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EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD  
INCLUSION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON A SCHOOL'S TRANSITION FROM  
SEGREGATED CLASSROOMS TO MORE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

A Dissertation Presented  
to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
Learning and Instruction Department  
Special Education Program

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Education

By  
Shally Moua  
University of San Francisco  
December 2021



## **Abstract**

THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Dissertation Abstract

Early Childhood Special Education Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inclusion: A Qualitative  
Study on a School's Transition From Segregated Classrooms to More Inclusion  
Classrooms

Inclusion has been a topic of interest in education and a great deal of research has identified teachers' attitudes as a barrier to inclusion. Therefore, using the model of attitude (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) and inclusive pedagogy framework (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2012), the qualitative study aims to: (1) examine the attitudes of early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers toward inclusion as a school shift from segregated to more inclusive classrooms, (2) explore types of support they received and how that support shaped their inclusive pedagogical practices to teach in inclusive classrooms, and (3) identify barriers that impact their transition to teach in inclusive classrooms.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and then coded using in vivo and pattern coding to determine categories and subcategories. Thus, three findings emerged: (1) participants understood the notion of inclusion as "all students," access, and belonging, (2) participants received some level of support, which may or may not have been beneficial in preparing them for the shift to teaching in inclusive classrooms, and (3) there are district and classroom barriers to inclusion. As a result, findings suggest a need for ongoing professional development to support the implementation of inclusion and teachers' inclusive pedagogical practices.

However, the study has several limitations: (1) sample size, (2) data collection, (3) time constraint, and (4) participants' response biases. Thus, the findings revealed several implications for research and practice. The study points toward the importance of fostering belonging, conducting a comparative qualitative study to examine attitudes of ECSE teachers in self-contained classrooms and ECSE teachers teaching in inclusive classrooms, and ensuring that future research is a longitudinal study to investigate the long-term benefits of professional development and support services, as well as the gradual transformation in teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Moreover, three implications for practice are recommended: (1) having provisions of continuous professional development and support services to meet the needs of teachers, (2) focusing on equity inventions that potentially provide access and foster belonging in the classrooms, and (3) considering to recruit teachers of diverse background. In conclusion, inclusion benefits people who have been marginalized, and it functions similarly to equity in that it pulls those who are most disadvantaged into the light.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies present in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

<u>Shally Moua</u>	<u>01/10/2022</u>
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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **STATEMENT PROBLEM**

The enactment of P.L. 99-457 Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in 1986 mandated school districts to provide education and support for young children with disabilities, ages birth to 5. Two decades later, in 2009, a total of 731,832 young children with disabilities, ages 3 through 5, were served under the IDEA Part B (US Department of Education, 2021). Thus, between 2009-2018, there was an increase of 83,178 more young children with disabilities being served, bringing the total to 815,010 children, which was an 11.4 percent increase (US Department of Education, 2021). When looking at education environments, 67.1 percent of young children with disabilities, a total of 547,211 of the 815,010 children, attended a regular early childhood program, while 22.4 percent, a total of 122,575 children, attended separate classes (US Department of Education, 2021). As the number of preschoolers with disabilities served under the IDEA 2004 increased, the availability of inclusion programs is more critical than ever (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2019). Thus, inclusion has become more prevalent and is shifting the outlook in early childhood special education, an area that focuses and specializes in young children with disabilities between the ages of three to five years old.

What is known about inclusion is that it has been defined and implemented varying across the United States. Research has interpreted inclusion as (a) a civil rights and social justice movement (Connor & Ferri, 2007), (b) access and full participation in general education classrooms (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005), or (c) both. From a civil rights and social justice approach, Connor et al. (2008) argued that inclusion rejects the deficit model of disability, and people with

disabilities should naturally be part of the community. Like Conner et al. (2008), Odom, Buysse, and Soukakou (2011) steered their interpretation of inclusion away from being a physical location with typical children; instead, inclusion is when "children with disabilities become a part of the larger social, community, and societal systems" (p. 345).

Whereas Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) described inclusion as the participation of children with and without disabilities in a classroom. Similar to Leatherman and Niemeyer, 2005, Zagona, Kurth, and MacFarland (2017) and Idol (2006) described inclusion as students having access to general education content and participating in the same activities as their typical peers. On the contrary, some scholars have argued that inclusion is about embracing inclusive communities that promote the social integration and school well-being of all students, not just students with disabilities (Heyder et al., 2020). Furthermore, other scholars interpret inclusion as fostering a sense of belonging among preschoolers with disabilities and their peers without disabilities (Odom et al., 2011). Thus, the literature interprets and understands inclusion variously to serve different purposes.

Though the interpretation of inclusion varies, research has established that inclusion benefits students with and without disabilities alike. Yet, students with disabilities continue to be educated in segregated classrooms. The inclusion of students with disabilities has developmental, social, and attitudinal outcomes (Odom, 2000; Odom et al., 2004; Odom et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2016). For example, the research highlights that students with autism in inclusive settings experienced more cognitive outcomes than those who attended educational placements that did not include non-disabled peers (Nahmias, Kase,

& Mandell, 2014). In addition, students with autism in inclusive classrooms showed higher cognitive scores in the areas of social-emotional and adaptive behaviors (Nahmias et al., 2014).

Moreover, Green, Terry, and Gallagher (2014) investigated emergent literacy skills in young students with disabilities and compared them to their non-disabled peers in an inclusive preschool setting. Findings indicated that students with disabilities made notable progress in emergent literacy skills, although they were further behind in achievement than their non-disabled peers (Green et al., 2014). In addition, although non-disabled students outperformed the students with disabilities, students with disabilities showed the most significant improvement in print awareness and recognizing uppercase letters (Green et al., 2014). Overall, Green et al. (2014) asserted that students with disabilities benefited from high-quality language and literacy instruction in early childhood inclusive classrooms. Also, teachers in the study were provided training, professional development, coaches, and weekly on-site support to improve students with disabilities' academic outcomes (Green et al., 2014). Lastly, Yu (2019) found inclusion benefited students' learning outcomes, such as peer modeling and social interactions (i.e., playing with other typical children). In addition, findings showed that inclusion benefited teachers as it increased their knowledge in supporting students with disabilities and observing growths that students with disabilities have made (Yu, 2019).

However, a growing body of research has identified teachers' attitudes as a potential barrier to inclusion (Barton & Smith, 2015; Buysse, Wesley, & Keyes, 1998; Rose & Smith, 1993). Also, the research found that teachers' level of support impacts their attitudes toward inclusion, in turn, it has a critical role in determining the



effectiveness of implementing inclusive practices. For example, in their study, Barton and Smith (2015) confirmed that lack of support, communication, collaboration, or resources are challenges contributing to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. In another study, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) emphasized that support involves everyone that serves students with disabilities and described the support as physical and human support services. Thus, consistent with Avramidis and Norwich (2002), Barton and Smith (2015) described support as "having an adequate infrastructure and systems to support high-quality preschool inclusion" and "all adults involved have access to quality professional development including ongoing coaching and support for collaborative teaming" (p. 73). In short, support services include physical to school personnel support.

Hence, a substantial body of research has identified that ongoing professional development opportunities enhance teachers' attitudes, inclusive practices, content and knowledge, and awareness of students with disabilities (Barton & Smith, 2015; Kwon, 2017; Warren et al., 2016; Yaraya, 2018; Zakai-Mashiach et al., 2021). A study conducted by Vaz, Wilson, Falkmer, Sim, Scott, Cordier, and Falkmer (2015) found that teachers' level of self-efficacy and training in teaching students with disabilities were associated with primary teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Lacking skills to teach students with disabilities was associated with teachers' negative attitudes toward inclusion (Vaz et al., 2015). The overall result indicated a need to enhance pedagogical content knowledge related to students with disabilities to influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, especially understanding specific disabilities (Vaz et al., 2015).

In addition, according to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are influenced by the availability of support services at the school

district and classroom levels. Fuchs (2010) investigated general education teachers' attitudes, and findings reported lack of administrative support, lack of support from special educators and support staff, and insufficient preparedness in teacher education programs. For example, participants in the study reported that planning, collaboration time, and teaching a diverse population of learners were challenges due to a lack of administrative support (Fuchs, 2010). In addition, DeSimone et al. (2013) argued that implementing inclusion requires strong leadership and ongoing support. Findings revealed a lack of administrative support for successfully organizing schools to include students with disabilities and a lack of valuable professional development required to include students with disabilities (DeSimone et al., 2013). Thus, ongoing professional development is critical for inclusion because it ensures that teachers acquire the necessary experience, skills, and ongoing resources to promote inclusion effectively (Odom et al., 2011). Therefore, there is a need to emphasize developing and improving continuous types of support for teachers to implement inclusive practices in classrooms efficiently, such as fiscal stability, which most districts may lack.

Though inclusion has academic and social benefits for students with disabilities, a barrier to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion is the availability of support (Barton & Smith, 2015). Thus, additional research is needed to better understand teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and the support to prepare them for inclusion. Also, to address the gaps in the literature, the study investigates the importance of understanding that teachers require ongoing, not one-time, support to serve students with disabilities more effectively in inclusive classrooms. Equally as necessary, the study addresses teachers' perceived competence and readiness to implement inclusive practices. Teachers need to feel

supported by having essential and relevant tools to teach students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study focused on the early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers' attitudes toward inclusion as a northern California school transitioned from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms. Precisely, the study investigated in what ways ECSE teachers make sense of the notion of inclusion, the types of support they received and whether or not that support informed their inclusive pedagogical practices, and how that support prepared them to teach in inclusive classrooms. Also, it is critical for the study to identify barriers to more inclusive classrooms, as they can potentially impact how ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are influenced. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews, and, thus, data were coded using in vivo coding in the First Cycle Coding and pattern coding in the Second Cycle Coding to identify categories and subcategories related to ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion as they transition from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study is significant to the field of early childhood special education for several reasons. First, the study offers insights into understanding teachers' attitudes in the context of support services as some districts transition from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms. Also, the study informs how support services influence teachers' inclusive pedagogy as traditional methods have failed to meet the learning needs of preschoolers with disabilities. Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion may reflect

the support they receive at the district and classroom levels. In addition, teachers' attitudes toward inclusion vary, and they are necessary to the learning environment and students' achievement. Thus, the purpose of the study is also to identify the challenges and efficacy of support services. In turn, it can lead to the identification of types of professional development, training, or administrative support that are tailored to the needs of early childhood special education teachers transitioning to more inclusive classrooms or currently teaching in inclusion programs. Without the study, early childhood special education teachers are forced to narrow and cookie-cutter teaching pedagogy, which enables students with disabilities to be marginalized.

Second, research shows that inclusion varies in interpretation and implementation and shifts over time. Therefore, a benefit of the study is to learn about the changes around inclusion, if any, as it facilitates the types of support to strengthen teachers' efficacy and preparedness to teach preschoolers with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. In doing so, early childhood special education teachers are better prepared to prepare their students for general education classrooms or participate in society. In general, the study enables the discussion of how disability is positioned and produced in society as a whole (Krischler, Powell, & Cate, 2019).

Third, the study contributes to early childhood special education credentialing programs in that inclusion courses should be a requirement rather than an elective (Kraska & Boyle, 2014). Also, the benefit of the study is to embed field experiences into inclusion courses as ongoing for teacher preparation. Though some early childhood special education credentialing programs have started to embed inclusive education as a required course, there is still a lack of preschool inclusion programs available for

student-interns to practice and observe fully. Moreover, the study informs early childhood special education program coordinators or field supervisors to support student-interns inclusive classrooms better. Support can include collaboration with general education practitioners, communities, families, and administrators. The consequence of not addressing the need to make inclusion courses as a requirement could hinder teachers' self-efficacy and preparedness from teaching a range of learners in an educational system driven by high-state testing, categorization of students based on abilities, and grading system.

Finally, the study benefits from the support of administrative bodies as school districts transition from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms. Previous research (DeSimone et al., 2013; Fuchs, 2010; Leatherman, 2007; Yu, 2019) has revealed that teachers want administrative support that focuses on giving more collaboration and lesson planning time, as well as being included in decisions about inclusive classrooms. Equally important as teachers, school administrators are a foundation to inclusion efforts. Long-term benefits of administrative support include developing a school culture that fosters trust, collaboration among teachers, staff, students, families, and administrators. Conversely, having left administrative support unaddressed has the effect of enabling a lack of structure and guidance to achieve goals, inefficient resources, unaccountability, irregular communication and collaboration, and absence of community-school partnership.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The study's conceptual frameworks are intended to enhance understanding of the relationship between early childhood special education teachers' attitudes toward

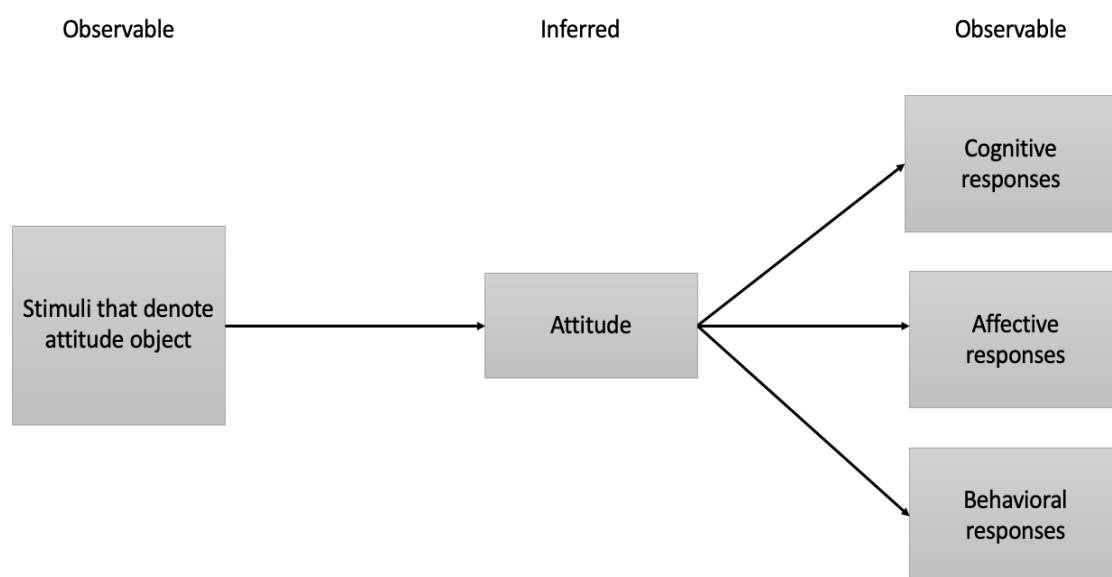
inclusion and how those attitudes influence their inclusive pedagogy approaches as they transition from segregated to more inclusive classrooms. The conceptual frameworks for the study include attitude and its components (cognitive, affection, and behavioral) (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) and the inclusive pedagogy framework (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2012). Both conceptual frameworks serve as the foundation for the study, examining how early childhood special education teachers think, feel, and act toward inclusion and how their inclusive pedagogy impacts their work with students with disabilities.

### ***What is Attitude and its Components?***

The nature of attitude is explored to analyze the attitudes teachers have toward inclusion. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) described attitude as “a *psychological tendency* that is expressed by *evaluating* a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (p. 1). *Psychological tendency* denotes an internal state of the individual or bias that can be positive or negative (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). *Evaluating* refers to the types of evaluative responding, including overt or covert, cognitive, affective, or behavioral (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Similar to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), Bohner and Dickel (2011) described attitude as “an evaluation of an object of thoughts,” in which “attitude objects comprise of anything a person may hold in mind, ranging from mundane to abstract, including things, people, groups, and ideas” (p. 392). In addition, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) described attitude as “anything that is discriminable or that becomes in any way an object of thought.” In short, attitude is a held belief, value, behavior, and emotion that can influence a person's outlook of things, people, groups, and ideas (Bohner & Dickel, 2011). Attitude comprises three components - cognitive, affective,

and behavioral - to describe teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). A person's attitude is developed in response to evaluating an entity on an affective, cognitive, or behavioral basis (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). As depicted in Figure 1, attitude is divided into three components - cognition, affect, and behavior (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Figure 1. Components of Attitude



Eagly, A. H., & Chaiken, S. (1993). The nature of attitudes. In *The psychology of attitudes*, ed. A.H. Eagly and S. Chaiken, 1-21. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College.

***The Cognitive Component of Attitude.*** The cognitive component is individuals' notion or belief about the attitude object (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) investigated preservice and in-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and specifically examined factors that influence their attitudes and how they are related to their classroom behaviors. To examine preservice and in-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) focused on the components of attitudes - cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005)

suggested that the cognitive component focuses on the knowledge and thinking of children with disabilities' behaviors in an inclusive setting. In addition, Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) found that planning individually for all children influenced their attitudes toward inclusion, part of the cognitive component.

Consistent with Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005), Boer et al. (2011) described the cognitive component of attitude as the belief or knowledge that an individual holds toward the attitude object. Boer et al. (2011) reviewed a total of 26 studies where teachers had neutral or negative attitudes towards inclusion at the primary level. Out of the 26 studies, 19 examined the cognitive component of attitude towards inclusion using questionnaire rating scales. Generally, individuals whose thoughts reflect favorable feelings about an attitude object are likely to retain positive attributes and are less likely to equate them with negative attributes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). On the contrary, individuals whose thoughts reflect unfavorable feelings about an attitude object are likely to relate it negatively and are less likely to equate it with positive attributes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

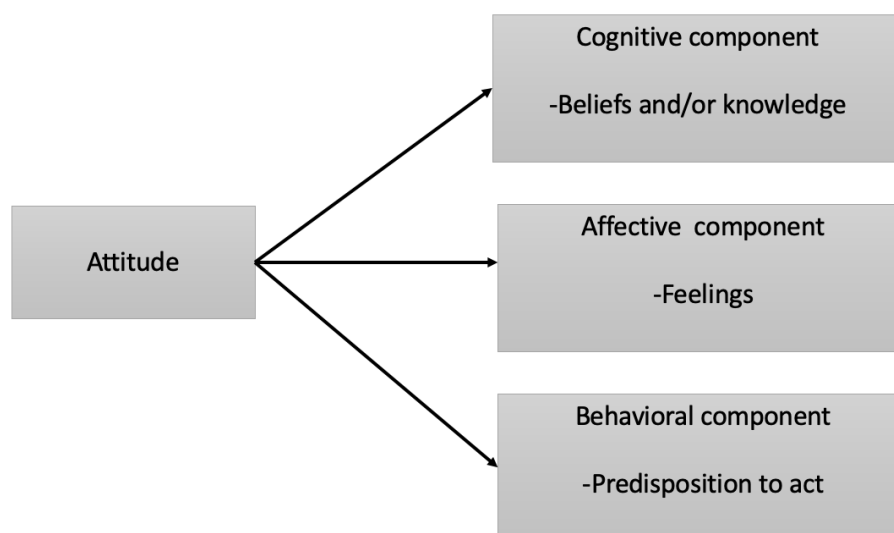
***The Affective Component of Attitude.*** Eagly and Chaiken (1993) argued that the affective component involves individuals' feelings or emotions relative to the attitude object. Typically, individuals who experience positive affective reactions usually develop favorable attitudes toward the attitude object and are not likely to experience negative affective responses (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Conversely, individuals who experience negative affective reactions are more likely to develop unfavorable attitudes and are not expected to experience positive affective reactions (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). The affective component is the emotional reactions to an attitude object (Boer et al., 2011). In



a review by Boer et al. (2011), six out of 26 studies investigated the affective component of attitude regarding teachers' feelings towards inclusive education. Specific to inclusion, teachers' feelings or emotional reactions toward students with disabilities could affect their understanding of a disability to include or exclude students with disabilities from activities (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) found teachers created a positive learning environment for inclusion when they encouraged social interactions between children with and without disabilities as suggested by the affective component of attitude.

***The Behavioral Component of Attitude.*** The final component of attitude is the behavioral response. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) described the behavioral category as the actions of individuals toward the attitude object. The behavioral component is the physical outcome of thoughts and emotions in motion. People generally have a collection of influences that stem from societal, institutional, and personal factors (Boer et al., 2011). The behavioral component reflects a person's inclination to act towards the attitude object in a certain way (Boer et al., 2011). Therefore, the behavioral component responds in a specific way when in contact with students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom or the physical action of what an individual thinks and feels (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005).

Figure 2. The concept of ‘attitude’ and its three components.



Boer, A. de, Pijl, S. J., & Minnaert, A. (2011). Regular primary schoolteachers' attitudes towards inclusive education: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(3), 331–353.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903030089>

### ***Inclusive Pedagogy***

Schools have a practice that sorts students into categories. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) called this the bell-curve thinking about ability. The bell-curve thinking about ability is based on the premise that instruction and curriculum content will meet most students' learning needs. In contrast, some students at the tail ends of the distribution may require additional or differentiated instruction (Florian, 2010). Students at the lower ends of the bell curve tend to be students with disabilities or labeled as having special needs. Regardless of students' learning difficulties, teaching should be taught similarly across all students and not just some.

Thus, based on a socio-cultural framework, inclusive pedagogy originated from a study by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011). Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011)

investigated educators' knowledge and skills and how their expertise and abilities informed their inclusive practice. Hence, inclusive pedagogy focuses on what teachers do and is shaped by three tenets (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The first tenet suggests that learning should focus on every child in the classroom by setting aside thoughts on conditions that impact development (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Instructors should make learning openings available so every youngster can take an interest, expand similar guidance across each kid, and pay heed to what is taught and how instead of who is to learn it (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The second tenet rejects the "deterministic belief" about children's ability (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011, p 818). In other words, the second tenet of inclusive pedagogy requires the belief that all children are capable of learning, progressing, and achieving. Additionally, teachers should emphasize what students are capable of doing rather than what they are unable of doing. A strategy recommended by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) is utilizing random grouping strategies rather than ability grouping and developmental evaluation to support their students. Lastly, the third tenet proposes improving the proficiency of teaching and learning processes of teachers and specialists. A collective effort among professionals, students, and stakeholders is needed to re-evaluate the process and develop a different approach to transfer and receive knowledge (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Namely, inclusive pedagogy is about learning support that requires professional partnership (Spratt & Florian, 2015). Teachers and specialists are encouraged to view students' learning challenges as professional issues and continuously collaborate to develop innovative strategies to support students and avoid stigmas (Spratt & Florian, 2015). However, the ongoing shortfall in learning

is a systemic problem where the traditional methods have failed to address all constraints (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Thus, practical approaches that address learning challenges include implementing alternative practices to working and supporting all children's learning, working collaboratively with other professionals in education that respect all children and seeking professional development to broaden the scope of inclusive practices (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Inclusive pedagogy seeks to remove marginalization and stigma related to students' learning difficulties (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Teachers' inclusive pedagogical approach to teaching is determined by their "knowledge, attitudes and beliefs" about students and their learning and how they respond to their learning barriers (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Florian and Linklater (2010) explored how student-teachers engaged with inclusive pedagogy principles as they reflected on the concept of transformability. Transformability is the notion that all children's learning abilities can change through practical pedagogical principles of co-agency, everybody, and trust (Florian & Linklater, 2010). The study also investigated student-teachers' responses to students struggling in learning and collaboration efforts with others, specifically general educators, as a means for differentiating teaching (Florian & Linklater, 2010). Findings indicated that it is not the knowledge and abilities that student-teachers possess to teach but how they support students with learning needs (Florian & Linklater, 2010). Florian and Linklater (2010) suggested that having a clear, rigorous framework guided the participants thinking about the correlation between teaching and learning to shift their teaching practices to recognize their capacity to teach all learners.

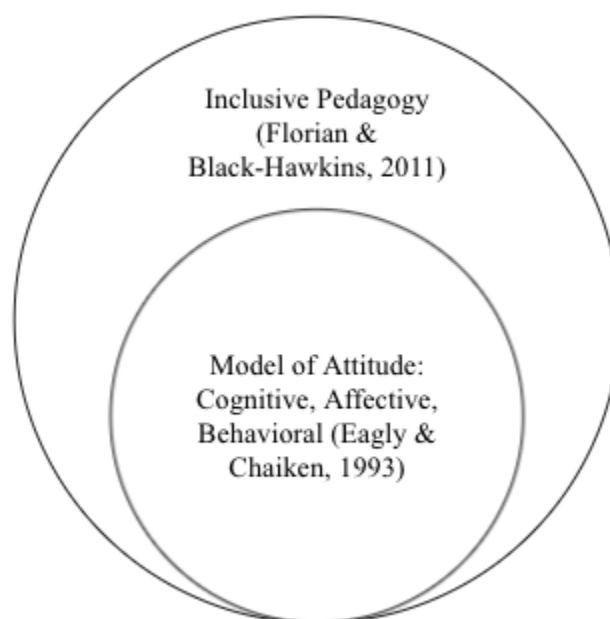
### *Summary*

Altogether, the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of attitude and inclusive pedagogy inform the study. There must be support for teachers to develop an understanding of inclusive pedagogy and implement it in the classroom (Brennan et al., 2019). Also, teachers must shift away from deficit thinking and strive toward the thought that all children can learn as districts move toward equity in education, which has to do with the components of attitude. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) argued that attitudes are exhibited through cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses though they do not require all three responses toward an attitude object (see Figure 2). Individuals' attitudes may form based on one component or two components (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Also, individuals may hold beliefs about some attitude objects and not display observable behaviors or have emotional reactions towards them (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Thus, the model of attitude shifts beyond understanding how teachers interpret inclusion; instead, it focuses on the various components of their thinking, feeling, and action.

