

PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF NONDISABLED PRESCHOOLERS IN INCLUSIVE  
CLASSROOM SETTINGS

by

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November, 2013

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The current study investigates perceptions, thoughts, and concerns of parents of nondisabled children enrolled in inclusive preschool classrooms. Utilizing a phenomenological approach and Ecological Systems theory, parents ( $N = 7$ ) of nondisabled children, enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom, were interviewed to collect the data. Results indicate that parental perspectives, thoughts, and experiences vary. While parents are supportive of inclusion in child care centers, they felt less than confident in explaining limitations of special needs to their children. Future research and development of educational programs for parents may be beneficial in increasing parental support and involvement within inclusive preschool classrooms.



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CLASSROOM SETTINGS

A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of Child Development and Family Relations

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and wisdom offered by several people. I wish to express a special thank you to my advisor, Dr. Natalia Sira for always making sure I was taking care of myself and for her constant support and assistance. Deepest gratitude is also due to my committee members, Dr. Cecelia R. Valrie and Dr. Carmel White, for all of their feedback and flexibility. Lastly, I would like to express my love and gratitude to my family and friends for their understanding and endless love throughout the completion of my education.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Within the special education community, policies regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities into general education classrooms have been highlighted and criticized over the past few decades. Inclusion began in 1975, when President Gerald Ford signed into law the Education for All Handicapped Children Act Amendment (PL 94-142). This act guaranteed each child with a disability a free, appropriate public education in each state country-wide. Eleven years later, “The Preschool Law” (PL 99-457) extended the services of early intervention and classroom inclusion to infants and young children ages birth through five years. The original act was amended in 1997 and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Both laws support inclusion, which is defined in multiple ways. Although the IDEA does not use the term inclusion, it defines the right to environment as including the child with disabilities in the least restrictive and natural environments based on the needs of the child (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Although passed as law years ago, inclusion has only surfaced as a key alternative for early childhood educational services within the 1990s (Odom, 2000).

Clearly defining inclusion allows all professionals in the educational field to hold the same understanding of regulations and policies. Researchers and practitioners have searched for a uniform definition of inclusion, formerly expressed as *preschool mainstreaming*, *integrated special education*, or *reverse mainstreaming* (Guralnick, 1994; Leyser & Kirk, 2004; Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011). Members of the education and early intervention fields now accept the term inclusion uniformly. This term is defined as a more meaningful movement to integrate children with disabilities on a level deeper than just physical placement (Odem et al., 2011). The National Association for the Education for Young Children (NAEYC) describes the features of

inclusion as “a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning” (DEC/NAEYC, 2009, p. 2). Classroom inclusion has been shown to affect children and their families in varied ways. Parents hold a variety of positive and negative viewpoints regarding inclusion (Garrick-Duhaney & Salend, 2000; Odem et al., 2011). This study provides an in depth look at perceptions, thoughts, and concerns of parents whose typical children are enrolled in an inclusive preschool classroom at Nancy W. Darden Child Development Center on East Carolina University’s campus.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Ecological Systems Theory

An ecological systems theoretical lens was used for the current study. Bronfenbrenner (1976) acknowledges the broad range of individual factors that affect human development and education through his ecological systems model. A child's development is described within the integrated systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Each level influences and can be influenced by each other. The child, at the center of the model, is surrounded by the microsystem which includes the child's immediate surroundings (i.e. family, school). Children can, and frequently do, become part of multiple microsystems. The inclusive preschool classroom would be an example of one microsystem the child participates in (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Next, comprised of the relationships between variables within the microsystem that can affect the child, is the mesosystem. An example of this would be the relationship between parents and teachers affecting the child in the inclusive setting. Therefore, both parents and teachers should hold supporting views and communicate well with each other regarding inclusion. Bronfenbrenner identified the next level, the exosystem, to include factors that affect the child indirectly such as regulations and social policies (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Although the people who make these policies never enter the actual classroom, they create policies that affect how the inclusive setting is created and supported. The child's overarching social, cultural, and political values construct the macrosystem, which influences other levels within the system. Lastly, to represent changes occurring in the system due to time, the chronosystem was conceptualized. According to this theory, parents who are actively involved in schools affect their child's education positively (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

## **Parents of Children with Special Needs**

Children with special needs are children who require special services, support, or interventions due to varying disabilities resulting in physical and/or mental health conditions (Internet Special Education Resources, 2012). One service and support amended through the IDEA is inclusion, which provides all children with the right to the least restrictive and natural environments, including educational settings, based on the needs of the child (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). As of 2009, 95 percent of students with disabilities age 6 to 21 years old were utilizing the service of inclusion in general classroom settings, while only 3 percent of disabled students were enrolled in a special education school. The other 2 percent of children with disabilities were either homeschooled, hospitalized, residing in a residential facility, or placed in a regular private school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Inclusion, passed through law in 1975, has only become prevalent in early childhood settings within the 1990s (Odom, 2000). Research has noted that inclusive environments benefit children with special needs as they “improve in social interaction, language development, appropriate behavior, and self-esteem” (Lewis, 1994, p.72). Current research focuses on social improvements rather than educational standards of inclusive settings (Peck et al., 2004). Parents of toddlers, preschool-age, and school-age (elementary, middle, and high school) children have all been surveyed in current research in regards to inclusion (Buysse, Skinner, Grant, 2001; Peck et al., 2004; Stahmer, Carter, Baker, & Miwa, 2010). However, research specific to preschool settings have centered on the care providers’ perspectives, rather than the parents’ perceptions (Eiserman, Shisler, & Healey, 1995; Rafferty & Griffin, 2005).

Leyser and Kirk (2007) and Garrick-Duhaney and Salend (2000) examined parental perceptions of children ages six weeks old to 18 years old without separating the children by age

groups, which did not allow for issues unique to each age group to be noted. Generally, parents of children with disabilities do not expect their child to master the higher educational skills in a general classroom, but these parents do expect their children to benefit socially from inclusion (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). Survey responses suggest parents of younger children, children with mild or moderate disabilities, parents with college level education, and parents who state not knowing whether their child is enrolled in an inclusive classroom are not provided the strongest support of inclusion (Leyser & Kirk, 2004). Although the majority of these parents are supportive of inclusive classrooms, both positive and negative anxieties were expressed regarding their child's well-being. Interviews conducted with parents by Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007) suggested that parents of children with disabilities perceived their child as being "happier, more independent, and more motivated to go to school [and] participate in class" (p.21). However, utilizing surveys, Leyser and Kirk (2004) found fears of these parents to include social isolation, inadequate individualized instructional time from the teacher, and inadequate accommodations made within the classroom. The majority of survey respondents were the mothers of children with disabilities, with only 34 of the 437 participants being fathers.

Recognizing the low response rate from fathers suggests the need for research on both maternal and paternal perspectives, as mothers and fathers cope differently with handicapped children (Heiman, 2002; Schilling, Schinke, & Kirkham, 1985). Both parents experience similar stress levels, however, Keller and Honig (2004) noted several differences in parent-child relationships. It is more difficult for fathers to build an emotionally close relationship with their disabled child (Keller & Honig, 2004). This may be due to the fact that fathers, of both typical and atypical children, spend significantly less time providing caregiving when compared to mothers. Fathers are also more likely to use avoidance to cope with the stress of raising a child

with a handicap. While parents of children with disabilities are affected greatly, these individuals are not the only ones affected by the philosophy of inclusion.

