocate for all children regarding access to quality preschool programming (National Association of the Education for Young Children, 2011). Barton and Smith, in 2015, surveyed one hundred administrators in thirty-two States. The respondents to this survey indicated that the challenges to placing children in an LRE were

founded in confusing state and local policies. The respondents indicated that multiple programs employed practices that differed regarding funding, personnel, and program quality.

Early Childhood Administrators

The Division for Childhood (DEC) defines early care and preschool administrators as those in leadership positions with authority over program services (Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2014). Administrators hold titles such as early childhood coordinators, building principals, assistant directors, and directors of early care and preschool programs (Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2014; Purcell et al., 2007). Administrators are responsible for delivering a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). FAPE must be provided to all children who access public school district programs, including school district preschool programs.

The administrative practices can impact public preschool practices and quality (Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2014; Odom, 2000 & New America, 2017). The implementation and sustainability of inclusion model practices begin with preschool administrators. Administrators are responsible for processes and policies supporting optimal development across domains of all children enrolled in the programs they lead (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011). Support from administrators is critical to implementing and sustaining a preschool classroom, employing inclusion practices (Purcell et al., 2007 & Halpern et al., 2020).

The unique leadership skills needed to serve children in high-quality programs involve knowledge of the services provided, strong organizational and financial management skills, and the ability to invest in staff training (Movahedazarhouli et al., 2022). In preparing program administrators, it is important to note that administrative training varies from state to state and depends on the type of early childhood program led (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Talan et al., 2014

& New America, 2017). The training of program administrators impacts program quality, thus impacting the outcome of young children (New America, 2017).

Professional expectations, in the field note that administrators must possess knowledge of operational systems and instructional practice. They should have expert knowledge of child development across developmental domains. They are charged with making decisions about the placement of children in an LRE. Finally, administrators are responsible for allocating, sometimes limited resources, recruiting, training, retaining quality staff, and communicating with families (LaRue & National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015 & New America, 2017).

Preparation of Early Childhood Administrators

The history of teacher preparation in the United States began with the work of Horace Mann. He founded universal education for children through the establishment of free public schools. In 1838, he created teacher-training schools called Normal Schools. He wrote that teaching was a challenging endeavor, in fact, “an art” (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2013, p.198). Preschool administrators often rise from the ranks of teachers and must acquire leadership competencies for a successful leadership role (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2022.).

When referring to early care leaders, many states in the United States offer multiple pathways for early care directors to obtain the preferred qualifications in their leadership roles. The NAEYC and Child Care Aware of America recommend a Bachelor’s degree as a best practice for those that will be leaders in early care settings. Other pathways to obtaining leadership qualifications include formal education, clock hours in early childhood education, clock hours in early care administration, and work-related experiences in child care. Training is critical in establishing best practices in early care settings (New America, 2017).

Universities actively recruit public school administrative candidates. Administrative candidates have typically been identified as distinguished teachers in their public school

districts. These candidates have demonstrated potential leadership skills. The components of a university-based leadership program include research-based content, cohort structures, mentoring, and coaching. (Crow & Whiteman, 2016). Leadership training and credentials must include acquiring knowledge skills and understanding how to synthesize knowledge and skills into practice (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2022). It is important to note that an administrator's level of formal education is a strong indicator of the overall preschool program quality (Talan et al., 2014).

Early Childhood Code of Ethics

A preschool administrator is placed in a role in which they will share their knowledge with staff, families, and the community. This role is filled with multiple duties, including their primary role; the well-being of children. An administrator oversees the day-to-day operations of an early childhood care and education program. The programs under the care of the administrator must be safe for children, both physically and emotionally. Finally, policies must be fairly applied to children, families, and staff. An administrator must ensure high-quality programming based on current research and best practices, prompting optimal child development across developmental domains.

Administrators have a responsibility to their field and for their own professional development. In addition, administrators are responsible for supporting their staff's ongoing professional development and promoting quality programming for the staff and children under their supervision. Finally, an administrator is "responsible for providing the community with high-quality early care and education" (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011 p 6).