Eagly and Chaiken's (1993) attitude model is used in conjunction with inclusive pedagogy, which can transform teachers' attitudes toward inclusion by shifting their thinking to every child having the potential to learn. The current research on inclusion has taken a turn in its definition by questioning what constitutes good practice and what counts as evidence of such practice (Florian, 2014). Inclusion is an ongoing debate due to the implementation of the least restrictive environment (LRE) under the IDEA. Thus, school districts frequently restructure instruction and curriculum content to determine their effectiveness (Florian, 2014). As such a shift occurs, decision-makers, such as administrators and policymakers, teachers, and specialists, cannot neglect students'

human differences. In practice, total inclusion requires the transformation of school cultures to ensure every student is accepted, and participation and achievement are maximized for all, not some (Ewing, Monsen, & Kielblock, 2018). Thus, Figure 3 highlights the study's conceptual frameworks.

Figure 3. Attitude and Inclusive Pedagogy Framework



### **Background and Need**

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, now referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, focused on accountability to ensure that every child receives a high-quality education and a mandate for highly qualified teachers (Pugach et al., 2011). Thus, the NCLB influenced the reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004 by aligning teaching standards with the NCLB, which meant that every special education teacher would be highly qualified (Pugach et al., 2011). Though special education may be a separate institution, federal legislation like the IDEA and

NCLB held all teachers accountable. In addition, the reauthorization of IDEA specified that children with disabilities should have access to the general education curriculum (Blanton, Pugach, & Boveda, 2018). However, it has been argued that general education for some children with disabilities may not be appropriate (Pugach et al., 2011). Thus, the IDEA requires that school districts consider the least restrictive environment (LRE) to determine the most appropriate support for students with disabilities.

Hence, in the following sections, the terminologies used to characterize children with disabilities in general education are reviewed to understand the movement of inclusion over time better as they have been contested. Following that, a brief overview of what is currently known about preschool inclusion establishes the case for why inclusion is crucial for preschool equity. Finally, the historical context of terminologies used to describe children with disabilities in general education and preschool inclusion contribute to the ways teachers think, feel, and act toward inclusion. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) identified three categories (child-related, teacher-related, and environment-related variables) to illustrate how prior research has classified teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. However, for this study, more focus is placed on the teacher-related and educational environment-related variables as both relate to teachers' experiences and support received to prepare for inclusion, and to identify the possible barriers to teachers' inclusive pedagogy practices.

### ***Inclusion and Its Use Over Time***

It is known that inclusion has a longstanding and evolving history; thus, it is imperative to examine the terminologies used to characterize children with disabilities in general education as they influence teacher practices and implementation. The original

term used for inclusion was *mainstreaming*. It describes a placement designated to serve children with disabilities in programs where the central focus is to help non-disabled children (McLean & Hanline, 1990). The idea around mainstreaming was to include students with mild disabilities into regular education programs (Bricker, 1995). In preschool, mainstreaming was problematic during the placement process, given that it was not fully supported and practiced by some public preschool programs in the United States (Lowenthal, 1999). Another term used to describe children with disabilities in general education was *integration*. Integration was used to describe interactions between students with and without disabilities (McLean & Hanline, 1990). Scholars like Thomson (2002) argued that integration is a physical location with non-disabled peers, a specific type of teaching practice, and the social integration by which students with disabilities integrate at the societal level. Integration was often for students with disabilities who were excluded from mainstream educational and community settings and was understood as placements in school settings only (Lowenthal, 1999). However, the terms and interpretation of mainstream and integration were not adapting to meet their purpose.

Thus, the term *inclusion* emerged as a response to the poor implementation of mainstreaming (Odom & Diamond, 1998). The term inclusion was a more suitable fit, which advocated that students with disabilities should not be excluded initially (Lowenthal, 1999). The idea of inclusion is to embody all students regardless of disabilities. Inclusion must extend beyond a physical location or placement by addressing the barriers, such as teachers' attitudes, resources, and curricula for successful inclusion (Bricker, 1995). However, present-day inclusion continues to endure scrutiny



as its definition is used and interpreted by different education sectors in addressing the educational and social equity of children with disabilities at the national and international levels (Messiou, 2017).

### *Synthesis of Preschool Inclusion*

As the interpretation of inclusion changes to adapt to the current context, inclusion in preschool has been on the rise primarily due to the (1) PL 99-457 enacted in 1986 to provide education and support for young children with disabilities, ages birth to 5, (2) the debates between the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) organizations that triggered reforms in early childhood teacher education, and (3) the increase of ECSE certifications to teach young children with disabilities (Pugach et al., 2011). According to the annual Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Report to Congress, based on 2007 data, preschool children placed in inclusion programs are occurring less often than initially thought a decade ago. Inclusion is happening for part of the day, and minimal progress has been made to increase placements of preschoolers with disabilities in inclusion programs (Odom et al., 2011). Through collaboration and advocacy efforts for young children with disabilities, early childhood inclusion or preschool inclusion became the main focus in early childhood education. How preschool inclusion has been defined has been debated but was done to support young children with disabilities.

For example, in 2009, the two most prominent organizations that focus on supporting young children with disabilities, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), published a shared statement on inclusion that focused on access, participation, and support. DEC

and NAEYC (2009) described access as providing a “wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environments,” which is a quality of early childhood inclusion (p. 2). Participation is when adults facilitate and support children’s engagement, participation, and belonging (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Finally, support is the collaboration among family members, educators, service providers (i.e., speech and language pathologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and so forth), and administrators with continual training to gain knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). The DEC and NAEYC strive to improve early childhood services. Structural and systemic approaches must set high standards for all children to achieve their potential, cultivate an inclusive philosophy, and establish a system of services and support (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Also, improving services for children with disabilities requires revising the program and professional standards, achieving an integrated professional development system, and influencing federal and state accountability systems (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). The proposed recommendations from DEC and NAEYC are essential to improving access, participation, and support in early childhood inclusion (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

Several studies have reviewed the literature about early childhood inclusion or preschool inclusion over the last two decades. In the most recent literature review about preschool inclusion, Odom et al. (2011) found eight crucial points, some of which are similar to those found in their previous studies (Odom, 2000; Odom et al., 2004). However, one of the most apparent critical findings not found in Odom et al. (2004) was professional development. Professional development is essential for inclusion, given that it ensures that practitioners gain the requisite expertise, skills, and continuing resources to

implement inclusion successfully (Odom et al., 2011). Also, Odom et al. (2011) found that preschool inclusion programs are not accessible to all students with disabilities from birth to age five.

### ***Brief Overview of Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inclusion***

It is now clear what inclusion is and how this research study benefits from the historical context of preschool inclusion. Also, research on teacher attitudes towards inclusion has increased over time (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Most recent studies like Barton and Smith (2015) found that teachers' attitude is a possible barrier to inclusion. Other studies have supported the three types of variables proposed by Avramidis and Norwich (2002). The first variable is child-related variables that examine the type and severity of disabilities based on physical and sensory, cognitive and behavioral-emotional factors, such as their prevalence and educational needs (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The second variable is teacher-related variables, including gender, age and teaching experience, grade level, training, teachers' beliefs, and socio-political views (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The third variable is the educational environment-related variables (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). This variable specifies the availability of support at the instructional and school levels (i.e., restructuring the physical space), help from the headteacher, support from specialist resource teachers, and sufficient resources and time for planning (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Thus, research relevant to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion is explored in the following sections to identify key findings based on child-related variables, teacher-related variables, and environment-related variables.

#### ***Child-related variables***

Research shows that factors related to a child, such as the nature of a child's disability, strongly influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Also, the severity of a student's disability was a factor that contributed to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Subban & Sharma, 2005). In a research study conducted by Subban and Sharma (2005), they found that teachers accepted and respected students with disabilities into general education classrooms, however, the nature and type of disability impacted teachers' attitudes. For example, students with physical disabilities appeared to make teachers feel anxious about the idea of inclusion (Subban & Sharma, 2005). They also found that general education teachers demonstrated less favorable attitudes toward students with more severe physical disabilities and lack self-care skills (Subban & Sharma, 2005). Other research has found that teachers held more negative attitudes towards students with learning disabilities, behavioral problems, and cognitive disabilities than students with physical disabilities and sensory impairments, of which teachers had more positive attitudes (Boer et al., 2011). Supporting research like Levins, Bornholt, and Bennon (2005) found that preservice and in-service teachers' perceptions of children with cognitive, social, or physical disabilities varied in a comparative study. The teachers showed more positive attitudes toward children with physical needs and learning difficulties and a more negative attitude toward children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) regarding their social needs (Levins et al., 2005).

In another example, Barned, Knapp, and Neuharth-Pritchett (2011) studied early childhood preservice teachers' attitudes toward inclusion for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Their results suggest that teachers support inclusion; however,

86.7% of teachers noted that the severity of the disability should be considered for inclusion classrooms (Barned et al., 2011). Like Barned et al. (2011), DeSimone et al. (2013) found that early childhood special education (ECSE) graduate students were more receptive to the idea of inclusion based on the types of disabilities. ECSE graduates seemed to favor inclusion for those students with more mild disabilities or learning disabilities than autism, sensory impairments, intellectual disability, and physical/health impairments disabilities. In general, regardless of being pre-service or in-service general and special education teachers, the literature suggests that the nature and severity of the disability have a tangible impact on attitudes toward inclusion.

In addition, interestingly, consistent with other studies (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Boer et al., 2011; Subban & Sharma, 2005), comparative studies have examined how teachers feel about inclusion in different countries and found that they have yielded similar results to studies in the United States. For example, Dupoux, Wolman, and Estrada (2005) compared high school teachers' attitudes toward integrating students with disabilities in Haiti and the United States. Reported attitudes were similar among teachers, but acceptance varied based on the type of disability (Dupoux et al., 2005). Thus, the researchers found that teachers in Haiti and the United States have preferences for different disability types (Dupoux et al., 2005). Therefore, the severity of a child's disability may be a factor in determining teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and their approach to inclusive pedagogical practices.

### ***Teacher-related variables***

Teacher-related variables include a teacher's gender, age, experience, grade level taught, training, teachers' beliefs, and sociopolitical views (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) examined 26 studies that focused on regular primary teachers' attitudes to inclusion in a literature review. Boer et al. (2011) found several teacher-related variables. Gender was a variable; for example, female teachers demonstrated more support toward inclusive education than male teachers. Boer et al. (2011) found that years of teaching experience influenced attitudes towards inclusion. Those teachers who had less teaching experience were more positive towards including students with disabilities than those with more years of teaching experience (Boer et al., 2011). Teachers who had previous experience with inclusive education held more positive attitudes than teachers who had no or less inclusive education experience (Boer et al., 2011).

Also, similar to Boer et al., (2011), Subban and Sharma (2005) found that gender, age, and teaching experience, teachers' qualification, class size, level of confidence, and previous experience teaching students with disabilities were factors that contributed to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. In another study similar to Subban and Sharma (2005), Vaz, Wilson, Falkmer, Sim, Scott, Cordier, and Falkmer (2015) investigated factors associated with primary school teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education. Vaz et al., (2015) found that age, gender, and level of self-efficacy were associated with primary teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Older teachers held more negative attitudes towards inclusion, given that more senior teachers have limited or no training in inclusive teaching (Vaz et al., 2015). Although results suggested that males were more likely to have negative attitudes toward inclusion, previous studies have indicated that there may be no differences (Vaz et al., 2015). Years of training are positively correlated with teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Goddard &

Evans, 2018). Lastly, teachers' professional and personal experiences, such as having family members with disabilities and previous experiences of inclusion, increased awareness of inclusion contributed to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Subban & Sharma, 2005).

### ***Educational Environment-related variables***

Educational environment-related factors, such as physical and human support services, are associated with teachers' attitudes towards inclusion Avramidis and Norwich (2002). Physical support services include resources, teaching materials, information technology (IT) equipment, or restructuring the physical environment (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). In contrast, human support services include leadership and administrative personnel, service providers (i.e., speech therapists, resource specialists), and general education teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Subban and Sharma (2005) identified that preparation to teach students with disabilities was a factor that influenced teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Also, support from administrative staff was a factor that contributed to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Subban & Sharma, 2005).

In another study similar to Subban and Sharma (2005), Vaz, Wilson, Falkmer, Sim, Scott, Cordier, and Falkmer (2015) found that training in teaching students with disabilities was associated with primary teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. In addition, teachers with special education training held positive attitudes more than those without training (Boer et al., 2011). Also, lacking skills to teach students with disabilities was associated with teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Vaz et al., 2015). The overall results indicated a need to enhance pedagogical content knowledge related to students with

disabilities to positively influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, especially understanding specific disabilities (Vaz et al., 2015). In their study, Subban and Sharma (2005) highlighted that professional training was a “bonus,” though they were not specific to areas of need for teachers.

Last but not least, other educational environmental-related variables that influenced teachers' attitudes toward inclusion include field experience and knowledge of special education policy and procedures. Literature supports that a special education course combined with field experience working with students who have disabilities shapes attitudes toward inclusion (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Swain, Nordness, & Leader-Janssen, 2012; Yu & Park, 2020). Teachers have reported that they lack confidence in skills and knowledge in working with students who have disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Yu, 2019). Also, teachers reported concerns around the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process, teachers' participation in IEPs, and instructional implementation (Alfaro, Kupczynski, & Mundy, 2015). A strong correlation was found between teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities and their knowledge of policies and procedures and instructional strategies (Alfaro et al., 2015).

### **Summary**

Early childhood and special education have evolved to accommodate the increasing number of preschoolers with disabilities served under the IDEA between 2008-2017 (US Department of Education, 2021). Additionally, the definition of inclusion has been modified to account for the unique needs of students with disabilities. Yet, inclusion still has its barriers, which Barton and Smith (2015) found teachers' attitudes and beliefs are a significant barrier to inclusion. Thus, the model of attitude, inclusive



pedagogy framework, the historical context of inclusion, its meanings, and preschool inclusion illuminate the study. Understanding teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and the influences on their attitudes, may strengthen teachers' inclusive pedagogy and teaching practices. Teachers' inclusive pedagogy should focus on every child in the classroom, presume a child's competence, dismiss the deficit model that a child with a disability lack competency, perceive difficulties as professional challenges instead of a child's deficits, and develop different approaches to those challenges (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). As a result, this study investigates early childhood special education teachers' attitudes toward inclusion as a district transitions from segregated to more inclusive classrooms to understand how they develop their inclusive pedagogy, as there is no evidence that they accept full inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

### **Research Questions**

The study includes several research questions. These questions are designed to explore the district ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion:

- 1) What are district early childhood special education teachers' (ECSE) attitudes towards inclusion as the district transitions from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms?
- 2) In what ways have district ECSE teachers felt supported and prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom?
- 3) What barriers do district ECSE teachers anticipate encountering in implementing inclusive pedagogical practices as the district shifts from segregated classrooms to inclusive classrooms?

## Definition of Terms

*Attitude* - Attitude has a cognitive, affective, and behavioral component (Boer et al., 2011; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). The cognitive part of attitude is an individual's assumption and thinking about inclusion (Boer et al., 2011; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). The affective component is an individual's emotional reaction toward inclusion (Boer et al., 2011; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). Finally, the behavioral part is an individual's action towards inclusion (Boer et al., 2011; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005).

*Early Childhood Education (ECE)* - a type of educational program that serves children between the ages of three to five years old.

*Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)* - a type of education program that serves young children with disabilities between the ages of three to five years old.

*Inclusion* - no longer holds the belief that it is a physical placement for students with disabilities; instead, inclusion is when "children with disabilities become a part of the larger social, community, and societal systems" (Odom et al., 2011, p. 345).

*The least restrictive environment (LRE)* - children with disabilities, ages 3-21, are offered programs that facilitate inclusion, settings with children with disabilities and children without disabilities in the same classrooms (Etscheidt, 2006).

*Individuals Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004* – the reauthorization of IDEA 2004 was to increase services and guarantee that all children from birth through age 21 with disabilities and their families receive free appropriate public education (FAPE) in

the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Trohanis, 2008). IDEA 2004 is an education law, civil rights law, and welfare law (Turnbull, 2005).

*No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001* – established six principles in education for all students for improving all schools, required accountability for all school students' academic performance, including those with disabilities.

*Special Day Class (SDC)* - a self-contained special education classroom that offers services to students with disabilities that are not available in a general education classroom.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research indicates that teachers' attitudes are a barrier to inclusion (Barton & Smith, 2015). Attitude has a cognitive, affective, and behavioral component (Boer et al., 2011; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). The cognitive part of attitude is an individual's assumption and thinking about inclusion (Boer et al., 2011; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). The affective component is an individual's emotional reaction toward inclusion (Boer et al., 2011; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). Finally, the behavioral part is an individual's action towards inclusion (Boer et al., 2011; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). Previous studies have investigated teachers' attitudes based on the three components of attitude (Boer et al., 2011; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). In addition, previous studies also examined factors that influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion concerning child-related variables, teacher-related variables, and educational environment-related variables (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Thus, the qualitative study has three main aims: (1) to examine ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion as a northern California school shifted from segregated to more inclusive classrooms, (2) to explore types of support they received and how that support shaped their inclusive pedagogical practices, and the extent to which that support prepared them to teach in inclusive classrooms, and (3) to identify barriers to that impact the transition to more inclusive classrooms.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth literature review related to the study. First, Odom et al.'s (2011) eight research synthesis points of early childhood education on inclusion are reviewed in-depth. Each research synthesis point is analyzed to understand previous

studies on inclusion in early childhood education. Second, the core of the study is focused on Odom et al.'s (2011) synthesis point about attitude and belief of inclusion. Therefore, a literature review on teacher-related variables (i.e., age, ethnicity, years of teaching experiences, etc.) (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002) that influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion is examined thoroughly. Also, educational environment-related variables (i.e., support services) (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002) are analyzed to gain insights into teachers' attitudes, specifically, to types of support, preparedness, and challenges, as a school district shifts from segregated classrooms to more inclusion classrooms. Finally, besides teachers' lesson planning and instruction, early childhood education teachers' core responsibility is to comply with special education policies. It is evident that special education policies and procedures, like IDEA and Individualized Education Plan (IEPs), play a significant role in implementing inclusive pedagogical practices. Thus, the historical context and challenges of the least restrictive environment (LRE) are examined. They are imperative from a legal stance and in practice for early childhood special education teachers. It is known that LRE is legally mandated by the IDEA and stated as part of a student with a disability's IEPs. Additionally, it is well established that the interpretation and application of inclusion have evolved. Therefore, it is vital to explore the underpinnings of LRE and its influences on inclusion and its implementation.

### **Overview Analysis of Preschool Inclusion**

Early intervention programs for young children with disabilities began emerging in the United States in the early 1970s (Bricker, 1995). However, it was in 1986 that the amendment of the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) affected education and

services for young children with disabilities and their families, which marked the beginning of the field of early childhood special education (ECSE) (Burton, Hains, Hanline, McLean, & McCormick, 1992). The educational agenda of EHA sparked three significant reforms: 1) to emphasize the child and family's strengths and needs for early intervention services, 2) a multidisciplinary approach that focuses on diverse perspectives to meet the needs of preschooler children with disability and their families, and 3) focus on family-centered practices by working collaboratively with families to meet the needs of their preschool children with disabilities (Burton et al., 1992). In turn, in the 1980s and early 1990s, early childhood education (ECE) and early childhood special education (ECSE) were combined as one area of specialization (Burton et al., 1992).

However, due to federal mandates requiring states to educate children in the least restrictive environment, there were high demands for more professionals specializing in ECE and ECSE (Piper, 2007). In addition, the variety of settings in which preschool programs are offered has impacted preschool education by integrating early childhood education programs with early childhood special education teacher preparation programs (Piper, 2007). Ultimately, states were provided with federal funds if they supported and developed services for preschoolers with disabilities (Piper, 2007). Although ECE and ECSE have held differing theoretical frameworks and approaches to practice, they also share similar values regarding educational development and learning in young children and issues related to the organization and delivery of services, such as inclusion (Burton et al., 1992).

Nevertheless, the inclusion of young children with disabilities in the United States has often meant placing them in Head Start programs, a federally funded program that

provides educational services and support for young children aged 3 to 5 and their families with low incomes (Gallagher & Lambert, 2006). Head Start programs are the largest provider of inclusive services (Gallagher & Lambert, 2006). In 1972, Head Start was initiated and required that at least 10% of its enrollment space be designated for young children with disabilities (Gallagher & Lambert, 2006). Besides Head Start being the primary setting that provided educational services and support to young children with disabilities, other locations, such as childcare centers, public preschools, and private preschools, began emerging as well (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2012). Odom (2000) argued that traditional special education programs are shifting to include young children with disabilities in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers. In addition, federal legislation that supported inclusion, such as the IDEA, is changing education and services for young children with disabilities (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Additionally, research on preschool inclusion has been conducted widely. Also, inclusion has become the focus in early childhood education (Odom, 2000; Odom et al., 2004; Odom et al., 2011).

Although inclusion has been interpreted varyingly (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005) to adapt to today's current educational context, research conducted by Odom et al. (2011) found research synthesis points on preschool inclusion. Odom et al. (2011) aimed to investigate inclusion after the reauthorization of the IDEA 2004. In turn, Table summaries Odom et al.'s (2011) eight synthesis points in early childhood inclusion.

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Table 1.

*Research Synthesis Points in Early Childhood Inclusion*

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- 1) Inclusion has several meanings but is essentially about belonging, participating, and reaching one's full potential in a diverse society.
  - 2) Inclusion takes many different forms.
  - 3) Universal access to inclusion programs is not yet a reality for all children from birth to age 5 with disabilities.
  - 4) A wide variety of factors such as attitudes and beliefs about inclusion, child and adult characteristics, policies, and resources can influence how inclusion is implemented and viewed by families and practitioners.
  - 5) Collaboration is a cornerstone of high-quality inclusion.
  - 6) Specialized instruction, interventions, and supports are key components of high-quality inclusion and essential in reaching desired outcomes for children and their families.
  - 7) Inclusion can benefit children both with and without disabilities.
  - 8) Professional development is likely necessary to ensure that practitioners acquire the knowledge, skills, and ongoing support needed to implement inclusion effectively.
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*Note.* Reprinted from Odom, S. L., Buysse V., & Soukakou, E. (2011). "Inclusion for young children with disabilities: A quarter-century of research perspectives" by S. L. Odom, V. Buysse, and E. Soukakou, 2011, *Journal of Early Intervention*, 33(4), 433-356. Copyright 2011 by the SAGE Publications.

In the following sections, each synthesis point is examined using previous research as it informs the foundation of the study.

***Inclusion has several meanings and takes different forms***

The idea of inclusion is defined differently across people and contexts (Odom, 2000; Odom et al., 2004; Odom et al., 2011). The term inclusion replaced mainstreaming and integration, although it is not written in the IDEA (Odom et al., 2011). The shift in the meaning of inclusion no longer holds the belief that it is a physical placement for children with disabilities; instead, Odom et al. (2011) argued that inclusion is when "children with disabilities become a part of the larger social, community, and societal



systems” (p. 345). The DEC/NAEYC influenced the shift in its meaning shared statement, highlighting access, participation, and support (Odom et al., 2011). Thus, the concept of the least restrictive environment does not suffice to support the purpose of inclusion on its own, but rather, all children are entitled to have positive relationships and championships, engage in meaningful ways, and receive support (Odom et al., 2011). Inclusive programs exist within different organizational contexts and have various services delivery models, such as co-teaching and team teaching (Odom et al., 2004).

For children with disabilities and their families, preschool inclusion provides opportunities for growth and learning as well as a sense of belonging (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Early childhood inclusion was also a reaction to counter educational practices that segregated children with disabilities (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). The misconceptions of inclusion influenced the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to combine efforts to create a shared definition of early childhood inclusion to achieve high-quality inclusion (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). DEC/NAEYC joint position statement clearly states that:

Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features

of inclusion that can be used to identify high-quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and support (p. 2).