### **Parents of Children without Special Needs**

While inclusion is reported to be beneficial for children with special needs (Lewis, 1994) parents with children without disabilities hold mixed feelings about inclusion, but generally express positive perspectives (Garrick-Duhaney & Salend, 2000; Peck et al., 2004). Researchers report that positive parental perspectives include seeing increased social cognition, prosocial characteristics, and greater acceptance of diversity in their nondisabled child. Parents also report an inclusive classroom as having educational benefits for their nondisabled children, whom were perceived as having fewer behavior problems after inclusion (Garrick-Duhaney & Salend, 2000). Supporting previous research, Rafferty and Griffin (2005) found parents of typically developing children view inclusion as beneficial in ways such as allowing children to develop sensitivity to others, accepting individual differences, and becoming more self-aware of strengths and weaknesses in prosocial characteristics.

Showing mixed results, a study surveying parents of elementary aged children with disabilities in the Pacific Northwest of the United States identified parental perceptions that reflected the social benefits of inclusion, the impact of inclusion on nondisabled children, and negative views regarding inclusion within an elementary school setting (Peck et al., 2004). The majority of respondents in this study described inclusion as holding overall social benefits within the classroom. One example of this is that parents perceive their child as more accepting of others (Peck et al., 2004). Although socially beneficial, parents did not feel inclusion was educationally beneficial; in fact, survey responses indicated that 78% of parents perceived inclusion to have no effect on their nondisabled child's academic progress (Peck et al., 2004).

However, 22% of the parents of nondisabled children in Peck et al.'s study (2004) indicated that the classroom teacher was spending less one-on-one time with their child. Some parents also viewed inclusion negatively because of behavioral disruption in the classroom. At the same time, parents of nondisabled children had mixed perceptions (Peck et al., 2004). Some felt that their child's own special needs were being unnoticed, while others believed their children were becoming more accepting of their own differences as a result of inclusion (Peck et al., 2004). Garrick-Duhaney and Salend (2000) identified specific negative concerns relating to individual time with the teacher. Among those concerns were decreased amount of individualized time with the teacher, imitation of inappropriate behaviors portrayed by children with disabilities, and staff not having enough training to handle children with disabilities appropriately (Garrick-Duhaney & Salend, 2000).

Another study suggested a parental concern expressed by the parents of typically developing children is the possibility that their children may be frightened by unusual behaviors occurring in an inclusive preschool setting (Rafferty & Griffin, 2005). Parents of typically developing children communicated apprehension in two general areas: (a) the classroom teacher focusing more energy and time on the children with disabilities than those without, and (b) classroom interruptions due to behavioral problems of children with disabilities (Peck et al., 2004).

Paying particular attention to children who are typically developing in the general classroom setting brings forth multiple questions for researchers and practitioners. For example, does inclusion adversely affect the educational outcomes of nondisabled children or does inclusion benefit the children without disabilities (Peck et al., 2004)? While generally positive attitudes regarding inclusion are expressed by family members of both typical and atypically



developing children. There are negative concerns within families about preschool inclusion (Odom et al., 2004). Parents of both disabled and nondisabled preschool children have voiced concerns about teachers' ability to give adequate attention to all children, the number of staff available to meet specific needs of children, and quality of staff (Seery et al., 2000). While these results portrayed similar feelings of all parents, this study seeks to investigate the perceptions specific to parents of typically developing children.

## **Perceptions**

Perceptions create a sensory experience to the world around us allowing recognition of stimuli and responsive actions to occur (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2007). It is through our perceptions that we process information and create reactions in such a way that we can interact with our environment. Our experiences and perceptions create schemas about the world around us. When an individual is unsure of what is happening, specifically in the social world, schemas help fill in the gaps of missing information (Aronson et al., 2007).

Evidence shows inclusion as a positive practice for children with disabilities. In order for inclusive programs to run successfully, the attitudes of those involved must be supportive (Narumanchi & Bhargava, 2011). Attitudes, either positive or negative, and reactions to stimuli are based upon the individual's perception (Aronson et al., 2007). Therefore, investigating parental perceptions, particularly parents of nondisabled children, could provide essential information for inclusive programs to create positive support for all families.

According to perceptual set theory, perceptions are active processes engaging selection, inference, and interpretation of situations. Some factors that could influence one's perception are expectations, emotion, motivation, and culture (Allport, 1955). Perception could be swayed by what an individual is expecting to see through use of contextual clues surrounding the stimuli.

Allport (1955) stated that along with expectation factors, one's motivation and emotion could influence their perception of the world. Six distinguished types of motivational-emotional variables include physiological needs, rewards and punishments, emotional connotation, individual values, personality, and the value placed on objects (Allport, 1955). When tied to emotions, individuals typically hold better attitudes towards familiar stimuli rather than new objects (Zajonc, 1968). Deregowski (1972) found that while viewing the same photographs and drawings, perception varies between cultural groups. This finding suggests that individuals, coming from unique cultural backgrounds may view the same situation in different ways. Although not yet researched regarding inclusion expectations could affect how parents perceive the classroom environment. Some other possible factors influencing one's perception could be age, gender, and education level. Recognizing this gap in the literature, this study aimed to make note of perceptions influencing factors of inclusive classrooms with particular emphasis on expectations, gender, and education level.

### **Understanding Parental Perceptions**

The involvement of parents of children, both with and without disabilities, in the inclusion process is a key component contributing to the effectiveness of inclusion programs (Garrick-Duhaney & Salend, 2000). Therefore, it is essential to understand parental perspectives of children with and without disabilities in regards to inclusion for many reasons. First, parents are advocates for their children and ultimately decide the placement of their child in an inclusive setting or not. Parents play a crucial role concerning their child's development and education, especially as society moves toward a family-centered care perspective. As advocates, parents are the driving force behind which early educational and developmental services are provided for their child. Lastly, the reactions of parents determine the social acceptance of classroom

inclusion (Gibb et al., 1997; Guralnick, 1994). Parental support of inclusion programs may depend upon their perspectives and reactions concerning the classroom practices and their preparedness of the inclusion process. Examining parental perceptions and identifying concerns could assist in enhancing inclusive programs and increasing parental support within the classrooms to provide the highest quality educational development for both children with and without disabilities. This will also help to identify the needs for possible recommendations when working with parents whose children are in inclusive settings, to address their concerns, provide educational material and/or other strategies to ensure support for inclusion not only in the classroom setting, but also within the home environment.

