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Qualitative Content Analysis of Policy as an Expression of Educational Theory on Special Education Preschool Placement Options

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QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF POLICY AS AN EXPRESSION
OF EDUCATIONAL THEORY ON SPECIAL EDUCATION
PRESCHOOL PLACEMENT OPTIONS

by

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(Under the Direction of Paul Brinson)

ABSTRACT

This study utilized a qualitative content analysis approach where the researcher collected policies

and theories to analyze and interpret and to examine the relationship between developmental

theories and Georgia preschool policies as they relate to inclusion using archived state policies

found on the Georgia Department of Education and Department of Early Learning website. The

theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) were examined, along

with the public policies on Georgia preschool. These policies included Georgia Early Learning

Development Standards, Bright from the Start operating guidelines, and Work Sampling System.

The researcher found common themes and/or phrases in the theories and related them to policies.

This study found that educational theories are aligned to preschool policies. These results

indicated that educational theories are aligned to preschool policies and placement options.

INDEX WORDS: Preschool, Inclusion, Special education, Developmental theories

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Without their love, support, and guidance this would have never been possible. To my husband Michael, who dealt with the endless weekends and nights alone with the children so that I could write. To my parents, who have guided me through life to be the best and most educated person I could be. To my brother Christopher, who does not understand why I would do this. Lastly, to my beautiful children, Mattie, Lilly Grace, and Cal, who have understood why I am not at every soccer game, dance, or gymnastics class, but understand that I will be there to watch them every step of the way as soon as my dissertation is complete. Thank you all for your love an encouragement over the past few years.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Special education continues to be a contemporary issue in education. Gruenberg and

Miller (2011) explained that over time, a continuum of options based on the extent of the

challenges for people with disabilities shifted somewhat, paralleling the changing laws in the

United States to focus on the "presumption of inclusion" (p. 23). This did not mean that all

children with disabilities should be fully included in general education classrooms; however, it

did mean that consideration of inclusion must be part of planning and placement. Over the last

two decades, preschool inclusion has become a critical part of the education reform efforts to

improve the delivery of services to students with disabilities by focusing on the placement of

these students in the general education setting (Praisner, 2003). As part of this educational

context, educators, legislators, advocates, school districts, and stakeholders have discussed the

various dynamics related to the placement options of early childhood children aged three to five.

Gupta, Henniger, and Vinh (2014) explained that inclusion is the full participation of

students with disabilities in settings with their typically developing peers. Inclusion is supported

by federal law and is recommended practice in early childhood. The Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act ([IDEA], 2004) provided for a free, appropriate, public education

(FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for children with disabilities ages 3 to 21.

However, neither the law nor other related regulations specify how school districts are to

determine the least restrictive environment.

Placement options at the preschool level have features that differ from placement options

at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. In Georgia, the regulations to implement the

least restrictive environment for students is approved by the state board of education and outlined

in the state board of education rules in section 160-4-7-.07 Article 3c. The article is aligned with

the federal regulations that implement IDEA. Interpretations differ, resulting in different implementation practices in school districts, but generally, administration of special education programs is quite similar across school districts within the same state. IDEA provides consistent requirements for school districts that are utilizing federal money to support special education; therefore, administrators across the state of Georgia and the United States have similar responsibilities when implementing special education.

Former President Obama's focus on early childhood education underscored his commitment to providing seamless and comprehensive supports and services for children birth to age five. It is imperative to include these children in settings with typically developing peers, but numerous factors act as a barrier to successful implementation of inclusion (Odom et al., 2010). Although legal policy instructs school district personnel to implement inclusion at the pre-K level, buy-in from teachers and administrators is lacking.

Gruenberg and Miller (2011) explained that the past 30 years have seen a remarkable change in the field of early childhood special education laws and regulations. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 with reauthorization in 2004 (IDEA, 2004) stated that qualifying preschool children are to have the same benefits as their school-age counterparts, which is a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (DeMonte, 2010). Therefore, public school personnel must streamline meaningful educational opportunities and services for preschool-aged students with disabilities along with necessary preparation for the teachers in the preschool inclusion program.

Researchers in the field of early childhood often discuss Bronfenbrenner's (1979) conceptualization of the "ecology of human development" theoretical framework for research on

the implementation of inclusion. Bronfenbrenner (1994) described the ecology of human

development as the entire ecological system in which growth occurs. The ecological system is

composed of five socially organized subsystems: (a) the microsystem, (b) the mesosystem, (c)

the exosystem, (d) the macrosystem, and (e) the chronosystem. These systems help support and

guide human growth. Additionally, Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory plays a

fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. Vygotsky's view was that social

learning precedes development. Vygotsky (1978) stated that "every function in the child's

cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level;

first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (p.57).

In a similar way, Piaget considered more how children's minds work and develop. Piaget's

theories of cognitive development (1972) suggested that children move through four different

stages of mental development. The theory focuses not only on understanding how children

acquire knowledge, but also on understanding the nature of intelligence. The different

theoretical frameworks can be further explored by the researcher to investigate implementation

of preschool inclusion for children with disabilities in relation to state policies.

Problem Statement

Volonio and Zigmond (2010) reviewed special education public policy and the criticism

special education has received based on the structure of general education and how the needs of

diverse learners are not being met. Children ages three to five with disabilities are to be provided

a free and appropriate public education. Mallory and New (1994) explained the placement

options that districts consider have shifted from using the framework of a developmental theory

to more of a constructivist model. Roffman and Wanerman (2010) described inclusion as a

model that enriches every aspect of a program, from the experience of the child, to the skills of

the teacher, to the harmony and diversity of the school community. Under IDEA, children with

disabilities have the right to participate and be educated with typical peers in the same classroom all day, every day.

According to the State of Preschool 2017 report (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2018), since 2002, access to high-quality state-funded preschools have grown over the years. Enrollment continues to increase, but in some cases, student growth begins to decrease. The researcher understands that preschools for three- and four-year-old children are greatly expanding across the United States. The gap in research is there is a federal policy on inclusion put forth by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education (2015) that leads states, local education agencies, and public and private early childhood programs to recommendations of preschool inclusion, but inclusion is not mandated in IDEA.

Research Questions

The overarching research question that guided this study was: What is the expression of educational theory on special education preschool placement options in Georgia state policy? The following research sub-question further guided this study:

1. In what ways is Georgia public policy on preschool in alignment with the following developmental theories?

    a. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

    b. Piaget's Stages of Development

    c. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory

Conceptual Framework

For this study, preschool placement options are the focus. The researcher examined how public policy in the state of Georgia is aligned to educational developmental theories. This required the researcher to examine policies on inclusion from the Georgia Department of Education along with the theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bronfenbrenner.

Figure 1 depicts how preschool inclusion is linked to both educational theories and Georgia inclusion policies.
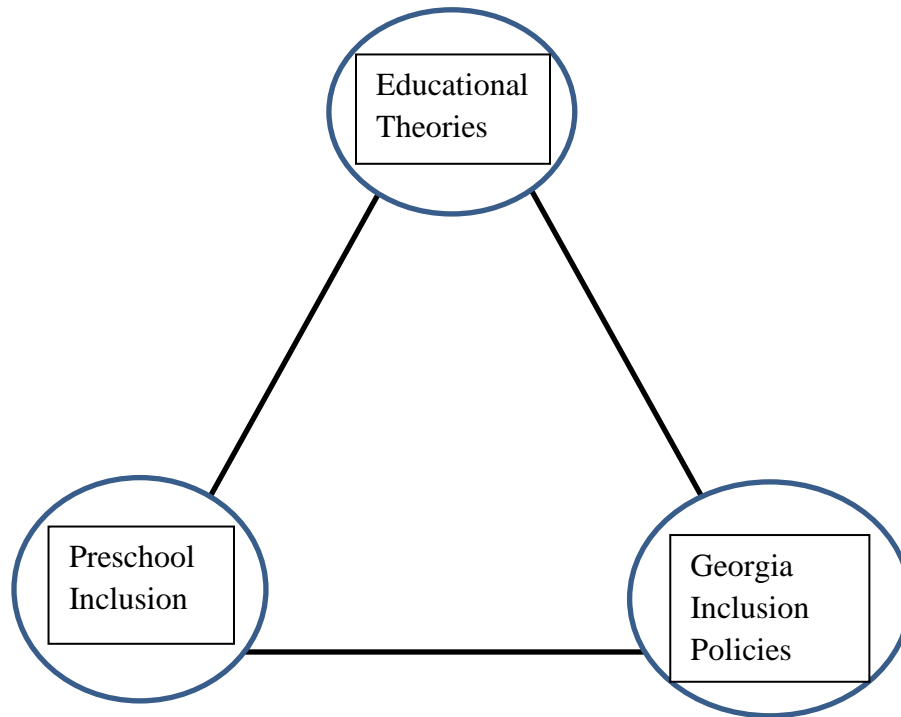
Figure 1. How Preschool Inclusion is Driven by Educational Theories and Georgia Inclusion Policies.

Importance of the Study

A qualitative content analysis was implemented to analyze selected educational theories and Georgia inclusion policies. The importance of this study was first to explore the expression of educational theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) as they relate to special education preschool placement options outlined in Georgia public policies.

The second goal of this study was to analyze the theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bronfenbrenner that have been utilized for many years in various educational settings. As a special education administrator primarily over preschool in the public schools, the researcher sought to uncover the relationship between the theories as it pertains to inclusion at

the preschool level and Georgia policies that guide special education inclusion. Guralnick and Bruder (2016) explained that general education preschool models require a shift in paradigm from the historical themes of inclusion focused just on children with disabilities being placed into the general education classroom for exposure to typical peers to now expecting general education teachers to promote the goal of access, accommodation, developmental progress, and social integration for all children, regardless of disability status. This is related to the educational theories that should be utilized in a variety of practical forms of teaching and learning (Leichsenring, 2013).

Procedure

The researcher used a qualitative content analysis method to address the research question. The research compared the relationship between the educational theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) to special education preschool placement options outlined in (a) the Georgia Early Learning Development Standards, (b) Bright from the Start: Department of Early Care and Learning operating guidelines, (c) the Work Sampling System assessment and data collection tool and (d) the Georgia State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report.

The study included the theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) along with a collection of samples from the Georgia public policies. The aim of this study was to determine if policies align with developmental theory. Specific research questions were identified, and Georgia policy documents were analyzed to develop themes that occurred.

Assumptions

The assumptions in this study were based on the significance of documents and theories. Federal policies such as IDEA and NCLB drive the Georgia policies to which school systems must adhere. These public policy documents are relevant in finding the relationship to the

theoretical framework. A main notion is that the policy documents are the driving force in the implementation of inclusion. The goal is for children with disabilities to be immersed in an educational foundation with children without disabilities. The goal of the special educator is to accommodate and modify the environment so that all children can be successful and participate in the inclusion classroom. Views of general educators and special educators vary. As explained by Guralnick and Bruder (2016), existing special education programs often lack the ability to seamlessly incorporate special education and related services into their educational curricula and routines, and there are challenges involved in reconciling the differing philosophies of special and general educators.