Access is the learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environments that characterize high-quality early childhood inclusion (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Students with disabilities should have access to various organizational and community contexts (i.e., Head Start and private and public preschools), Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices, and technology to enable children to participate in inclusive settings. In addition, participation is key in play and learning activities with peers and adults (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). To access participation, preschoolers with disabilities will require individualized accommodations and support, including social-emotional and behavioral supports (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Also, there must be a healthy support system when serving children and families in inclusive settings. For instance, family members, practitioners, specialists, and administrators must access ongoing professional development, effective collaboration practice, funding policies, and program quality that reflect inclusive practices (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). All together, access, participation, and support can shape education policies and procedures that support high-quality early childhood inclusive programs (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

### ***Universal Access to Inclusive Programs is Not Yet a Reality***

Though it is well-known that inclusion has various meanings and is emerging in Head Start programs, inclusion is not accessible to all preschoolers yet. The Center for Educational Equity, formerly known as the Campaign for Educational Equity, supports the notion of free universal access to high-quality preschool programs (Rebell, Wolff, Kolben, & Holcomb, 2017). Universal access to preschool programs “afford all children

regardless of income level, race, cultures, disability, or dual language status, the right to be educated in the inclusive environments that are the hallmark of public education and support the ideals of a democratic nation” (Rebell et al., 2017, p. 18). However, characteristics of children with disabilities have been associated with placement in more or less restrictive settings (Kurth et al., 2019). For instance, Lee et al. (2015) found children with specific learning disabilities and speech and language impairments were often approved for inclusion. In addition, Odom (2000) found that school district practices are more likely to place children with mild disabilities in inclusive programs than those with severe disabilities.

In contrast, children with behavioral challenges were less favorable in inclusive settings (Lee et al., 2015). White, Scahill, Klin, Koenig, and Volkmar (2007) indicated that lower-cognitive ability and communication skills were associated with placement in special education or more restrictive settings, implying that specific disabilities were factors determining educational placements. Consistent with existing literature (White et al., 2007), Segall and Campbell (2014) examined first-grade teachers’ opinions on students’ educational placement and found that one’s cognitive ability was a factor in educational placement decision making. Students’ disability labels and deficits were frequently mentioned as reasons to be excluded from general education settings.

Moreover, the disproportionality of preschoolers with disabilities in special education has been examined relating to inclusion levels (Morrier & Gallagher, 2011). Morrier and Gallagher (2011) investigated factors that impacted disproportionate representation in preschool special education programs based on inclusion levels in five Southern states (i.e., North Carolina, Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Georgia). The

level of inclusion was described as the number of times children spend in the classroom with typically developing children (Morrier & Gallagher, 2011). Levels of inclusion are as follows: (a) full inclusion is when a child is in a regular early childhood program more than 80% of the time, (b) partial inclusion is when a child receives special education services in a regular early childhood education placement but less than 80% of the time, and (c) no known inclusion is when a child is placed in a separate class, separate school, or residential facility (Morrier & Gallagher, 2011). The results indicated that preschoolers with disabilities classified as Black in North Carolina were overrepresented in partial inclusion (Morrier & Gallagher, 2011). In addition, preschoolers with disabilities from Hispanic backgrounds were overrepresented in Alabama, Arkansas, and Tennessee in partial inclusion (Morrier & Gallagher, 2011). Findings suggested that Hispanics showed the most significant disproportionality in placements for preschoolers with disabilities (Morrier & Gallagher, 2011). Though Odom et al. (2011) did not specifically explain why universal access to inclusive programs is not yet an actuality for early childhood children with disabilities, evidence shows the barriers and inequity to preschool inclusion.

### ***Attitudes and Beliefs about Inclusion***

The controversy on inclusion, its interpretation, and its access has sparked attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion. Factors that influence attitudes and beliefs about inclusion have been examined across teachers and families (Odom, 2000; Odom et al., 2011). According to Odom et al. (2011), a wide range of factors such as attitudes and views about inclusion, child and adult characteristics, policies, and resources can all have an impact on how inclusion is implemented and perceived by families and practitioners.

Thus, research also appears to support that teachers generally show optimistic attitudes toward inclusion (Odom, 2000). For example, Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) conducted a qualitative study that included open-ended interviews to examine in-service (teachers that are currently working in a classroom) and preservice teachers' (teachers that are enrolled in a teacher education program) attitudes toward inclusion. Participants included those who were working in prekindergarten inclusive programs at a public school. Results indicate that in-service teachers' experiences in their inclusive classrooms shaped their attitudes toward inclusion, and preservice participants benefited from hands-on experiences in an inclusive classroom (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005).

Additionally, similar to the findings from Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005), Yu and Park (2020) examined 90 early childhood preservice teachers' to understand their attitude development toward inclusion of children with disabilities. Thus, Yu and Park (2020) found eight influential factors that shape teachers' attitudes toward inclusion: (1) working experiences with children with disabilities, (2) positive experiences in inclusive classrooms, (3) college courses, (4) family influences, (5) lack of experiences with inclusion, (6) negative experiences with inclusion, (7) just my belief, and (8) my disability. Approximately 48 participants (33.3%), the highest percentage, indicated that working experiences with children who have disabilities influenced by their attitudes, and the lowest rate (2.8%), approximately 4 participants, showed that personal experiences as a child with a disability influenced their attitudes toward inclusion (Yu & Park, 2020). Thus, the results from both studies (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005 and Yu & Park, 2020) reveal the importance of working experiences with children with disabilities, which is related to Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) teacher-related and educational

environment-related variables notion. That is, to have work experiences and field experiences as necessary components when working toward inclusion.

Though the study does not focus on parents' attitudes, it is important to consider how culture influences families' perspectives of disability (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009), as highlighted in Odom et al.'s (2011) research synthesis point of attitude and belief. Odom (2000) also found that parents of children with disabilities often express positive attitudes toward inclusion and increase over time. Odom (2000) emphasized the importance of children's cultural and linguistic background and its influences on inclusion. Their views influence how they react and respond to their child's disability (Blanchett et al., 2009). Blanchett et al. (2009) emphasized one's cultural perspective of disability and how they seek services. For example, Boer et al. (2011) conducted a study to review the literature on parents' attitudes towards inclusive education, including selected articles published between 1998 and 2008. The study indicated that 46.6% of participating parents with children with disabilities agreed with the statement that inclusion was good, and more than half of the participants believed that inclusion would be suitable for their children with disabilities (Boer et al., 2011). In turn, parents' attitudes and types of disabilities were negatively related to students with emotional difficulties, cognitive deficits, or autism (Boer et al., 2011).

On the other hand, parents displayed more positive attitudes toward including students with physical and sensory disabilities (Boer et al., 2011). Rafferty, Boettcher, and Giffin (2001) conducted a study that examined parents' attitudes toward inclusive education and the impact of the type and severity of a disability. Results indicated that parents of children with and without disabilities were more supportive of including

children with mild-moderate disabilities, such as children with speech and orthopedic impairments (Rafferty et al., 2001).

Conversely, parents of children with and without disabilities indicated less positive attitudes of children with more severe disabilities, such as emotional problems, cognitive impairments, or autism (Rafferty et al., 2001). These findings (Boer et al., 2011 and Rafferty et al., 2001) are consistent with Paseka and Schwab (2020). Paseka and Scwab (2020) investigated parents' attitudes toward inclusive education, in addition to their perceptions of teaching practices and available resources. Data determined that the type of disability was significant to parents' attitudes toward inclusive education (Paseka & Scwab, 2020). In line with previous research (Boer et al., 2011 and Rafferty et al., 2001), parents regard the inclusion of children with learning disabilities more positively than those with behavioral challenges (Paseka & Scwab, 2020). Also, Paseka and Scwab (2020) found that parents with children who attended inclusive classrooms and parents who participated in general education classrooms experienced a high level of inclusive teaching practices. Thus, research indicates that parents' attitudes toward inclusive education are generally positive or at least neutral (Paseka & Schwab, 2020).

Equally important, it is unethical to ignore the ways policies have influenced inclusion directly by impacting the implementation of inclusive programs and the interpretations of policies (Odom, 2000; Odom et al., 2011). The least restrictive environment (LRE) principle, for example, has been used to plan services for children with disabilities (Taylor, 2004). As a guiding policy for this purpose, its vagueness and implementation pose compliance challenges that further sanction segregation of educational settings embedded in district practices (Ryndak et al., 2014). Similar to

Taylor (2004) and Ryndak et al. (2014), Williamson, Hoppey, McLeskey, Bergmann, & Moore (2020) also noted that the continuous movement toward inclusion of students with disabilities often places them in the most restrictive environments. Policymakers and stakeholders have ceased to identify issues of LRE that it originally intended to solve, which in the next section discusses the impact on collaboration to create high-quality inclusion.

### ***Collaboration is Fundamental to High-Quality Inclusion***

A considerable body of literature has found that collaboration between teachers and related educational members is associated with high-quality early childhood education and students' academic outcomes (Hunt, Soto, Maier, Liboiron, & Bae, 2004; Lieber et al., 1998; McCormick, Noonan, Ogata, & Heck, 2001; Odom et al., 2011). Co-teaching has been widely used in inclusion. The partnership between early childhood education and early childhood special education teachers share a classroom and the shared responsibility for planning and students' learning (McCormick et al., 2001). Preschoolers in high-quality inclusion programs with a co-teaching model tend to demonstrate increased communication skills and verbal adult-child interaction (McCormick et al., 2001).

Similar to McCormick et al. (2001), Hunt et al. (2004) examined general education and special education teachers' collaboration process and the impact of it on preschoolers with severe disabilities' outcomes (i.e., engagement, development, and learning) using a team-teaching approach. The team-teaching model is the joint responsibility of an early childhood education teacher and a special education teacher for each student's education in the classroom (Hunt et al., 2004). Hunt et al. (2004) found



that effective teamwork requires consistent or planned team meetings with all education team members, including parents, to share their expertise, identify goals, share priorities, establish support plans, and identify responsibilities. Effective implementation of collaboration increased educational, social (i.e., participation and engagement), and communication and language outcomes of preschoolers with severe disabilities (Hunt et al., 2004). In line with McCormick et al. (2001), preschoolers with severe disabilities demonstrated increased participation and engagement in small to large group activities and recess play, social interactions with peers, communication skills, and engagement in literacy activities (Hunt et al., 2004).

### ***Special Instruction, Interventions, and Supports***

High-quality inclusion involves collaboration, specialized academic instruction, invention, and support to maximize each child's educational outcomes (Odom, 2000; Odom et al., 2004; Odom et al., 2011). Odom (2000) and Odom et al. (2004) emphasized that specialized instruction has positive behavioral and developmental outcomes for preschoolers with disabilities. For example, one specialized method of instruction that teachers use is naturalistic teaching to teach lessons naturally throughout children's school day (Kohler, Anthony, Steigher, & Hoyson, 2001). The purpose of naturalistic teaching is to allow children to make choices, present objects that draw attention to children's interests, position objects that are out of reach for children, and sabotage the situation (Kohler et al., 2001). Another critical component of naturalistic teaching is to complement children's interests with actions (Kohler et al., 2001).

When a child is engaged and shows interest in an activity, teachers praise and encourage them to increase their engagement. Kohler et al. (2001) conducted a study to

increase social interaction of preschool children with autism in an integrated preschool program using naturalistic teaching. Kohler et al. (2000) concluded that preschool children with autism demonstrated increased social skills. In a systematic review, Snyder, Rakap, Hemmeter, McLaughlin, Sandall, and McLean (2015) aimed to identify, examine, and summarize literature that focused on naturalistic approaches for preschool children with disabilities when the instruction was delivered in classroom settings. Findings from their literature review showed that children's outcomes related to skill acquisition were encouraging (Snyder et al., 2015). Overall, having specialized instruction, intervention, and support in inclusion work are key components that produce beneficial outcomes for students.

### ***Benefits of Inclusion***

Inclusion creates positive outcomes for young children with and without disabilities, with evidence from several studies supporting this notion (Odom, 2000; Odom et al., 2004; Odom et al., 2011). Nahmias, Kase, and Mandell (2014) conducted a comparative study that examined the relationship between early intervention placement in three settings (autism-only, mixed disability, or inclusive) and their outcomes for young children with ASD. Nahmias et al. (2014) found that children in inclusive settings experienced more positive cognitive outcomes than children who attended educational placements that did not include non-disabled peers. Results from their study also implied that early childhood inclusive education placements benefited children with more severe social impairments over autism-only settings (Nahmias et al., 2014). In another study, Green, Terry, and Gallagher (2014) investigated emergent literacy skills in young children with disabilities and compared them to their non-disabled peers in an inclusive

preschool setting. The results of their study demonstrated that children with disabilities made notable progress in emergent literacy skills, although they were further behind in achievement than their non-disabled peers (Green et al., 2014). Although non-disabled children outperformed the children with disabilities, children with disabilities showed the most significant improvement in print awareness and recognizing uppercase letters (Green et al., 2014). Overall, Green et al. (2014) asserted that children with disabilities benefited from high-quality language and literacy instruction in early childhood inclusive classrooms.

Equally important, studies indicate that children without disabilities also benefit from early childhood inclusive classrooms by showing positive developmental, social, and attitudinal results (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2016). For instance, Diamond (2001) found that typical preschool children who socially interacted with their peers with disabilities demonstrated higher scores on emotional understanding and acceptance measures than those with social interaction only with other typical preschool children. Also, inclusion may identify all children's needs that may not have been identified by specialists who work directly with children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

The research appears to support the notion that social interaction with peers in young children with disabilities occurs less often than their non-disabled peers in inclusive programs (Odom, 2000). Odom, Zercher, Li, Marquart, Sandall, & Brown (2006) explored social acceptance and social rejection of young children with disabilities in inclusive environments and the social behaviors and characteristics of social

acceptance and social rejection. Results from their study highlight that: (1) friendship mediates social acceptance for some children with disabilities, particularly those with disabilities that are less likely to impact social skills, (2) children with disabilities in inclusive environments were socially rejected, and (3) communication skills were associated with social rejection (Odom et al., 2006). Nahmias et al. (2004) inferred that inclusive placement for some children with ASD could increase opportunities to interact with typical children and produce positive cognitive outcomes for them. Guralnick and Bruder (2016) emphasized that inclusion facilitates and supports social interactions among children with and without disabilities.

In another study, Kishida and Kemp (2009) found that peer interactions occur in inclusive settings, though it was still relatively low for young children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Kishida and Kemp (2009) investigated young children with ASD during free play activities in both segregated and inclusive early childhood environments to compare their engagement and interaction across both environments. Results demonstrated that children with ASD were engaged for more than 80% of the observed time in segregated settings and more than 70% of the observed time in inclusive settings; in other words, they were engaged in both settings (Kishida & Kemp, 2009). Also, Kishida and Kemp (2009) found that adult interaction in segregated settings was significantly higher than adult interaction in inclusive settings. Children with ASD rarely interacted with peers in segregated settings and sometimes in inclusive settings (Kishida & Kemp, 2009). Peer interactions in inclusive environments occurred less than in segregated environments (Kishida & Kemp, 2009). Overall, the results indicate that the setting (i.e., segregated or inclusive) does not imply increased learning opportunities for

children with ASD (Kishida & Kemp, 2009). Kishida and Kemp (2009) focused on the quality of staff interaction in segregated and inclusive environments and found no significant differences. The authors concluded that potential strengths in both environments need to be maximized (Kishida & Kemp, 2009). Optimizing learning experiences for children with ASD is necessary to increase their interest and interaction (Kishida & Kemp, 2009).

### ***Professional Development***

Last but not least, Odom et al. (2011) emphasized that implementing inclusion requires continuous professional development. Professional development is intended to help professionals learn core skills or strengthen teaching and intervention methods (Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009). In addition, it should stress the link between the quality of the curriculum and the quality of the early childhood workforce (Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009). Professional development is essential to effectively implement inclusion and support children with disabilities in inclusion programs (Odom et al., 2011). Barton and Smith (2015) suggested that providing joint professional development for early childhood teachers, special education teachers, and community providers is a solution to address teachers' challenging attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion. Similar to Barton and Smith (2015), Yu (2019) found that Head Start teachers were willing to provide individualized support to preschoolers with disabilities and expressed the importance of learning practical strategies to support the learning needs of each child with a disability. Therefore, professional development and having consistent and continuous collaboration and coaching are crucial to preschool inclusion (Odom et al.,

2011). In conclusion, some research synthesis points made by Odom et al. (2011) are related to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion.

### **Influences of Attitude Towards Inclusion**

There is growing support for inclusion in early childhood education programs in Head Start, childcare, community preschools, and ECSE programs (Barton and Smith, 2015). However, the progress in preschool inclusion remains static. Barton and Smith (2015) conducted an online survey with two hundred thirty-eight educator professionals. They found that attitude and belief were ranked number one out of eight factors influencing attitudes toward inclusion (Barton & Smith, 2015). The participants were primarily concerned about the lack of cooperation between general education and special education settings and their related staff, teacher preparedness, lack of knowledge of the benefits of inclusion, turf, and lack of respect (Barton and Smith, 2015). Barton and Smith (2015) compared their results to Rose and Smith (1992), conducted more than 25 years ago. Rose and Smith (1992) found that attitude was the second most reported factor, while Barton and Smith (2015) reported that attitude and belief were the primary factors influencing teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Thus, data indicated that attitude and belief were the primary challenge of inclusion and were no longer secondary (Barton & Smith, 2015). Previous studies argued that best practices are influenced by teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward inclusion (DeSimone, Maldonado, and Rodriguez, 2013). To further understand teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, it is imperative to examine factors that influence them in the following sections.

### ***Teacher-Related Influences***

Research regarding teacher characteristics associated with their attitudes toward inclusion has been sought. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) identified teacher-related variables as age and gender, years of teaching experience, self-efficacy, and so forth. Thus, teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are influenced by teacher-related variables (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). For this reason, below is a synthesis of these findings.

### ***Age and Gender***

Although teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward inclusion, several studies revealed inconsistent results associated with the factors of age and gender. For example, Avramidis et al. (2000) found that age and gender, along with years of teaching experience, were not significantly related to attitudes towards inclusion. In addition, supporting studies like Boyle (2014) examined the impact of teacher-related variables on attitudes toward inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002) using a large sample of preschool preservice teachers. Findings appeared to support the study by Avramidis et al. (2000), concluding age and gender did not influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. In contrast, Vaz et al. (2015) concluded that male teachers held less favorable attitudes toward inclusion, and teachers aged 55 years or older had less favorable attitudes toward inclusion than those aged 35-55. In contrast, Saloviita (2020) found that female teachers held more positive attitudes towards inclusion than male teachers. Also, age was a predictor of attitudes, indicating that younger teachers have slightly more positive attitudes towards inclusion (Saloviita, 2020). Thus, the impact of teacher-related variables, such as age and gender, on attitudes towards inclusion is still unclear based on the existing research literature.

### ***Years of Teaching Experience***

Various studies have examined the relationship between years of teaching experience and teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, and the results are somewhat inconsistent. For example, Vaz et al. (2015) found no association between years of teaching and teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. However, Boer et al. (2011) found that years of teaching experience were associated with teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and further explained that teachers with fewer years of teaching experience held more positive attitudes towards inclusion than teachers who had more years of teaching experience. There are also indications that years of teaching experience in an inclusion setting influenced teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Boer et al., 2011). Teachers with years of teaching experience in an inclusion setting held more positive attitudes towards inclusion than teachers with less or no inclusion experience (Boer et al., 2011).

### ***Teachers' Self-Efficacy***

The nature of a student's disability is just one factor that influences teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Teaching efficacy is yet another factor that has been found to influence a teacher's attitude toward inclusion. Teaching efficacy is a teacher's level of confidence and competency to facilitate learning successfully (Brady & Woolfson, 2008). Research studies revealed that teachers with high self-efficacy are more inclined to meet students with learning difficulties needs in their classrooms (Brady & Woolfson, 2008). Savolainen et al. (2012) conducted a comparative study of in-service teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in applying inclusive practices in South Africa and Finland. Results from their study indicate that South African teachers' level of self-efficacy in using inclusive practices was strongest for managing behaviors, whereas managing behaviors was the inclusive practice that Finnish teachers had the lowest self-efficacy. Self-efficacy



is also associated with teachers' attitudes; for example, when teachers believe in implementing inclusive practices, they develop more positive attitudes (Savolainen et al., 2012). Consistent with Savolainen et al. (2012), Vaz et al. (2015) found that primary school teachers held low levels of self-efficacy, which was related to negative attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities. Sari, Celikoz, and Secer (2009) investigated the self-efficacy and attitudes of preservice and in-service preschool teachers towards inclusive education. Their study indicated that teachers who held positive perceptions of their performance had more positive attitudes toward inclusion (Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009). A takeaway from the existing research literature is that as preschool teachers' level of confidence, and competency increases, so do their positive attitudes toward inclusion (Sari et al., 2009; Savolainen et al., 2012).

### ***Personal and Professional Experiences with Students who have Disabilities***

Having previous personal and professional experiences with students who have disabilities appears to be a strong predictor of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Several studies indicated that having prior experience teaching students with disabilities influenced positive attitudes toward inclusion (Dias & Cadime, 2016; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Subban & Sharma, 2005). In contrast, some studies found that teaching a child with a disability was not significant to teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2012; Jeon & Peterson, 2003). Subban and Sharma (2005) found that teachers with previous experiences working with students with disabilities or who have a family member with a disability influenced their awareness of inclusion. The study also revealed that earlier experiences with inclusion are associated with being prepared to include students with disabilities in classrooms (Subban & Sharma, 2005). Similar to

Subban and Sharma (2005), Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) indicated that participants' attitudes toward inclusion were associated with having previous experiences with children who have disabilities. Also, having experiences working in inclusive classrooms influenced teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). For example, teachers reported that direct practical experiences with children with disabilities and developing effective teaching strategies shaped their positive experiences (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005). In other words, field or direct experiences with children with disabilities influenced in-service teachers' formation of a positive attitude toward inclusion, reported by preservice teachers (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005).

Consistent with Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005), Dias and Cadime (2016) examined personal and professional variables that influence preschool teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Results from their study suggested that experience with or knowing a person with special education needs was a strong predictor of attitudes towards inclusion (Dias & Cadime, 2016). Having personal contact with a person with a disability provides opportunities to understand one's needs, which appears to be a predictor of teaching efficacy (Dias & Cadime, 2016). Yu and Park (2020) found that early childhood preservice teachers' attitudes were influenced by personal experiences, especially by direct contact or working with students with disabilities in inclusion settings. Moreover, Jeon and Peterson (2002) found that student teachers' attitudes toward inclusion were significantly associated with having personal relationships with individuals with disabilities. Although several studies revealed that teachers' overall attitudes toward inclusion were associated, Hsieh and Hsieh (2012) revealed that having a minimum of one child with a disability in the classroom was not associated with teachers' attitudes

toward inclusion. According to Hsieh and Hsieh (2012), the findings cannot be generalized to other geographical locations, teachers working with various child populations, or in other settings.

In sum, research has highlighted the importance of attitudes toward inclusion and the role of personal and professional experiences of teachers. However, previous studies (Dias & Cadime, 2016; Hsieh & Hsieh, 2012; Yu & Park, 2020) noted limitations of having small sample sizes, geological locations, and specific groups of teachers (i.e., pre services teachers, female participants). As a result, Dias and Cadime (2016) and Yu and Park (2020) recommended larger samples. Also, Dias and Cadime (2016) suggested that there be more representation in terms of gender and geographic locations.

### ***Educational Environment-related Influences***

Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are influenced by elements relating to the educational environment variables. Thus, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) argued that educational environment-related variables have two categories: physical and human support services. Physical support services include resources, instructional materials, information technology (IT) equipment, and physical environment (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). On the other hand, human support services include leadership and administrative staff, service providers (such as speech therapists and resource specialists), and general education teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The research appears to support that both physical and human support services are significant factors influencing teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. As a result, the following sections describe how physical and human support services influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion.

### ***Human Support Services***

*Administrative Support.* Previous studies show that administrative support contributes to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. It is known that inclusion requires plenty of planning and coordination. However, inclusion cannot succeed unless school administrators are dedicated to it (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). Fuchs (2010) examined general educators' barriers associated with inclusion and found that lack of administrative support contributed to their feelings towards inclusion. The participants described a lack of time to plan and collaborate and a lack of instructional time to teach all curriculum requirements (Fuchs, 2010). Specifically, the administrative expectations and job responsibilities they required of teachers were "unrealistic" (Fuchs, 2010, p. 32). The participants further described that they had opportunities to attend in-service training; however, it was irrelevant and described as a "waste of time" (Fuchs, 2010, p. 33). Fuchs (2010) also found a lack of support from special education staff, especially the quality of assistance and support in the study.