### **Typical Early Childhood Development**

The preschool years present distinct developmental milestones that children tend to follow in areas such as social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). This study discussed social, emotional, and cognitive expectations parents of nondisabled children hold. Between ages 3 to 5 years, preschool children become self-aware of their emotions, understand feelings of others, and learn to regulate emotions (Berk, 2007). When compared to younger children, preschoolers are able to articulate complex social emotions including pride, guilt, and shame. Children portray greater awareness of other children's needs during this time period while beginning to learn social cognition outside of egocentrism (Berk, 2007). While mastering the skill of labeling, describing, and coping with different emotions, social relationships play a key role in the preschool years. Children at this age struggle through conflict resolution and still need assistance maintaining social relationships. Social development is promoted through modeling by teachers, in small and large group activities, and in schedules allowing for extended peer interaction time (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). During these play

times, preschoolers are able to successfully enter play and be involved in mature sociodramatic play which requires complex role play and extended sustained play. It is during these years that children also develop prosocial behaviors (Berk, 2007). Prosocial behaviors related to inclusion would be increased responsiveness and helpfulness to the needs of disabled peers (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

In addition to social and emotional growth, preschoolers undergo specific cognitive changes. Preschool children have the ability to think about past events and anticipate future happenings (Berk, 2007). Piaget (Crain, 2011) described this stage as preoperational, emphasizing the fact that children ages 2 to 7 years old are less capable in their thought processes as they can be illogical, egocentric, and one-dimensional. As preschoolers move from and between simple and complex thoughts, they tend to narrow their focus on limited thoughts. This balances out the plethora of new information they are rapidly learning (Berk, 2007). While reorganizing their thoughts, preschool children may express unsystematic and illogical thoughts. It is not until the age of 7 years old that a child's thought process becomes concrete and organized (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Crain, 2011).

Cognitive changes also include language development, which blossoms throughout the preschool ages where children will learn an average of five new words each day (Berk, 2007). The average preschooler has a vocabulary of 10,000 words, which is greatly increased from the 200 word vocabulary a toddler has. Preschoolers contrast new words with words they already know to create meaning and assign labels to objects. These children, still viewing the world egocentrically, rely on adults to appropriately label new objects and actions (Berk, 2007). Inappropriate labeling by parents, combined with the high curiosity level for this age, can be a negative factor influencing parental perceptions (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). For example,

children may ask questions about disabilities and behaviors seen in an inclusive classroom and it is the adult's role to appropriately label these for the child to fully understand. Another way preschoolers advance their vocabulary is by inferring word meanings from others' social cues, including others' intentions and perceptions. Both learning strategies require preschoolers to rely on adults to assist in vocabulary building (Berk, 2007). Inclusive classroom settings, acknowledging the importance of proper labeling and appropriate social cues, should provide parents with the tools to adequately communicate with their child about disabilities and behaviors they may experience in the classroom. Currently, the center in which this study was conducted does not have any such tools providing education to parents regarding disabilities. Understanding parental perceptions could allow inclusive programs to appropriately prepare families and provide them with the tools needed to effectively communicate with their child.

### **Aim of Study**

The aim of this study was to investigate perceptions, thoughts, and concerns of parents of nondisabled children enrolled in inclusive 3-year-old and 4-year-old preschool classrooms. In particular, this study focused on how the parents' perception of the child's social and emotional development and social cognition were perceived by the parents in the light of having a child with special needs in the classroom and how this experience impacted the family overall. The current project used semi-structured interviews to explore ideas, thoughts, perceptions, and experiences related to inclusive preschool settings.

Emphasizing and understanding parents' concerns could draw attention to important issues that centers could use to more readily prepare all families to provide the highest quality inclusive setting for children and their families. Social cognition was measured through evidence of the child having a greater awareness of other children's needs, while acceptance of

others was noted through examples of feeling comfortable with disabled classmates. Parental perceptions of preschoolers could provide an important piece of missing literature within the special education field.

Since inclusion is a fairly recent trend in preschools, many parents of preschool aged children have never experienced integration of children with special needs in their own childhood, nor have enough knowledge about the topic to feel prepared in fully supporting inclusion. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 6.5 million children ages 3 to 21 years of age are currently receiving special education services. Understanding and acknowledging perceptions of parents could help early childhood classrooms to better prepare parents for inclusion, possibly resulting in increased support of the program.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the current study is to 1) explore parental perceptions and views on inclusion in an early education setting based on the parent's expectations, 2) investigate involvement and support of parents in inclusive preschool classrooms, and 3) examine the tolerance and comfort level of parents to discuss special needs with their children.

## **Chapter 3: Method**

### **Participants**

The criteria to participate in the study were to (a) be a parent of a child enrolled in the center's three-year-old or four-year-old classroom during the spring 2013 semester and (b) be a parent of a typically developing child, meaning the child has no individualized education plans (IEP) on file. Both the three-year-old and four-year-old classrooms are inclusive classrooms and had at least one disabled child enrolled at the time of this study.

### **Procedure**

After IRB approval, letters describing the project and inviting participation were distributed in both classrooms and sent home with each child by the lead teachers. Letters included the researcher's contact information for interested participants. Those who responded favorably were screened to fit the participant criteria, and then contacted via e-mail or phone to schedule an interview time. Semi-structured interviews, ranging from 40 minutes to 80 minutes in length, were conducted by the researcher in a private office space within the child care center between the dates of April 18, 2013 to May 15, 2013. Interviews were scheduled based on participants' availability. Prior to beginning the interview, the researcher discussed the study and explained the interviews were going to be recorded. Participants were informed that there is minimal risk involved in the study and their answers were going to be kept anonymous. Informed consent was signed as permission to begin the interview.

Following the framework of Marshall and Rossman (1995), the interviews were conducted much like conversations to allow the researcher to explore a general topic to assist in uncovering the participant's meaning perspective, while otherwise respecting how the participant responds. Semi-structured interviews allow for discovery and elaboration through the use of

several key questions that aide in defining specific areas of exploration. Participants had the flexibility to discuss details that may not have been previously important to researchers. Participants were asked to describe the classroom environment, specific examples of their children's social interactions, their views, experiences, and thoughts regarding inclusion (see Appendix B). Demographic data was collected at the conclusion of each interview to explore the type of population that participated. Demographic data included age, gender, race, years of education, and number of children in the household.

All interviews were systematically recorded and transcribed by the author. Data was securely stored on a computer in Rivers 169 (private office space in the child development center) with double password protection, only known to the researcher. Once interview audiotapes were transcribed into text documents in Microsoft Word, the audiotapes were destroyed. Each transcription was assigned a letter to maintain confidentiality throughout the study. Qualitative data analysis procedures were then used to examine experiences, thoughts, and perceptions of participants.