School systems that house preschool programs need information to help leaders and teachers plan, structure, and implement inclusion. In 2015, Georgia began implementing the Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to recognize and improve the quality of programs. Georgia QRIS not only encourages, but also expects all programs to include children with disabilities. The tiered system program uses a three-star designation to recognize programs that include students with all disabilities (Horowitz & Squires, 2014). Therefore, administrators are looking for guidelines to help establish successful inclusion in their schools and to ensure their teachers have continuous professional development to help them succeed. Cox (2016) stated that special education personnel could use the information to develop curriculum guidelines, implement parent education programs, and structure professional development opportunities for preschool teachers. Parents can use the information to gain knowledge about the most effective instructional setting for their preschool child with disabilities. The researcher stated that administrators could benefit from participating in professional development along with teachers in order to assist parents in IEP meetings when discussing the LRE for their child.

The inclusion of preschool age children with disabilities is explained by Bruder (2010) as helping children in the process of development, encouraging the emergence and convergence of various developmental milestones across separate behavioral domains. Exposure to typically developing peers helps a child grow and develop both socially and cognitively.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of a qualitative content analysis are based on the limited work done in education using a deductive approach. Research on federal and state special education policy documents as they relate to the theory and practice of inclusion, where a common link is established and then utilized in a study with a coding system, were unavailable to use as a sample. The limited amount of control that the school systems have in implementing inclusion should be based on what is appropriate as outlined by the developmental theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bronfenbrenner versus a variety of political factors (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 2006). Social and economic factors have a significant effect on public policy regarding students with disabilities. These aspects of today's society are out of the public school system's control.

According to Simon (2011), delimitations are those characteristics that limit the scope and define the boundaries of the study. The delimitations of the study are within the researcher's control. The current research problem is delimitated by conducting a study that addresses whether the placement options are driven by Georgia public policy and the extent to which they are aligned with developmental theories.

Definition of Terms

*504 Plan***:** A plan developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives accommodations that will ensure their academic success and access to the learning environment ("Special Education Dictionary," 2018).

Developmental Delay (DD): A delay in one or more of the following areas of childhood development: cognitive development, physical development (including vision and hearing), communication development, social and/or emotional development, and adaptive development (including eating skills, dressing and toileting skills and other areas of personal responsibility) (Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, 2018).

Early Intervention (EI): Services for at-risk children from birth to their third birthdays, as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ("Steps in Early Intervention," 2018).

Eligibility: Students are evaluated and qualify for one or more of the 13 eligibility categories as outlined in the Individual with Disabilities Act (Lee, n.d.).

IDEA (Part A): This section of IDEA provides the basic foundation for the rest of the Act. This section defines the terms used within the Act as well as providing for the creation of the Office of Special Education Programs, which is responsible for administering and carrying out the terms of IDEA (IDEA, 1997).

IDEA (Part B): This section of IDEA provides the educational guidelines for school children 3-21 years of age. By law, states are required to educate students with disabilities (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). IDEA provides financial support for state and local school districts.

IDEA (Part C): This section of IDEA recognizes the need for identifying and reaching very young children with disabilities. This portion of IDEA provides guidelines concerning the funding and services to be provided to children from birth through 2 years of age. Families are entitled to several services through part C of IDEA (IDEA, 1997).

Individualized Education Program (IEP): An IEP is a legal document that defines special education services between the school district and the parents ("Special Education Dictionary," 2018).

Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP): An IFSP is a written treatment plan that details the early intervention services a child (age birth to his/her third birthday) will receive, as well as how and when these services will be administered. It describes a child's current levels of functioning, specific needs, and goals for treatment (referred to as outcomes) ("Special Education Dictionary," 2018).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): The environment in which students with disabilities must be educated, as mandated by The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Students with disabilities must be educated in a classroom setting that is as close to the general education setting as possible ("Legal Rights to Services," 2018)

Modifications: Curricular adaptations that compensate for learners' weaknesses by changing or lowering expectations or standards ("Adaptations, Accommodations, and Modifications," 2018).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): The current reauthorization of President Lyndon Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), passed in 2001 and implemented in 2002, the purpose of which was to raise achievement and close achievement gap (National Education Association, 2018).

Special Education: Special education is specifically designed instruction for students that are evaluated and that have a disability.

Summary

Under IDEA, children with disabilities have the right to participate and to be educated with typical peers in the same classroom all day, every day. The researcher understands that preschools for three- and four-year-old children are greatly expanding across the United States. The gap in research is that there are federal policies on inclusion put forth by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education (2015) that leads states, local education agencies, and public and private early childhood programs to recommendations of preschool inclusion; however, inclusion is not mandated in IDEA. IDEA states that students be educated in their "natural environment" and in the "least restrictive environment." Georgia policies follow IDEA in stating in the special education rules implementation manual (2015) that local school districts locate, identify, and provide services and supports to young children with suspected disabilities and developmental delays. Children should be provided education in the "least restrictive environment." In this study, the researcher examined educational theories and how public policy in the state of Georgia is expressed through the policies. This required the researcher to examine policies on inclusion from the Georgia Department of Education along with the theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bronfenbrenner.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The qualitative content analysis based on the expression of education theories in relation to Georgia public policies was the focus of this study. The researcher chose qualitative content analysis in order to analyze educational theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) and how they relate to the written Georgia policy documents surrounding preschool special education placement options. The literature review first provides a brief history of historical aspects and legislation that have influenced special education reform. Second, the researcher investigated literature related to the efficacy of inclusion, what successful inclusion is, and how it can be implemented in schools with administrative support. The third section of the literature review details Georgia public policy as it relates to inclusion. Next, the researcher examined the theoretical framework as it relates to developmental stages of children. Finally, current literature supporting how this study adds to the field of administration and special education inclusion from a special education administrator perspective is discussed.

History of Educating Children with Disabilities

Over 50 years ago, the United States embarked on an unprecedented venture to improve the lives of young children with delays and disabilities along with families. With the passage of Education for All Handicapped Children Act, otherwise known as Public Law 94-142 in 1976 and the reauthorization in 1997, which became known as the Individual with Disabilities Education Act, the provision of intervention services to children with disabilities younger than school age became a law (Hebbler, Spiker, & Kahn, 2012). Under IDEA, children with disabilities have the right to participate and be educated with typical peers in the same classroom all day, every day. Children with disabilities in Georgia may receive their special education in a variety of environments. The child's IEP team will discuss the needs of the individual child and

determine the appropriate services to address the child's needs (Georgia Department of

Education, 2012).

Political Influence

DeMonte (2010) and McLaughlin (2010) studied the history leading up to the law that

changed the lives of many children with disabilities and the amendments that continue to

enhance it. Both researchers formulated many excellent points in reference to court cases,

legislation, school systems, and equality for children with disabilities. DeMonte and

McLaughlin (2010) referenced the court's landmark decision to the court case *Brown vs. Board*

of Education (1954) as being the decision that altered this interpretation when it repudiated the

notion that simply providing exposure to the same curriculum, regardless of location, constituted

equity. The results in the case were the links that led to children receiving an equitable

education. Historically, inclusion began as the antithesis to the practice of exclusion of students

with disabilities from general education settings, which was an outgrowth of the civil rights

movement (Antoinette, 2003). The bonds between inclusion and civil rights became stronger

with the idea that students with disabilities suffered when not instructed in the general education

classroom. The idea of excluding students with disabilities from the general education classroom

soon became synonymous with causing those students social and academic damage (Antoinette,

2003). Individuals in various emotionally-charged court cases illustrated that the issue of

inclusion was more about social justice than educational welfare. Subsequently, advocates

portrayed challenges to inclusion as being against children with disabilities' civil liberties rather

than against inclusion for the academic welfare of all students (Antoinette, 2003). Providing

equal access followed the reasoning in the *Brown* decision that when a state provides an

opportunity for an education in its public schools, such an opportunity is a right that must be made available to all on equal terms (*Brown vs. Board of Education*, 1954).

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142 or EHA) passed, which offered a free, appropriate, public education (FAPE) to all children with disabilities ages 3 to 21 no later than September 1, 1980 (an exception was made for children ages 3, 4, and 5, if it were inconsistent with state law). The law also required that students be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) by placing the students in the most normal environment possible in order to meet their needs. Due process procedures were also put in place to protect parents and students with disabilities. Through his research, McLaughlin (2010) discovered that before the passage of this act, more than one million children with disabilities did not have access to the public school system.

Political influences surround special education, especially in the area of inclusion concerning preschool children with disabilities. As a result, this becomes a challenge of the proper system and models available in the public school. Legal authority is demonstrated by the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Acts of 1990. The development of IDEA renamed the preceding laws and amendments, including PL 94-142 and PL 98-1999. It addressed the educational needs of children with disabilities from birth to age 21 in cases that involve 13 specified categories of disability (Zirkel, 2009). Under IDEA, DeMonte (2010) clarified the wording of "natural environment," stating that services for infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children should take place in natural environments that can include their home and community settings to the maximum extent appropriate.

Public Policy and Amendment 99-457

In 1983, amendments to the Education of the Handicapped Act, PL 98-199 was added to

PL 94-142. The federal government created PL 98-199 to allow federal funding to be spent on

parent training and information centers so that parents could be educated on how to protect their

child's rights under PL 94-142. In 1986, PL 94-142 (EHA) Congress amended PL 94-142 to

include children with disabilities three to five years of age. These amendments also became

known as the Early Intervention Amendments to PL 94-142. Amendment PL 99-457 established

incentives to encourage states to expand services to children birth to three years of age and for

transition services from school to adult living for children with disabilities who were 21 or over.

DeMonte (2010) explained that Congress gave states more of an incentive to serve all qualifying

preschool children with disabilities beginning at age 3. She noted that these amendments also

added provisions for grants for providing services to infants and toddlers with disabilities birth to

2 years of age. States that failed to provide these services of FAPE by October 1991 risked

losing funds and grants they received under PL 94-142. PL 99-457 came under section 619, part

B to have all states participate in order to receive funding. Part H of this section was also added

to create new programs for infants, toddlers, and their families; it required development of an

individualized family service plan (IFSP) for each child/family served.

The 1997 amendment of IDEA included the term *least restrictive environment* along with

its explicit meaning. According to Mithaiwala (2004), IDEA makes consistent reference to a

preference for children with disabilities to be educated in regular classes and specifically says

that a child with a disability must be educated in the school he or she would attend if they were

not disabled. The amendment specifically includes FAPE and LRE requirements to include

preschool-aged children. In 2004, the amendment of IDEA occurred in order to become aligned

with the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act to increase student performance. In the amendment, Part C (Early Intervention) was added to IDEA mandating that states provide early intervention services to infants and toddlers less than 3 years of age. To the greatest extent possible, services for students with disabilities are to take place in the same environments as their non-disabled peers.