Moreover, consistent with Fuchs (2010), DeSimone et al. (2013) conducted a descriptive study using the Attitudes Toward Inclusion Survey to explore early childhood special education (ECSE) graduate students' attitudes towards inclusion. A total of 170 surveys were distributed to graduate students enrolled in the ECSE program over three years (DeSimone et al., 2013). Of the 170 surveys distributed, a total of 152 surveys were returned (DeSimone et al., 2013). The Attitudes Toward Inclusion Survey included three parts: 1) Part I gathered participants' demographic information and schools (if currently teaching), 2) Part II measured participants' attitudes about students with disabilities, their ability to learn, and classroom placements, and 3) Part III consisted of two open-ended questions that asked why they were in "favor" or "against" inclusion

(DeSimone et al., 2013). DeSimone et al. (2013) found that administrative support significantly influenced teachers' attitudes toward early childhood inclusion programs. More importantly, the study revealed that successful inclusion requires ongoing teacher training, support from administrators, and adequate resources (DeSimone et al., 2013). Teachers generally have negative attitudes towards inclusion when there is a lack of formal training, advanced notice, or adequate support, which are obstructive to teachers, children and negatively affect classroom practice (DeSimone et al., 2013).

*Training and Preparedness.* Another strong predictor of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion is training, which has been revealed in other studies (Avramidis et al., 2000; Boer et al., 2011; Dais & Cadime, 2016; Vaz et al., 2015; Yu, 2019; Yu & Park, 2020; and Zagona et al., 2017). For example, Avramidis et al. (2000) found that mainstream teachers with considerable training in special education reported more positive attitudes than teachers with slight to no training about inclusion. In turn, training increased teachers' levels of confidence in meeting IEP compliances (Avramidis et al., 2000). Moreover, some studies strongly support teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and the amount of training compared to teachers who did not receive training (Barned et al., 2011; Boer et al., 2011). For example, student-teachers that had training in teaching children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) held positive attitudes towards inclusion (Barned et al., 2011). In contrast, Hunter-Johnson, Newton, Cambridge-Johnson (2014) found that insufficient training in special education and inclusive education was the most prevalent factor influencing teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Thus, there is an association between teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and the amount or types of training they received.

In addition, other studies have shown similar findings to Avramidis et al. (2000), Barned et al. (2011), Boer et al. (2011), and Hunter-Johnson, Newton, Cambridge-Johnson (2014). For example, Vaz et al. (2015) found that training focused on teaching students with disabilities was related to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Knowledge seems to be a significant attribute that influences teachers' teaching practice (Vaz et al., 2015). Consistent with Vaz et al. (2015), O'Connor, Yasik, and Horner (2016) discovered that teachers lack critical knowledge about IDEA and recommended additional professional development in special education law to raise teachers' awareness of students' rights to campaign for the children they teach. Barton and Smith (2015) recommend creating easy-to-read materials on the benefits and laws related to inclusion to address teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Therefore, teachers' expertise is critical as it indicates how much they understand a particular subject area, or, in other words, their competence in a subject area (O'Connor et al., 2016). Having content knowledge could increase teachers' performance due to their understanding and classroom practices to meet their students' needs (O'Connor et al., 2016; Vaz et al., 2015). There must be joint professional development or training activities between early childhood (EC), early childhood special education (ECSE), and community providers (Barton & Smith, 2015).

*University Coursework in Teacher Preparation Programs.* The research found that university coursework in teacher preparation programs influences teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Vaz et al.'s (2015) study indicated that having an educational degree focusing on inclusion was unrelated to teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. However, a significant association was found between teachers who have taken university courses on inclusive education and their preparedness for it (Zagona et al., 2017). University

coursework that fosters skills in inclusive practices includes individualizing instruction, providing accommodation, and adapting to standards (Zagona et al., 2017). For example, coursework assignments require students to conduct ecological assessments and design and implement individualized adaptations for their practicum or fieldwork placements (Zagona et al., 2017). Overall, the participants mentioned that the coursework descriptions were described as “hands-on learning” and “practical preparation,” but they indicated that there were challenges of meeting students' individual needs (Zagona et al., 2017, p. 174). The participants found it challenging to balance supporting the student participating in class activity and meeting individual academic needs (Zagona et al., 2017). Hence, Zagona et al. (2017) recommend that additional research is needed to investigate teacher preparation programs and university coursework on inclusive education for students with disabilities, teaching strategies, general and special education teachers' experiences with collaboration, and teachers' preparation to improve inclusive education.

In parallel with Zagona et al. (2017), Yu and Park (2020) found that early childhood student-teachers' field experiences influenced their preparation for inclusive education, contributing to their preparedness to adapt instructions and behavioral supports. Field experiences allow student-teachers to experience a variety of inclusive practices (Yu & Park, 2020). For example, student-teachers can learn adaptation of curriculum and behavioral support. In addition, as a requirement in teacher preparation programs, self-reflection is critical in field experiences as it enables student-teachers to consider how their views, attitudes, and experiences affect their interactions with children, families, and other professionals in inclusive classrooms (Yu & Park, 2020).

Self-reflections contribute to teachers' preparedness to teach, which can be done by writing a journal, engaging in a conversation with fellow teachers, or discussing their reflection in a meeting (Yu & Park, 2020). Yu and Park's (2020) findings are in line with Zagona et al.'s (2017) notion of advancing university coursework and Leatherman and Niemeyer's (2005) findings of combining university-level early childhood and early childhood special education programs, which influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Ultimately, teachers must receive advanced training to improve their awareness and expertise in implementing effective inclusive practices (Yu, 2019).

*Collaboration as Co-teaching.* Equally important as training and university coursework are for inclusion work, co-teaching and collaboration are key components influencing teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Collaboration entails joint planning, shared values, shared accountability for all children, communication, professional duties, relationship stability, and administrative support (Lieber, Beckman, Hanson, Janko, Marquart, Horn, & Odom, 1997). Additionally, collaboration occurs differently under various inclusive models. As a result, numerous research studies have examined the effect of collaboration on the implementation of inclusion and teachers' attitudes toward it (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Odom et al., 2011; Zagona et al., 2017).

For instance, Hammond and Ingalls (2003) found that teachers had concerns regarding the lack of collaboration opportunities with fellow teachers. Yet, collaboration is necessary for inclusion work as it requires planning and coordination between general and special education teachers. In another study, Zagona et al.'s (2017) data revealed that a participant in the study, who was a special education teacher in a self-contained class, developed positive experiences collaborating with general education teachers and



preparedness for inclusive education, such as having shared knowledge about inclusive education and responsibility to inform others about training (Zagona et al., 2017).

Additionally, another special education teacher in a co-teaching role mentioned the impact of the role and being a point-person for other special education teachers in the district to learn about co-teaching (Zagona et al., 2017). However, overall, participants in the study described their experiences as feeling “separated” and not feeling “comfortable” revealed when collaborating with other teachers, especially with those who held differing beliefs or those that did not want to collaborate (Zagona et al., 2017, p. 172). In short, the critical point of collaboration is that it is fundamental to creating high-quality inclusion programs, as mentioned in the Odom et al. (2011) article. Thus, there need to be opportunities for transdisciplinary teams to build support for inclusive programs and ongoing professional development related to collaboration among early childhood and early childhood special education practitioners (Barton & Smith, 2015).

### ***Physical Support Services***

Physical support services are as critical as human support services. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) described physical support services as resources, instructional materials, information technology (IT) equipment, and reconstruction of a physical environment. Much attention has been focused on adapting instructions, fiscal or funding, and resources in the literature of teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion and preschool inclusion (Odom et al., 2011). Thus, as noted previously, Odom et al. (2011) highlighted specialized teaching, interventions, and supports as critical components of high-quality inclusion for children and their families to achieve targeted goals. For example, participants in Zagona et al.’s (2017) study revealed that finding a “balance”

between supporting students with disabilities in classroom activities and modifying activities for them to do the activities independently, as well as, having health concerns for students with disabilities that have complex medical needs (Zagona et al., 2017, p. 172). Hence, Zagona et al. (2017) highlighted some of the challenges of adapting and modifying instruction for students with disabilities. As part of a teacher's job expectation, it is to identify students' needs and adapt to meet their learning needs.

Apart from adapting instructions, there is an assumption that inclusion programs are more costly than segregated programs (Barton & Smith, 2015). However, inclusion programs are less expensive than segregated or traditional special education programs (Odom, Hanson, Lieber, Marquart, Sandall, Wolery, Horn, Schwartz, & Beckman, 2001). Cost includes teacher salaries, administration, equipment, materials, transportation, and building cost (Odom et al., 2001). It has been noted that teacher salaries have been identified as the primary component of instruction costs (Odom et al., 2001). Also, equipment includes tables, desks, toys, blocks, puzzles, and so forth in the classroom and any specialized equipment a child needs (Odom et al., 2001). Furthermore, materials and supplies are used for instruction and necessary for learning, such as construction paper, paint, glue, books, snack food, and so forth (Odom et al., 2001). Other fiscal costs include transportation, such as school buses, of children with disabilities to their inclusive programs (Odom et al., 2001). Lastly, administrative salary is a factor in fiscal costs (Odom et al., 2001).

Thus, Barton and Smith (2015) mentioned that having fiscal support or funding is critical to advancing the quality of inclusion programs. Inclusion requires an adequate budget for resources, teaching materials, and so forth to enable high-quality inclusion

programs. Overall, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; DeSimone et al., 2013; and Fuchs, 2010), teachers expressed concerns about limited resources and lack of knowledge in providing individualized support, which could hinder educational opportunities for children with disabilities in inclusive settings (Yu, 2019).

### **Summary**

Previous research focused on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion is crucial as it lays the foundations for future research. The proposed study investigates factors that shape district early childhood special educators' attitudes toward inclusion, as previous studies have mainly focused on general education teachers. Inclusion at the preschool level continues to emerge with various delivery models, interpretation, instruction, and limited physical access (Odom et al., 2011). It is known that preschool inclusion produces positive academic, social, and language outcomes (Kishida & Kemp, 2009; Nahmias et al., 2004; Odom et al., 2006).

Thus, teacher-related and educational environment-related variables are identified as significant to the study. Teacher-related variables that inform the study include teachers' (a) age and gender, (d) years of teaching experience, and (c) self-efficacy. Just as significant as teacher-related variables, educational environment-related variables that are relevant to the study are (a) administrative support, (b) training and preparedness, (c) university coursework in teacher preparation programs, (d) collaboration or co-teaching, (e) adaptation of instructions, and (f) fiscal or funding.

In conclusion, the primary objective of inclusion is to find solutions for both students with disabilities and those without disabilities in education. Therefore, Barton and Smith (2015) recommend identifying and using current resources as leverage, using

evidence-based practices that improve student outcomes, and using an implementation science framework that focuses on leadership and organizational procedures to support preschool inclusion to maximize their impact.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Inclusion has become a topic of interest in special education, in particular, early childhood special education. Thus, the purpose of the qualitative interview study was to investigate early childhood special education teachers' (ECSE) attitudes toward inclusion as a northern California district transitioned from segregated to more inclusive classrooms. The study aimed to identify the types of support ECSE teachers received and to determine whether those supports were effective in preparing them for the transition to implement inclusive pedagogical practices in their classrooms. Also, another component that is imperative was to identify barriers to inclusion and to understand how those barriers influence their implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted to determine categories and subcategories related to ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion as they prepared to transition from segregated to more inclusive classrooms.

Chapter 3 presents the research questions, research design, ethical consideration and human subjects protection, setting and participants, instrumentation, data collection and procedure, data analysis, and the researcher's subjectivity statement.

#### **Research Questions**

Several research questions are identified for the study:

1. What are district early childhood special education teachers' (ECSE) attitudes towards inclusion as the district transitions from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms?

2. In what ways have district ECSE teachers felt supported and prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom?
3. What barriers do district ECSE teachers anticipate in implementing inclusive pedagogical practices as the district shifts from segregated classrooms to inclusive classrooms?

### **Research Design**

The study's research design was a qualitative interview study, and the primary mode of inquiry was conducted mainly through interviews (Bhattacharya, 2017). Qualitative interviewing is a versatile and effective method for capturing people's voices and how they make sense of their experiences (Rabionet, 2011). Also, Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicated that interviews are useful to gain participants' insight on historical information when the researcher cannot directly observe. However, interviews have limitations, such as the researcher's presence or relationship with the participants may present biased responses, and participants may articulate or understand questions varyingly (Creswell, & Creswell, 2018). Thus, the study used semi-structured interviews by asking participants specific questions that the researcher intended to investigate.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Upon the institutional review board (IRB) approval for human subjects research, the researcher followed ethical principles for researching human subjects. Participants in the study had the right to voluntary consent or not to consent to participate. In other words, any participation was voluntary. Written informed consent was developed to describe the study with the option to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Also, participants were given the option to skip any interview questions that

made them feel uncomfortable without penalty, however, each participant responded to all the interview questions. Thus, a total of four informed consent was obtained for the study.

Moreover, to maintain participants' privacy, all written data from the current study were kept confidential, and the researcher used pseudonyms for each participant, including the name of the school. The researcher informed each participant of any data generated by the research and that the data would be stored in a secure location for seven years, after which it will be destroyed. Thus, the researcher stored audio recordings and electronic data on a password-protected computer and hard-copy paper data in a locked cabinet. The researcher did not anticipate any risks or discomforts to the participants from participating in the study. The study also did not have direct benefits to any participants. However, possible benefits to others could include identifying areas of need for professional development or training and building awareness of inclusion. In sum, the current study did not exploit any participant or person.

### **Setting and Participants**

It must be noted that the researcher has a professional relationship with the selection of the setting and participants in the study. The researcher is an early childhood special education teacher that is currently teaching at the selected setting for the past eight years in an early childhood special education classroom special day class.

#### ***Setting***

The study was conducted at Little Sage Elementary (pseudonym), a Title I public school located in a small suburb community in Northern Central California. Little Sage Elementary is dedicated to meeting the learning needs of preschoolers with disabilities,

including those who have substantial speech and language, social, and behavioral needs that cannot be served in traditional early childhood or preschool classrooms. The school offers specialized academic instruction, speech and language therapy, behavioral support, occupational and physical therapy with an educational focus, as well as vision, deaf and hard of hearing, and other associated services.

Little Sage Elementary is a unique school and offers a morning and an afternoon program. Each program is approximately two-half hours per day Monday through Friday. The morning program begins at 8:20AM until 11:00 AM and the afternoon program begins at 12:30PM until 3:10PM. The school has eight early childhood special education (ECSE) classrooms with eight ECSE credentialed teachers, 16 paraprofessionals, five speech therapists, two school psychologists, and a registered nurse (RN). The occupational and physical therapists are contractors from private companies and provide services on the school campus as needed based on the students' Individual Education Plan (IEPs). In addition, Little Sage Elementary also has an inclusion early childhood education (ECE) classroom with two ECE teachers, one credentialed ECSE teacher, a paraprofessional, and a teacher assistant. The ratio of students to teachers is 2:1. In other words, each classroom has a ratio of two students to one ECE teacher and two paraprofessionals, with a class size of no more than six students. Little Sage Elementary provides special education services to over 96 students and conducts over 250 educational and speech assessments each year.

Based on the California Department of Education (CDE), Little Sage Elementary was opened in July 1999 and closed in June 2007 as a proposal to merge four neighboring school districts into one school district was approved in 2007. As a result,



Little Sage Elementary became part of the newly created school district. CDE has not published any information on Little Sage Elementary since the school districts merged in 2007. However, given that the researcher has been an employee of the school district for over eight years, the researcher was able to provide some informational insight. Little Sage Elementary became a comprehensive school site during the 2017-2018 school year when the district added an ECE (i.e., preschool general education) classroom at the school. The purpose of adding an ECE classroom was to provide preschoolers with disabilities with access to typical peers in order to improve student outcomes with the goal of eventually becoming an inclusion program. Thus, one of the early initiatives toward preschool inclusion was to provide integrated recesses for preschoolers with disabilities. However, there were financial, logistical, and facility constraints that impacted the shift to inclusion. Some issues included licenses and permits to use the existing facility, the facility did not meet the CDE requirements, and the existing playground structure was deemed unsafe and need to be removed. Before solutions were implemented, the administrator resigned.

Then, the following school year 2018-2019, Little Sage Elementary appointed a new administrator who carried on the prior administration's inclusion work and applied for an inclusion grant for the district. The grant was the Inclusive Early Education Expansion Program (IEEEP) which funds school districts over a three-year period to increase access to inclusive early learning and care programs for children with disabilities. The IEEEP funds may be used for facilities, such as facility repairs and renovations that will assist children with disabilities in increasing access to inclusive ELC programs, adaptive equipment, and professional development (Inclusive Early Education

Expansion Program - Child Development (CA Dept of Education), 2021). As a result, the IEEEP was granted to the school district, which led to the district's transition from segregated to more inclusive classrooms. Little Sage Elementary was one of the schools in the district with a plan to have an inclusion program. However, in the school year of 2019-2020, the Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic impacted schools as they shifted to distance learning.

While many school districts across the country closed their doors and shifted to online learning, the district maintained its commitment to inclusiveness by delivering four professional learning (PL) sessions from January to May 2021, in which were voluntary to teachers and paraprofessionals. These PL sessions were known as the "IEEEP Core Group PL" (the title of the professional learning sessions). The trainers of the PL included a university associate professor and an inclusion coordinator for the district's Early Childhood Education department. The inclusion professional learning sessions were held on January 29th, February 26th, March 26th, and May 12th of 2021. In addition, the trainers held an hour-long virtual 'Cafe Hour' on the first and third week of every month from January to May 2021. The four IEEEP Core Group PL sessions were based on the *Building Blocks for Teaching Preschoolers with Disabilities, Third Edition* by Susan R. Sandall, Ilene S Schwartz, Gail E. Joseph, and Ariane Gauvreau. Specific topics that the PL sessions explored were the following: (1) inclusion, (2) Multi-tiered Systems of Support, (3) evidence-based inclusion strategies, (4) curriculum modification, (5) embedded learning opportunities for children, and (6) child-focused instructional strategies. Moreover, the final session of the inclusion professional learning focused on collaboration, such as sharing inclusive practices or strategies to facilitate

inclusion work with young students that teachers learned over the course of the professional learning sessions.

### *Participants*

Participants in the study were selected through purposeful selection. Maxwell (2013) described purposeful selection as a sampling strategy in which "settings, persons, or activities" are chosen based on relevance to the purpose and research questions in studies (p. 97). Participants were selected purposefully from a district that is transitioning from segregated to more inclusive classrooms. The study included four ECSE teachers, Darya, Bonnie, Patricia, and Julia, all of which are currently teaching at Little Sage Elementary (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participant's Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Years of teaching experience	Years of teaching at Little Sage Elementary	Current classroom Type	Educational Level
Darya	30	Female	White, Southeast Asian	6	6	Special Day Class - Autism	Master Degree
Bonnie	31	Female	Hmong	3	3	Special Day Class - Autism	Master Degree
Patricia	39	Female	Mexican	8	2	Special Day Class - Autism	Master Degree
Julia	33	Female	Not Hispanic, White	12	4	Special Day Class - Autism	Master Degree

***Darya***

Darya is a thirty-year-old female teacher with a total of six years of teaching experience. She has taught at Little Sage Elementary for six years. She teaches in an autism ECSE special day class (SDC). Darya identified herself as White and Southeast Asian, and her highest level of education is a Master's degree. She shared that she does not look like either side of her family and has been told by others where they think she belongs based on what she looks like. In turn, Darya does not feel a sense of belonging within her own culture. She continued by stating that having a multiracial identity and being included are inextricably linked in the sense that individuals may not completely feel a sense of belonging as a product of the stigma and miseducation from the larger community. Darya raises important questions, such as “who gets to belong and who does not? Who gets to belong within a culture and who does not? Who gets to be in an inclusive classroom and who does not?” Thus, Darya concludes that,

“ Being included has been such a struggle for me my whole life. Being from a mixed background like I never feeling like I belonged anywhere. I feel like I can speak on because I experienced this you know.”

Additionally, her first special education course influenced her decision to become a special education preschool teacher. Overall, she emphasized that her upbringing and background shaped how she viewed the world.

***Bonnie***

Bonnie is a 31 year-old female ECSE teacher, who is Hmong, and she has a total of three years of teaching experience. Her highest level of education is a Master's degree. Bonnie teaches in an autism ECSE SDC. She has taught at Little Sage

Elementary School for three years. Bonnie highlighted that her personal experience of being an English Language Learner (ELL) influenced her attitudes towards inclusion. She emphasized that “growing up when I was in my classroom, I felt like my teacher made me feel really stupid.” She used the term "stupid" to describe the condescending manner of some teachers. Bonnie noted that, while she understood her teachers, they delivered information in a way that made her feel as though she was less knowledgeable than other classmates. In turn, it got to the point where when teachers asked questions, she doubted her ability to respond so she avoided participating in class discussions. Therefore, Bonnie’s personal experience followed her into adulthood and it has been difficult to leave behind.

### ***Patricia***

Patricia is a 39-year-old female ECSE teacher who identifies as Mexican. She has eight years of teaching experience, including two years at Little Sage Elementary. She also holds a Master's degree. Patricia teaches an autism ECSE SDC classroom and has been teaching at Little Sage Elementary for two years. Patricia emphasized that her role as an ECSE teacher influenced her attitude towards inclusion. In addition, Patricia mentioned that her mother, who has been a special education teacher for over 22 years, is another factor that influenced her attitude towards inclusion. She shared that her mother “always tried to run an inclusive classroom even when it wasn't really a thing” and described her mother as the “number one” influential factor.

### ***Julia***

Julia is a 33-year-old White female who has been teaching for a total of 12 years, including four years at Little Sage Elementary. Her highest level of education is a

Master's degree. Julia teaches an autism ECSE SDC classroom and has been teaching at Little Sage Elementary for four years. Julia noted that her mother is special education teacher. Also, having cousins with disabilities has shaped her attitude towards inclusion, as she wants them to be included and wishes the same for her students with disabilities. She also added that inclusion is "like a personal thing" and "having been involved in inclusion classes just seeing the benefits." It is clear that Julia has a personal connection to inclusion due to the benefits (i.e., social and language benefits) from it.

All participation was voluntary, and each participant had the option to withdraw at any time during the study. Participants were compensated for their participation in the study. Compensation included \$25.00 in a gift card from Lakeshore Learning, funded by the researcher.

### **Instrumentation**

The qualitative data for the study was collected using semi-structured interviews. Interview questions focused on participants' thoughts on inclusion, their experiences, and factors influencing their attitudes toward inclusion. Thus, the researcher used Creswell and Creswell's (2018) interview protocol to ask questions and record responses. Creswell and Creswell's (2018) interview protocol included six steps: (1) basic information about the interview, (2) introduction of the researcher, (3) an opening question, (4) content questions, (5) using probes, and (6) closing instructions. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand participants' thoughts, feelings, and emotions about their inclusive pedagogical practices as the district was transitioning from segregated to more inclusive classrooms, as well as the types of support they received for the transition. Also, the researcher asked interview questions to generate

conversation about some challenges facing inclusion during the transition. See Appendix A for a copy of the interview protocols.

### **Data Collection and Procedures**

The study was conducted over a seven-week period. In Week 1, the researcher made several efforts to recruit participants about their interests during the summer of 2021. Given the researcher's professional relationship with the participants, the researcher communicated with them by text message via WhatsApp, a digital and secure platform for immediate text, audio, and video communications. WhatsApp was utilized as the initial contact method due to the researcher and participants already utilizing it for work-related communication. Unfortunately, the researcher received no responses to this first request.

In Week 2, due to no responses from potential participants, the researcher made the decision to follow-up with potential participants by individually text messaging their personal phone numbers. As a result, a total of three participants responded and informed the researcher of their interests to participate in the study. The researcher asked the participants for their email addresses so written informed consent could be sent to them along with a Kami link, a digital annotating online program allowed the researcher to obtain permission and signature without direct contact. See Appendix 2 for a copy of the email sent to each participant. After the researcher received participants' consent forms, the researcher contacted participants for their availability individually. Once participants indicated their availability, the researcher sent a confirmation email to them indicating dates and times, and a personalized Zoom link. Also, the researcher asked the

participants to complete a demographics survey (i.e., age, gender, years of teaching, educational level, etc.) using Google form prior to the interview.

In Week 3, the researcher followed the interview protocol and conducted three semi-structured interviews. Prior to each interview, the researcher informed participants that the interview will be recorded and only the audio-recording will be used when transcribing it. Also, the researcher asked participants for permission to use the “Live Transcription” function on Zoom. Each participant consented to the interview being recorded and using the transcription function. The length of the interviews ranged between 35 minutes to 1-hour. In sum, a total of three interviews with all three participants were conducted thus far.