### **Instrument**

The interview survey was created by the researcher to aide in understanding parents' perceptions and experiences with inclusive preschool settings (see Appendix B). The questions were set to broaden knowledge regarding inclusive preschool environments, effects on nondisabled children, and parental readiness to answer their children's questions about classmates. The questions were created to identify relationships between factors seen in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem). The survey was field tested by a committee of three experts in the field of child development including professors, early childhood teachers, and master's



degree child development and family relations students. Feedback was utilized to refine the survey instrument before conducting surveys with parents. The survey instrument consisted of questions relating to each level within the ecological systems theory including classroom environment, parent and teacher relationships, peer to peer interactions, parent support, center policies, social expectations, children's reactions and maturation of children. Questions concerning inclusion asked about experiences, questions their children had, information available to the families, concerns, weaknesses, and strengths parents perceived. Initial interview questions focused on views and beliefs about inclusion. Probing questions followed by open-ended questions expanded on their child's attitudes and behaviors within the inclusive classroom. Final interview questions centered on inclusion preparedness and supportive or unsupportive behaviors provided by the center's staff.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher used her own lens to analyze the collected data phenomenologically. The researcher has past experience working within inclusive preschool settings as a teacher which helped to keep objectivity and control biases, understanding the classroom routine of three and four year olds and provide skills in conducting the interviews with parents. While reading over transcripts, underlying complications or supportive gestures were discovered in participants' responses. Key words and similar responses were highlighted and circled. Units of relevant meaning were picked from the transcriptions and grouped together into meaningful clusters. These meaningful clusters were used to determine relevant themes. The themes were then contextualized and described through the researcher's own lens. The focus of the study was not to measure the frequency of responses, but rather to determine the meaning of parents' experiences and explore perceptions and thoughts related to inclusion. As qualitative research is

interpretive research, the researcher used her own judgments to identify codes and themes utilizing guidelines from Creswell (1994).

### **Preschool Setting**

The study was conducted in a Southeastern university's inclusive child development center. The child development center holds a five-star child-care license issued by the Division of Child Development of Health and Human Services, and is fully accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The center serves as a learning laboratory for university students studying child development and family relation, birth through kindergarten education, early intervention, and child life. The center also provides observation experiences for students, as well as practical (teacher assistant) experiences for graduate students. The teacher to child ratio in the three year old classroom is one teacher to eight children. In the four year old classroom the ratio is one teacher to nine children. There is a lead teacher and assistant teacher in each preschool classroom, along with university practicum students rotating in and out of the classrooms most of the day. The teaching approach is eclectic, combining developmental and educational theories from Piaget, Erikson, Montessori, Reggio-Emilia, and Vygotsky. Lesson plans and daily routines are created utilizing Creative Curriculum.

In the Spring 2013 semester, the three-year-old and four-year-old classroom had thirteen to fifteen students enrolled. Among those, the three year old classroom had a student with mild autism, while the four year old classroom had a child with speech delays and a child with behavioral issues stemming from an abusive past. The child with speech impediments was taken out of the classroom twice a week for occupational therapy sessions. Parents, as well as their children, may not have noticed these special needs because they are not trained in child

development and because physical limitations are noticeably different to the eye. Other children with special needs followed typical classroom requirements and routine, while requiring special intervention (from the teacher) based on behavioral reactions and/or based on the tasks set for the class.

The typical day in a preschool classroom at this particular setting consisted of circle time, morning snack, free choice center time, outdoor recess, family style lunch, two hour nap period, afternoon snack, an afternoon free choice center time, and an afternoon recess. The Nancy Darden Child Development Center is open from 7:30am to 5:30pm Monday through Friday, leaving most children to spend 9 hours in the classroom every weekday.

The Child Development Center provides child care services to local citizens and faculty members of East Carolina University. The demographic of this population includes highly educated parents, as well as young parents who are attending classes at the University. When enrolling their child, parents receive information regarding the purpose of the child development center as a place for university students to conduct research and gain practical experience.

## Chapter 4: Results

The main purpose of the methodology was to explore parent's perceptions, experiences, thoughts, and concerns regarding preschool inclusion. Therefore, the goal of the semi-structured interview process was to offer parents of preschool children without special needs an opportunity to discuss their philosophies and knowledge of inclusion, concerns regarding inclusion, and situations described by their children. The interviews were guided by a number of research questions (see Appendix B). To best present the results, the information gathered will be presented by the nine categories that surfaced throughout analysis. The categories that will be discussed in this chapter include the inclusion philosophy and parental concerns, philosophies and knowledge of parents, experiences related to inclusion while communicating with their children, the classroom's physical environment, opportunities to learn about inclusion, strengths and weaknesses of inclusion, social interactions of children in inclusive preschools, and parental involvement in the inclusive classroom.

Seven participants meeting the criteria responded to the letter sent home and agreed to participate in semi-formal interviews (see Table 1). Among those, six participants (86%) were mothers, while only one (14%) father agreed to be interviewed. The age of participants ranged from 32 to 36 years old, with the average age being 32.3 years. All participants were of Caucasian race. Five participants are married (71%), one separated (14%), and one refused to share (14%). The majority ( $n = 5$ , 71%) of participants did not want to disclose their current household income. Three participants (43%) disclosed information about household income, averaging a household income of \$98,000. One participant holds an associate's degree (14%), three hold doctorate degrees (43%), two hold masters degrees (29%), and one would rather not say (14%). Six participants (86%) have one child, while one (14%) has two children living at

home. Emerging themes from the analyzed data include environmental factors, social interactions of the children, parental involvement and support, inclusion philosophies, perceived inclusion strengths and weaknesses, and parental readiness.

*Table 1*

*Description of Participants*

Participant	Age	# of children	Race	Marital status	Income	Education	Age of child (years)	Disability in classroom
Father A	36	1	Caucasian	Married	\$100-\$150,000	PhD	4	Behavioral and speech delay
Mother A	35	1	Caucasian	Married	\$100-\$150,000	PhD	3	Mild autism
Mother B	N/A	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	4	Behavioral and speech delay
Mother C	34	1	Caucasian	Married	N/A	Masters	3	Mild autism
Mother D	32	1	Caucasian	Separated	\$40-\$49,000	Masters	4	Behavioral and speech delay
Mother E	33	1	Caucasian	Married	N/A	Associates	3	Mild autism
Mother F	35	1	Caucasian	Married	N/A	PhD	4	Behavioral and speech delay

## **Inclusion Philosophy and Parental Concerns**

As a teacher in the three and four year old classrooms, I feel that there is a great benefit to providing preschool education to both children with special needs and typical children combined in classes together as peers. The typical students serve as models for the children with special needs by inspiring language and creative play. The typical children are gaining understanding and acceptance, while building values. Thus, I was looking for ideas, thoughts, and concerns from the parents of nondisabled children on inclusive care. With some hesitancy, more than half of the parents ( $n = 4$ , 57%) said if they had the choice to select an inclusive classroom or one without a child with special needs, they would have to know more information before deciding. Mother B, a mother of two, said, “it depends on the child”, while Mother A claims:

“As long as the balance is good, I am a strong supporter of inclusion at this age.

I would need to know more before forming an opinion about inclusion for older children and it is probably child or context dependent.”

These examples show researchers that parents have concerns about inclusion and are hesitant to agree with inclusion philosophy without knowing more information on a child with disabilities enrolled with their child. Parents hold high expectations when enrolling their child in preschool and look at factors in the classroom to determine if the childcare center is a good fit for their family. If parents are educated and encouraged to help with maintaining a well-balanced classroom environment, then they may be more likely to keep their child enrolled in an inclusive preschool.