Background

The intense debates regarding the efficacy of inclusion have gradually subsided with an increasing acceptance of more integrated models of service provision. This has corresponded with changing laws and practice (Gruenberg & Miller, 2011). Gruenberg and Miller also noted that although there has been an increasing trend towards inclusion, this does not mean there is universal support or standardized implementation practices for inclusion. In 1991, legislation in the United States mandated public school systems provide free, appropriate educational services to preschool-aged children with disabilities beginning at age 3. The legislation suggested that it is imperative to include these children in settings with typically developing peers, but numerous factors have acted as a barrier to successful implementation of inclusion (Odom et al, 1996). Wesley and Buysse (2008) developed a survey for professionals and parents of special needs preschool children. Some of the barriers for inclusion identified by the survey were:

- Fear that children with disabilities will be harmed in some way

- The lack of high-quality programs

- Insufficient training to prepare teachers for teaching in an inclusion classroom

- The shortage of teachers in the inclusion classroom

Historical aspects and legislation have influenced special education reform to ensure students with disabilities are provided a free, appropriate public education. According to the

State of Preschool 2017 report (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2018), 43 states and the District of

Columbia have developed policies and procedures for state-funded preschool access, resources,

and quality. These policies include procedures for special education and inclusion through the

local department of education. These documents guide states to ensure that federal mandates and

outcomes are being developed and followed for special education.

Most early childhood programs identify themselves as primarily constructivist based on

the belief that children can construct their themes and engage in appropriate activity (Gruenberg

& Miller, 2011). Piaget (1936), Vygotsky (1978), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) are some of the

primary theorists cited in early childhood education. Their theoretical framework will be

examined throughout the review of literature of public policies and their relation to early

childhood inclusion practices.

Blending the approaches of early childhood and special education has had a significant

impact on teachers and administrators of early childhood inclusion programs. It is expected that

teachers and administrators be prepared to meet the needs of all students including those with

special needs in adapting the curriculum and environment. The Division for Early Childhood

(DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAYCE) issued a

joint position statement in 2009. In it, a national definition was established to explain what is

needed in order to have a common understanding of the approach and implementation of

inclusion at the preschool/early childhood levels. Three key principles to be utilized collectively

to identify high quality early childhood programs are access, participation, and supports.

Students should have access to a range of learning opportunities and settings. They may need

individual accommodations and supports to fully participate in learning activities and system

level supports must be in place (National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center

[NECTAC], 2010). History shows that various laws and policies have improved the lives of children with disabilities included with their typical peers. According to a nonprofit organization, Kids Together, the benefits of inclusion are numerous for both students with disabilities and students without disabilities (Kids Together, 2009). Students with disabilities benefit from increased social initiations and relationships. Students have peer role models for academic, social, and behavior skills. Students without disabilities learn to understand and accept individual differences and diversity. Additionally, they are offered various opportunities to master activities by practicing and teaching others. These are just a few of the benefits of inclusion.

Georgia Public Policy

Georgia's universal preschool is one of the oldest in the country. Rose (2010) explained that in the 1990s, Georgia policymakers, along with those in Oklahoma and New York, made publicly funded pre-kindergarten universal. Governor Zell Miller promoted the idea to improve education and boost the state's economy by creating the Georgia lottery to fund education. In 1992, the referendum passed, and Georgia developed a pilot program for preschool, in which 750 at-risk children were served. Governor Miller and then Governor Deal were personally involved to create one of the most successful prekindergarten programs in the nation. By 1994, 15,000 children from low-income families were being served in preschool. In 1995, the lottery had made more money than expected by Miller, so Georgia legislators voted to open the preschool to all 4-year-old children whose parents chose to enroll them. Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning stated that by 2012-2013, 84,000 children were receiving universal preschool in Georgia (Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2013).

In Georgia, students receiving early intervention as classified in Part C under IDEA must transition to Part B of IDEA no later than a child's third birthday. The child, parent(s), and early intervention case manager must transition the student from Part C to Part B of IDEA. This means that a child with a known disability is eligible for special education services in the public school setting if he/she qualifies under Georgia regulations. In Georgia, the early intervention program Babies Can't Wait has developed an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) to address the child's and family's needs while they serve them. At the transition meeting with the school system, the child is evaluated and if the child continues to qualify for services under Georgia regulations, an Individual Education Plan (IEP) will be developed to take place of the IFSP. At the IEP meeting, a full continuum of educational services will be discussed and considered in order to place the child in the LRE.

Community and school program settings designed for children with disabilities include settings designed for students without disabilities. These environments allow children with disabilities to participate in meaningful activities and create opportunities that may help children achieve age-appropriate abilities and skills. The American with Disabilities Act prohibits the exclusion of any child with a disability from a childcare or preschool setting based upon a condition resulting from the child's disability (Department of Human Resources [DHR], 2004).

The Georgia Department of Education rule for young children ages 3-5 (Georgia Department of Education, 2012) mandates that special education services and supports be provided through the public schools for young children with disabilities beginning at age 3. Young children in Georgia may receive their services in a variety of environments. Bright from the Start and the Department for Early Care and Learning (Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2018) offer supports for inclusion through a team of regionally-based inclusion

specialists. Inclusion specialists provide a variety of resources, strategies, and supports to programs, classrooms, and the community. These resources and supports include Bright from the Start approved training and intensive professional development designed to empower childcare providers, early learning professionals, families, and community members to identify and utilize resources, services, and supports to ensure that all children are successfully included in early care and learning environments. They also work to promote and increase inclusive childcare options for children with disabilities and their families in their communities (Georgia Department of Early Care, 2018).

According to the State of Preschool 2017 report (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2018), Georgia is funding a multi-year evaluation of the preschool programs to consider specific domains of learning as found in the Georgia Early Learning and Developmental Standards (GELDS) which were developed in 2010. The purpose of the GELDS is to promote quality learning experiences for children and address the question, "What should children from birth to age five know and be able to do?" The research conducted on theories about children's development can help support these standards as they are compared to developmental theories to examine whether Georgia policies are aligned to the theories.

Theoretical Framework

According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), a theoretical framework is the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed for a research study. The theoretical frameworks used in this study are: (a) Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978), which explains how a learner differs when given help or not given help; (b) Piaget's theory of cognitive development (1936), which explains the ages and stages that a child develops; and (c) Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), which explains how a child interacts within five different levels.

Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bronfenbrenner

The theories of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bronfenbrenner are commonly used theories in early childhood education, and they provide a theoretical framework for this study. Vygotsky's theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition, as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of "making meaning." Vygotsky argued, "Learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). According to Bray, McGovern, and Perini (2011), Vygotsky's theory is one of the foundations of constructivism and contributes to instructional development. His work asserted three major themes:

- Social interaction. Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development.

- The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The MKO refers to anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept.

- The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is the distance between a student's ability to perform a task under adult guidance and/or with peer collaboration and the student's ability solving the problem independently. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs in this zone.

Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) explains the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help. Within the ZPD, Vygotsky stated, children follow adult examples and gradually develop the ability to complete activities with little to no help. Vygotsky (1978) defined ZPD as "the distance between

the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of

potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in

collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86).

Piaget's theories differ from Vygotsky due to the fact that Piaget considers the

development of the child. Bray et al. (2011) explained that Piaget came to believe that

intelligence is a form of adaptation where the child adapts to his physical and social environment

through the processes of assimilation and adaptation by constructing his/her own intellectual

world. He believed that a child's development occurred in four distinct stages: (a) sensorimotor,

birth to approximately two years; (b) preoperational, typically lasting until age six or seven; (c)

concrete operations, lasting until ages 10-12; and (d) formal operations, ages 12 and up.

Atherton (2011) explained that Piaget believed knowledge is constructed sequentially and

the child, regardless of social background, must pass through each stage of cognitive

development in succession. Figure 2 is a comparison of Piaget's ideas and Vygotsky's ideas.

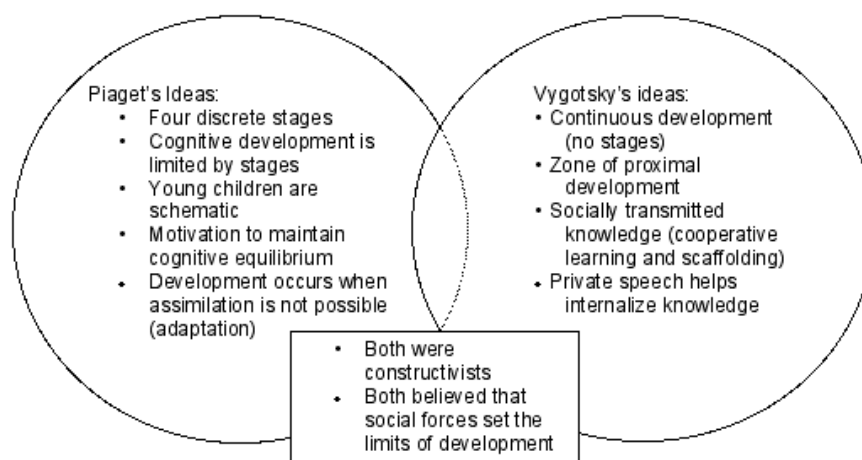The figure also shows the commonalities between the two.

Figure 2. Venn diagram of Piaget and Vygotsky (Slavin, 2005).

According to Daniels and Clarkson (2010), Piaget's and Vygotsky's social constructivist

approaches attempts to balance child teacher-directed learning activities. For Vygotsky, learning

is socially-based, and children master meaningful cultural activities through guided participation with adults and peers. Piaget's theory helps teachers to understand and support children's development and learning. He theorized that children created their own knowledge through interactions with their environment and others.

Vygotsky and Piaget are similar in that they both believed that children learn by watching and interacting with each other. Burns and Mogharreban (2009) shared a framework based on their experiences working with an interdisciplinary study group. The study showed that teachers were excited upon realizing that what they were doing in their separate classrooms could continue to be implemented in the inclusion classroom. Both teachers built their instruction on the constructivist theories of Piaget and Vygotsky.

In the Burns and Mogherreban study (2009), the early childhood teacher implemented developmentally appropriate practices and provided specialized materials and strategies in order to establish a developmentally appropriate environment. The early childhood teacher took on more of a Piagetian approach by considering the cognitive stages in which all children should learn. The teacher understood that children learn at different cognitive stages and that she must build on them. The special education teacher not only continued to build on Piaget's theory, but also on Vygotsky's theory by allowing the children with disabilities to socially interact with their typically developing peers to ensure cognitive development. Both teachers understood that they did not have to change their teaching, but to continue to build on what they already knew. This study is an example of successful implementation of preschool inclusion. Formal structure of a school is in place and a Weberian Model is evident; both teachers were able to structure, organize, and share responsibility for all students and for teaching. Administrators and teachers worked together to ensure the success of their students. A constructivist approach to learning

was evident and the teachers understood their role and the expectation they each had regarding their students socially and psychologically. Placing students with disabilities in a general education setting means having two teachers who focus more on additional specialized instruction.