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

Early childhood administrators must balance a multitude of responsibilities. Administrators must have technical knowledge and skills in the pedagogy of early learning

strategies and the curriculum to be implemented. Administrators must make a connection between the relevant research and the implementation of best practices in the classroom setting. They must be able to think critically, with the ability to make decisions and navigate complex problems (Movahedazarhouli et al., 2022).

Administrators must possess strong organizational skills and demonstrate interpersonal skills. They are responsible to the child, parent, staff, and community. Early childhood administrators manage the physical space, staff assignments, training, and program budgets (Steed et al., 2023). Additionally, there is a correlation between administrative practices and the quality of the preschool classroom setting (LaRue & National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015 & Talan et al., 2014). "Quality leadership is critical in supporting optimal outcomes for children and families" (Movahedazarhouli et al., 2022, p. 4).

Literature Review Summary

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), public law 94-142, guarantees access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in a least-restrictive environment (LRE) to every child with a special need. Public law 94-142 goes on to state that children accessing early intervention services in a public preschool program must be placed in an LRE. (U.S. Department of Education, 2022) An LRE, can be defined as a physical classroom setting or community of learners that creates a sense of belonging and support the child's development across domains (Barton & Smith, 2015; National Association for the Education of Young Children et al., 2021; Odom et al., 2011& Purcell et al., 2007).

Historical models and perspectives have influenced current preschool practices. Multiple approaches, varied access, varied academic standards, and tuition structures could impact a child's access to a preschool program (Sanchez & Nadworny, 2017) The factors in the implementation of inclusion model practices (inclusion model), an LRE practice, depend on the personnel attitudes and beliefs, the organizational structure of the preschool, staff training, and

program leadership (Purcell et al., 2007). Administrators provide the necessary resources so that all children can participate in a public preschool program (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011) and influence how inclusion practices will be implemented in a preschool setting (Odom et al., 2001).

High-quality inclusion preschool classrooms positively impact all children, by building skills across developmental domains (Lundqvist, 2021; Odom, 2000; Sandall & Schwartz, 2008; Steed et al., 2023 & Zaslow et al., 2010). Appropriate support must be in place to construct high-quality classroom environments and experiences for all children (Barton & Smith, 2015; Odom et al., 2011). Early childhood administrators play a vital role in placing young children in the least-restrictive environments (Steed et al., 2023). The administrator is responsible for managing the supportive policies, procedures, staffing, staff training and funding to support inclusive model practices. (Barton & Smith, 2015). When administrators support inclusive model preschool classrooms, they are advocating for all children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011).

Administrator skill sets must include strong organizational skills, knowledge of child development, and knowledge of curriculum pedagogy (LaRue & National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015; New America, 2017). Administrators must also possess strong financial management skills and the ability to work with and supervise staff (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2022). They must demonstrate the ability to apply policies and processes equitably throughout the early education program (Barton & Smith, 2015). They must have the ability to navigate challenges in support of student access, student participation, and high-quality educational experiences for all children (Steed et al., 2021).

Chapter III: Results

Conclusions

Navigating the complexity of access, participation, and support in the public preschool setting is the role of the early childhood administrator. When placing children in an LRE (Frankel et al., 2010), the administrator's audit of professional ethics, coupled with public law 94-142, and the realities of leading a preschool program provide ongoing challenges. For my Master of Science in Early Childhood Special Education I researched the following questions, through the lens of an early childhood administrator.

1. What are the least-restrictive environment practices in public preschool settings?

- An LRE, can be defined as a physical classroom setting and a community of learners that create a sense of belonging, and support the child's development across domains (Barton & Smith, 2015; Frankel et al., 2010; National Association for the Education of Young Children et al., 2021; Odom et al., 2011 & Purcell et al., 2007).
- An LRE includes inclusion practices that create high-quality preschool classrooms (Buysse et al. 1999 & Odom, 2000), including adding additional staff, blending and braiding of funding, and engaging staff in ongoing training (Barton & Smith, 2015).
- A high-quality inclusive classroom offers developmentally appropriate learning experiences (Frankel et al., 2010).
- A high-quality inclusive public preschool classroom respects a child's cultural experiences and beliefs (Frankel et al., 2010).