In Week 4 and Week 5, interviews were transcribed by verbatim. Participants were assigned pseudonyms by using a name generator website found on Google.com.

In Weeks 6 thru Week 9, the researcher coded the transcriptions, in which included two cycles of coding using in vivo and pattern coding. Furthermore, in Week 7, a fourth participant contacted the researcher directly in person and indicated interest to participate in the study while the researcher was analyzing interviews collected earlier. Thus, Creswell and Creswell (2018) described the process as simultaneous procedures, referring to the fact that data analysis occurs concurrently with other aspects of developing the qualitative study. Therefore, the researcher emailed a PDF copy of the written consent form to obtain a signature. In the same week, Week 7, an interview was scheduled over Zoom with the fourth participant and the researcher followed the same interview protocol as the first three interviews conducted. This interview was transcribed



in full in the same week and then coded in Week 8. Data analysis is discussed in the following section.

### **Data Analysis**

As indicated in the previous section (Data and Procedures), data analysis proceeded concurrently with other parts of the qualitative study's development. Thus, the researcher followed the five steps for data analysis as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Step 1 indicates that the researcher organize and prepare all data for analysis, which were completed in Week 4 and Week 5. The researcher transcribed a total of four interviews using the transcriptions generated from Zoom and relistening to the audio-recordings. Step 2 requires the researcher to read or look at all the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, the researcher read and re-read all transcriptions to grasp an in depth understanding of them. Also, in Step 2, the researcher underlined or highlighted words or phrases that stuck out or required clarification.

Next, Step 3, is the coding process, which the researcher conducted in Week 6 through Week 9. Coding is a process of organizing the data by grouping text or image segments and categorizing them into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher completed two cycles of coding - First Cycle coding and Second Cycle coding. In the First Cycle coding, *in vivo* coding was used to chunk data into manageable components by using the participants' actual language or responses as codes by hand (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher developed a data analysis matrix chart for each participant's interview to make sense of the data See Appendix C for a sample copy of the data matrix chart used in the study. The data analysis matrix chart included two columns. From left to right, column one included the three research questions and

participants' responses and column two First Cycle coding - in vivo coding. After the First Cycle coding, the researcher used coding landscaping to determine the most frequent word or phrase that appeared in the data for each research question. The researcher used EdWordle.net, an internet tool that generates graphic content, to identify words and phrases that occurred frequently in the data. As the frequency of use of particular words or phrases increases, their visual size increases correspondingly. As the frequency of a given word or phrase decreases, its visual size reduces as well (Saldana, 2013). Therefore, a list of master list codes were generated based on graphic code landscaping visuals and the research questions. A total of 18 codes were generated in the First Cycle coding process.

Next, Step 4 is when the researcher develops description and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, Step 4 began in the Second Cycle coding, which was completed by hand. The intention of the Second Cycle coding is to create a sense of categorized, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization based on the codes produced during the First Cycle coding (Saldana, 2013). Hence, a third column, labeled as "Second Cycle coding - Pattern coding," was added to each of the participant's data analysis matrix chart, which was created in Step 3. Pattern coding was used to analyze the 18 codes generated in the First Cycle coding. Pattern coding is typically used to develop statements that describe a major theme (Saldana, 2013). Also, in the Second Cycle coding process, the researcher used inductive coding, a process where codes emerge from the data, as unexpected categories emerged (Saldana, 2013). As a result, three inductive codes emerged. Moreover, it is in the Second Cycle coding that the researcher contacted

participants through phone text messages to gain clarification on specific words or phrases said during the interview process, which were coded as well.

Lastly, Step 5 is how the researcher represents the description and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition to the researcher using EdWordle to represent the codes in the First Cycle coding, Google Jamboard was used to compile all pattern and inductive code processes that emerged in the Second Cycle coding by categories and subcategories for each research question. This approach enabled the researcher to visualize the categories and subcategories associated with each research question on a single image. The researcher used Google Jamboard as it enables users to easily reposition graphic content.

In summary, the researcher used Creswell and Creswell's (2018) data analysis process, consisting of five steps, to make sense of the data collected from the interviews. Also, the researcher checked for validity by disclosing the researcher's bias (see Researcher Subjectivity), a method to check for validity as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018). The researcher was unable to triangulate from various data sources as data was collected through interviews only.

### ***Researcher Subjectivity***

As a Southeast Asian American and a woman of color, inclusivity has been a distant dream. I remember yearning to belong and be part of society as a young girl. My apparent physical features and accent stood out, especially in the past year due to the increase in Asian American and Pacific Islanders violence. As far as I can remember, I sought to feel accepted, welcomed, and validated as a human being my entire life due to my skin color, gender, race, culture, language, and ethnicity. However, I knew that I had

to conform to survive in the dominant culture, which reflected a survival mode rather than a thriving one. In turn, one of the greatest influences that led me to become a special education teacher was the systemic oppression of exclusion, discrimination, and violence that has had generational effects on my family, and it is no novel experience for us.

I was born and raised in the central valley of California, and to make ends meet, my parents and grandparents farmed and sold vegetables on the weekends at the local farmer's market. My primary language is Hmong, and English is my second language. I am from an immigrant family whose parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles experienced trauma due to war - the Vietnam War. Thus, trauma shaped my family's basic principles, especially those that lived it. My grandmother's stories of the war shaped her perception of fear, separation, grief, resentment, and contentment. One of her stories that protrudes so vividly for me, even today, is her story of the decimation of the Hmong people during the Vietnam War by Vietnamese and Laotian soldiers. The Hmong people were hunted and murdered because of their ethnicity, physical features, and beliefs during the war. Also, they were massacred for aiding American soldiers during the war. As a young girl, I couldn't fathom why somebody would seek to eradicate a group of people based on their ethnic origins and political beliefs. Some of my grandmother's stories of the war and how her family and children fled to Thailand to seek refuge sounded like scenes from a Rambo film series or an Asian grandmother's fictional story to frighten her grandchildren, but her stories are true lived experiences. I now understand the importance of her war stories, which highlight the feeling of belonging and acceptance.

Thus, my grandmother's stories of war have healing effects on my own lived experiences. It was in elementary school that taught me being different was a deficit, yet

it led me to embrace differences. As a child, schooling made me feel isolated and uneasy in my own skin. Also, my ethnicity and accent was noticeable. I was labeled as an 'English Learner' (EL) and was provided activities that excluded me from those students who were 'English only' speakers. Besides my apparent features, I was humiliated for my food palate in second grade. My second-grade teacher, an older white woman, forced me to eat cheese she brought back from a trip to Europe. I was lactose intolerant, and yet she still had me eat the cheese. She urged me to stay seated in my chair until the cheese was entirely consumed. I was terrorized by her angry tone of voice towards me. I felt frightened and vulnerable as she shamed me for my differences for an entire school year. Additionally, I felt powerless because my culture discourages disobeying an elder or an authority. The experience was startling to me as a young child and no child should have to endure it. Furthermore, I disliked cheese for the longest time and it took me years to enjoy it again.

Though my grandmother's story and my second-grade experience are in no way relevant to each other, trauma exists in both our experiences and the emotions from them are lifelong. Trauma is trauma, and there are no different levels of severity for it. I believe there is healing from both lived experiences, which makes inclusivity so crucial to me personally and professionally as an early childhood special education teacher. Inclusion enables me to genuinely love and accept each human being. I used to believe that I was the 'problem' in school. I am simply a data point on the graph of the disadvantaged people category. However, reading Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I had hope that I could regain my humanity through liberating myself and those around me who are oppressed. Though school created trauma for me, education has

been one of the most influential factors that shaped my take on inclusion. Inclusion is not a place; but instead, it is belonging and accepting unconditionally.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

As stated in Chapter 1, the qualitative study had three main aims: (1) to examine the attitudes of early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers toward inclusion as a northern California school shifts from segregated to more inclusive classrooms, (2) to explore types of support they received and how that support shaped their inclusive pedagogical practices, and the extent to which that support prepared them to teach in inclusive classrooms, and (3) to identify barriers that impact the transition to teach in inclusive classrooms. As a result, Chapter 4 discusses the findings in relation to each research question.

**Research Question #1: What are early childhood special education teachers' (ECSE) attitudes towards inclusion as the district transitions from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms?**

Eagly and Chaiken (1993) described attitude as “anything that is discriminable or that becomes in any way an object of thought.” Thus, to address this research question, in the following sections, data analysis revealed how each component of attitude (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) is in relation to participants' perspectives toward inclusion as the district transitions from segregated to more inclusive classrooms.

#### *Cognitive Component of Attitude*

Data analysis revealed that the cognitive component of attitude consists of how the participants made sense or thought about inclusion.

***Inclusion for “all students” and “access”***

When participants were asked to define inclusion and what it means to them, they indicated that inclusion meant “all students.” For example, Bonnie described inclusion as,

“...all students, but not just the students but the kids with disabilities, students who identify as LGBTQ, and students who are low income. It is a classroom where it’s inclusive and allows them [students] to access resources and teaching that fits their needs.”

Bonnie’s interpretation of inclusion encompasses “all students,” including LGBTQ and low socioeconomic students. Similar to Bonnie, Patricia defined inclusion as,

“everybody, all students of demographics, the students being included, and having access to the general education curriculum.”

Julia also defined inclusion as,

“all students being involved in the general ed. classroom altogether...like no separation at all like within the classroom, so it's like an integrated model where you're like pulling them up, and they're just kind of part of the crew not sticking out in any way and having access to all of it.”

Patricia and Julia used the terms “all students” to describe inclusion and highlighted the importance of having access to general education classrooms and curriculum. Likewise,

Darya defined inclusion as,

“Everyone being together in one place with a common goal, everybody in one space together, have a common goal.”



Darya defines inclusion as a place in which each person works toward a common objective. For example, in the quotation below, she describes what a shared goal looks like:

“Everybody, every staff member believes in the children, every staff member believes that the children can do anything that any other child can do if given the skills and chance to demonstrate it.”

As a result, Darya understands inclusion as every student, staff, and everyone involved in the process of inclusion. Darya describes inclusion as the notion of presumed competence in children. That is, all students can learn. Overall, participants in the study concluded that inclusion refers to “all students,” “everyone,” and “access.”

### ***Inclusion as “belonging”***

Another perspective to think about inclusion is through the lens of belonging, as demonstrated by the findings. Darya and Bonnie illuminated the concept of belonging and the extent to which inclusion must incorporate it. For example, Darya explained that inclusion is a feeling of belonging, as shown in the following passage,

“having everyone feel like they have a place, a sense of belonging, a chance to learn an opportunity. We're going back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Everybody needs love, everybody needs to feel like they belong. I don't care who you are or what you think about people. We're all human, and we all have this like sense and urgency to be wanted and loved. That is to say that a child in a wheelchair, a child with a G-tube, or a child with autism doesn't feel the same way. You can have somebody in a place and be like, okay, ‘yay!’ inclusion it's happening, but what are you doing to make the child and make them feel like they

[are] wanted there. I want you here, be part of my classroom, you're part of me, this is our community. This is not just us now."

Darya pointed out that inclusion is how a person feels when entering a space and references Maslow's hierarchy of need, such as love.

Also, Bonnie highlighted the importance of belonging as inclusion. She described belonging as,

" the feeling like you're part of something. Because you lack something or you don't have a certain kind of ability, like can't speak English, or can't sit at a table long enough, you have to be able to provide other alternatives. Sometimes, the paras [para-educators] will remove them [students] from their seats because they become disruptive to the other kids. I feel bad because I feel like they're taking that learning experience away from the kids. To make them feel like they belong...finding other ways to help them stay in that space so that they don't feel that way."

Bonnie emphasized the importance of creating a space that fosters a sense of belonging rather than removing disruptive students from that space. For Bonnie, inclusion is critical to her work as an ECSE teacher as she experienced exclusion due to her English Language Learner (ELL) label in elementary school. Overall, Bonnie and Darya's understanding of inclusion embraces the notion of belonging.

### ***Summary***

According to the participants in the study, inclusion entails "all students" or "everyone," "access" to general education and resources, and "belonging." The data strongly support the notion that inclusion means "all students" and that everyone,

regardless of their status or labels, has access to the resources and curriculum often available in general education. Additionally, two individuals perceived inclusion as having a sense of belonging, which is critical for inclusion implementation. As described by Daray, belonging is a sensation experienced when a person feels "wanted" and "loved." Whereas, Bonnie defined belonging as active engagement in a space by not being removed from it. In general, the study demonstrates that inclusion takes on a variety of forms depending on the social setting.

### *Affective Component of Attitude*

Eagly and Chaiken (1993) argued that the affective component involves individuals' feelings or emotions relative to the attitude object. The attitude object in this case is inclusion. The affective component of attitude in the study refers to the participants' emotional reaction towards inclusion. In other words, how the participants feel about inclusion. Thus, data analysis suggests that participants' emotional responses to inclusion were motivated by the benefits, difficulties, and qualities of inclusion.

### *Benefit: Social and Language Skills*

The participants' emotional reactions were stimulated by the perceived benefits of inclusion, as evidenced by data. Inclusion benefits students with disabilities by improving their social and language skills. For example, Julia discussed how inclusion supports social interaction and language skills of students with disabilities, which is a motivating factor for her.

“Having been involved in inclusion classes just seeing the benefits and when you see the benefits it like really drives you even on really hard days like you'll pick up that one little time that there's like this little social event that couldn't end if we

weren't in the classroom [inclusion classroom] so I think that's what keeps me going.”

Julia also elaborated on the social aspect of inclusion,

“I mean it's like within an SDC like I taught like all kids with autism and so you're trying to teach them social skills and they all lack them. It's just really hard to not have a good turn-taking partner to like help a child learn that skill other than an adult and then they feel like they kind of get dependent on adult support. So, I think a huge benefit is just having the socialization opportunities. The other thing is language. I have a couple of kids that we have in our classroom for three weeks and I see more language out of them than I did before! So, you don't just have the adults talking to them or your speech therapist, they have 6, 7, 8 other kids that are great language models for them.”

Julia emphasizes the benefits of students with disabilities being in an inclusive classroom, such as having students without disabilities serve as peer models for students with disabilities.

In comparison, Patricia also underlines the importance of inclusion in promoting the use of social and linguistic skills for students with disabilities to interact with “all of their friends [peers] and not just their friends that can talk to them or are physically mobile.” On the whole, inclusion benefits students with disabilities in terms of social and language development.

***Difficulty: Students with Disabilities with Behavioral Challenges***

On the other hand, this study found that supporting students with disabilities who have behavioral challenges had an effect on a participant's emotional response to

inclusion, which posed a significant challenge in inclusive classrooms. Julia, for example, drew on her previous professional experiences, having taught in an inclusion class stating that,

“The one thing that I struggle with are students with severe needs. I think it is hard for inclusive environments, not that I'm against it, but I don't know how to support that. I know that everyone pushes for full inclusion and all kids included all the time, and I want that for all kids. But, as a special ed. teacher of 12 years, I need to learn more about how to support certain kids with just very high needs in the classroom. It can be overwhelming someday.”

Even as an experienced ECSE teacher who has taught for 12 years, Julia still faces challenges in supporting students with disabilities who have “severe needs” or “high needs.” Julia used the terms “severe needs” and “high needs” synonymously to describe “a student who has more intense behaviors within the classroom...things like hitting, throwing toys, eloping, and throwing furniture.” Thus, the main takeaway from Julia’s excerpt is to consider the types of support a student with a disability would need in an inclusive classroom and how to implement those supports.

### ***Characteristics of Inclusion: Undesired Qualities***

Last but not least, participants in the study indicated what is not inclusion. For instance, Darya described her experience of ‘inclusion’ as a push-in model in which students with disabilities spend a specific amount of time (i.e., 30 minutes per day) in a general education classroom in the following section:

“They [administrator] selected a few kiddos who, like those that could handle it [inclusion]. They go into the classroom [general education classroom] spend some

time and do God knows what, you know. I can't leave my kiddos in my SDC class. But see, like that's a shortcoming because then I never get to see what they're doing. I don't have data that I can trust, that's saying 'Oh, this is great inclusion like they're doing,' they're working on goals meanwhile there, you know, being social and playing, how do I know they're playing. I don't know what they're doing, they could just be an accessory in the classroom. I don't want them to be. It's tough.”

Darya underlined that pushing her students with disabilities into a general education classroom for a predetermined amount of time does not constitute inclusion. She also discussed the difficulties associated with a push-in include model, such as being unable to leave her SDC classroom and enter a general education classroom to observe her students. Also, Darya emphasized the importance of needing to know what her students are doing in general education classrooms without sufficient data. Thus, inclusion is not a push-in model.

Similar to Darya, Julia described her co-teaching inclusion experience of piloting a full integrated preschool program as “it was good.” However, Julia explained that “it definitely had it’s like issues and errors” due to “our kids were not part of their roster so we were like an add-on to the class.” While an inclusion integrated model was deemed adequate for Julia, her students with disabilities were not included on the attendance record; rather, they were added-on. Thus, evidence indicates that students with disabilities were classified differently based on their attendance record placement. Altogether, inclusion is not a push-in model and integrated model that differentiates students.

### *Characteristics of Inclusion: Desired Qualities*

Participants' affective attitudes toward inclusion were composed of desirable qualities they hoped to see exhibited during the implementation of inclusion. Data analysis shows that the importance of collaboration and teamwork are potential indicators to achieve inclusion.

Each participant in the study emphasized the importance of having collaboration and teamwork between early childhood education (ECE) and early childhood special education teacher (ECSE). For example, Bonnie described that inclusion

“is a team effort type of thing. Everybody has to be on board, have the same kind of mission and values in order to support students with different learning abilities by making and creating a learning space.”

Consistent with Bonnie, Darya discussed that inclusion requires an entire team’s “buy-in,” for example, she stated that

“We can't go anywhere else unless the team is on board. How are we going to do all these cool, fancy, wonderful activities if the mind is not in that space. I could plan like the best science day ever. If my team is just like ‘oh god this is not going to work,’ then my spirit is broken and the kids can sense it.”

Julia also stated that inclusion looks like

“a unified team and class. I think that the bad experiences that I had, it's been very like ‘our’ and ‘your’ kids and we're just like doing this thing together kind of like parallel teaching. I think good inclusion looks like when someone walks in the room and they don't know who's the teacher, the special Ed teacher, general ed.

teacher, who's supporting who, and can't pick up some of the kids that would have IEPs.”

As evidenced by data, Julia defined 'good' inclusion as the impossibility to differentiate between staff and students with and without IEPs. Julia used the term “integrated model” for this type of inclusion, which is having “no separation” and “the crew [students] not sticking out in any way.” Also, Julia believes that an integrated model involves all students in a general education classroom. Similar to Julia, Patricia indicates that

“Inclusion starts with communication. I think that's a lot of the flaw with programs in general the way they are set up and implemented. There always seems to be some separation between general education teachers and special education teachers. I think [in] an inclusion program, both teachers, ideally would be experienced in both. The general education teacher would have experience with the special education teacher, and the special education teacher would have experience with gen. ed., and they would work cohesively there. Their paras and service providers provide an environment that basically just creates inclusion amongst all kids like really walking in and know[ing] what student has an IEP and just see kids playing together and learning together.”

Patricia emphasized the need for collaboration among the general education and special education teachers. It is critical to recognize that collaboration addresses the needs of students and teachers.

Finally, the idea that collaboration fosters a sense of community emerged in the findings, as described by Darya,



“I think what Little Sage [pseudonym for school name] has always done well with is fostering a sense of community. So maintaining community, I think that would be great for inclusion too because that's what it's all about you know belonging in a community, the kids feeling safe, welcomed, loved. They say it takes a village right?”

Darya points out that collaboration moves beyond ECE and ECSE coming together to lesson plans, it is the notion of “feeling safe, welcomed, and loved,” which she referred to as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Indeed collaboration is important, but fostering a sense of community requires safety, acceptance, and love.

### *Summary*

In general, the findings show that there are several indicators that contributed to the ECSE teachers’ emotional response towards inclusion. First, the ECSE teachers felt that inclusion enhances social and language skills in students with disabilities. Second, the ECSE teachers felt that inclusion presents a challenge when supporting students with disabilities who have behavioral difficulties. Thirdly, the ECSE teachers felt that inclusion is not a push-in model where students with disabilities spend a limited amount of time in a general education classroom. Lastly, the ECSE teachers in the study felt the importance of teamwork, which includes collaboration and communication, is critical. Thus, collaboration and communication should incorporate all stakeholders involved in the process of implementing inclusion, as these actions promote a sense of community. Darya defined a sense of community as "feeling safe, loved, and welcomed," as evidenced by data. In an essence, a sense of community ensures that each member is

significant. Thus, having a team that has a shared goal facilitates successful collaboration and communication, which encourages the growth of a sense of community.

### *Behavioral Component of Attitude*

Eagly and Chaiken (1993) described the behavioral category as the actions of individuals toward the attitude object. The behavioral component is the physical outcome of thoughts and emotions in motion. The following paragraphs reveal that the physical outcome of ECSE teachers' attitude towards inclusion include ECSE teachers' experiences with inclusion and reflective practice.

### *ECSE Teachers' Experiences with Inclusion*

Participants were asked to describe their experiences with inclusion. As a result, data analysis revealed that three of the four participants had never taught in an inclusive classroom, however, their teaching practices reflected inclusive practices. Darya, who has taught for six years, explained that the closest she experienced with inclusion was being a co-founder of a program she and another colleague put together. The name of the program was called **Monthly Early Childhood Education and Early Childhood Special Education Collaboration Activity (MEECA)**. The program's objective was to create an integrated model that represented inclusive practices once a month through participation and engagement for preschoolers with and without disabilities in a variety of activities such as art, STEM, gross motor, dramatic play, and music. However, as far as teaching in an inclusive classroom, Darya indicated she did not have any experience.

Similar to Darya, Bonnie and Patricia have never taught in an inclusive classroom, however, both applied inclusive teaching practices in their special day class (SDC). For instance, Bonnie used inclusive teaching practices by applying differentiated instruction

and strength-based approaches (i.e., getting to know her students and their present levels rather than assuming they lack competency). Likewise, Patricia indicated that the closest experience of inclusion was at her previous job, which was a nonpublic school that focused on students with highly aggressive behaviors. Patricia's role at the nonpublic school was a teacher with a provisional intern permit, which is issued to those who have not yet met the subject matter competency criteria for admission to an internship program. She described that the nonpublic school had kindergarten classrooms that reflected an inclusion classroom, such as having "free range of different activities." Patricia didn't specifically indicate any professional experiences in an inclusive classroom.

Whereas, Julia's, who has taught for 12 years, attitude was influenced by her professional experiences piloting an inclusion program in Texas. Julia mentioned that she co-taught activities with a general education teacher, however, she returned to her classroom for the remainder of the day after co-teaching. She described this as a "not so good model of inclusion." What Julia described is a push-in model, where students with disabilities participate in a general education classroom for part of their day. However, in the second year of the pilot inclusion program, Julia described it as an integrated model, in which students with and without disabilities were fully participating together in a general education classroom for most part of their school day. However, she stated that though it was an integrated model of inclusion, her students were not included on the general education preschool rosters. Thus, she emphasized that "there was a separation" between special and general education. Despite the experiences of teaching in an

inclusive classroom, Julia indicated there were challenges, which is discussed later in the chapter.

### ***Reflective Practice***

Data emphasizes the need for reflective practice when implementing inclusive pedagogical practices. Data shows that the following items are needed as part of the reflective practice process: (1) identifying a problem, (2) evaluating the problem, (3) creating a solution, and then (3) implementing it. For example, as Patricia described, “I need to see it [inclusion] happen...I learn by being able to step back, let me handle this, then test it.” In addition, Darya explained the importance of reflection as part of inclusion work. She said,

“Reflective process of what worked, what didn't work, what can I improve on ,was this really inclusive, was that a good choice to make? Should I do that again, or how do the kids feel about it?”

Darya emphasized the value of reflection as a form of teaching practice that enables teachers to identify students’ areas for growth and what teachers might do differently next time.

### ***Summary***

Participants in the study indicated that they have not taught in an inclusion classroom. However, some participants implemented inclusive pedagogical practices such as using differentiated instruction, co-creating an integrated model that reflects inclusive practices once a month, and piloting an inclusive program outside of California. In general, data analysis found that most participants in the study had no prior teaching experience in inclusive classrooms and would like to have a reflective practice process

that is embedded in implementation of inclusion. By incorporating reflective practice into implementation of inclusion, teachers' inclusive pedagogical approaches will be strengthened as they transition from segregated to more inclusive classrooms.

**Research Question #2: In what ways have ECSE teachers felt supported and prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom?**

***Preparedness and Support***

In this section, participants were asked to (1) describe the types of support they have received during the transition to begin teaching in an inclusive setting, (2) how prepared they felt to teach in an inclusive classroom, and (3) what would make them feel more prepared? Thus, findings indicate that the level of preparedness and support for inclusion differs between participants.