Many educators and parents still ask the question, "Why would we want to make our programs inclusive if we didn't have to?" (Roffman & Wanerman, 2010). Bruder (2010) explained that the multi-tier developmental system model of early childhood intervention remains a challenge to implement. The author continued to explain that although the Division for Early Childhood and the Council for Exceptional Children published recommended practices for early intervention almost 20 years ago, they are still not incorporated into higher education teacher preparation programs; therefore, teachers will continue to have a difficult time integrating collaboration and providing needed support to the students. Dewey (as cited in Hoy, 2008) urged educators to structure schools as democratic learning communities and his ideas gained acceptance in the early 1990s. DeMonte and McLaughlin (2010) referenced the court's landmark decision to the court case *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) as being the decision that altered this interpretation when it repudiated the notion that simply providing exposure to the same curriculum, regardless of location, constituted equity.

The two characteristics of constructivist views as explained by Hoy (2008) are a real-life learning environment, linked with natural environment and social interaction, which relates to learning occurring socially with constructed opportunities as stated in Vygotsky's theory. The students interact face-to-face and this creates a positive interdependence for students to need each other for support, explanation, and guidance (Hoy, 2008). Collaboration among teachers is necessary for individual students to demonstrate learning. Teachers need the proper training in

order to understand and expand their learning of diverse student populations. This comment by Hoy (2008) is indicative of this educational idea: "In order for successful inclusion to occur, cooperative activities require extra attention to planning and preparation" (p. 242). This is a challenge for teachers due to not having cooperative planning time. Thus, the challenge of implementing an effective inclusion preschool classroom continues to remain a contemporary issue in education today through administrators continually questioning the how and why of implementation. Beckman et al. (1998) explained the effects of implementation of inclusion by using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) conceptualization of "ecology of human development" theoretical framework for research.

Vygotsky and Lewin influenced Bronfenbrenner's theory. He is known for his work with child development and also as the co-founder of the Head Start program. Bronfenbrenner (1979), known for the "ecology of human development," provided a useful theoretical framework for research on the implementation of inclusion (Guralnick, 2001). He proposed that human development is influenced by factors operating at different "system levels" within a broad, ecological structure. Odom and Diamond (1998) published a paper in which they used Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory as the conceptual framework. In this framework, they examined the research related to variables proximal to inclusion preschool programs. Bronfenbrenner indicated that human development is influenced by five system levels. Figure 3 shows Bronfenbrenner's model of how an individual relates to the environment.
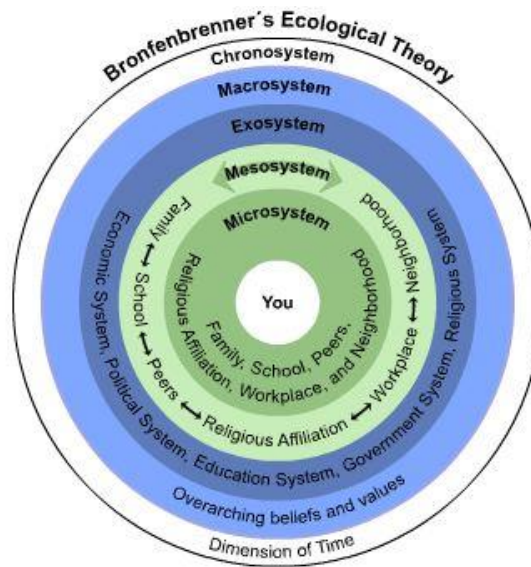
Figure 3. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. Odom et al. (2010).

Bronfenbrenner's theory incorporates the following five system levels:

- Microsystem. The first system level contains the child's immediate environment, in which the child has the most interactions.

- Mesosystem. Within the mesosystem level, a connection is made between two or more environments. It is the relationship between the microsystem and the broader environment.

- Exosystem. The exosystem is the layer where the child does not engage directly, but it has an impact on the child's development. This is the social setting that affects but does not directly include the child.

- Macrosystem. The macrosystem is the outermost layer of the child. It is where the child lives but is responsible for the culture and value.

- Chronosystem. The chronosystem encompasses all of the environmental elements and events that occur within the child's life over time. This affects the child either externally or internally.

Current Literature as it Relates to Administration and Special Education

Students with disabilities exist in all Georgia public schools pre-K through12[th] grade. School- and system-based administrators must work collaboratively to ensure that students with disabilities receive an appropriate education, including being placed in the least restrictive environment according to their IEP. Being able to provide special education knowledge, structure, leadership, and supports to general education teachers is an integral part of the day-to-day routine in public schools. As stated in the joint position statement (2009), the defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and support. These are defined as follows:

- Access: Providing access to a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environment is a defining feature of high-quality early childhood setting.

- Participation: Depending on the individual needs and priorities of young children and families, implementing inclusion involves a range of approaches, from embedded, routine-based teaching to more explicit interventions, to scaffold learning and participation for all children.

- Supports: System-level supports must be in place for family members, teachers, specialists, and administrators, and they should have ongoing professional development and support to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to implement effective inclusive practices.

Gupta, Henninger, and Vinh (2014) explained that when leaders insist on these features, they set the tone and philosophy for their program. Administrator duties have changed over the past few decades and more responsibilities are being placed on administrators and teachers. They are expected to implement programs for all students including students with disabilities,

along with managing and leading teachers in a positive inclusive environment. Flavey (1995)

explained that administrator roles include identifying and articulating the needs of inclusive

schools and providing an important link between the schools and larger community (as cited in

Praisner, 2003). Ensuring that students with disabilities are being placed in the least restrictive

environment is an important part of an administrator's role to ensure that the school is following

IDEA.

The work of administrators in an early childhood setting focus on the developmental

theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979). Vygotsky (1978) and

Piaget (1936) explained that children learn by watching and interacting with others. One of the

concerns of a school administrator is how the school day is structured to include interaction

outside of the learning environment. Inclusive practices allow for students with disabilities to

interact with typical peers on the playground, in physical education, and within the classroom

when encouraged to sustain positive interactions (Division for Early Childhood [DEC]

Recommended Practices, 2014). The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for

Exceptional Children also recommended that administrators create a culture and a climate where

teachers and students feel a sense of belonging and support. This recommendation aligns with

Bronfenbrenner's microsystem which contains the child's environment. The microsystem not

only supports the child's access to learning, but also their safety. In the schools, administrators

are responsible for implementing policies, structures, and practices that promote relationships

and trust with families and students.

Creating an Effective Inclusive Environment

According to Regenstein and Lipper (2013), 60% of children spend time in the care of

someone other than their parent. With this being said, educational systems, leaders, and teachers

are trying to build successful inclusive classrooms while trying to ensure teacher quality.

Previously in education, managing of special education occurred at the district level and not at

the school level. Principals are now expected to design, lead, manage, and implement programs

for all students, including those with disabilities (Praisner, 2003). According to Patterson,

Marshall, and Bowling (2000), school administrators continue to encounter challenges in the area

of special education at all educational levels, including:

- New accountability in the 1997/2004 reauthorization of IDEA, requiring students with
  disabilities to participate in state testing and accountability programs

- Ambiguous and varying definitions of least restrictive environment (LRE) and
  inclusion

- Conflicts from outside groups such as advocacy groups about the value of inclusive
  practices

- The need for collaboration between regular and special education teachers and
  specialists to modify their curriculum and pedagogy

- Balancing the special education challenges with other administrative challenges
  including funding for education, buildings, and facilities, and fear of lawsuits.

Georgia Quest for Inclusion (2010) has adapted a book on providing inclusive childcare

from the Oregon Council on Developmental Disabilities. The book was designed to help create

an inclusive environment. The author stated that educators must look at the organization of the

room. Strain (1990) also indicated that classroom organization and structure needs to be of high

quality in order to meet the needs of all of the students being served in inclusion models.

Teachers need to use activities that are well-organized. Teachers should encourage children's

participation, treat all children with respect, and be consistent in routines and interactions. A

preschool inclusive environment must be able to accommodate all children. To meet the specific

needs of a child, changes may need to be made in one or more of the instructional conditions (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Assessments and resources need to be available to address the needs of the students that are educated in inclusion classrooms. Proper policies and procedures need to be in place to ensure a quality service model.

Piagetian theoretical undercurrents that have had widespread influence on teacher education program and classroom practices include discovery learning, sensitivity to children's readiness to learn, and the acceptance of individual differences (Berk, 2009). Administrators must observe that teachers in inclusive environments are providing a variety of activities that promote discovery, including puzzles, art, and science tasks. More hands-on teaching and learning is evident in Piaget's theory. Teacher preparation programs and professional development programs have not kept pace with the growth of inclusive early childhood programs in this country (Harper, 2019). Textbooks in education programs typically have the topic of educating children with disabilities as an addendum or in a separate section of the book. Based on this, students studying to be teachers are trained in a framework that supports a *separate but equal* mentality instead of viewing each child as having unique needs (Darragh, 2007). In a study conducted at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (2013), researchers noted that while early intervention and special education are parts of the mission of many programs, coursework and training fall short. Teacher preparation is mentioned as needing to be an integrated model in order to prepare teachers to teach in such environments. The integrated model is an approach to combining special and general education pedagogy for teacher education. In an integrated model, separate general and special education licensure programs are retained, but faculty work together to develop a set of courses and/or field experiences in which

special education teacher candidates learn about general education curriculum and instruction and vice versa.

Leichsenring (2013) explained that the theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1936) are recognized as influential in early childhood policies. They both theorized that children are active in the construction of knowledge. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development denotes the importance of children acquiring language skills and gaining the ability to participate in dialogues with others in order to learn.

National Trends

"Children with disabilities should have an equal opportunity to benefit from all aspects of a high-quality preschool program" (Education Law Center, 2010, p.7). State leaders have developed plans to increase access to public preschool programs. According to the Education Law Center, West Virginia implemented full inclusion of all children. In New Jersey, for every 10 preschool classrooms serving children with disabilities, districts need to provide an "inclusion master teacher" (pg. 9). In Arkansas, preschool teachers and paraprofessionals are required to have training in special needs and the regulations of IDEA. Some researchers, however, have found that many states are not meeting their obligations under IDEA to educate preschool children with special needs in the least restrictive environment (Odom et al., 2010). This becomes an issue not only with placement options but also with inclusion. In order to implement inclusion, states need to follow the full continuum of special education placement options.

According to Georgia's Bright From the Start website, each district is assigned an inclusion coordinator. The coordinator works closely with the Department of Education's Division of Exceptional Students to ensure that preschool children with disabilities receive appropriate services. Bright from the Start also developed a curriculum for preschool classrooms that provides accommodations and adaptations to the teacher so that he/she can utilize them with

her children that have disabilities. Iowa, New Jersey, and Massachusetts also have similar curricula.