## **Parent Philosophies and Knowledge**

Despite the fact that the inclusion philosophy is spread well in school systems and higher education, few parents ( $n = 2$ , 29%) have ever heard of the inclusion philosophy. This reveals

that parents do not know much about inclusion, which shows a gap in how prepared parents are when researching child care for their child. Inclusion philosophy was explained within the interview to parents as, “Inclusive classrooms incorporate children with disabilities into a typical school setting with typically developing children”. All parents felt it is appropriate for children at such an early age to be introduced to children with special needs and all parents agreed that preschool inclusion is appropriate. Some examples of parents’ philosophies included:

“It’s important for kids to know not everyone is the same and get to know special needs children on an individual level. I think it helps them become more compassionate and may be less scared or awkward around special needs individuals in the future.” –Mother A

“It is never too early to introduce children to people who are different than themselves. It is important to learn and accept differences early on.” –Mother D

and, “I appreciate the fact that the center strives for diversity in the classroom that mirrors the real world, including diversity in cultures and abilities.” –Mother F

Mother D, a separated mother, believed it is appropriate timing, but felt it is hard for the [typical] child to understand why other children [with special needs] may not talk to him or respond. Six parents (86%) believed their child is able to understand limitations of other children to some extent at the ages of 3 and 4 years old. Mother C mentioned, “I think physical limitations are probably easier to understand than mental limitations.” These suggestions raised questions about whether preschool children are cognitively able to understand why other children are different. Preschool children may not understand if the contexts of situations are not explained in a child friendly and age appropriate manner.

### **Experiences Related to Inclusive Classroom: Communicating with their Children**



Good communication between a parent and their child provides excellent modeling and learning opportunities for a child outside of the classroom. While children were spending eight hours a day in the childcare setting, some situations arise during the day that were important for the children to discuss with their parents. Thus, Mothers D and F (29%) described situations in which their child talked to them about a child with special needs in their classroom. Parents heard about varied situations from linguistic special needs to behavioral special needs. For example, Mother D reported, “He (son) has mentioned a boy in his class who is hard to understand.” While another Mother F stated, “We have heard about behavioral issues, screaming, throwing chairs, throwing toys, things like that...” The examples given illustrate negative behaviors associated with children with special needs, apparently affecting the child as they mentioned it to their parents.

The majority of parents ( $n = 5$ , 71%) reacted to these questions and stories by talking with their child about respect or treating everybody as a friend. A specific example of this is seen when Mother D said,

“We told him that student has learning disabilities that make him slower than other kids. My son said he liked him anyway. I also told him it is important to be kind and accept and play with all friends despite how they are different.”

The parents reflected that they “did our best to explain that people have differences in understanding how to be a friend, how to obey rules...” This seems to be a trend in responses; parents stated they will try the best to explain to their children as situations arise. When answering the question, “Were you (or are you) prepared to answer the questions related to other children’s limitations or disabilities in terms your child could understand?” many parents paused,

hesitated, sighed, or fidgeted in their chair while answering which may demonstrate uneasiness and no confidence in their preparedness. Very few parents ( $n = 2, 29\%$ ) confidently said they felt prepared to answer their child's questions related to other children's limitations or disabilities, whereas most of the parents ( $n = 5, 71\%$ ) "think" they are prepared to explain the best they could or explain in vague terms. All participants felt comfortable talking to their child about their classmates with special needs, "although that can be difficult if I am unaware of what makes a particular child special needs." Parents are comfortable talking with their children, but need to have confidence to discuss these issues in a way their child will comprehend.

### **Classroom Environment in the Child Development Center**

The physical environment of the inclusive classroom can help or hinder development of children at the microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. All parents ( $n = 7, 100\%$ ) described that the classroom environment helps their child meet social and developmental needs. Mother A states, "Yes, my son is an only child, so school is an important venue for him to learn social skills and how to interact with other children." While each parent acknowledged knowing the child development center was inclusive, three parents (43%) commented that it was not obvious whether or not children with special needs were actually enrolled in their child's classroom at the time of the interview.

"I know the center does enroll special needs children... I don't think my son's classroom always has special needs children and I don't know if I have been or am aware of all the special needs children at the center." –Mother C

### **Opportunity to Learn about Inclusion: Whose Job is it?**

It is the philosophy of the Child Development Center that children are encouraged to learn and grow by providing a foundation of developmentally appropriate experiences where all

children can succeed in a safe and nurturing environment. Teachers believe that each child is a unique individual and that all children can learn. The Child Development Center preschool program provides inclusive settings that recognize children's varied abilities, interests, needs, and learning styles.

When asked if parents had the opportunity to gain access to information regarding inclusion, responses varied. Some parents ( $n = 4, 57\%$ ) "think" the teachers or directors would inform them if need be, while other parents ( $n = 3, 43\%$ ) did not know of any opportunities aside from asking the teachers or director. Not having any opportunities, none of the participants have taken any steps to learn more about inclusion or gain information about the disabilities present in their child's classroom. Participants were asked to suggest what inclusive classrooms could do differently to help families be more prepared. While few parents ( $n = 2, 29\%$ ) did not offer any suggestions, over half of the parents ( $n = 4, 57\%$ ) believed that better communication between teachers, directors, and families would be beneficial. Specific suggestions included,

"Informing parents of special needs children in the classroom or school or some suggestions for how to explain those needs to my child... If it's a physical problem with a child I feel comfortable explaining those needs to my child, but I don't want to make assumptions about a child's cognitive, social, mental development without more information." –Mother B

The same Mother B suggested a great idea to encourage communication within the classroom and share information between parents in inclusive classrooms, "I would also like to know what the parents of the special needs child would like parents to explain to their child about their son or daughter." While other parents suggested, "...information on specific limitations may be

helpful, if that can be done without infringing on privacy of others, perhaps in a generic way.”, and “...specific knowledge could be useful in conversations with our child.”

### **Weaknesses of Inclusive Care**

Parents ( $n = 5$ , 71%) considered a weakness of enrolling a typically developing child in an inclusive classroom is neglect and less teacher time focused on individual children. While Father A and Mother E ( $n = 2$ , 29%) stated not noticing any limitations or weaknesses in the classrooms, Mother C felt “Learning is hindered as the learning environment is not advanced enough for the [typical] child.” Over half of the parents ( $n = 4$ , 57%) stated they have no concerns when introducing their child to an inclusive classroom because they believe the teacher’s will appropriately handle situations and will be able to balance the classroom. For example, Mother F commented on a behavioral situation, “I have no concerns in general... the specific story about throwing chairs was mildly disturbing, but we know the teachers are watching out for the safety of all the children.” When specifically asked, all participants agreed that staff is able to provide their child with appropriate educational and social needs. Three parents (43%) believed the teachers’ ability to balance the classroom depends on the types of special needs that are present and the teacher to student ratio policy. Even with this balance, families felt it is important to offer inclusion as

“attending to a special needs child required teacher attention or was disruptive to the place where other students were not being met physically, mentally, and developmentally, that said... this is a balance and having special needs children in the classroom is valuable.” –Mother A

A common concern within inclusive classrooms is the teacher’s ability to equally divide his or her attention to all students. For example, Mothers A and B expressed “...lack of teacher focus

on all students,” and, “the needs of some children [with or without disabilities] can be neglected.”