***Types of support received during the transition***

All participants indicated that they received some form of support in preparation for the transition to teach in inclusive classrooms. Two participants attended training provided by the district, one participant attended a training that was funded through a grant awarded to the district, and another participant received support through her mentor teacher.

Three out of four participants mentioned that they attended four professional learning sessions between January 2021 through May 2021. These professional learning sessions were funded by the Inclusive Early Education Expansion Program (IEEEP) grant. The IEEEEP funds were awarded to the district to

“...increase access to inclusive early learning and care (ELC) programs for children with disabilities, including children with severe disabilities; and to fund

the cost to the California Department of Education (CDE) of conducting an evaluation of the IEEEP” (Inclusive Early Education Expansion Program - Child Development [CA Dept of Education], 2021).

The IEEEP funds may be used for facility issues, such as repairs and renovations that will assist children with disabilities in increasing access to inclusive ELC programs, adaptive equipment, and professional development (Inclusive Early Education Expansion Program - Child Development [CA Dept of Education], 2021). The trainers for the “IEEEP Core Group PL” (the title of the professional learning sessions) included a university associate professor and an inclusion coordinator for the district’s Early Childhood Education department. Bonnie, Patricia, and Darya attended the four professional learning sessions. Whereas, Julia was on maternity leave and was unable to attend those professional learning sessions. However, she attended *Beginning Together: Inclusion Facilitator Training Institute*, which was held once a week for four-weeks and it was also funded through the IEEEP grant.

Bonnie, Patricia, and Darya described how attending the four professional sessions prepared or did not prepare them to teach in inclusive classrooms. In particular, Bonnie indicated that the IEEEP Core Group Professional Learning (PL) sessions were “repetitive” and covered material that she “already learned in grad school.” Similar to Bonnie, Patricia indicated that she did not take away much from the training as there was a lack of opportunity to implement it. However, Patricia did explained that the most support she received that was helpful were from colleagues as described in the following passage:

“I ask questions and get support and I think it is really nice for new teachers to have a mentor teacher...for me it was really nice having a mentor teacher and being able to ask questions like I know I’ve asked you [mentor] this 500 times.”

Patricia mentioned that the type of support she received to prepare her to teach in an inclusive classroom was having a mentor teacher. Darya, on the other hand, described that “those collaborative sessions were really great” and appreciated that paraeducators were invited as well.

As for Julia, she attended *Beginning Together: Inclusion Facilitator Training Institute*, which held its first online institute in March of 2021. Beginning Together was created in collaboration with the California Department of Education, Early Learning and Care Division (ELCD) and WestEd, Center for Child and Family Studies as inclusion support to the Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC). The purpose of Beginning Together is

“...to ensure that children with disabilities are incorporated, and appropriate inclusion practices are promoted, in the training and technical assistance provided by existing cadres of trainers in California. This is accomplished through a “training of trainers” institute, regional outreach activities, revision/development of written materials, support to institute graduates, and support of inclusive practices in other PITC activities, such as the demonstration programs (Beginning Together, 2012).

This training held synchronous meetings and training every Thursday in March 2021. Additional asynchronous activities were offered online each week and to be completed on attendees' own time. Julia described her training experience as follows:

“I signed up for the Beginning Together Institute with the California Department of Education. It was like every week for like a month. At the end of it, when you go through the training and if you lead a training, which I helped to lead one this summer, and then like orchestrated facilitation with an inclusion class where you just like you consult or support. For me, I do that every day so check! But then you get a certificate from the California Department of Ed. saying you're like you could be an inclusion facilitator. I was like this is worth it though it was one day from my maternity leave but yeah so I attended that.”

Julia concluded by saying that the training supported her transition to teach in an inclusive classroom

### ***Preparedness to teach in an inclusive classroom***

Next, participants were asked “how prepared do you feel to teach in an inclusive classroom?” intentionally after having received some types of support. It was found that participants’ level of preparedness varies despite the level of support.

Data analysis reveals that more training would have been beneficial for the participants in the study. For example, the lack of training impacted Bonnie’s level of preparedness for the transition to teach in an inclusive classroom. She also emphasized that training she received through her district was redundant and reminded her of graduate coursework. Bonnie also indicated that the training that has been offered does not relate to preschool special education and oftentimes usually focused on preschool general education. Moreover, she indicated twice in the interview that she is not prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom:



“I honestly do not feel prepared at all. I'm just gonna end up doing what I've been doing all along like doing the things that I've been practicing, just because with all the new stuff that we're supposed to do I just don't think that what was provided for us was like efficient for us to kind of even start. So, starting off with something that's kind of unfamiliar, or like not something that is not clear like I don't know, I just don't feel that I'll do a great job at it.”

Hence, Bonnie also added that she is unsure what inclusion is given that it is a buzzword, for example,

“I don't know if what I'm doing is inclusion because there's like a label and so a lot of times I feel like I don't feel confident.”

Also, as Bonnie prepared for her maternity leave, she sought support from the school administrator. However, Bonnie said “when I reach out for support and help like how do I implement this in my classroom, you know I'm not really getting anything.” The school administrator referred her to another administrator in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) department. In turn, Bonnie still did not receive any sort of support or guidance on how to prepare for the new school year.

On the other hand, Darya is “somewhat competent” and Patricia “feels prepared” to teach an inclusive classroom, still in all, they indicated that more training and hand-ons experience on inclusion are needed. Though Darya is somewhat prepared, she has a fear of failure and what she might face after a failure:

“I do have this fear of failure, fear of messing up and doing the wrong thing. I don't want to do something that is going to backfire on me or if the kids have a bad experience, as well-intentioned as what I'm doing is, I have this fear of failure

that just in the back of my mind that you know I've done this before, I probably will fail. But then the other part of me imagine[s] how the kids are feeling. They're being thrown into this, no idea what's going on, and they're looking up to us for guidance and, right? Maybe they have a fear of failure too. They don't want us to disapprove of them and it's just like this back and forth, fear that everybody has.”

Nonetheless, Darya makes a connection between her level of preparedness and fear of failure by conceptualizing how her students would feel. Similar to Darya and Patricia, Julia felt prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom and emphasized that no matter how prepared she felt, it still required an entire team to be prepared for inclusion. As explained by Julia,

“I felt prepared like I had done it before so I felt like I knew on my end what I was walking into. I did not feel like the district was prepared... So it was like I felt prepared but then once I realized how unprepared they were, I felt unprepared because it doesn't matter how prepared I am. If the whole team is not prepared for it, then I am not prepared.”

Though Julia noted that she has 12 years of teaching experience as an ECSE teacher, her level of preparedness was dependent on the entire team’s level of preparedness, including the district. Consistent with Julia, Darya also emphasized that “we are ready for inclusion but are you [district]?” In other words, Darya pointed out that teachers are ready for inclusion while the district is not. Overall, Julia and Darya are implying that the district is not ready logistically.

***Support needed to feel prepared***

When participants were asked “what would make you feel more prepared,” they responded by indicating a wide range of support, such as having structure, on-going coaching support to foster a sense of belonging in a community, observing inclusion programs, and planning time. Participants would like to see these items occurring as the district transitioned to more inclusive classrooms.

To illustrate, Bonnie reported that she “honestly do[es] not feel prepared at all,” however, she indicated that having “some kind of structure” will be beneficial. Bonnie used the term structure to describe a curriculum that guides teachers on how to implement lesson plans, how to use them in the classroom, what kind of materials are needed, how to set up the classroom, and so forth. Bonnie would like to see the district using a curriculum that is structured to guide teachers in classrooms. In another example, Darya draws attention to the ongoing coaching model that is critical in preparing and supporting teachers’ transitions into inclusive classrooms. She explained,

“I think I would do well with coaching, and not just having like someone set it up for us and do the data sheets and tell us something one time then leave. We need somebody checking in on us, communication, having the same information go to everyone, so we get all the information. It's [coaching] not about walking through and everything looks good. It’s actually spending time with us watching us and knowing the kids. Coaching is meeting with somebody on a consistent basis, and no one time or two times a year. We're talking like every week. Somebody comes in and serves it real-time feedback.

Darya welcomes continuous coaching rather than a person dropping by to glance at datasheets and leaving. Thus, she emphasized the ongoing collaboration between ECE and ECSE teachers, which is “really beneficial.” She also revealed that collaborating with ECE this past school year has helped her know the “names and faces” of ECE teachers rather than just knowing an “anonymous mob of people.”

In addition, Darya pointed out an important feature of inclusion. Darya gave emphasis to fostering a sense of belonging in a community. She explained that,

“I think what Little Sage has always done well with is fostering a sense of community. So maintaining community I think that would be great for inclusion too because that's what it's all about you know belonging in a community, the kids feeling safe, welcomed, loved. They say it takes a village, right? What you need to get down to is the basics of human connection. I cannot stress this enough, belonging, community. It is a place where people are allowed to make mistakes.”

Darya speaks eloquently about a sense of belonging and concludes that children, just like adults, need to feel safe, welcomed, and loved. This is the basics of human connection which will prepare ECSE teachers for the transition to teaching in inclusive classrooms, as highlighted by Darya.

Apart from that, Patricia focuses attention on “just get[ting] the ball rolling” as the district has been static about the implementation of inclusion at the preschool level.

However, she suggested that “every single teacher at our site, it would be very helpful to have a sub for the day...and go observe a couple of functioning, like those that have been doing inclusion. Let us go and observe, maybe even not in our district.” Patricia would like to see the district start practicing inclusion. That being said, conversely, Julia is

currently teaching in an inclusive classroom. She mentions not having adequate lesson planning time. In Julia's interview, she said,

“Pre-planning would have been great and then also just like planning like you know they don't have any breaks in their schedule other than like their lunch break and there's not like planning time, right? So, like embedded in the program. We have to get like really creative on when we can make that happen and so that's hard because so far we've made it happen but the future when we added more kids and when schedules get different..they're not like planned like preset planning time and that's key like if we're not on the same page it's not alright.”

Though a challenge is not having enough time to plan with ECE teachers, Julia indicated that they have made lesson planning possible so far.

To conclude, all participants in the study received some form of support though it may or may not have been helpful in preparing them for the transition to teaching in inclusive classrooms. As a result, some participants indicated they are not prepared while others indicated they are prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms. Lastly, the participants in the study suggested practical methods to prepare them for the transition to teaching in inclusive classrooms, such as having structure, ongoing coaching to foster a sense of belonging in a community, observing inclusion programs, and having preplanning time.

**Research Question #3: What barriers do ECSE teachers anticipate encountering in implementing inclusive pedagogical practices as the district shifts from segregated classrooms to inclusive classrooms?**

### ***Barriers to Inclusion***

Data analysis indicates that participants experienced a range of challenges at the district and classroom levels. Participants indicated concerns around human services and physical services (i.e., fiscal, facility, logistic).

#### ***District Level Barriers***

Data analysis shows that there is a major significant challenge to inclusion, which influenced participants' attitudes toward it. At the district level, leadership and administration, fiscal policy (i.e., funding and teachers' salary), and logistics barriers were indicated by the participants as anticipated barriers to implementing inclusion.

*Leadership and Administration.* Participants indicated several issues with the district leadership and administration. First, it was found in the study that changes in administrators are common at Little Sage Elementary. In particular, Bonnie explained that her administrator resigned and a new administrator is anticipated. She described that “I’ve been at Little Sage Elementary for like only three years and within that three-year time span, I’ve had three administrators, including the new admin.” On average, Bonnie has at least one different administrator per year. Bonnie is also concerned about “what’s going to happen” and if the new administrator will continue the inclusion initiative that was established by the previous administrator. Another concern Bonnie discussed is having support from the new administrator as well. Overall, Bonnie emphasized the lack of consistency due to turnover in administrators.

In another example, Patricia explained that the district’s leadership model “does not work” and “I don’t care what industry you’re in. It does not work!” She described the district’s leadership model as “a lot of talking at us [teachers], and not listening to what

we're [teachers] saying." Not to mention, Darya delineated that administrators have "unrealistic expectations" for their teachers in the following excerpt:

"They [administrators] have expectations, certain expectations that they are told, and those expectations come back to us [teachers]. We interpret them as unrealistic, right? Like how are we going to do that? So, I feel like it's people [administrators] who have never been to Little Sage who are talking about what Little Sage needs to do. Our admins are kind of stuck because it's their job to listen to their higher-ups and say, 'Okay, we'll do it but I mean just going to tell you like we don't know how our teachers are going to feel about it.' So they bring that back to us. We're just like, "oh my goodness, this is a great idea but it's so unrealistic" like, how did you act, you know. Um, yes I feel like they are stuck in between a rock and a hard place. I think that's the thing. It's like they're putting these unrealistic, or challenging feats on us and we're just like chickens running around with their heads cut off. But I also think that this year, especially, our resiliency was challenged because our admin was not very communicative. And like having those really high expectations mixed with bad communication... It's just not a good combination. Any workplace, not just school."

Darya brings out the issue of administrators' lack of communication, which conflicts with administrators' expectations of teachers. In addition to the lack of communication, Bonnie emphasized the importance of administrators acting as the lead person for delivering school information to staff in order to avoid teachers acting as "micromanaging" paraeducators.

*Fiscal Policy.* The second barrier that the participants anticipate may hinder implementing inclusive pedagogical practices as the district shifts from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms is fiscal policy. For instance, Darya mentioned that “budget” is a barrier and teachers were “scrambling for funds.” In the following excerpt, she described how Little Sage could not even print paper for students:

“We couldn't even print paper. I mean the budget, equipment, training, personnel. So many things that are overlooked but we have these huge ideas. These big fantastical ideas. That sounds so wonderful, in theory, but it takes like mountains to move in order to make them happen. We have to have these things in place. Everybody is super resourceful and we can come together and just make Little Sage what it is and we've always done that.”

In the same context of fiscal policy, Julia brings up another important barrier and that is the salaries between ECE and ECSE teachers. In the following passage, with hesitation, Julia described how the difference between income impact the implementation of inclusion:

“Honestly, I'm just gonna like - the income that's a barrier for sure. They make significantly less than we do as ECSE and I mean I do think we like have more credential like more like a lot of us have more I think credentialing would be the right phrase, however it's just like, it's weird if you're supposed to be like on a team and we're splitting duties and we're doing this together but I make significantly more. Like it's been brought up in my classroom a couple times already, and so to me that's a big barrier because it's hard to be on the team when that [is]happening, so. Beth's [pseudonym of early childhood education teacher]



is like ‘why am I busting my butt to do inclusion? Like I'm not getting any incentive to do it? You're making a lot more money than I am.’ We have very blunt conversations, and I was like ‘I get it like that you're right ,like you have to unfortunately really want to do it [inclusion].’”

Thus, Julia raised an important matter of teachers having genuine commitment to inclusion despite compensation disparities.

*Logistics.* The third barrier to implementing inclusive pedagogical practices as the district shifts from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms is logistics, such as inclusion program types, scheduling, not having a clear process for the transition, and the district not prepared for it. Case in point, Julia shed light on how the types of inclusion programs impact her in the following quotation:

At the district level, it's just logistically hard, right, like we have so many different types of these classes and that we would push into like full day Head Start, half day Head Start with full day state, half day state. So that does seem to be like a barrier and figuring out what is OK and what is not, and like their rules in the state programs are very different than like the rules of ECSE teachers and so I think district wise that is a barrier...So, I think like barrier wide like, as a whole, just like our schedules are different, you know, and like it's not cohesive within the upper management right now. I think it was going to be with like Shelby [pseudonym for previous ECSE Special Education Site Coordinator] and with Jackie [pseudonym for Early Childhood Education Director] and then with both of them leaving at the same time there's definitely this hole right now, and I fully think Hedi [pseudonym for current ECSE Special Education Site Coordinator] can

fill it...It's just like the lack of planning, and then district wide like there's seems to be like an understanding that we're [ECE and ECSE] all the same we're under the same umbrella.”

In addition to the logistical issue of types of inclusion programs, Julia points out that two of the administrators who were involved in leading teachers and staff toward inclusion left their positions and new administrators are taking their places, a finding in the study that was noted in the first barrier (leadership and administration). On the whole, the major takeaway from Julia’s passage is that types of inclusion programs offered in the district do not align cohesively, which is a logistical issue that involves the “upper management.”

Another logistical obstacle is the lack of a well defined transition procedure, and Patricia pointed out that “there’s a flaw in the system...from the district level.” She suggested that “there needs to be less talking about ‘what we’re going to do,’ and more how it is going to be effective. It doesn’t work and I don’t learn that way. I need to see it [inclusion] happen! We need more implementers and less talkers at the district level.” In fact, Bonnie revealed that the entire transition process lacks clarity, possibly because the district is still figuring out a process, adding “there is no consistency,” which is the product of the “flaw in the system” as described by Patricia.

Finally, three participants indicated that they are prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms, but the district is not equipped or ready to implement inclusion. To illustrate, Darya’s passage explained “We are ready for inclusion but are you? You know, we don't think just high functioning kids should be given this opportunity [inclusion] but everyone should at some point, you know. So I think one of the biggest barriers at our site is just

logistics and making it work on a physical level.” Darya brings up an important point about logistics barriers at the ‘physical level.’

In the same way as Darya, Julia said,

“It’s like trial and error in a lot of things. I thought I was prepared and then it was like, situationally we weren't prepared. The school wasn't prepared. It was even like with our kids like they come half a day, and then they have a full day in the ECE state program for half a day and then they don't come on Friday. So it was just like logistically not prepared. So that has played a big role and how I think the general ed teachers feel about the program, you know, like we have had to figure out a lot of this stuff, which that doesn't bother me but it does bother them. So that, I think, has affected some of the attitudes towards just the way the whole program was started. They [early childhood education teachers] are both very pro inclusion and they're great with the kids, but we hit a lot of walls logistically because of the lack thereof on the end of the district.”

As a result, Julia drew attention to the district's lack of logistical capacity for preschool inclusion.

*Summary.* In sum, participants in the study identify three major barriers to inclusion at the district level, which include leadership and administration, fiscal, and logistics. In leadership and administration, there is lack of administrative support and communication, leadership is not listening to teachers and continuously “talking at us,” leadership lacks in relaying information to the entire staff, frequent change in administration, and unrealistic expectations from leadership and administration. Also, participants indicated that fiscal policy impacts funding to purchase materials, and

equipment, as well as, there is an income difference between ECE and ECSE teachers. Lastly, logistics is a barrier as well. The district's current inclusion programs' schedules do not align with each other and there are multiple types of ECE programs, which makes the implementation of inclusion challenging, and there is no definite protocol for the implementation of inclusion.

### ***Classroom Level Barriers***

While there are district level barriers, classroom level barriers exist as well. In no order of importance, the study identified two classroom level barriers: (1) mindset of paraprofessionals, and (2) obtaining support ("buy-in") from staff. In the following sections, findings are discussed for each classroom level barrier.

*Mindset of paraprofessionals.* The first classroom barrier to inclusion is the mindsets of paraprofessionals and their assumptions of students with disabilities and children's learning capacity. The finding in the study revealed that the participants reject paraprofessionals having "fixed" mindsets or "deficit views," and there is a need for "growth" mindsets. However, data shows that mindsets of paraprofessionals hinder the participants' ability to implement inclusive pedagogical practices. In particular, Darya described that one of her paraprofessionals "has a little bit of a fixed mindset about children." When Darya introduced new activities to her students with disabilities, she described her paraprofessional's response as "Oh no, oh no he won't be able to, it's too much for him." Darya also emphasized that students must be given learning opportunities before saying "no." Thus, she pointed out that inclusion focuses on one's mindset, for example, she explained that "even though we know that inclusion is a place like how you're doing things and the frame of mind that you're in." In general, Darya

understands inclusion as the framing of the mind, such as every child has the capability to learn. She also underlined that her ultimate goal for the school year is to improve her staff's attitudes, and she believed that she is equally at fault for her own attitude, as described in the following quotation:

“I'm not completely innocent in this game of teaching. I do feel like I have the mindset to be inclusive. It's a work in progress. You have to work on it and you're going to get different kiddos. You have to take their strengths, and create activities to meet their needs. This is just good teaching practice. So for me, I work on my staff's attitudes and then check myself too.”

To achieve shifting staff's attitudes and hers, Darya mentioned the “reflection process” as described in the quotation,

“Having a reflective process of what worked, what didn't work, and what I can improve. Should I do that again? How do the kids feel about it?”

Darya also pointed out that there are assumptions about preschool, such as “it's just play, we're just overhyped babysitters.” Thus, she suggested that “well, come and visit our classroom for a day and then you tell us.” Darya pushes back on the assumption that preschool is about play only.

In another example, Patricia stated that paraprofessionals are like teachers. When describing her classroom, Patricia used the term “our” classroom and “our” students.” Therefore, to embrace the phrase “our,” Patricia emphasized that “paras need to have growth mindsets, as far as stop looking at everything that could go wrong, and be excited about what could go right.” In other words, Patricia pointed out the obvious that an inclusive environment requires staff to shift their thinking.

Similar to Patricia, Bonnie also indicated that working with adults in the classroom is a barrier and described it as “a little bit harder and challenging” given that some adults hold “deficit views.” Bonnie described deficit views in the following passage,

“I set up activities a certain way, right but there's always that other person who's kind of like, why are you doing it this way? He can't do this, like, A, B and C and D. He can't do this because he can't talk. I guess it's the language that's being used, in, around the classroom. I want it to be more positive language about the student, and not always describing them in a way that's like ‘I can't do this.’”

In this passage, she stressed the tension and resistance to changes from her paraeducators. She also raised the importance of how language is used to describe students in the classroom. Thus, Bonnie explained that certain staff may “roll with the punches,” however, realistically, they may hold “attitudes that are not always a positive one” and “there's already a lot of questions of, you know, ‘why are we doing this? These kids can't do this.’ The type of thing.” Moreover, Bonnie stated that as the new academic school year begins, “I think just kind of not go in [the new academic school year] with the attitude that okay I know that all these kids are the same.”

She brings up a critical point that students are often perceived the same.

Equally as important, Julia highlighted how students with disabilities tend to be seen differently and how her co-teachers and her talk about it openly in their classroom. As explained by Julia,

“I'm trying to figure out what's the difference between like kids that have behavior problems. There's so many ECE kids that have worse behaviors than some of our

students, but it's like because they have a diagnosis, which sometimes it's like seen a different way. We have a lot of conversations about it amongst our team and when we talk openly about it, then I think everyone realizes like 'Oh yeah like that's not a fair assumption' or like a fair thing to think, but it is interesting that we say 'these are our kids,' and we never say things like 'your caseload,' or 'my kid.' Everything is ours, but there's still just this thing like it's not quite there."

Thus, Julia explained how students with disabilities are perceived differently and how the team is able to speak on it openly. In these conversations, similar to Patricia, Julia's teaching team used phrases like "our" and "these" rather than "mine" or "your" to show that there isn't a separation between ECE and ECSE teachers.

*Obtaining Support ("buy-in") from Staff.* Lastly, the third classroom barrier found in the study is obtaining team "buy-in" for inclusion. Darya and Julia emphasized the importance of having an entire team to be on board in order to achieve inclusion. For instance, Darya believes that without team buy-in inclusion is impossible to achieve as described in the following passage,

"We can't go anywhere else, unless the team is on board. What I'm saying, how are we going to do all these cool fancy wonderful activities, if the mind is not in that space? I could plan like the best science day ever. If my team is just like, oh god this is not going to work, then like, I'm like, my spirit is broken, the kids can sense it."

Similar to Darya, Julia described a scenario of obtaining a team's buy-in. In the following excerpt, Julia described a boy with autism who had buy-in from the ECE

teachers. However, Julia felt like she had to earn the general education teachers' buy-in for adding more students with disabilities in the preschool inclusion class as described in the following quotation,

“There’s a boy in our classroom that has autism but mom said ‘no’ to SAI [specialized academic instruction] service and they [early childhood education teachers] [had] done like amazing things with him like he’s the perfect model of inclusion, but it was interesting like the buy-in was there for him with his team. Then, we [early childhood special education team] came in and it was like I had to gain the buy-in from them of adding more students [students with disabilities]. So that has been interesting.”

Overall, evidence indicates that obtaining support from staff and teachers is essential for successful implementation of inclusion.