Bright from the Start developed different models of inclusion. The district must apply to have a Georgia Pre-K inclusion program and must be selected in order to receive funding from the state. Strain (1990) linked teacher training and classroom structure and organization as two key factors to building inclusive environments. The Education Law Center lists some key components to a high-quality preschool: (a) positive interactions, (b) communication, (c) active parent involvement, (d) low child-staff ratios, (e) well-equipped facility, and (f) periodic site visits to monitor the implementation of the program. Therefore, researchers must look at the constructivist theories and practices based on beliefs that all children can develop and learn in meaningful ways as long as supports and policies are in place.

Guidelines from IDEA concerning square footage per student must be followed and modified to meet students' needs. According to the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) Rule IDDF (14) 160-7-7-.14, the LEA shall provide a classroom of suitable size in a distraction-free area, as required by the type of program or services to be established, with appropriate furniture, materials, supplies and equipment to meet the needs of the class or individual children to be served. The GaDOE has established this policy as a safeguard to prevent placing children with disabilities in classrooms that are too small, have visual or auditory distractions, or do not have items necessary to provide appropriate instruction. Administrators sometimes do not understand that the typical classroom arrangement of furniture must be adapted based on the types of students that are included in the class. Bright from the Start has very specific furniture and equipment guidelines that include tables, storage shelves for each play area, minimum of three props for each development concept, develop alphabetic principles, promote language

development, writing instruments, real materials, props for kitchen, child size props, block

accessories, shape materials, and age appropriate mobile equipment. Typically, all of the

materials that must be present in these classrooms do not fit, especially in newer school buildings

where the majority of the classrooms are the same size. For that reason, administrators are

responsible for guaranteeing adequate space is available within their school to house the

preschool classrooms and typically a room to store other needed supplies that the teachers use

throughout the year. This is another challenge that administrators face when housing a variety of

programs, but the programs also bring benefits to the school.

There is a growing body of discussion in the literature indicating inclusion benefits

students with and without disabilities. Odom et al. (2004) discussed the benefits for populations

of students, the communities, and their families. Students with disabilities have peer models to

show them how to interact with each other in turn increasing their social and adaptive skills.

Students without disabilities become more aware of students' needs and adjust to helping them.

Within their community, students with disabilities are more accepted inside and outside of

schools. Students who begin inclusion at an early age are more likely to remain in general

education classrooms rather than special education (Odom & Diamond, 1998). The families

develop relationships with other families of children with and without disabilities. This helps the

parents to see what a typical developing child is doing and encourages them to continue working

with their child.

<center>**What Educators Need to Know**</center>

In April 2009, a joint position statement was issued by the Division for Early Childhood

(DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children and the National Association for the Education of

Young Children (NAEYC) to establish a definition of what an inclusive setting should look like

and then to be used as a blueprint to identify the key components of a high-quality early

childhood inclusion program. The document explained that an ever-increasing number of infants

and young children with and without disabilities play and learn together in a variety of places,

homes, early childhood programs, and neighborhoods. The document contains recommendations

to families and administrators on how to improve early childhood inclusion for all children. The

document also shows readers how school system personnel can use the position statement in

approaching inclusive settings. The position statement elaborates on what approach should be

taken in the natural environments. Children should have access to a wide range of activities in

promoting learning and development, increase of children's participation should occur through

play and learning, and inclusion environments should have the correct supports in place such as

professional development, incentives, and engagement of families. These approaches that are

mentioned in the position statements must be in place in order to ensure a successful preschool

inclusion environment; otherwise, parents, administrators, teachers, and students will face

constant challenges in implementing inclusion. In 2014, the Division for Early Childhood of the

Council for Exceptional Children released DEC recommended practices. The practices are for

teachers and administrators to enhance the optimal development of young children who have or

are at risk for developmental delays/disabilities. These practices outline eight different areas that

state and local leaders can implement to support pre-school programs.

Summary

This review of literature examined many important points surrounding preschool

inclusion and the historical aspects of inclusion implementation were discussed. The research

presented in this chapter viewed public policies that led to special education reform in order to

include students with disabilities. Public policy and early intervention has been discussed in

order to explain the amendment to PL 94-142 to include children ages 3 to 5. The theoretical

frameworks of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bronfenbrenner were discussed and explained by an interdisciplinary study group. The review examined the position statement issued by the Department of Early Childhood and National Association for the Education of Young Children as the blueprint for successful early childhood inclusion. Researchers have assessed national trends and how states compare and where they stand as far as implementation of IDEA. Further, the combination of research considers where inclusion programs started and what needs to be implemented to guarantee the success of inclusion. Benefits and challenges will continue to be included in preschool inclusion regardless of the training and funding received. The challenges regarding the political and schools system influence of inclusion, the structure of the program in regard to environmental and teaching, and the accountability will continue to be imperative when planning and delivering inclusion at the preschool level.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship that exists between developmental theories and Georgia public policy, using state-reported data that are publicly available as archival data on the Georgia Department of Education website. In this chapter, the theoretical framework and methodology used to answer the research questions outlined in chapter 1 are discussed further. The researcher conducted a content policy analysis of specific policy documents to examine the relationship between educational theories and special education preschool placement options. According to Marshall (1999), critical policy analysts purposely contemplate whether a particular policy will "empower and democratize, and whether it will dispense goods to the 'have nots'" as much as they consider traditional questions such as weather policy is efficient.

Through qualitative content analysis, the researcher examined whether developmental theories were foundational through Georgia policies on preschool. The policies the researcher examined were the Georgia Early Learning Development Standards (GELDS), Bright from the Start Operating Guidelines (BFTS), and Work Sampling System (WSS). GELDS are the standards used in the preschool classrooms and are written as a continuum of skills, behaviors, and concepts that children develop through their life, particularly ages birth to 5. For this study, the researcher only considered skills related to children ages 3 to 5. The BFTS operating guidelines outline the requirements and regulations for operation of a Georgia Pre-K classroom. For this document, the researcher only examined classroom requirements, delivery of services, and student support. The WSS assessment program is used to measure students' progress across indicators as aligned to the GELDS. The approach provided a non-invasive method for the analysis of educational theories in relation to education preschool placement options.

Research Questions

The overarching research question that guided this study was: What is the expression of educational theory on special education preschool placement options in Georgia state policy? The following research sub-question further guided the analysis:

1. In what ways is Georgia public policy on preschool in alignment with the following developmental theories?

    a. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

    b. Piaget's Stages of Development

    c. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory

Research Design

The research design for this study was a qualitative content analysis examining Georgia policy documents to determine if Georgia utilized educational theories to support their development of policies for preschool inclusion. The researcher chose to examine only Georgia public policies as they relate to preschool. In addition, a qualitative content analysis examined the relationship expressed between educational theory and special education preschool placement options in Georgia public school districts. The data sources used were policy artifacts and the objectives, language, and acts that make up preschool policies in Georgia.

In this study, the researcher used qualitative content analysis to critique and offer alternate strategies for examining not only the context and intent of policy, but also the themes embedded in each policy. Themes were determined in order to capture the importance of the data as it relates to the research questions. Each educational theorist has a different interpretation and lens on how development is shaped over time. Vygotsky (1978) believed that social interaction precedes development. Piaget (1936) believed that cognitive development came in

stages. Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed interaction between individuals and their environment shapes development over time. The qualitative content analysis determined whether educational theory aligned with Georgia preschool policies and how theories are described through special education public policies in Georgia. The researcher attempted to examine the implications of policy language, which explicitly addressed special education and preschool inclusion. The source of this qualitative content analysis included document analysis of Georgia Early Learning Development Standards (GELDS), Bright from the Start Operating Guidelines (BFTS), and Work Sampling System (WSS). The analysis was designed to determine the alignment between developmental theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) and determine their expression through Georgia public policy.

The study organized a content policy analysis that examined the three theories. Vygotsky's theory asserted three major themes: (a) social interaction, (b) the more knowledgeable other, and (c) the zone of proximal development. Piaget's (1936) theory identified four themes: (a) four discrete stages, (b) young children are schematic, (c) motivation to maintain cognitive equilibrium, and (d) development occurs through assimilation, equilibration, and accommodation. Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that development occurred in five stages: (a) microsystem, the immediate environment; (b) mesosystem, the relationship between environments; (c) ecosystem, which has an impact on the child's development; (d) macrosystem, where the child lives, and (e) chronosystem, which encompasses all elements of a child's life. The researcher also collected the policy documents GELDS, BFTS, and WSS.

Instrumentation

Qualitative content analysis was determined to be the most appropriate approach to analyze data. The sample for this study included the theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936),

and Bronfenbrenner (1979) along with a collection of samples from the Georgia public policies. The aim of this study was to determine if Georgia utilized the educational theories to support their development of policies for preschool inclusion.

Qualitative content analysis essentially involves a systematic analysis of text to extract patterns and symbols of meaning to allow researchers to infer or predict phenomena that cannot be observed easily (Krippendorf, 2004). Thee researcher identified major themes of each theorists' work along with examining policies to determine if the policy aligns with theory.

First, the researcher analyzed each theory individually for developmental themes. Second, the researcher analyzed the theory as it addressed specific fundamental, foundation of the policy. Categories were not exclusive and some content in the policies represented several themes. Commonalities of theories along with content from policies were grouped by similarities and themes were identified. That is, the aggregated formulated meanings were organized into emergent themes and subthemes, with each theme and subtheme consisting of units that were deemed similar to content (Bustamante and Combs, 2011). Third, the researcher then identified specific aspects of theories that aligned to policies that focus on inclusion. Finally, the researcher systematically analyzed the data, highlighting the connections between themes of individual theories and policies.

Data Collection

Developmental theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) were gathered. Georgia policies were determined based on guidelines used to govern Georgia preschools as evident from Bright from the Start.

Data for this study included a thorough review of literature and relevant policy documents. Data was analyzed in several phases. First, the researcher read and re-read all three

theories and policies. Second, themes from each policy were identified as related to context and

intent of the policy. Third, themes were collapsed into categories specific to fundamental,

foundation of the developmental theory (e, g., social interaction). Lastly, the researcher analyzed

each policy for themes as they related to each of the three theorists' categories (e, g., social

interaction shown in GELDS under the social-emotional developmental strand). More

specifically, the researcher investigated what theory says about how children learn, whether

inclusion was noted in policy, and how policy aligned to the three theories.

Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to determine whether a relationship existed

between the educational theories and Georgia policies. Correlation analysis was determined to

be the most appropriate approach to analyzing the data between theory and policy. This

approach allowed for the researcher to make inferences of various characteristics in the theories

and policies. A deductive approach was established to test the relationship of the three

educational theories as they relate to preschool policies, using a correlation analysis to view the

narrative more critically. The findings helped to determine if Georgia utilized the theories to

support the preschool policies. The public policies are utilized in Georgia preschools, Georgia

preschool curriculum, and Georgia inclusion services.