### **Strengths of Inclusive Care**

Most of the parents ( $n = 5$ , 71%) mentioned acceptance and understanding that people are different as strengths of enrolling a typically developing child in an inclusive classroom (i.e., “...being exposed to the wide diversity of people in order for kids to recognize and appreciate it...”, “Children learn that not everyone is the same.”, “...helps them learn about human differences and to teach them to be accepting.”). Parents believe children become compassionate and caring in inclusive classrooms. Being enrolled in an inclusive classroom “can help alleviate fears of kids and people who are different”.

### **Social Interactions of Children**

When asked what changes participants have noticed about their child in the past year, five parents (71%) noticed maturity and increased independence in their children. All of the parents were able to describe peer to peer social interactions involving their child playing with other classmates, sharing, taking turns, and creating games together. Parents expect their children at this age to control their emotions, communicate with peers, and be friendly and respectful to others. For example, “I expect him to use good manners and to be caring and friendly to his friends and teachers...”, “I want her to treat others with respect and empathy...”, “I expect my child to be social with other children and adults, to play well and share.” All of these expectations are developmentally appropriate and are aligned with developmental levels preschoolers should be achieving socially.

### **Parental Involvement in the Classroom**

Despite discussing social expectations for their children with teachers, none of the

parents discussed inclusion or classmates with special needs with the classroom's teacher.

Although no discussions were held regarding children in the classroom with the teacher, all of the parents had an opinion regarding whether they would keep their child in an inclusive classroom or take them out if given a choice.

The majority of parents ( $n = 5$ , 71%) reported spending "some" or "limited" times involved in their child's classroom, but talk to the teachers or director at points of drop off or pick up. Parents ( $n = 6$ , 86%) have discussed the social expectations they hold for their son or daughter with the classroom teacher, while Mother D felt it is expected of the teacher to know appropriate social interactions for preschool children. Holding high expectations of the teacher reinforces how trusting families are when enrolling their children. Parents believe it is the teacher's responsibility to incorporate diversity, learning, and communication between families, while managing the classroom with a balance of time and attention to each student.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Limitations, and Future Research**

### **Awareness of Inclusion**

Overall, the current study added to the existing literature the perspectives, thoughts, and experiences of parents of nondisabled children, exclusive to experiences and interactions related to inclusive preschool settings. The study revealed that parental perspectives and experiences with inclusion vary depending upon the type of special needs visible in the classroom and the teacher's ability to effectively manage the classroom. Similar to previous studies (Peck et al., 2004; Rafferty & Griffin, 2005), the majority of parents appear to support inclusion as they believe children enrolled in inclusive preschool settings learn compassion, empathy, and respect for differences. The fact that some participants expressed no concerns or weaknesses regarding inclusion may be due to the types of special needs visible in the classroom. At the time of the study, children with special needs enrolled in the classroom did not have any visible physical limitations and high teacher to child ratio in the center helped to ease parents concerns.

The enrolled children, having cognitive and behavioral special needs, may have been harder to notice during the limited times that parents were involved in the classroom. The fact that parents are not aware of children with special needs enrolled in their child's classroom could mean the parents are not highly involved in the classroom. Parents may be too busy or have conflicting work schedules, which prevents them from being involved in their child's classroom. Low parent involvement could also be due to the lack in volunteer opportunities provided by the child care center. Other possibilities that parents are not aware of specific children with special needs enrolled in the preschool could be that their child is not directly affected by the peer with special needs or perhaps cognitive disabilities and physical disabilities attribute different factors to classroom environments. Future research would need to be conducted to compare the effects

of physical disabilities versus cognitive disabilities present in classrooms.

### **Addressing Type of Disability**

Preschool children may not have questions regarding limitations in the classroom setting, but one participant mentioned questions their child had when out in public witnessing physical handicaps. Again, this reinforces that physical disabilities may be more noticeable to the eye, therefore peaking the curiosity of children more so than cognitive disabilities.

Children at this age are more likely to recognize physical limitations, but not behavioral. It has to be addressed and explained by a teacher when inappropriate behavior takes place in the classroom. Parents raised questions about whether preschool children are cognitively able to understand why other children are different. Preschool children are able to understand, but may not comprehend differences if situations or behaviors are not explained in a child friendly and age appropriate manner by a teacher or parent. This shows a gap in education that child development centers could potentially fill by providing the tools and resources to assist families in explaining special needs in a way that preschool children will understand. For example, preschool children may respond better and comprehend diversity when the topic is approached through play situations or simple explanations using child friendly terms rather than having a formal discussion with their parents. Overall, parents expressed the importance of teaching their children to acknowledge and understand diversity.

### **Micro- and Meso-systems and Communication**

Parents are comfortable talking with their children, but need to have confidence to discuss these issues in a way their child will comprehend. It is unclear who is responsible for preparing and teaching parents how to appropriately handle situations with their children. The parents could take initiative, although as mentioned earlier parents believed it is the teacher's



responsibility. The child care center or the classroom teacher could be proactive in encouraging parents' initiatives by providing education, communicating effectively, or creating opportunities to support diversity in developmentally appropriate ways.

Social stigmas attached to disabilities play a role in forming an individual's perceptions and experiences. Parents may not hear or associate stories about positive accomplishments or interactions with children with special needs. The negative stories may be more pertinent in the parent's memories due to the social stigma attached to special needs and the emotional reaction an individual has towards unacceptable behaviors. Positive stories may get lost as parents tend to focus on their own child's accomplishments. Opportunities for children, with and without special needs, and their families to share their personal stories within the classroom setting could be beneficial in encouraging an acceptance of diversity. This would provide families with information that was acceptable to share and discuss without having to create assumptions about other children. These social policies and family stories put in place by the child care center fall into the child's exosystem, which systematically affects the child's development as stated by Bronfenbrenner (1976).

### **Concerns and Benefits**

Another common concern within inclusive classrooms is the teacher's ability to equally divide his or her attention to all students. This concern could fluctuate between classroom settings, as each classroom is unique and certain children may require more attention depending upon the degree of their disability. Further research could be conducted to examine the amounts of time actually spent with individual children in preschool classrooms, with or without special needs, to determine whether or not this is a valid concern.

Despite concerns, parents also noted benefits of inclusion. One benefit of having a child

enrolled in an inclusive classroom is that the environment “can help alleviate fears of kids and people who are different”. Children may develop compassion and caring due to the situations experienced within the comfort of a classroom where a teacher is able to explain and teach the child about human differences. These findings support previous studies that found the same context of strengths within inclusive elementary settings (Peck et al., 2004).

### **Highlighted Role of a Teacher**

In addition to the perceived benefits of inclusion, parents also hold teachers accountable for creating an appropriate environment to encourage optimal development for their child. Parents place high amounts of trust in the teachers believing that their children are being cared for properly. Before enrolling in a preschool, parents look at factors in the classroom to determine if the childcare center is a good fit for their family. Determining factors could be the age range of the children, the teacher to student ratio, the teachers’ education level, the severity of a child’s disability, the typical child’s maturity level, the classroom organization, or the relationship between the parents and the teacher. Further research needs to be conducted to establish which deciding factors truly have an effect on whether or not a parent enrolls their child into a specific program. These dependent factors support the importance of communicating with families and preparing them for inclusion. If parents are educated and encouraged to help with maintaining a well-balanced classroom environment, then they may be more likely to keep their child enrolled in an inclusive preschool.