2. What administrative challenges exist in the implementation of least-restrictive environments in public preschool settings?

- Administrators are critical in the implementation and sustainability of inclusive preschool classrooms (Halpern et al., 2020 & Purcell et al., 2007).

- It is important to note that an administrator's level of formal education is a strong indicator of the overall preschool program quality (Talan et al., 2014).
- Appropriate support must be in place to construct high-quality classroom environments and experiences for all children (Barton & Smith, 2015; Odom et al., 2011 & Steed et al., 2023), including the recruitment, training, retention of quality staff (LaRue & National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015; New America, 2017).
- Administrators have a direct impact on the placement of children in an LRE (Steed et al., 2023) and may choose to remove challenging children from the regular education setting in favor of another placement but should only do so when the severity of the child's disability is such that the use of assistive technology and other special education services cannot provide for that child's educational needs (Smith & Barton, 2015).
- The availability of school district preschool programs and service delivery models within programs could limit preschool access for some children (Barnett et al., 2010; Lieber et al., 2000 & Odom et al., 2011).
- Challenges to the success of inclusion model practices in an LRE include attitudes and beliefs around the ability to provide the services needed (LaRue & National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015; New America, 2017).
- The increasing number of children with challenging behaviors has become an ever-increasing barrier to the placement of children in an inclusive preschool setting (Purcell et al., 2007). The number of children presenting challenging behavior demands that staff are appropriately trained and that program-wide inclusion policies are in place (Purcell et al., 2007; Sandall & Schwartz, 2008).
- The challenges include the equitable implementation of the selected curriculum, (Steed et al., 2023).

- There are financial challenges to implementing inclusion principles and creating an inclusive preschool classroom (Steed et al., 2023).

3. What are the primary duties and responsibilities of early childhood administrators to best serve all children placed in least-restrictive environments?

- The unique leadership skills needed to serve children in high-quality public preschool programs involve knowledge of the services provided, strong organizational skills, the ability to invest in staff training and to evaluate program data (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2022).
- Administrators must possess the ability to advocate for all children enrolled in public preschool classrooms (LaRue & National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015 & New America, 2017).
- Administrators must demonstrate strong organizational skills, financial management skills, knowledge of child development, and knowledge of curriculum pedagogy (LaRue & National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015; New America, 2017 & Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2022).
- Administrators provide the necessary resources so that all children can participate in a public preschool program (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011) and influence how inclusion practices will be implemented in a preschool setting (Odom et al., 2001).
- Early childhood administrators must manage the physical space, staff assignments, supervision of staff (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2022) and program budgets with the ability to navigate challenges, create access, encourage participation, and offer ongoing support appropriate for all children (Steed et al., 2021).
- Administrative training and credentialing must include acquiring knowledge, skills and understanding (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2022) about the benefits of inclusive settings

and practices, thus maximizing child outcomes for all children in inclusive preschool classrooms (Barton & Smith, 2015; Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2014; Odom et al., 2011).

- An administrator must ensure high-quality preschool programming is based on current research and best practices, prompting optimal child development across developmental domains (National Association for the Education of Young Children).
- There is a correlation between administrative practices and the quality of public preschool classrooms (LaRue & National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015; Talan et al., 2014).
- “Quality leadership is critical in supporting optimal outcomes for children and families” (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2022, p. 4).

Recommendations for Research and Investigation

1. What are the least-restrictive environment practices in public preschool settings?

The number of children with identified special needs has been tabulated at 10 percent of all preschool children. Within that 10 percent, 33 percent of children with special needs are placed in preschool classrooms that have implemented inclusion model practices (Odom et al., 2011). Although my research did not address the enrollment of children with identified special needs placed in LRE classrooms. The research from Odom would then suggest that there are 67 percent of preschool children with identified special needs that are perhaps engaging in other learning environments. The suggested research would include the exploration of other learning environments that are considered LRE and the enrollment statistics of these environments.