Reporting the Data

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify whether a relationship existed

between theory and policy. For this study, the researcher identified themes from each of the

three individual theories. From there, the researcher extracted patterns and symbols of meaning

from the policies to allow the researcher to infer or predict phenomena that cannot be observed

easily (Krippendorf, 2004). The researcher used the theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936),

and Bronfenbrenner (1979), for a total of three theories. The researcher read each theory and policy. After themes were identified, based on the literature review, for each policy, the researcher matched the theories to the policies based on context and intent of the policy. The aim of this study was to determine if Georgia utilized the educational theories to support their development of policies for preschool inclusion. Preschool inclusion policies address placement, service delivery, standards to be addressed, and assessment used to evaluate students. Each of these are relevant policies due to IDEA 2004, which states that children with disabilities have the right to be educated with typical peers in the same classroom every day. Policies must identify how students will be educated in their least restrictive environment with their typical peers. Administrators at the system and school level must ensure that this is occurring in order to be following state and federal policies.

Summary

The focus of this study was to determine if Georgia utilized the educational theories to support their development of policies for preschool inclusion. Further, the combination of research examined the political influence and public policies of inclusion. The study examined the theoretical framework of child development as stated by Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979). The qualitative content analysis identified how theories relate to policies. There were instances where policy addressed specific fundamental, foundational developmental theory. The study identified how Georgia utilizes theories to support their development of policies for preschool inclusion and that were essential in providing all students with inclusive opportunities.

The study will continue to discuss the approaches to preschool placement options to include administrator's role, professional initiative, challenges, benefits and how to implement

effective inclusion for both teachers and leaders. The study continues on to address Georgia

public policies on inclusion and the relation to theoretical framework on child development.

Research questions based on public policy and the alignment with inclusive preschool placement

were answered by conducting this study. The significance of the study was to determine the

relationship between public policies of special education placement and theories of child

development as they related to Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bronfenbrenner's theories. A qualitative

content analysis was chosen as the research design for this study. Policy documents along with

the theoretical framework were analyzed and coded to determine in what ways Georgia utilizes

educational theories to support their development of policies for preschool inclusion.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As demonstrated in the review of literature, the focus on preschool inclusion and the

historical aspects of inclusion implementation has been an integral part of special education

reform in order to include students with disabilities. Legislation has affirmed the practice of

inclusion as noted by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Specifically, the

amendment of 2004 noted that states are mandated to ensure children with disabilities be

educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate to meet their unique needs. In Georgia,

policies have been enacted by the Georgia Department of Education's Division of Exceptional

Students and Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning to ensure that preschool children

with disabilities receive appropriate services. To address this, educational theorists' beliefs must

be taken into consideration, that all children can develop and learn in meaningful ways as long as

supports and policies are in place.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship that exists between

developmental theories and Georgia public policy. The researcher used qualitative content

analysis to review policy and to examine the relationship between educational theories and

Georgia public policy. Chapter three includes the methods the researcher used to address the

relationship.

The overarching research question that guided this study was: What is the expression of

educational theory on special education preschool placement options in Georgia state policy?

The following research sub-question further guided this study:

1. In what ways is Georgia public policy on preschool in alignment with the following

developmental theories?

a. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

b. Piaget's Stages of Development

c. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory

The population was based on archival data; therefore, there were no participants per se (Greenway, 2017). The population was the educational theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) and the policy documents of GELDS, BFTS, and WSS. All of the policies are available from the Georgia Department of Education and Department of Early Care and Learning as they relate to preschool.

Research Design

Qualitative content analysis was determined to be the most appropriate approach to analyze the data on developmental theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Georgia public policies as they relate to preschool placement. In this study, the researcher examined the context and intent of Georgia policies. Themes were developed from each theory to address the context and intent of the policy.

Data were analyzed in several phases. First, the researcher looked at each theory individually (Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bronfenbrenner). Then, the researcher looked at each policy individually (GELDS, BFTS, and WSS). Each policy contains a framework or guideline that outlines their purpose and intent of how they should be used in the preschool classrooms. Second, each policy was analyzed for common themes of context and intent. The researcher identified 20 themes/phrases from each policy and determined the frequency that they were present. After that was established, the researcher looked at each theory individually and determined the instances that the policy was aligned with theory. Next, policies were categorized by their guidelines of GELDS and the domains of WSS that are followed by the

teachers and administrators in a Georgia preschool classroom to teach and assess students. The purpose of this was to show the instances where the policy addresses fundamental foundational developmental theory. Specific theories in child development are essential to providing all students an appropriate inclusive opportunity at the preschool level.

Policy Analysis

The researcher examined the preschool policies that are used in the Georgia preschool programs - Georgia Early Learning Development Standards (GELDS), Bright from the Start Operating Guidelines (BFTS), and Work Sampling System (WSS).   As stated on the Department of Early Care and Learning, GELDS are used as the standards that guide the question, "What should children from birth to age five know and be able to do?" GELDS serve as a framework for learning and is aligned to WSS to assess children on developmental standards. Bright from the Start guidelines support the classroom requirements, delivery of services, and student support. These policies assist districts with serving students in inclusive preschool settings. A procedure to analyze the data was involved: (a) reviewing the policies. (b) determining the intention of the policies, and (c) establishing the relationship between the educational theories and the intent of the policies.

Research Findings

This section provides a brief analysis of each research question which illustrates how the data were analyzed to associate with each question, to analyze each theory to explain the intent that it has on policy. Question 1 addressed Georgia preschool policies as they align with theories. Question 2 considered the elements of theory as expressed through Georgia special education policies.

Research Question 1: Georgia Public Policy and Developmental Theorist Theories

The first research question was: In what ways does Georgia public policy on preschool align with developmental theories? To answer this question, the researcher analyzed the theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) and related them to themes found in Georgia policies.

The researcher identified themes from each policy and determined if they were aligned with the developmental theory. Themes were found throughout the policies. Data were analyzed in terms of common themes identified from the Georgia policy intent as they matched to Vygotsky's (1978), Piaget's (1936), and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theories. Themes were identified based on specific phenomena, the pattern, or intent of the theme. This allowed the researcher to infer or predict phenomena that cannot be observed easily (Krippendorf, 2004). The themes identified are relevant to the policies. In the policies, the themes are based in theories regarding how children develop. The researcher considered each policy (GELDS, BFTS, and WSS) and categorized the theme or phrase to fit in the policy guideline within the 5 domains.

Vygotsky's Theory as Intended by Public Policy

In Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, social interaction is identified as a process of cognitive development, cooperative learning, and scaffolding. According to GELDS, social-emotional development is a strand of the developmental standards that children are taught. The BFTS guidelines outline social interaction, social relationships, and socialization throughout the guide for preschool classrooms. WSS contains personal and social development as an outcome indicator that is assessed. In Vygotsky's (1978) the *more knowledgeable other* aspect refers to anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner has with

respect to a particular task, process, or concept. This is thought to be an older adult, teacher, or coach. GELDS's goal is for children to develop a relationship with adults. BFTS requires adult supervision, a teacher being actively involved, children being directed and/or supported by a teacher. The teacher is the administrator of the WSS. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) explains the distance between the actual development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. GELDS includes standards relating to communication with peers and adults, developing relationships with peers, seeking adult support to resolve peer conflict, naming feelings of peers, and respecting peers' personal space. BFTS requires adult supervision, the teacher to be actively involved, lessons to be teacher-directed, and inclusion classrooms where students with and without disabilities learn together. WSS assesses the interactions between children with adults. Vygotsky's (1978) theories are in alignment with Georgia preschool policies. The most evident theme that was identified throughout the theory was the process of development.

Piaget's Theory as Intended by Public Policy

According to Piaget, the preoperational stage (ages 2-7) is the time that students learn to use words and pictures to represent objects. Children struggle to see things from the perspective of others. Their language and thinking begin to increase, but they still think about things in concrete terms. GELDS explains that children will develop communication, language, and literacy skills. They will use non-verbal communication to communicate. The child will begin to use more complex spoken language. The stage moves children through the cognitive development and general knowledge stages. BFTS guidelines explain that a child will participate in large, small, and independent groups to work on instructional activities at their developmental level. WSS assesses knowledge with skills in language and communication.

Piaget explained that children are schematic and they categorize learning. They develop or acquire basic building blocks for learning. GELDS content standards relate to cognitive development and cognitive processes, each of which build on each other. BFTS encourages children's participation in learning using multiple learning patterns. WSS assesses the learning processes of the child.

Assimilation, equilibration, and accommodation were also explained by Piaget (1936). Motivation to maintain cognitive equilibrium, moving from one stage to another, is explained by GELDS. A child moves through all five stages from birth to 5 years old. BFTS uses instructional activities on a child's developmental level. A teacher observes the child moving through three outcomes and rates them at their level on WSS. Development occurs when assimilation is not possible; accommodations may aid a child in their learning experiences and even help them alter information slightly to fit into pre-existing beliefs. GELDS expects children to interact in their environment by experiences and information given by the teacher. BFTS offers additional student supports to benefit the child if needed. WSS's intent is to meet and assess students' personal and social development. Piaget's (1936) theories are in alignment with Georgia preschool policies. The most evident theme/phrase that was identified throughout the theory was learning. This phrase was throughout the theory in different contexts of how children learn throughout the different stages of development.

Bronfenbrenner's Theory as Intended by Policy

Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested five ecological systems with which a person interacts, listed closest to them to the furthest away. Microsystem is the immediate environment with which the child has the most interaction. GELDS has standards that teach children social and emotional development. BFTS guides the preschool classrooms in a public school that has

teachers and assistants that are with the child on a daily basis. WSS assesses the child on personal and social development as child outcomes.

The mesosystem is the relationship that a child makes between two or more environments. GELDS works through the standards to develop a relationship between school, home, and community. BFTS guidelines requires a school and home relationship. WSS considers how a child solves social problems.

The exosystem is the area in which a child does not engage directly but it has an impact on their development. GELDS are standards that the child learns and the impact it has on their development. BFTS is the guideline for the preschool that the child attends. The teachers observe the children in the classroom environment and rate them on a developmental checklists for WSS.

The macrosystem is where the child lives, including their culture and their values. GELDS has standards that address cultural and environmental factors, including in social studies and science domains. BFTS encourages family participation. Knowledge and skills indicators look at social studies, citizenship, government, and where people live are assessed through WSS.

The chronosystem encompasses all elements over the child's lifetime, externally and internally. GELDS standards show how a child develops and moves through the stages to help prepare him for school. BFTS prepares students through preschool for elementary school. The development checklist that is used for WSS ensures students are developing and progressing at appropriate developmental levels. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theories are in alignment with Georgia preschool policies. The most evident theme that was identified throughout the theory was development, and this phase was throughout the theory in different contexts. The theory explains the different stages of a child's life as Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed.

Of the three theorists, Piaget's (1936) theory was represented more in the GELDS than Vygotsky (1978) or Bronfenbrenner (1979) theory, although the GELDS policy is in line with all three theorists' educational theory. The context of each theory was used in the GELDS policy, although some themes/phrases were represented more than others. The GELDS policy shows that theory is the driving force for the policy.