Once enrolled, parents talked to the teachers about social expectations they held for their children at preschool age, but did not discuss special needs with staff members. The study shows that parents do want to know more about special needs. Parents feel knowing what types of special needs were in their child’s classroom would make them more comfortable talking to and

educating their own children when they had questions. However, parents believe it is the teacher's responsibility to incorporate diversity, learning, and communication between families, while managing the classroom with a balance of time and attention to each student. One way around legalities and privacy acts would be to ask the family with the child with special needs to share their story with the class. Providing parents with opportunities to volunteer and encouraging family participation in the classroom setting may increase involvement, which in return would enhance overall parental support of the child care center. Programs and information could be created for families to promote understanding and encourage communication between preschool staff, families, and children. These social policies and family stories put in place by the child care center fall into the child's exosystem, which systematically affects the child's development as stated by Bronfenbrenner (1976). Preparing families and children without disabilities could be equally beneficial as preparing children with special needs for the transition into an inclusive classroom. As discussed before, high parental support and involvement is crucial in providing the child with optimal educational opportunities and in continuing the business of a successful child care center.

### **Limitations**

The one on one interviews provided specific reflection on experiences of parents whose child was in an inclusive preschool classroom in a specific research based child care center. The children's experiences were filtered through the perspectives of parents, which was then filtered through the lens of the researcher. Individual parents hold different perceptions of situations and these perceptions could be skewed as their children may act one way in school and completely different at home. A high level of care provided by teachers and the classroom ratios created a unique situation where disability was not "visible" nor interfered with the normalcy of the child

care environment.

While sharing their perceptions, parents may hesitate to express negative concerns due to societal beliefs and values of how individuals should feel about children with disabilities. Responses could have been skewed by a need to give responses viewed as socially acceptable. It may be difficult for the parents to acknowledge their own negative emotions about inclusion. Although responses remained anonymous, parents may withhold important aspects of their perceptions if they feel it will cause them to be looked down upon. It may be possible that those with more pleasant experiences with inclusion or more positive attitudes regarding inclusion were more likely to take the time to be interviewed.

Unfortunately, the current study had an extremely low response rate at twenty-three percent. This is especially surprising because upon enrollment of the child development center, parents are aware that research is regularly conducted and it is a possibility they will be asked to participate. In the future, an incentive to participants could have offered a better response rate. Also, the timing of recruitment fell right during a chaotic time as the end of an academic semester was approaching. Being part of the university caused timing conflicts as participants who are professors, advisors, or students had trouble scheduling an hour and a half interview.

Lastly, due to geographical reasons, the sample within this study may not be generalizable to parental perceptions in other areas. High income level parents are not a general population and were unique to the specific setting of this study. All inclusive preschools are unique as they have different parent populations and could have a variety of different disabilities in the classroom. It would be interested to explore the perceptions, thoughts, and concerns of parents at other child care centers with lower star ratings, different parent populations, or different types of disabilities in the classroom.

Despite these limitations, this study added to the field of research in ways that support inclusion as it is showed similar results of other studies, parents seeing inclusion as building compassion, empathy, and understanding of differences in peers specifically in preschool settings. The study illustrates parental perceptions, which allows inclusive centers to understand the parents of nondisabled children and better prepare them for inclusion. Parents want more information and education available to them. Tools could include, but are not limited to, increased communication with teachers, involvement within the classroom, understanding disabilities, and being able to explain disabilities to a young child. Creating brochures, workshops, or programs to teach parents about inclusion, types of disabilities present in their child's classroom, and child friendly language to help with understanding may assist in preparation and increase parental support and readiness.

### **Future Research**

Due to a low response rate from fathers, the current study was unable to compare mother and father responses. Future studies could investigate paternal perceptions versus maternal perceptions regarding inclusion. This could branch out further into how different parenting styles perceive and handle situations regarding diversity and limitations.

Further research could be conducted to examine the amounts of time teachers actually spent with individual children in preschool classrooms, with or without special needs. Research could validate whether or not time and attention is taken away from certain children and reasons behind the teachers division of time. The current study suggested that parents hesitate when deciding which child care center to enroll their child in, when it comes to an inclusive environment. Future research could further examine which factors are relevant in contributing to a parent's decision to enroll a child into a specific program.

## **Practical Implementation**

As participants in the current study held high expectations on teachers to inform families and maintain a classroom balance, future studies could examine teacher perceptions or preparedness for managing an inclusive preschool classroom. Using these results, researchers could create preparation programs or family education programs to teach families how to communicate effectively with their nondisabled children. These programs would also need further research to test their effectiveness and value.

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**APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL**



**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**  
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office**  
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682  
600 Moyer Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · [www.ecu.edu/irb](http://www.ecu.edu/irb)

Notification of Initial Approval (Committee)

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: [Erica Maine](#)  
CC: [Natalia Sira](#)  
Date: 4/18/2013  
Re: [UMCIRB 13-000159](#)  
Parental Perceptions of Inclusive Classrooms

I am pleased to inform you that at the convened meeting on 3/20/2013 2:00 PM of Social/Behavioral IRB, the committee voted to approve the above study. Approval of the study and the consent form(s) is for the period of 4/14/2013 to 3/20/2014.

The Social/Behavioral IRB deemed this study Minimal Risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description	Modified	Version
<a href="#">Demographic Survey</a>   <a href="#">History</a>	Surveys and Questionnaires	2/1/2013	0.01
<a href="#">Erica Maine Thesis</a>   <a href="#">History</a>	Study Protocol or Grant Application	2/1/2013	0.01
<a href="#">Informed Consent Form</a>   <a href="#">History</a>	Consent Forms	3/13/2013	0.03
<a href="#">Interview Questions Script</a>   <a href="#">History</a>	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions	2/1/2013	0.01
<a href="#">Letter to Parents</a>   <a href="#">History</a>	Recruitment Documents/Scripts	3/13/2013	0.04

The following UMCIRB members were recused for reasons of potential for Conflict of Interest on this research study:

None

The following UMCIRB members with a potential Conflict of Interest did not attend this IRB meeting:

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IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418  
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

Informant #: \_\_\_\_\_

Time/Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Possible prompts to clarify or expand:

- What do you mean?
- Can you give me an example of that?
- How so?
- In what way?
- What was that like for you?
- Tell me a story

Explain that the interview will be recorded, but all information will be kept confidential. If at any point they feel uncomfortable they can refuse to answer a question or leave the interview at any time without penalty.

You responded to a letter sent home about research being conducted on parent's perceptions of preschool classroom environments within the Nancy W Darden Child Development Center. Could you tell me about your involvement in your child's classroom?

Within the last year, what changes have you noticed in your child's behavior? Has your child expressed different eating, sleeping, playing, or communication habits?