2. What administrative challenges exist in the implementation of least-restrictive environments in public preschool settings?

Educating administrators about the benefits of inclusive settings and practice will maximize child outcomes for all children (Barton & Smith, 2015). In the State of Minnesota, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) administrators are tasked with implementing program and staff practices and policies that promote high-quality preschool classrooms. The 2005 NAEYC position paper identified critical quality components for educational programs that serve children 3 to 5 years of age. The components of a quality preschool program include the following guidance:

- Relationships that support both the child's and adult's feelings of belonging
- Curriculum that promotes learning and growth across a child's developmental domains (Odom et al., 2011)
- Teaching approaches that support the learning goals of each child (Odom et al., 2011)
- Assessment of a child's progress, allowing for adjustments to a child's learning goals
- Health policies that promote the optimal health of each child
- Teachers whose educational qualifications can support the needs of all children
- Connection to the child's family, with a focus on the goals defined by the family, within the context of their culture (Odom et al., 2011)
- Appropriate physical environments
- Leadership and management that implement policies and procedures to support staff, families, and all enrolled children

Suggested research identifying the barriers, in Minnesota ECFE programs, to FAPE in an LRE, providing universal preschool access for all children with special needs would provide information to programs and administrators in the State of Minnesota.

3. What are the primary duties and responsibilities of early childhood administrators to best serve all children placed in least-restrictive environments?

Minnesota state statute 124D.15 outlines the qualifications for a public school preschool program administrator. Subdivision 10 of the statute addresses the required qualifications of the program's administrator and states that a (school readiness preschool) public preschool program must have an administrator who is a licensed early childhood teacher, a certified early childhood educator, or a licensed parent educator (Minnesota Office of the Revisor, 2023).

In 1988, 32 states and the District of Columbia offered some type of certification for preparing teachers of young children. Fourteen states endorsed an elementary education license (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2013). A review of leader competencies in administration, management, communication, collaboration, knowledge of child development, and instructional leadership would strengthen the linkage to the formal school experience. Identifying gaps in the current early care and education leadership training model will provide high-quality leaders in the field (LaRue & National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015).

The Minnesota Department of Education, colleges and universities, and local programs working together to design a licensure track for early childhood administrators in support of high-quality programming for all preschool children. Research identifying current training opportunities for public school early childhood administrators, as well as, supportive cohorts and associations would provide a starting point from which additional pre-service strategies could arise.

Recommendations for Field/practice

Administrators are important in establishing high-quality learning experiences for the children enrolled in their programs. These individuals are responsible for the selection and training of staff. They ensure that best practices, program policies, curriculum and assessment, and resources support optimal child outcomes across developmental domains (LaRue &

National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015). The varied pathways to the administrative role in public preschool programs suggests research into the university and college administrative credentialing programs, with a focus on the skill set identified in this research paper.

Final Thoughts/reflections

In my work as an administrator of multiple early education programs, the professional dialogue and indeed administrative action around supporting an LRE has provided insights into each programs' model for the placement of preschool children in an LRE. I have found there are varying models of service delivery, utilizing a varying degree of inclusive practices in public preschool classrooms. The variations in both service delivery models to families, who have a condensed understanding of LRE, can be confusing and leave a family feeling that the options offered as placements are the only options, from which to choose their child's educational placement.

The scope of LRE placement options can also be informed by the teaching and support staff. Challenging child behaviors, little understanding of the criteria used to identify the child with special needs, and incomplete staffing drives the placement of some children in public preschool classrooms. The need for ongoing teaching and support staff training may diminish staff burnout and resistance to universal access for all preschoolers. Access for all preschoolers to high-quality preschool classrooms and support in those classrooms, promoting engagement and participation will result in optimal child outcomes for all children.

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