The researcher focused on the three areas that the researcher identified from the Bright from the Start Pre-K providers operating guidelines. Those areas are classroom requirements, delivery of services, and student supports. The researcher chose to focus on these three areas due to them having the most impact on preschool children and their classrooms. Of the three required areas for Vygotsky (1978), the themes were represented in both classroom requirements and student supports, required curriculum, language development, and inclusion. The mention for delivery of services included schedule and program delivery. Piaget (1936) showed themes in both classroom requirements and student supports but was not as high on delivery of services. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory focuses on the child in their environment as represented by delivery of services. Classroom requirements and student support were both expressed through theory, but not as commonly as classroom requirements.

The operating guidelines were all analyzed for their mention of theoretical themes or phrases as outlined above. The analysis showed that the intent of the policy is represented in developmentally appropriate theories. Inclusion was specifically mentioned under student supports; various levels of support are offered to preschools for children with and without disabilities. Assessment of the domains of the WSS, which are aligned with GELDS, are conducted by preschool teachers three times per year. Educators use WSS checklists to evaluate

a preschool child's knowledge, skills, behavior, and accomplishments. WSS has three different ratings for all students and is appropriate for students with disabilities.

There are seven indicator areas on the Work Sampling System observation checklists. Of the indicators, personal-social development, language and literacy, mathematical thinking, and social studies were aligned to Vygotsky's theory (1978). Scientific thinking, the arts, and physical development, health, and safety were also evident. All seven indicators show alignment to theory.

Piaget's (1936) theory is also evident across the seven indicators on the WSS. Of the indicators, mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, social studies, and the arts were aligned to Piaget's theory (1936). Language and literacy were also evident, along with physical development, health, and safety. All seven indicators show alignment to theory.

Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) is aligned to the seven indicators on the WSS. Of the indicators, social studies is the highest, based on his theory of children relating to their environment. Personal and social language and literacy, mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, and the arts were evident along with physical development, health, and safety. All seven indicators show alignment to theory.

Each theorist considered the development of the child, through their own lens. From the analysis of the Georgia policies, the theories are clearly defined in the intent of each policy. The theories are specific and foundational to development of children. Although the policies are aligned to the theories, the only policy that mentions inclusion of the preschool child is the BFTS guidelines. The WSS checklists assessment does state that the assessment can be used with children with disabilities. The GELDS progression through the domains does add differentiation for children with disabilities. This helps them to remain on track even if they are on a different

sub-domain. Georgia preschool polices are driven by developmental educational theories and are evident in the study of individual polies in correlation with theories.

Table 1 shows the overall picture of the theories as they are expressed in the policies of GELDS and WSS and how they all align to drive classroom teaching and assessment to strengthen the programs for preschool age children, including children with disabilities. In the table, the first concept is the GELDS indicator and the one under that is the WSS domains for which the GELDS guides the instruction in the classroom; the WSS assessment shows how the student performs under each of the indicators.

Summary

This study showed how educational theories are aligned to preschool policies. Based on the themes of each of the developmental theories, the researcher found evident correlation to content policy alignment. Policies are based in theory regarding how children develop. In this study, the common themes or phrases were illustrated and reported to determine relationships between theory and policy and alignment was evident. As shown, some themes were more frequent than others, but remained relevant to the research questions.

For teachers and school/district leaders, the policies that are being used in the preschool classroom are significant to children's development. One finding of this study shows evidence that GELDS (the curriculum) and WSS (the assessment) were more commonly related to theory and focus on the development of the child where as BFTS (operating guideline) had a section discussing inclusion, and how to support children with IEP's in the preschool classroom.

Chapter five presents an overview of the study, a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings, the implications of this study considering the relevant literature and theory and offers recommendations for future research.

Table 1

Alignment between GELDS, WSS, and Theories

GELDS & WSS Indicators	How Selected Theories are Expressed in the Policies
Physical Development & Motor Skills	This indicator is linked in Piaget's theory. He believed that children need to be able to see, touch, taste, smell, move, and hear the things they are learning about. He called this concrete Learning.
Gross Motor, Fine Motor, Self-Care, Health, & Safety	This indicator is linked to Vygotsky's theory. He believed that working with adults and skilled peers is essential for children to acquire ways of thinking, knowing, and belonging. He also stated that essential skills such as caring for one's self is learned by observing and learning from peers or adults. This is an important concept of scaffolding.
Social and Emotional Development	This indicator is linked to Vygotsky's theory. Children have a strong sense of well-being. Vygotsky's theory focuses on the importance of relationships, solving problems with help, and learning occurs, in part, in groups. He emphasized children internalize feelings, emotions, and ideas.
Personal and Social Development; Language and Literacy	This indicator is linked to Bronfenbrenner's theory. Preschool children see the immediate, or micro, level of their environment, which consists of family and direct caregivers such as teachers and babysitters. Children with caregivers who show warm, compassion, understanding, and a genuine concern toward others will also learn to show empathy and prosocial behavior during later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Children who witness caregivers modeling mostly angry, punitive, and cold emotional responses will struggle more to develop empathy and prosocial behavior.

Approaches to Play and Learning	This indicator is linked to Piaget's theory. He believed that children are active learners. Children must be given opportunities to explore, discover, and experiment, as these contribute to cognitive development.
Personal and Social Development	This indicator is linked to Vygotsky's theory. Vygotsky explained that children should be led in guided exploration and discovery. Through relationships in play, children develop and demonstrate improved verbal communication and high levels of social interaction skills. creative use of play materials, along with imaginative, divergent thinking and problem-solving capacities are developed.
Communication, Language, And Literacy Development; Language and Literacy	This indicator is linked to Vygotsky's theory. He believed that social interaction plays a significant role in child development. He emphasized the role of language in the development of children's thinking processes. Vygotsky explained that language is the key factor in the development of concepts. He believed that language, literacy, and numeracy skills should be scaffolded by adults or peers. These areas should be developed and enriched.
Cognitive Development and General Knowledge; Mathematical Thinking, Scientific Thinking, Earth Science, Social Studies, Human Interdependence, Citizenship and Government, The Arts	This indicator was linked to all three theories. Vygotsky explained that learning occurs by participating in groups. This is the social constructivist point of view. He believed that numeracy Skills should be scaffolded by adults or peers. These areas should be developed and enriched. Piaget, as a psychological constructivist, believed that learning was individual. He believed development and learning occurred in stages. Children should be able to see, touch, taste, smell, move, and hear the things about which they are learning. He believed that universal knowledge came from self. Bronfenbrenner believed that environment greatly influenced a child's development. They develop a sense of belonging to their environment. He also believed that fostering positive relationships with children and their families is vital to the development of the child. The way They interact with and support those families will affect the child's development.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether theory was expressed through policy as they relate to preschool and special education. The researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis to review policy and to examine the relationship between educational theories and special education preschool placement. The data were publicly available on the Georgia Department of Education website and Department of Early Care and Learning website. The data collected included the theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1976), and Bronfenbrenner (1979), along with the policy documents. The researcher analyzed key themes or phrases found in theories and policies.

As noted throughout the literature, under IDEA 2004, children with disabilities have the right to be educated with typical peers in the same classroom every day. Georgia policies state that local districts must locate, identify, and provide services and supports to young children with disabilities and/or delays. Blending approaches of early childhood and special education has had a significant impact on teachers and administrators of early childhood inclusion programs.

An additional component of this study was to examine the developmental theories as they relate to policies. Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1936) were similar in their belief that children learn by watching and interacting with each other. Vygotsky (1978) believed that children continuously developed, whereas Piaget (1936) believed they developed in stages. Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized that development was influenced by factors operating at different system levels. The three theorists' views are very different, but similar in nature in how children learn and interact with each other and within their environment. This is expressed throughout the policies as the researcher evaluated curriculum, guidelines, and assessment. All

three policies discussed how children learn and the type of environment in which they should learn.

Discussion of Research Findings

In this study, the researcher examined theories and how they are expressed through policies as they relate to preschool and special education placement options. The three developmental theorists examined were Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1936), and Bronfenbrenner (1979). One of the primary factors examined was preschool policy as it aligns with theory and the efficacy of inclusion at the preschool level. The data collected included the identification of developmentally appropriate themes or phrases identified from each theory. Data were analyzed in several phases. From each of the policy documents (GELDS, BFTS, and WSS), themes or phrases were analyzed and categorized for each policy and theory. The themes or phrases related to each theory were used to explore the expression of educational theory in special education preschool placement in Georgia policies. Additionally, the researcher addressed whether the theories and policies showed an alignment to the development of children ages 3-5. The findings can aid administrators in supporting teachers to utilize developmentally appropriate teaching and learning strategies in the classroom and to also support inclusion.

The researcher collected the necessary documents in order to complete a content analysis. The researcher analyzed whether theory was embedded into the intent of policy. Themes or phrases were developed out of each theory and categorized into a systematic analysis of text to develop patterns of meaning.

The purpose of this research was to examine if and how theory drives policy. In all of the policies, it is safe to say that theories regarding how a child develops and learns is evident in the policies examined. This is crucial to the development of children ages 3-5 and the exposure to

create consistency for educational outcomes. Theory is the basis of how children develop, and

GELDS is a set of appropriate, attainable standards that are flexible enough to support children's

individual rate of development, thus supporting their use in Georgia preschool classrooms.

GELDS is more aligned with each theorist because it is the curriculum that teaches skills and

concepts that children develop throughout this time of life (Georgia Department of Early Care

and Learning, 2019). The purpose of GELDS is so that all preschool classrooms are structured

the same and the language of teaching concepts is strengthened to make it easier to move on to

kindergarten.   The WSS is the assessment for preschool age children. Georgia preschools use

this to assess the level of performance for each child as it relates to GELDS to promote a

seamless educational program for early learning. WSS is a developmental checklist that teachers

observe and record student data and upload it into an online portfolio.

BFTS was also examined as a policy guideline. This manual is used by the preschools to

provide high quality educational instructional services for eligible four-year-olds. The researcher

considered the classroom requirements, delivery of services, and student supports. The operating

guidelines describe the requirements and regulations to help all Georgia preschool programs to

ensure compliance and quality service. Georgia preschools are allowed to use approved age-

appropriate instructional materials to enhance and supplement the GELDS. The researcher noted

that this is the only policy that inclusion is mentioned along with other student supports for a

variety of children.

According to the 2018-2019 manual, children grow and develop at their own rate. This is

evident in the three theories that were examined. All of the theories discussed consider how

children develop. Vygotsky (1978) believed that children develop with adult guidance. This is

evident in the manual as program components are outlined and teacher-directed language

development time is part of the typical day. Piaget (1936) believed that children developed in

stages. The manual discusses how, although there is a predictable sequence of developmental

milestones, all children may not proceed through these stages in the same way or at the same

time. Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized that a child's environment greatly influences

development. As noted in the manual, children are given time to acclimate to the preschool

environment; development begins once they feel safe and secure in their new environment.