Tell me about the social expectations you have for your child at this point in their life.

Have you talked to your child's teacher about these expectations?

Do you feel the classroom environment is helping your child meet these expectations?

Could you give me an example of your child's social interactions with their peers?

Do you feel it's appropriate for children at such an early age to be introduced to special needs children? Is it too early or too late? Tell me about your philosophy.

Have you ever heard of the inclusion philosophy? Tell me what you know.

Inclusive classrooms incorporate children with disabilities into a typical school setting with typically developing children. Were you aware that your child is enrolled in an inclusive classroom?

Do you have the opportunity to gain access to information about inclusion in your child's classroom? If yes, how so?

Have you taken any steps to learn more about inclusion or gain information about the disabilities present in your child's classroom?

Do you feel comfortable talking to your child about their classmates with special needs?

Has your child had burning questions to ask you after being introduced to a classmate with limitations or special abilities?

Tell me about a time your child has talked to you about a classmate with special needs or any stories about behaviors they have witnessed in the classroom.

What was your reaction and how did you respond to these questions/stories?

Were you (or are you) prepared to answer the questions related to other children's limitations or disabilities in terms your child could understand?

Have you talked to your child's teacher about your child's questions/stories about their classmate with special needs?

What were your concerns (or what would be your concerns) when a special needs child was introduced to your child's classroom?

Do you think your child is able to understand limitations of other children?

Do you feel that having your child in an inclusive setting, staff is able to provide your child with appropriate educational and social needs? How so?

What could your child's classroom do differently to help your family be more prepared or more supportive of inclusion?

What do you believe are some strengths of enrolling a typically developing child in an inclusive classroom?

What do you believe are some weaknesses of enrolling a typically developing child in an inclusive classroom?

If you had a choice to select, would you select this classroom for your child or another one, without a special needs child enrolled?

Is there anything else you would like to mention that I haven't asked about?

Thank them for their time, then give them a debriefing and see if they have any questions.

## APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student at East Carolina University's Department of Child Development and Family Relations. I am asking you to take part in my research study aiming to investigate parental perceptions of the environment within preschool classrooms in the Nancy W. Darden Child Development Center (NDCDC). By conducting this research, the research team would like to learn more about preschool classroom environments and how to provide the most support for families. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will not influence your child's standing within the NDCDC.

You are being invited to take part in this research because your child is enrolled in a preschool classroom at the Nancy W. Darden Child Development Center. The amount of time it will take you to complete this study is approximately an hour and a half. Data will be collected via face-to-face interviews with the principal investigator. Interviews will be conducted in a private office space at the Nancy W. Darden Child Development Center, at a time convenient to you. For data collection, interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for coding. However, the information you provide will not be linked to you in any way as the transcriptions will change names and identifying information. Therefore, your responses cannot be traced back to you by anyone. The audio recordings and transcriptions will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and on a double password protected computer only the researcher has access to. Audio tapes will be erased upon completion of the researcher's thesis defense (approximately December 2013). You will also be asked to complete a demographic survey. The demographic surveys are coded to each interview script. Only the principal investigator has access to this coding list. All of this information will be shredded upon completion of thesis defense as well.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the UMCIRB Office at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00am-5:00pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of UMCIRB Office, at 252-744-1971.

You do not have to take part in this research, and you can stop at any time without penalty. If you decide you are willing to take part in this study, please continue by emailing the principle investigator at [mainee07@students.ecu.edu](mailto:mainee07@students.ecu.edu) or calling the principle investigator at (336)782-6850 to schedule an interview time.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research.

Sincerely,

Erica L. Maine, Principal Investigator  
Dr. Natalia Sira, Research Adviser

## **APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT**

Title of Research Study: Parental Perceptions of the Environment within Preschool Classrooms

Principal Investigator: Erica L Maine

Institution/Department or Division: East Carolina University Child Development and Family Relations

Address: 2008 Tower Place Apt. H Greenville NC 27858

Telephone #: (336)782-6850

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Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study problems in society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. Our goal is to try to find ways to improve the lives of you and others. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

### **Why is this research being done?**

The purpose of this research is to learn how parents view preschool classroom environments and provide feedback to create tools to increase classroom support, which would allow children to develop to their fullest potential. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn how preschool classrooms can create a supportive environment for families.

### **Why am I being invited to take part in this research?**

You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a parent of a child enrolled in a preschool classroom at the Nancy W. Darden Child Development Center (NWDCDC). If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 15 people to do so.

### **Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?**

I understand I should not volunteer for this study if I am under 18 years of age or do not have a child enrolled in a preschool classroom at the Nancy W. Darden Child Development Center.

### **What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?**

You can choose not to participate.

### **Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?**

The research procedures, semi-structured interviews, will be conducted at the Nancy W. Darden Child Development Center in a private office space. You will need to come to the preschool office, Rivers 171, located in the child development center one time during the study. The total amount of time you will



be asked to volunteer for this study is an hour and a half during the time you schedule with the principal investigator.

**What will I be asked to do?**

You are being asked to do the following: If you wish to participate in the study, you will be answering interview questions one-on-one with the researcher. The one-on-one interviews will be audio recorded for later transcription. Questions in the interview will ask about your views on preschool classroom environments, your child's behaviors, and your expectations for your child. You will then be asked to fill out a demographic survey at the conclusion of the interview.

**What possible harms or discomforts might I experience if I take part in the research?**

It has been determined that the risks associated with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life.

**What are the possible benefits I may experience from taking part in this research?**

We do not know if you will get any benefits by taking part in this study. This research might help us learn more about preschool classroom environments and how to provide the most support for families. There may be no personal benefit from your participation but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

**Will I be paid for taking part in this research?**

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

**What will it cost me to take part in this research?**

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

**Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?**

To do this research, ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- The research supervisor, Dr. Natalia Sira, may use your information as she oversees your wellbeing during the research.

**How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?**

Demographic surveys, transcriptions, and audio recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Interview recordings will be erased and computer files will be deleted upon completion of the researcher's thesis defense (approximately December 2013). Surveys and interview recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, while interview transcriptions will be kept on a computer under double-password protected files. All transcribed interviews and demographic surveys will be coded with no identifying factors attached. Transcriptions will include name changes to prevent identification. Paper information will be shredded upon completion of the researcher's thesis defense (approximately December 2013).

**What if I decide I do not want to continue in this research?**

If you decide you no longer want to be in this research after it has already started, you may stop at any time. There will be no negative consequences for stopping. Your child's standing within the Nancy W. Darden Child Development Center will not be influenced.

**Who should I contact if I have questions?**

The people conducting this study will be available to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at (336)782-6850 (days Monday through Friday, Hours 1:00pm- 8:00pm)

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office for Human Research Integrity (OHRI) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the OHRI, at 252-744-1971.

**I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?**

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.

- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- I know that by choosing to participate or to stop participating does not influence my child's standing within the Nancy W. Darden Child Development Center.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

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**Participant's Name (PRINT)**

**Signature**

**Date**

**Person Obtaining Informed Consent:** I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

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**Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)**

**Signature**

**Date**