### **Summary**

Overall, Chapter 4 highlights major findings in the study that shaped ECSE teachers' attitude towards inclusion as a school transitions from segregated to more inclusive classrooms. ECSE teachers' attitudes were described based on Eagly and Chaiken's three components of attitude (cognitive, affective, and behavioral). Thus, it was found that ECSE teachers perceive inclusion as “all students,” “access,” and a sense of belonging, which relates to the cognitive component of attitude. Furthermore, the ECSE teachers' in the study felt that inclusion was beneficial for students with disabilities. However, they also described the challenges they felt implementing inclusive practices, such as supporting students with disabilities with behavior challenges. The ECSE teachers felt that inclusion is not a push-in model where students with



disabilities spend a limited amount of time in a general education classroom. In addition, data analysis showed that three of the four ECSE teachers never had experience teaching in inclusive classrooms, while one ECSE teacher has taught in an inclusive classroom, which is related to the behavioral component of attitude. However, some participants indicated that reflective practice should be embedded in the implementation of inclusion.

The study also found that all participants received some type of support, which may or may not have helped them prepare for teaching in inclusive classrooms. As a result, some participants indicated that they are not prepared while others indicated that they are. Finally, the study's participants suggested establishing structure, continual coaching to promote a sense of belonging in a community, monitoring inclusion initiatives, and preplanning time as practical methods to prepare them for the transition to teaching in inclusive classrooms.

Finally, participants in the study identified three key challenges to district inclusion: leadership and administration, fiscal policy (i.e., funding and teachers' salary), and logistics (i.e., varying inclusion program schedules). There is a lack of administrative support and communication, leadership is not listening to teachers and always "talking at us," leadership fails to transmit information to the full staff, and leadership and administration have unrealistic expectations. Participants also noted that fiscal policy affects funding for materials, and equipment, and that ECE and ECSE teachers earn different salaries. Lastly, logistics is a hindrance. The district's inclusion programs' schedules do not correspond, and there are different types of ECE programs, making implementation difficult. In addition, there are barriers to inclusion at the classroom level, such as mindsets of paraprofessionals, and obtaining support ('buy-in') from staff.

Additionally, as revealed by one of the study's participants, planning time was associated with classroom barriers. Thereby, three major findings were found in the study.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The current study addresses a significant gap in the literature by giving a contemporary overview of equity work in inclusion by examining ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion as districts transition from segregated to more inclusive classrooms. Chapter 5 summarizes the study and draws significant inferences from the data reported in Chapter 4. The following sections provide: (1) a brief overview of the study, including significant findings, (2) findings related to the literature, (3) limitations, (4) implications for research and practice, and (4) a conclusion that summarizes the study's central points.

#### **Brief Overview of the Study**

Due to the changing social context of education, inclusive education has been a long-standing vision without a specific process. While evidence indicates that preschool inclusion promotes social and language development, it also demonstrates that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are a substantial barrier to its implementation. Previous research found that teacher-related and educational environment-related variables are associated with teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Teacher-related variables include gender, age, teaching experience, grade level, training, teachers' beliefs, and political views (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). In contrast, educational environment-related variables include resources and time for planning and instructional and school-level support (e.g., reorganizing physical space, administration) (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The study draws from the model of attitude (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) and the inclusive pedagogy (Florian

& Black-Hawkins, 2012) framework, which is used to understand how early childhood special education teachers' attitudes toward inclusion determine their inclusive pedagogy practices as they shift from segregated to more inclusive classrooms.

Thus, the qualitative study had three main aims: (1) to examine the attitudes of early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers toward inclusion as a northern California school shifts from segregated to more inclusive classrooms, (2) to explore types of support they received and how that support shaped their inclusive pedagogical practices, and the extent to which that support prepared them to teach in inclusive classrooms, and (3) to identify barriers that impact the transition to teach in inclusive classrooms. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and then coded using in vivo and pattern coding to determine categories and subcategories related to ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Findings from the study provide some insights for research and practice around ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and the potential factors that impact the transition from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms.

### **Summary of Findings**

Findings revealed that inclusive education is about more than teaching students with and without disabilities; it is about cultivating inclusive communities that promote social integration and school well-being for all students and staff (Heyder, Südkamp, & Steinmayr, 2020). In this qualitative study, three significant findings emerged that addressed ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. First, it was found that participants made sense of inclusion by drawing on their interpretation or thinking of inclusion, how they felt about inclusion (i.e., benefits of inclusion versus challenges of inclusion, desired

qualities of inclusion, and what is not inclusion), and three of four participants have never taught in inclusive settings. Participants understood the notion of inclusion as “all students,” access, and belonging. The findings illustrate the impact of inclusion and social and language development among students with disabilities. However, the findings revealed that ECSE teachers are faced with the task of supporting students with disabilities who have challenging behaviors in inclusive classrooms. Also, participants indicated that collaboration, and reflective practice are potential indicators of participants’ affective attitude towards inclusion.

Second, participants received some level of support, which may or may not have been beneficial in preparing them for the shift to teaching in inclusive classrooms. As a result, some participants said they are not prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms, while others claimed they are. Finally, participants suggested practical ways to prepare for the shift to teaching in inclusive classrooms, such as having structure, ongoing coaching to build a sense of belonging in a community, observing inclusion programs, and having preplanning time.

Third, another finding indicates that there are district and classroom barriers to inclusion. Participants identified leadership and administration, finance, and logistics as significant district-level inclusion hurdles at the district level. Namely, leadership does not listen to teachers and is constantly “talking at us,” leadership does not effectively communicate with the entire team, and administration frequently changes. A participant also noted a disparity in pay between ECE and ECSE teachers. Finally, logistical issues are barriers as well. Implementing inclusion in the district is difficult since the district's inclusion programs' schedules do not coordinate, and there is no set process. Whereas

classroom barriers include mindsets of paraprofessionals, and obtaining support (“buy-in”) from staff. Overall, the findings suggest that future research should explore barriers to inclusion for a smoother transition. Thereby, in Chapter 5, the researcher discussed the relationship of the findings to the literature.

### **ECSE Teachers’ Attitudes Toward Inclusion**

Eagly and Chaiken’s (1993) attitude model is used to inform the findings to understand ECSE teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) argued that attitudes are exhibited through cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses though they do not require all three responses toward an attitude object (i.e., inclusion). Individuals’ attitudes may form based on one component or two components (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Also, individuals may hold beliefs about some attitude objects and not display observable behaviors or have emotional reactions towards them (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Thus, the attitude model shifts beyond understanding how teachers interpret inclusion. Instead, it focuses on the various components of their thinking, feeling, and action, which are discussed in more detail in relation to the findings in the following paragraphs.

Hence, ECSE teachers in the study were asked to define inclusion and what inclusion meant to them. The study's findings echoed prior research that examined how inclusion has emerged and shifted over time (Odom et al., 2011). As a result, inclusion has been centered on belonging, participation, and fulfilling one's potential (Odom et al., 2011). The findings indicated that inclusion is about all students, including students of all demographics, LGBTQ, low socioeconomic, having access to general education, resources, and inclusion is a physical place. The findings fit into the cognitive

component of Eagly and Chaiken's attitude model. The cognitive component is an individuals' notion or belief about an object or idea (i.e., inclusion) (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Individuals whose thoughts reflect favorable feelings are likely to retain positive attributes and are less likely to equate them with negative attributes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). In contrast, individuals whose thoughts reflect unfavorable feelings are likely to relate it negatively and are less likely to equate it with positive attributes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). The participants did not indicate positive or negative attributes. However, they indicated the value of inclusion by defining what they perceived it to be. For instance, Patricia and Julia highlighted the importance of having access to general education classrooms and curriculum. This finding supports the notion that access refers to the learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environments that characterize high-quality early childhood inclusion (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

On the contrary, though the meaning of inclusion shifted from the belief that it is a physical setting (Odom et al., 2011), it cannot be without belonging, as indicated in the findings. In other words, people may be included in space but may or may not feel as though they belong there. As a result, there is an indication in the study that some participants understood inclusion as belonging, such as *being part of* something. Also, findings show that a sense of belonging is required for inclusion, which is associated with the affective component of attitude. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) argued that the affective component involves individuals' feelings or emotions relative to the attitude object. For instance, Bonnie and Darya indicated that inclusion involves a sense of belonging. Darya explained that "you can have somebody in a place and be like, okay, 'yay!' inclusion it's happening, but like what are you doing to make the child and make them feel like they

wanted there?” This example clearly shows that belonging is a necessity. Thus, when inclusion comprises belonging, it influences Bonnie and Darya’s attitudes towards as they had lived experiences being excluded. Moreover, organizations like the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009) support the notion of belonging. DEC and NAEYC (2009) believe that students with and without disabilities and their families should experience a sense of belonging. However, the DEC and NAEYC do not elaborate on what belonging looks like and how it could be measured.

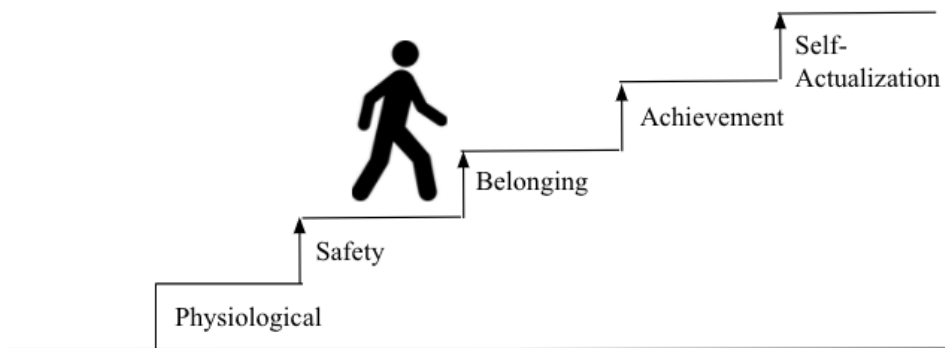
In addition, in the book, *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity: The Keys to Successful Equity Implementation*, written by Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple (2019), the authors defined belonging as “the extent to which people feel appreciated, validated, accepted, and treated fairly within an environment (e.g., school, classroom, or work).” Cobb and Krownapple (2019) emphasized that “belonging isn’t just a nice sentiment or word on a Hallmark greeting card, rather it is a need that is hardwired into human beings” (p. 43). Likewise, as Cobb and Krownapple (2019) argued, belonging is a need, and neglecting it is harmful to a person's overall health. When there is a lack of sense of belonging, it is called a belonging gap, as Cobb and Krownapple (2019) explained. A belonging gap occurs when the “disproportionate frequency with which some groups of people experience a lack of belonging” (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019, p. 208). For instance, in the current study, Bonnie described that when students are removed from their seats for being disruptive, they are not part of the group, making them feel like they don’t belong, which refers to a belonging gap (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). In other words, students who become disruptive are removed from the environment, and the



frequency of them being removed may affect their experience of belonging. In another example, Darya explained that she was never really accepted due to her multi-racial identity. This example shows that there is a belonging gap due to racial identity, which Cobb and Krownapple (2019) pointed out that race frequently dictates how people feel about their place in any given environment. The findings suggest that belonging is necessary to inclusion.

In addition, findings in the study revealed that components of belonging are being loved, wanted, and welcomed. These findings support Cobb and Krownapple's definition of belonging and connect to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory of human motivation developed by Abraham Maslow (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). Darya, for instance, mentioned that every person needs love, to feel wanted, and to feel like they belong, which supports the notion that belonging is a need (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019) and prompts the curiosity of how it fulfills one's potential as stated by Odom et al. (2011). Therefore, the findings suggest that belonging can be understood by using the Stairs of Fulfilling Potential conceptual framework as proposed by Cobb and Krownapple (2019). The Stairs of Fulfilling Potential conceptual framework was originally used to understand the achievement culture in the United States (See Figure 4). However, the study can benefit from this conceptual framework to understand the importance of belonging and its long-term impact.

Figure 4. Stairs of Fulfilling Potential Conceptual Framework



Cobb, F., & Krownapple, J. 2019. *Belonging through a culture of dignity: The keys to successful equity implementation*. Mini and Todd Press.

In Figure 4, the Stairs to Fulfilling Potential conceptual framework functions by working up the stairs, starting with physiological, safety, belonging, achievement, and self-actualization. Cobb and Krownapple (2019) explained people can fluctuate up or sometimes down the ladder of the stairs of hierarchical needs. Thus, each stair builds on the previous one. For instance, when a person's physiological or basic conditions are met, this lays the groundwork for the subsequent stair, which is safety and so forth. In short, according to the findings, belonging is important to the work of inclusion as it fosters being part of a classroom or community, which is the third staircase on the Stairs to Fulfilling Potential conceptual framework. Only when people belong can they focus on achieving or fulfilling their potential without distraction, Maslow referred to as self-actualization (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019).

Furthermore, another significant key point about belonging involves one's cognitive, behavioral, and affective attitude, components of Eagly and Chaiken's (1993) attitude model. The research reveals that participants reported several staff members who

held fixed mindsets on children's learning capacity. Findings show that participants who were aware that paraprofessionals held “fixed” or “deficit views” toward children’s learning capacity hindered their ability to implement inclusive pedagogical practices in the classrooms. A participant emphasized the need of paraprofessionals adopting a growth mindset. In turn, another person's cognitive attitude can impact teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Therefore, the data show that belonging may be in danger of being obliterated when individuals hold deficit thinking. Thus, it becomes possible for teachers to become “gatekeepers and can determine whether or not a student ‘truly’ belongs in that placement” (Cobb & Krownapple, p. 50). For example, participants in the study indicated that the frustration of how to address or respond to paraprofessionals’ views on childrens’ learning capacity. In this example, it demonstrates the participants’ behavioral attitude toward inclusion, which is how they reacted toward their paraprofessionals’ thinking.

Furthermore, as a result, the findings supported Florian and Black-Hawkins’s (2011) second tenet of inclusive pedagogy and the components of attitude (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). The findings point to Florian and Black-Hawkins’s (2011) argument of rejecting the deficit thinking of children’s learning and Eagly and Chaiken’s (1993) notion of individuals whose thoughts reflect unfavorable feelings are likely to relate it negatively and are less likely to equate it with positive attributes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Patricia, for instance, points out the obvious that an inclusive environment requires staff to shift their thinking and emphasizes that “paras need to have growth mindsets, as far as stop looking at everything that could go wrong, and be excited about what could go right.” This finding is fundamental to the study as inclusive pedagogy

focuses on how teachers support students with learning needs. Therefore, inclusion requires that teachers or any education personnel reject the beliefs about children's learning capacity as being fixed and the related belief that the presence of some will impede the growth of others (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). All teachers and staff, including paraprofessionals, need to shift their deficit thinking and presume competence in students.

Also, the study's findings revealed a potential strategy to eliminate "gatekeepers," which is collaboration and teamwork. Collaboration and teamwork between ECSE and ECE teachers are fundamental to inclusion. For example, Julia stated that inclusion looks like "a unified team and class," and Patricia emphasized the need for collaboration among the general education and special education teachers to help address and support the needs of students and teachers. Thus, prior research indicates that teamwork and collaboration are essential in doing inclusion work (Hunt et al., 2004; Lieber et al., 1998; McCormick et al., 2001; Odom et al., 2011). Effective teamwork requires consistent or planned team meetings with all education team members, including parents, to share their expertise, identify goals, share priorities, establish support plans, and identify responsibilities (Hunt et al., 2004), supported by findings in the study. Therefore, to achieve inclusion by eliminating gatekeepers, there must be a sense of belonging among students, staff, and the entire school community.

Additionally, the study discovered that inclusion might be an instructional practice tailored to all children's needs, such as differentiated instruction. According to Ernest, Heckaman, Thompson, Hull, and Carter (2011), differentiated instruction is an effective strategy for meeting the needs of all students in an inclusive classroom. For

example, Bonnie stated that good inclusion knows how to differentiate instruction to “fit their [students] needs” but challenges them to work towards student success. In addition, Ernest et al. (2011) explained that differentiated instruction shifts away from the traditional top-down model of teaching toward a universal model that works for all students (Ernest et al., 2011). This finding is essential to the study as it informs teachers’ inclusive pedagogical practices.

Lastly, another significant finding that informed ECSE teachers’ inclusive pedagogical practices and attitudes toward inclusion are social and linguistic benefits of inclusion. Julia, for example, emphasized the social and linguistic benefits of inclusive classrooms for students with disabilities. She explained that students without disabilities are great role models for students with disabilities. Julia also emphasized that “a huge benefit is just having the socialization opportunity and the other thing is language. There are a couple of kids that we have in our classroom who have been there for three weeks, and I see more language out of them than I did before!” The findings support studies like Green et al. (2014), who asserted that children with disabilities benefited from high-quality language and literacy instruction in early childhood inclusive classrooms. For instance, Patricia emphasized the critical nature of inclusion in supporting children with disabilities using social and language skills to interact with “all of their friends [peers] and not just their friends that can talk to them or are physically mobile.” In addition, supporting research such as Guralnick and Bruder (2016) emphasized the importance of inclusion in facilitating and sustaining social relationships between children with and without disabilities, corroborating the study's findings. Altogether, the

findings suggest that inclusion fosters students with disabilities' social and linguistic development.

In summary, the findings indicate that inclusion has several meanings and takes on different forms (Odom et al., 2011). ECSE teachers interpreted inclusion as “all students,” access, a place, belonging, and instructional practice, which previous studies have supported these notions (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019; DEC/NAEYC, 2009; Odom et al., 2011). However, findings indicated that although inclusion can take the form of a physical place, inclusion may not be achieved unless belonging is present, as it is a basic need (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). Thus, belonging is fundamental to inclusion as much as food and water to meet one's physiological needs. Cobb and Krownapple (2019) shared their definition of inclusion:

“Inclusion is engagement within a community where the equal worth and inherent dignity of each person is honored. An inclusive community promotes and sustains a sense of belonging; it affirms the talents, beliefs, backgrounds, and ways of living of its members” (p. 33).

Their notion of inclusion encompasses the existence of shared power, equal worth, and co-creation, all of which are necessary components of successfully implementing equity (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). In addition, findings imply that inclusion is an instructional practice where teachers can tailor their teaching to meet the needs of their students. Lastly, an inclusive classroom supports social and linguistic development for students with disabilities by having peer models and social interactions with typical peers. Overall, the findings inform the research literature on how teachers and education

personnel can co-create and foster belonging in inclusive classrooms and how belonging is measured.

### **ECSE Teachers' Attitude Formation Towards Inclusion**

Now that the study has investigated and understood ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, it is essential to analyze the potential factors that form their attitudes. In this section, ECSE teachers' attitude formation is discussed and defined as those that affect ECSE instructors' attitudes toward inclusion. The findings are critical to the study because they shed light on how inclusion has evolved and how to best promote transitions to more inclusive classrooms. The following sections discuss personal influences toward inclusion, followed by professional influences and how they relate to previous studies.

Findings revealed that while the participants' influences differed, there were some common threads in their justifications for being strong advocates for inclusion. Two participants indicated that family influences strongly shape their attitudes toward inclusion. For instance, Julia and Patricia noted that their influences stemmed from their mothers' special educational backgrounds. This finding supports Yu and Park's (2020) study that family influences shape teachers' attitudes toward inclusion; however, family influences are not mentioned as a teacher-related variable in Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) study. In addition, findings from the study indicated that knowing family members or relatives with a disability was an influential factor that shapes one's attitude towards inclusion. In particular, Julia has cousins with disabilities, and previous studies like Dias and Cadime (2016) support this finding. Dias and Cadime (2016) suggested that experience with or knowing a person with special education needs was a strong predictor of attitudes towards inclusion.

Moreover, findings in the study appeared to support the notion that college courses influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. For example, Darya recalled her first special education course that influenced her decision to become a special education preschool teacher, which was not reported as a teacher-related variable in Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) study. In addition, findings revealed that one's belief is an influential factor that shapes ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, supported by Yu and Park's (2020) study. Darya, for instance, noted that simply "living life" and "being who I am, experiencing the world and never really feeling like I had a place" were significant influences on her attitude toward inclusion.

Also, the study discovered that personal experiences affect ECSE teachers' attitudes on inclusion. For example, findings determined that participants' personal experiences of schooling and one's identity (i.e., multi-racial identity) shaped ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, which were not discovered in previous studies (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Leatherman & Niemeier, 2005; Odom, 2000; Odom et al., 2011; Yu & Park, 2020). Bonnie emphasized how her personal experience as an English Learner (EL) shaped her views on inclusion. She emphasized that "as a child, I felt as though my teacher made me feel extremely foolish." She used the epithet "stupid" to describe certain teachers' condescending demeanor. Also, Bonnie explained that while she understood her teachers, they engaged in a way that made her feel less knowledgeable than her peers. As a result, she distrusted her ability to respond to her teachers' questions and avoided engaging in class discussions. Thereby, Bonnie's personal experience has stayed with her into adulthood, making it tough to let go. Ultimately, as a



result of her experience as an EL student, it shaped her inclusive pedagogical practices in the classroom.

On top of that, racial identity is another influential personal factor, which was not found in previous studies (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Odom, 2000; Odom et al., 2011; Yu & Park, 2020). Darya, for example, explained that she doesn't look like either side of her family and has been told by others where they think she belongs based on her physical features. In turn, Darya does not feel a sense of belonging within her own culture and at work. She stated that having a multiracial identity and being included are inextricably linked because individuals may not completely feel a sense of belonging due to the stigma and miseducation from the larger community. Darya's racial identity resulted in her feeling unappreciated, unvalidated, and unwelcomed, all of which impacted her attitude toward inclusion. The findings suggest that schooling experience and racial identity are factors that need to be further explored and considered for inclusion in the list of teacher-related variables proposed by Avramidis and Norwich (2002).

What follows next are findings related to professional factors toward inclusion. Results suggest that most participants had never taught in an inclusion classroom. However, some participants had implemented inclusive pedagogical practices; for example, Bonnie uses differentiated instruction in her segregated classroom, while Darya collaborated with an ECE teacher to develop a monthly integrated model that mirrored inclusive practices. In another example, professional experiences of teaching in inclusive classrooms shaped one participant's attitude towards inclusion. Julia, for example, has 12 years of ECSE teaching experience and piloted an inclusive program for two years in

Texas. Overall, most participants in this study had never taught in inclusive classrooms before, suggesting that districts should provide opportunities for ECSE teachers to observe or offer more options to teach in inclusive preschool classrooms.

In sum, the study shows that personal and professional experiences are potential indicators of ECSE teachers' attitudes towards inclusion as the district transitions from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms. Also, the findings provided insightful information on potential indicators that district personnel can take away from this study to better support teachers who are in the transition process. These findings are significant because they enable a better understanding of the changes occurring in the equity work on inclusion and, thus, strengthen teachers' teaching efficacy and preparedness to teach in inclusive classrooms.

### **Professional Development and Ongoing Support for Inclusion**

It is known that professional development is to help professionals (i.e., teachers) learn core skills or strengthen teaching and intervention methods (Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009). Thus, participants were asked to describe: (1) describe the types of support they have received during the transition to begin teaching in an inclusive setting, (2) how prepared they felt to teach in an inclusive classroom, and (3) what would make them feel more prepared? Findings indicate that the level of preparedness (i.e., professional development) and support for inclusion differs between participants. For example, Bonnie, Patricia, and Darya mentioned that they received professional development training throughout the school year, including four sessions for an entire academic school year. Whereas Julia attended *Beginning Together: Inclusion Facilitator Training Institute*, held once a week for four weeks. Overall, though participants'

readiness levels and support for inclusion vary, there was no indication of any ongoing professional development, whereas Odom et al. (2011) proposed that implementing inclusion requires continuous professional development. Also, a study by Yu (2019) emphasized a need for follow-up activities after training and workshops, which was not found in the study. This finding suggests that the ECSE teachers in this study were not receiving ongoing or follow-up professional development.

Moreover, along with professional development, having consistent and continuous collaboration and coaching is crucial to preschool inclusion (Odom et al., 2011). Several studies have examined the effect of collaboration on the implementation of inclusion and teachers' attitudes toward it (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Odom et al., 2011; Zagona et al., 2017). Collaboration is required for inclusion work because it necessitates planning and cooperation between general education and special education teachers. Thus, there was an indication in the study for ongoing collaboration and coaching. Darya, in particular, emphasized the need for continuing collaboration between ECE and ECSE teachers, which she said would be “really beneficial.” She also revealed that collaborating with ECE this past school year has helped her know ECE teachers’ “names and faces” rather than just knowing an “anonymous mob of people.” In addition, Darya, for example, mentioned that an ongoing coaching model is critical in preparing and supporting teachers’ transitions into inclusive classrooms and discussed how it would support her. She emphasized that a coaching model requires the teacher and coach to meet consistently every week, and it is about observing teachers rather than “walking through” classrooms. Thus, Odom et al. (2011) and Yu (2019) suggested ongoing coaching is necessary to prepare teachers for inclusion. Furthermore, Brown,

Gatmaitan, and Harjusola-Webb (2014) indicated that coaching relationships should exist between teachers and related service providers (speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and vision therapists specialists) in the classroom or consultation with the teacher.