Children with a disability are permitted to be dual-enrolled in a special education preschool

classroom and a Georgia preschool classroom. There is also the option that the school has a

Georgia preschool inclusion classroom, and this could also be the classroom they attend.

Research has indicated that educational reform movements have further supported trends

towards inclusion in the United States (Gruenberg & Miller, 2011). The results of this study

support that research. Policy documents are the driving force in implementation of inclusion,

and the goal is for children with disabilities to be immersed in an educational foundation with

children without disabilities. Blending the approaches of early childhood and special education

has had a significant impact on teachers and administrators of early childhood inclusion

programs. It is expected that teachers and administrators be prepared to meet the needs of all

students, including those with special needs in adapting the curriculum and environment.

According to Grant and Osanloo (2020), a theoretical framework is the foundation from

which all knowledge is constructed for a research study. The researcher identified theoretical

frameworks identified in Georgia educational policies. The theoretical frameworks used in this

study were Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978) that explains how a learner differs

when given help or not given help, Piaget's theory of cognitive development (1936), which

explains stages through which a child develops, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979),

in which he explains how a child interacts within five different levels. A relationship was shown between Vygotsky's theory, GELDS, and WSS. Piaget's theory was related to GELDS and WSS. Bronfenbrenner's theory had a relationship with all policies.

The overarching purpose of policy is to ensure that children are receiving a developmentally appropriate education in a creative and supportive environment. If Georgia preschool inclusion teachers are following these guidelines and are being supported from educational leaders, students should be able to thrive in an inclusive environment no matter their disability or delays. Administrators and teachers in Georgia preschool classrooms should feel confident that policies are reflective of best early childhood theories that focus of student's development in all areas.

Conclusion

As stated in Chapter 1, over the last two decades, preschool inclusion has become a critical part of the education reform efforts to improve the delivery of services to students with disabilities by focusing on the placement of these students in the general education setting (Praisner, 2003). As part of this educational context, educators, legislators, advocates, school districts, and stakeholders have discussed the various dynamics related to the placement options of early childhood children ages 3 to 5.

One challenge for special education inclusion is that general education and special education are separate, thus making it hard to work together in bridging that gap. In some districts, there are separate administrators to oversee the programs, making it challenging to work together when funding sources are different. After gathering all of the policy documents and exploring them, the barriers to development based on how the theories are outlined and how the policies are designed are evident. Students are expected to progress at a rate that allows them

to move through the continuum of skills, but students with disabilities often progress at a different rate than typically developing children.

Buysse and Bailey (1993) noted that research has been conducted on preschool inclusion, but the external and ecological validity are in question due to the research being typically carried out in model, university-based settings rather than in ordinary settings such as public schools, community settings, or Head Start locations. Fortunately, Georgia does have universal preschool for all students ages 4 and 5. This raises a challenge for children age 3 with an IEP. They can attend a special needs preschool, but Georgia preschool does not allow children less than 4 years old. It is a challenge, therefore, for district administrators to find a quality inclusive environment for 3-year-old children.

Implications

When considering the impact of this study on educational leaders, there are implications at the state, district, and school levels. State leaders should consider the results of this study and evaluate the needs for additional preschool inclusion classrooms to include children that are 3 years old. A strong positive relationship was found between the theories and policies. As a result, administrators need to ensure that teachers, both general education and special education, are implementing the Georgia Early Learning Standards and Work Sampling System in order for students to progress through the continuum of developmentally appropriate standards. Reflection of this is reported and analyzed by the state and district to ensure that implementation of the least restrictive environment is being provided. The results of this study imply that preschool inclusion is embedded in educational theory and therefore should be implemented to help children with disabilities be accepted by and treated like their typical peers throughout school and society.

Implications for State Leaders

The results of this study show a strong correlation between developmental theories and public policy. State leaders should explore this further to determine the application of results of this study of preschool inclusion in Georgia preschools. Georgia does not have universal preschool for 3 year old children. LEAs are challenged to find a general education setting for young children, especially those who are 3 years old. Many Georgia districts provide high quality services for young children with disabilities, but at times, the services are provided outside of the general education setting. Although the environment is still in the public school system, they are still separated from general education peers into a special education classroom receiving appropriate services with the appropriate staff. This information could be impactful when considering the standards as they relate to not only children ages 3 to 5, but also birth to 5 years old, and how student achievement is impacted based on the developmental concepts outlined in this study.

Implications for District and School Administrators

Previous research indicates that inclusion of preschool age children with disabilities helps children in the process of development (Bruder, 2010). This includes the emergence and convergence of various developmental milestones across separate behavioral domains. Exposure to typically developing peers helps a child grow and develop both socially and cognitively. The results of this study reinforce the research and shows that Georgia public policies align with developmental theories. Addressing areas that impact the outcome data as it relates to the Annual Performance Plan (APP) could help strengthen improvement of general education and special education working together. Administrators need to work effectively with special education teachers to ensure that district, state, and national goals are being worked towards and

achieved. This implies that teachers need to work with other teachers to allow for students to be included if they are in a separate setting like a special education classroom. Communication about these relationships needs to occur between the administrators, teachers, and parents, if applicable. Administrators are the driving force of the school to help implement open communication between both sets of teachers and parents. The perception that children with disabilities do not belong in the typical classroom needs to disappear. Administrators can do this by facilitating professional development, setting the stage in an IEP meeting to discuss the LRE for a particular student, and engaging staff in collaborative practices.

Improving Preschool Inclusion over Time

One approach that district and school administrators can do to improve the inclusive opportunities in their school is to focus their resources toward collaboration of all teachers, along with other administrators. Early childhood and special education directors need to collaboratively build, along with the principal, an environment that will facilitate inclusion. Structures and conditions need to be put in place to facilitate a successful transition to inclusion that allows it to exist over time. Administrators need to facilitate these transitions and develop processes to organize success for every child.

Impact Statement

State, district, and school administrators are consistently trying to find ways to provide more inclusive opportunities in the school. One of the goals of this study was to examine preschool inclusion. This has been a critical part of education reform efforts. In high-quality early childhood programs, inclusion is simply an example of best practice in meeting the individual needs of each child. Administrators and teachers want to improve delivery of services to students with disabilities by focusing on placement. This study compared three well-

established developmental theories along with the guiding policies for Georgia preschool. One of the factors examined was how theory of educational development was expressed through policy. Children develop at different times and at different paces, whether they have a disability or not. Each one of the theorists identified how they believed children developed.

Preschool is not a one-size-fits-all classroom for 4-year-olds. To understand how Georgia preschools provide a developmentally appropriate education, administrators and district leaders should immerse themselves in that setting. People need to observe what is taken into consideration as teachers try to develop children into well-rounded and responsible students and to be lifelong learners. Within this study, the researcher discovered that each of the theorists believed development occurred in different contexts. The one important thing is they all believed it happened. They each believed that social forces, whether it be continuous, in stages, or based on the child's environment, set the limits for development.

This study contributes to a larger discussion. It helps educational leaders in planning and expectations within the preschool classrooms. It eliminates some of the guesswork out of teachers teaching age-appropriate concepts to preschool children. It answers stakeholders' questions that are concerned about the relationship of educational theory, development, and public policy concepts. Teachers cannot solve all the problems that arise in the classroom, but hopefully, bridging the gap and understanding why one is expected to teach using guidelines, standards, and assessment will help teachers in terms of knowing that this is what is best for the child.

Teachers not understanding the rationale for GELDS is not what districts want teachers to experience. District leaders should help and support teachers in developmentally appropriate curriculum to expose and enrich the students and to enable them to become higher-level thinkers.

As the nation has more diverse students than ever in terms of language, culture, and class, their needs are also constantly evolving. The exposure that children receive at home is not the same as it was 20 years ago. Children's interests and skills for learning is not as strong. Educational leaders and teachers must encourage full participation for typically developing preschoolers and preschoolers with a disability. It takes everyone collaboratively planning and implementing strategies to see education succeed.

This study shows that developmental theories are the basis for public policies, including curriculum, guides, and assessment. As inclusion has become a more typical setting for students with disabilities, teachers have had to begin adapting their environments and teaching styles. Thus, the opportunities for inclusion are limited for preschool-aged children. Over the years, Bright from the Start has begun funding more inclusive classrooms to ensure children are in the least restrictive environment. Administrators at both the district and school level can facilitate collaborative processes across the school to ensure inclusion is occurring in all types of settings, not just academic ones. As for students younger than 4, a separate preschool with typically developing peers would help facilitate those developmental concepts until they could attend a Georgia preschool classroom.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, I would recommend state and district administrators focus on trying to help school districts facilitate opportunities outside of the "typical" classroom, especially for children with disabilities that are age three or younger. Districts have community-based teachers that serve students with an IEP, typically at daycares. They can encourage parents to join play groups, library groups, or any outside group that includes typical children. In these settings, children with disabilities can receive their services as outlined in their IEP from

the community-based teacher to ensure inclusive opportunities and that federal guidelines are being met. The district administrators can work with outside partners - daycares, Head Start, churches, and in-home licensed care - to help parents find inclusive childcare for their child with disabilities. Districts have to start being more creative to find inclusive opportunities for children ages 3 to 5. The child outcome summaries indicate that this is an area of deficit upon which Georgia districts must improve.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Future researchers should consider evaluating individual district demographic characteristics and inclusive opportunities available at the preschool level.

2. Future researchers should choose certain students in an inclusive preschool classroom with an IEP and measure their progress on GELDS and WSS to determine if achievement is evident.

Dissemination

The goal of this study was to examine how theory was expressed in policies for Georgia preschools. The researcher plans to share the results of this study with the following organizations and individuals:

- District preschool and special education teams in which she is a member

- Through research publications and through communication with other researchers and authors

- Researchers who study and examine educational theories and/or Georgia preschool policies

- Georgia Southern University's website; Georgia Southern University's educational programs as they continue to improve upon their teacher preparation models

- Georgia district leaders that oversee Bright from the Start Preschools

- Georgia special education directors

- Georgia Preschool Consortium

- Georgia Department of Early Learning

Concluding Thoughts

Georgia's universal preschool is one of the oldest in the country. As preschool is becoming more prevalent in order for children to prepared for kindergarten, the researcher chose to look at preschool policies through a lens of theory. Educational theories have been the basis for school programs for decades. Georgia continues to grow and continues to push for students to receive instruction in the least restrictive environment. Thus, the researcher wanted to examine preschool policies and their relation to inclusion placement. Based on the qualitative content analysis, it is evident that theory drives policy and the implementation of inclusion in preschool. Schools and administrators are being held accountable by reporting yearly that children are being served in the least restrictive environment and are making progress. Ensuring that students with disabilities are being placed in the least restrictive environment is an important part of an administrator's role to ensure that the school is following IDEA. Although inclusion comes with challenges and administrators are asked to do more of the compliance role with it, educators must ensure that all children are receiving an appropriate education in the appropriate setting.

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