Overall, previous studies show there is an association between teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and the amount or types of training they received (Avramidis et al., 2000; Boer et al., 2011; Dais & Cadime, 2016; Vaz et al., 2015; Yu, 2019; Yu & Park, 2020; and Zagona et al., 2017). Thus, findings in the study show that professional development is related to teachers' level of preparedness is related to their teaching efficacy. Teaching efficacy is a teacher's level of confidence and competency to facilitate learning successfully (Brady & Woolfson, 2008). For instance, though Darya felt somewhat prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom, she had a fear of failure and the consequences she might face from it, such as "fearing of messing up, fear of doing the wrong thing...something that is going to backfire." As a result, she indicated that there needs to be more training. Also, previous studies suggest that teachers with high teaching efficacy are more inclined to meet students with learning difficulties needs in their classrooms (Brady & Woolfson, 2008). For example, Julia felt prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom in the study, as Brady and Woolfson (2008) pointed out. However, seeing how unprepared the district was made Julia feel unprepared. Therefore, the study suggests a need to focus on supporting teachers' teaching efficacy.

Overall, professional development and ongoing support are essential for inclusion as they strengthen teachers' teaching efficacy and inform their inclusive pedagogical practices. The findings from the study indicate that district personnel may need to

rethink their approach to professional development and support for teachers who are shifting from segregated to more inclusive classrooms. Also, the study's findings suggest that future professional development practices should be continuous and ongoing.

### **Identified Barriers to Inclusion**

Lastly, findings in the study reveal barriers to inclusion, which are categorized as district and classroom-level. The barriers indicated by participants were educational environment-related variables (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The educational environment-related variables have two categories: physical and human support services (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Physical support services include resources, instructional materials, information technology (IT) equipment, and physical environment (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). On the other hand, human support services include leadership and administrative staff, service providers (such as speech therapists and resource specialists), and general education teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The following paragraphs discuss barriers at the district and classroom levels using Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) notion of educational environmental-related variables.

#### ***District Level Barriers***

Findings show that district-level barriers included leadership and administration, finance, and logistics, all educational environment-related variables - human and physical support services (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Leadership and administration are considered human support services, whereas finance and logistics are physical support services.

Under the category of human support services, findings indicated that leadership and administrative support are critical players in implementing inclusion. Previous

studies show that administrative support contributes to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. For example, Fuchs (2010) found that lack of administrative support contributed to teachers' feelings towards inclusion. Specifically, the administrative expectations and job responsibilities required of teachers were "unrealistic" (Fuchs, 2010, p. 32). The findings of the current study support Fuchs's (2010) findings. Participants indicated that administrators have unrealistic expectations from teachers. For instance, Darya explained, "They [administrators] have expectations, certain expectations that they are told, and those expectations come back to us [teachers]." She also added that "it's like they're putting these unrealistic, or challenging feats on us, and we're just like chickens running around with their heads cut off." Darya concluded by saying, "having those really high expectations mixed with bad communication... It's just not a good combination." In another example, Patricia emphasized how leadership is not listening to teachers and continuously "talking at us." A previous study by DeSimone et al. (2013) also supports the findings in the study and found that administrative support significantly influenced teachers' attitudes toward early childhood inclusion programs. The findings show that inclusion cannot succeed unless school administrators are dedicated to it (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003).

Also, Darya and Patricia's examples pointed out the critical nature of communication, which earlier research has confirmed was important for collaboration (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Liber et al., 1997; Odom et al., 2011). Collaboration involves joint planning, shared values, shared accountability for all children, communication, professional duties, relationship stability, and administrative support (Lieber et al., 1997). Also, collaboration occurs differently under various inclusive

models. As a result, numerous research studies have examined the effect of collaboration on the implementation of inclusion and teachers' attitudes toward it (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Odom et al., 2011; Zagona et al., 2017). Hammond and Ingalls (2003) found that teachers had concerns regarding the lack of collaboration opportunities with fellow teachers. For instance, Julia explained that she and the ECE teachers had no time for collaboration due to their varying working schedules. In another study, Zagona et al. (2017) found that a special education teacher in a self-contained class developed positive experiences collaborating with general education teachers and preparedness for inclusive education, such as having shared knowledge about inclusive education and responsibility to inform others about training. Patricia, for example, emphasized the need for collaboration among the general education and special education teachers and believed that inclusion involves some level of communication. Therefore, findings produced from the current study reveal that collaboration and communication synchronize or exist together.

However, the study's findings indicate that lack of communication is directly linked to leadership and administrators, impacting the collaboration between ECSE and ECE teachers. According to Barton and Smith (2015), they found a lack of collaboration between general education and special education settings and their associated personnel. There was no opportunity for ECSE and ECE teachers to collaborate as schedules did not align. In particular, Julia stressed that a significant challenge was not having prep time with ECE teachers when the inclusion classroom started its first year. Also, Julia said, "we didn't have any time to plan before...so it was just like 'hey starting Monday' like we're gonna be in there and that I think it was a big barrier for us." In this example, the

barrier is the prep time and how it was communicated untimely by administrators without providing any guidance to Julia. As a result, it impacted collaboration between Julia and the ECE teachers to prepare and lesson plan successfully. In another example, Darya pointed out that collaboration and communication are key components in fostering a sense of community. She explained that collaboration moves beyond ECE and ECSE coming together to lesson plans; therefore, it is the notion of “feeling safe, welcomed, and loved,” which she referred to as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Indeed collaboration is essential, but fostering a sense of community requires safety, acceptance, and love.

In contrast, it is also important to note that physical support service barriers exist, including finance and logistics. The study revealed that financial issues, such as the availability of funds to purchase materials, supplies, equipment, etc., are barriers. Equipment materials include tables, desks, toys, blocks, puzzles, and so forth in the classroom and any specialized equipment a child needs (Odom et al., 2001). In addition, materials and supplies include construction paper, paint, glue, books, snack food, and so forth, which are used for instruction and are necessary for learning (Odom et al., 2001). The findings from the study support studies like Barton and Smith (2015), who found that fiscal support (i.e., funding) is critical to advancing the quality of inclusion programs. For instance, Darya mentioned that “budget” is a barrier, and teachers were “scrambling for funds.” Inclusion requires a sufficient budget for resources, instructional materials, and other costs of delivering high-quality inclusion programs. Overall, previous studies found teachers expressed concerns about limited resources and lack of knowledge in providing individualized support, which could hinder educational opportunities for



children with disabilities in inclusive settings (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; DeSimone et al., 2013; Fuchs, 2010; Yu, 2019).

Moreover, another financial issue found in the study was the salaries between ECSE and ECE teachers. Julia, for instance, pointed out that the salary difference between ECSE and ECE teachers impacts the implementation of inclusion, given that inclusion involves having to share duties. Julia explained that “you're supposed to be like on a team, and we're splitting duties, and we're doing this together, but I make significantly more...” In addition, Julia believes that one potential explanation for the salary discrepancy is having a credential versus not having one. This data suggests that increased educational and certification requirements for ECSEs may affect salary determination. Though there is a lack of research that examines ECSE and ECE teachers' salaries, it is known that previous studies like Odom et al. (2001) found administrative salary as a factor to fiscal cost. Also, studies like Barton and Smith (2015) noted that financial support and resources included funding for high-quality inclusive classrooms and programs. For example, school districts establish Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between programs to share paraprofessionals or reimburse parents for transporting their children with disabilities to the programs (Barton & Smith, 2015). Thus, Odom et al. (2001) and Barton and Smith (2015) made no indication about salary discrepancies between ECSE and ECE teachers. The findings in the study suggest that a barrier to inclusion in the salary discrepancy between ECSE and ECE teachers, and future research is needed to understand it.

Finally, logistics, such as the organization, structure, and implementation, of inclusion is another physical barrier. The study's findings indicate that inclusion program

types, the implementation process, and district preparedness affected the participants' attitudes toward inclusion as the district shifted from more segregated to more inclusive classrooms. As found in Odom et al.'s (2011) study, inclusion takes many different forms. Julia, for example, explained that "at the district level, it's just logistically hard, right, like we have so many different types of these classes and that we would push into like full-day Head Start, half-day Head Start with full-day state, half-day state." For Julia, the inclusion programs that her district offered do not align cohesively. For a better practice system, school districts with early childhood inclusion programs should adopt a strategy for implementing inclusion and ensuring that inclusive program types follow a similar service delivery model.

### *Classroom Level Barriers*

Equally as significant as district-level barriers are classroom-level barriers: (1) preparation (i.e., lesson planning) for inclusion, (2) paraprofessionals' mindset, (3) and obtaining team "buy-in." Preparation (i.e., lesson planning) and obtaining team "buy-in" are environmental education-related variables, whereas paraprofessionals' mindset is a teacher-related variable. Avramidis and Nowich (2002) argued that teachers' beliefs and socio-political views are teacher-related variables. The following sections discuss the classroom level barriers to the study and previous research.

As mentioned in the previous section, preparation (i.e., lesson planning) for inclusion is an educational environmental-related variable. The study's findings revealed a lack of preparation (i.e., lesson planning) time while shifting from a segregated to a more inclusive classroom. For Julia, who taught in an inclusion classroom, one of the classroom challenges was not having enough time to plan with her ECE counterparts.

She explained that “I felt like we had like a day to figure it out, you know, and that was hard and still is hard.” This research indicates that the transition period between segregated and inclusive classrooms should include appropriate preparation and lesson planning time for ECSE and ECE teachers.

Another classroom barrier that is related to educational environment-related variables is obtaining team “buy-in.” Two of the four participants emphasized the importance of having an entire team on board to achieve inclusion. For instance, Darya believes that inclusion is impossible to accomplish without team buy-in and noted that “we can't go anywhere else unless the team is on board.” Julia, in another example, explained that there was a boy with autism who had buy-in from the ECE teachers. However, she felt like she had to earn their buy-in for adding more students with disabilities in the preschool inclusion class. Also, a potential explanation for this barrier is the concern around whose “turf” (Barton & Smith, 2015). For instance, Julia described the transition of teaching in a segregated classroom to an inclusive classroom as “hard” as it involves relinquishing control, being flexible, and figuring out her place in an established classroom or another teacher’s turf. She also frequently felt as if she was imposing on a teacher who had her classroom set up in a certain way, and now she’s coming in and causing “a little bit of chaos,” which makes it difficult for her to find her place in the classroom. This finding emphasizes the value of belonging, discussed previously in Chapter 5, and demonstrates the critical nature of achieving team buy-in.

Lastly, another classroom barrier is the thinking or mindset of paraprofessionals working in segregated classrooms that participants reported. Paraprofessionals are trained to assist special education teachers in delivering special education services for

children with disabilities. This barrier is a teacher-related variable (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Thus, the study's findings noted that paraprofessionals' thinking directly impacts the ECSE teachers' inclusive pedagogical practice. The inclusive pedagogy framework by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) rejects the deficit model that children's learning capacities are static. Instead, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) suggested that everyone benefits from a paradigm shift in mindset, regardless of whether they are categorized as having special needs.

The study's findings support Florian and Black-Hawkins's (2011) notion of rejecting a deficit view of children's learning capacity. Some of the participants in the study explained that their paraprofessionals held deficit views of children's learning process. Also, participants described how it hinders their ability to implement inclusive pedagogical practices. For example, Darya explained that one of her paraeducators "has a little bit of a fixed mindset about children," and Darya has to continuously reiterate, "hey, this is where we're at." When Darya introduces new activities to her students with disabilities, she described her paraeducator's response as "Oh no, oh no, he won't be able to, it's too much for him." Darya explicitly notes that students must be given learning opportunities before "we say no." In another example, Bonnie indicated that working with adults in the classroom is the most significant barrier and described it as "a little bit harder and challenging" given that some adults hold "deficit views." Darya and Bonnie's examples demonstrate the challenges of working with staff who have different views of learning. While Darya and Bonnie believed that all children have the learning capacity, their paraprofessionals believed that children have a limited learning capacity, a deficit thinking attitude. Also, Darya pointed out that she plans to focus on nurturing her

paraprofessionals and herself as “this is good teaching practice.” Thus, paraprofessionals’ thinking of children’s learning capacity hinders how teachers carry out lesson plans or classroom activities.

In conclusion, district and classroom level barriers seemed to influence ECSE teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion. Though the research question specifically asked, “what barriers do ECSE teachers anticipate encountering in implementing inclusive pedagogical practices as the district shifts from segregated classrooms to inclusive classrooms?” the participants’ responses included challenges or barriers that already existed. However, the findings are crucial because they guide enhancing teacher support and improving the implementation process, as there is no standard procedure.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with any research, it is essential to identify and consider the limitations of the study. There were several limitations to the study that should be considered for future practice and research. Also, follow-up interviews were not conducted; however, the researcher contacted participants via emails or text messages to clarify words or phrases they shared during the interview. Four limitations are identified in the following paragraphs: 1) sample size, 2) data collection, 3) time constraints, and 4) participants’ response biases.

First, the sample size in the study did not generate enough information to develop conclusive findings that can be generalized to the vast majority of teachers and classroom contexts. Also, the study focused on participants at one particular school site only. Though there are eight ECSE teachers at the school site, four participants volunteered for the study. Thus, the sample size does not accurately reflect most ECSE teachers’

attitudes toward inclusion throughout the school district, not representative of those outside the location. Also, one participant transitioned to teaching an inclusive classroom at the start of the school year. Therefore, it is recommended that future research and practice explore ECSE teachers throughout the school district as more inclusive classrooms are being opened.

Second, another limitation to the study is the type of data collection used. Data collection included semi-structured interviews. The researcher developed interview questions to gather participants' attitudes toward inclusion as the district transitions from segregated to more inclusive classrooms. The researcher did not anticipate how the participants would understand the interview questions and how they responded. Thus, when the researcher asked the interview question, "what barriers do ECSE teachers *anticipate* encountering in implementing inclusive pedagogical practices as the district shifts from segregated classrooms to inclusive classrooms?" they responded by identifying challenges or barriers that already existed. Overall, no triangulation was used to check the validity of participants' responses and reduce biases. Future studies should use several data collection methods to determine whether approaches with varying strengths and limitations support a conclusion, allowing researchers to understand the investigated issues (Maxwell, 2013).

Third, the study was conducted over a seven-weeks period. Thus time constraint was a limitation. There was insufficient time to gather and conduct follow-up interviews to provide additional information and clarification from the participants. However, the researcher emailed or sent text messages to participants to clarify words or phrases.

Future research is recommended to explore the long-term effects of ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion as they move from segregated to more inclusive classrooms.

Finally, the fourth limitation of the study is the possibility of response biases from the participants. The participants and the researchers are acquainted through work as they all teach at the same school setting. Thus, the study's participants may have responded to interview questions in ways that they believed were desired by the researcher.

### **Implications for Research**

The findings produced from the study have three implications for research. First, the conclusions of the study point toward the importance of fostering belonging in classrooms. The study found no evidence that cultivating belonging should occur in self-contained, inclusive, or general education classrooms. However, it is known from the interviews that some participants emphasized the importance of belonging when doing equity work in inclusion. Belonging, as described by John A. Powell, is “when our full humanity, as a group and as individuals, is embraced” (Powell & Simon, 2021, 6:10). While having a sense of belonging is crucial for inclusion, the study did not investigate how participants fostered this sense of belonging in their classes. However, the researcher elicited clarification from participants regarding their meaning of belonging. Thus, the findings recommend that future research focus on belonging as a feature of inclusion and examine how belonging is interpreted and how teachers can measure it in their classrooms.

A second implication for research is potentially conducting a comparative qualitative study among ECSE teachers in self-contained classrooms (or segregated

classrooms) and ECSE teachers teaching in inclusive classrooms. The findings in the study show that there appears to be a range of attitudes toward inclusion among ECSE teachers who teach in self-contained classes and those who teach in inclusive classrooms. For example, Julia, who transitioned to an inclusive school, encountered several district and classroom challenges that the other participants who taught in self-contained classrooms did not. Julia pointed out some of the barriers to inclusion, such as entering another teacher's "turf," lacking lesson planning time, obtaining team buy-in, and salary discrepancies. Similar to Julia, Darya reported that funding is a barrier as well. However, all participants stated that there is a lack of leadership and administrative support. Though the reported barriers by participants overlapped somewhat, the current study did not compare the ECSE teachers' responses to determine if those who taught in self-contained classrooms experienced more or fewer barriers, for example, compared to those who taught in inclusive classrooms. In addition, future research would benefit from studies that compare ECSE teachers in self-contained and inclusive classrooms' attitudes toward inclusion.

Finally, the third implication for research is to conduct a longitudinal study as ECSE teachers are transitioning from segregated to inclusive classrooms. The current study would have benefited if it was a year-long study that examined ECSE teachers in self-contained classrooms over time or at least until they transitioned into an inclusive classroom. The potential benefits of a year-long research would have uncovered the types of professional development and support services and standard process for inclusion.



### **Implications for Practice**

Findings in the study offer several implications for practice. First, the current research shows that ECSE teachers' attitudes toward inclusion have a detrimental impact on implementing their inclusive pedagogical practices, especially regarding professional development and support services. Thus, the findings point to Florian and Black-Hawkins's (2011) inclusive pedagogy third tenet, which improves the proficiency of teaching and learning processes of teachers and related specialists. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) put forth that a collective effort among professionals, students, and stakeholders is needed to re-evaluate the process and develop a different approach to transfer and receive knowledge. Also, teachers and specialists are encouraged to view students' learning challenges as professional issues and continuously collaborate to develop innovative strategies to support students and avoid stigmas (Spratt & Florian, 2015). Thus, the findings show that professional development and support services, such as collaboration and coaching, must be relevant to and continuous with teachers' student population. While school districts frequently provide formal training to teachers, there are no ongoing workshops or follow-up activities throughout the school year. As a result, a future practice should include the provision of continuous professional development and support services to meet the needs of teachers, which enhances their inclusive pedagogical practices and level of preparedness to teach in inclusive classrooms.

Second, the study suggests a shift in the understanding of inclusion, which has been highlighted as crucial to inclusion implementation. Based on the findings, belonging is when a person feels welcomed, wanted, loved, and validated. However, the results show that deficit thinking can affect a person's sense of belonging in a classroom.

Thus, inclusion in practice is about design, the process through which teachers consciously construct an environment, and about collaborating with the communities we serve and transforming the culture so that students experience access and unconditional belonging (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). This model does not require students to alter who they are to fit in (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). Therefore, the study suggests that future practice focuses on inventions and strategies that could foster access and unconditional belonging in classrooms for all students, not some.

Lastly, one of the key takeaways from the study is the variation of the participants' background can determine who belongs and who does not. Darya, for example, expressed how her multiracial identity had made her feel alienated. In contrast, Bonnie's English Learner status had made her avoid engaging in and participating in school activities and classroom discussions when she was younger. Thus, the study recommends a shift in the recruitment process for teachers in early childhood special education to create a more diverse and inclusive teaching staff in response to the move toward fulfilling the needs of diverse students with disabilities.

### **Conclusion**

As equity work in inclusion moves beyond what is already known, potential indicators of successful inclusion described in the study must be considered and further explored. The study's findings are crucial as some participants indicated some other forms of exclusion. For example, Bonnie explains that the "pre-k SPED [special education] department is kind of left in the dark," and Julia delineates with frustration that "there seems to be like an understanding that we're [ECE and ECSE] all under the umbrella." It is known in the literature that special education has been separated from the

mainstream and been its own, as Julia described, “umbrella.” Thus, it is time to embrace the notion of inclusion and belonging. Cobb and Krownapple (2019) argued that there are four diverse environments: (1) excluded, (2) segregated, (3) integrated, and (4) included. They explained that individuals are denied access and experience conditional belonging in an *excluded* environment, individuals that are separated from the mainstream experience unconditional belonging and low access in a *segregated* environment, and individuals that are in the mainstream culture experience conditional belonging but high access in an *integrated* environment (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). Finally, individuals in an *included* or inclusive environment have increased access and unconditional belonging and are “co-creating and experiencing access and belonging through a process of systemic and cultural transformation” (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019, p. 70). It is the included or inclusive environment that Cobb and Krownapple (2019) described that schools should reflect so that no one is excluded or “left in the dark,” as described by Bonnie.

Another important takeaway from the study is ongoing professional development and support for the implementation of inclusion. Professional development and support are often present at the beginning of every school transformation; however, as months or the school year goes by, they dissipate, and teachers are left to solve problems on their own without adequate support. However, inclusion involves ongoing professional development and support as it requires ECSE and ECE teachers to work together and collaborate. Though not found in the study, inclusion requires adequate funding for professional development and support. Previous studies like Odom et al. (2011) and

Barton and Smith (2015) have supported fiscal cost and funding are critical components of inclusive education.

Finally, the study sheds light on teachers' inclusive pedagogical practices and what it is. Teachers' inclusive pedagogy is how they respond to inclusion. The study shows that inclusion is "all student," access, and belonging, which is all possible. However, inclusion is only achievable when teachers approach learning from the perspective of spreading it to all students, not just some. When teachers respond in this way, it creates equity among all students, regardless of if they are LGBTQ, students with disabilities, students with low-income socioeconomic status, and so forth. Inclusion benefits people who have been marginalized, and it functions similarly to equity in that it pulls those who are most disadvantaged into the light. Thus, teachers' inclusive pedagogical practices are made up of their attitudes toward inclusion as well. In conclusion, while there appears to be a national and international shift toward inclusion, future practice and research must bridge gaps between general and special education by co-creating a sense of belonging in which no one is excluded and everyone is treated with dignity.

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## APPENDIX A

### *Interview Protocols*

Research Question	Semi-Structured Interview Questions
<p>1. What are district early childhood special education teachers' (ECSE) attitudes towards inclusion as the district transitions from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me what you think of when you hear the word 'inclusion.'</li> <li>2. Describe your experiences with inclusion.</li> <li>3. What does good inclusion look like?</li> <li>4. How would you complete the statement: Inclusion is _____ (always, often, rarely, never) good. Please explain why.</li> <li>5. In your own words, tell me what influences your attitude towards inclusion?</li> <li>6. Tell me how you intend to arrange your teaching practices to be more inclusive.</li> </ol>
<p>2. In what ways have district ECSE teachers felt supported and prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Describe your feelings or emotions about teaching as you transition from a segregated classroom to a more inclusive classroom.</li> <li>2. Describe the types of support you have received during the transition to begin teaching in an inclusive setting.</li> <li>3. How prepared do you feel about teaching in an inclusive classroom?</li> <li>4. What would make you feel more prepared?</li> </ol>
<p>3. What barriers do district ECSE teachers anticipate encountering in implementing inclusive pedagogical practices as the district shifts from segregated classrooms to inclusive classrooms?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Describe some of the biggest challenges that you see facing the implementation of inclusion in the:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. district</li> <li>b. classroom</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Elaborate on what gave rise to these difficulties?</li> </ol>

**APPENDIX B*****Copy of Email to Participants***

Hey [Participant's Name],

I appreciate your interest in my research study. The purpose of the qualitative interview study is to investigate district early childhood special education teachers' (ECSE) attitudes toward inclusion as districts are transitioning from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms. Specifically, the study is to identify the types of support teachers have received and to determine whether those supports have been effective in preparing district ECSE teachers to implement inclusive pedagogical practices. Also, as districts transition from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms, it is imperative to identify barriers to inclusion and understand how those barriers influence their perceived competence for implementing inclusive pedagogical practices.

During this study, you will be asked to complete a demographic (i.e., age, gender, years of teaching, educational level, etc.) Google form and participate in one interview session. Upon completing the interview, you will receive an electronic Lakeshore Store gift card of \$25.00. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time of the study without penalty. If you would like to participate in my study, please click the link below for the consent form.

[Kami Link for informed consent]

The link is accessible to you and me only.

Thus, please review the consent form. If you have any questions or concerns about the study or consent form, please feel free to contact me by email or phone. Once I receive your signed consent form, I will contact you to schedule an interview along with a link to complete a demographic survey on Google form.

Thank you for your interest and time!

Best regards,

Shally

## APPENDIX C

*Sample of Data Matrix Chart*

[Participant's Name] Interview

<b>Transcriptions</b>	<b>First Cycle coding: In Vivo</b>	<b>Second Cycle coding: Pattern coding</b>
Research Question 1: What are district early childhood special education teachers' (ECSE) attitudes towards inclusion as the district transitions from segregated classrooms to more inclusive classrooms?		
[TEXT]	[TEXT]	[TEXT]
Research Question 2: In what ways have district ECSE teachers felt supported and prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom?		
[TEXT]	[TEXT]	[TEXT]
Research Question 3: What barriers do district ECSE teachers anticipate encountering in implementing inclusive pedagogical practices as the district shifts from segregated classrooms to inclusive classrooms?		
[TEXT]	[TEXT]	[TEXT]