

Examining the Perceptions of Families, Teachers, and Administrators of Preschool Programs Meeting the Needs of Young Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

Statefunded preschool programs in the United States (US) increased substantially in the recent years, often times without evaluating how effective the programs are at meeting the needs of all children, including children with special needs. This study sought to investigate how families, teachers, and principals perceived how state funded preschool programs in an urban school district in the US met the needs of young children with special needs and their families. Participants included 301 parents of children with special needs, 45 teachers, and 30 principals. Overall, all stakeholders identified the programs' structure, personnel, and home to school connections as strengths, and believed that the preschool programs were an appropriate place for young children with special needs. Parents and teachers indicated satisfaction with the frequency of communication; however, both parents and principals still wanted to see an increase in communication between home and school. Areas needing improvement included critical elements needed in preschool programs related to human resources, increased funding, and appropriate adult-child ratios.

Keywords: special education, disabilities, early childhood, preschool, parents

1. Introduction

Given that young children who attend quality preschools tend to have more academic success later in school (e.g., Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2009), there has been an increase of attention in the United States (US) to enhancing the support of statefunded preschool programs leading to more children enrolling in preschool than ever before (Barnett & Carolan, 2013).

Although in recent years there was a downturn in funding, due to the impact of the recession, the support for state funded preschool programs has begun to increase again and now enroll 28% of all 4-year-olds in the US (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, & Clarke Brown, 2013). The expansion of these preschool programs has created more opportunities to identify children with special needs and to serve children with disabilities in least restrictive environments (Barnett & Carolan, 2013).

However, with this increase of children served through state funded preschool programs, more focus needs to be directed at evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the programs to meet the needs of young children (Mathis, 2012). There are serious concerns that there are not adequate resources available to ensure the quality and effectiveness of these state funded preschool programs, since 41% of children attend programs that met only 50% or less of the quality standard benchmarks for preschools (e.g., class size of 20 or less) (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, & Clarke Brown, 2013).

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Although these quality standards benchmarks do not guarantee quality, the benchmarks do provide some insights into how state funded preschool programs are striving towards enhancing the resources available to young children. It is also vital that these state funded preschool programs deliver high quality services and supports to children with special needs and their families (Sandall, McLean, Santos, & Smith, 2000).

The recognition of the importance of preschool programs has been noted and shaped by history, legislation, research, and our views of child development. Yet, it is key that the programs available are of high quality; thus improving preschool programs requires a focus on offering evidence-based curriculum and practices, supporting the needs of families, providing professional development for staff, and systematically monitoring and assessing the programs (Engle et al., 2014). Determining how to define and measure dimensions of quality in preschool programs has not been agreed upon by the field or policy makers, which has led to assessments that focus on a wide range of components such as classroom dynamics and interactions, staffing characteristics, support services, and funding (Mathis, 2012). Nevertheless, for a preschool program to be of high quality, it needs to have foundation in developmentally appropriate practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), even though for young children with special needs there is also a necessity to provide more specialized practices (DEC, 2014).

According to the Division of Early Child's (DEC) Recommended Practices (2014), high quality in programs, those that enhance the learning outcomes and development of young children with special needs, include a targeted focus on practices related to issues such as assessment, instruction, family, and transition. Quality preschool programs should have a strong emphasis on the process of learning and development, and not just on the end products, which can be accomplished by ensuring that preschool teachers implement curriculum that allows for children to engage in play, to self-initiate their learning, and to provide opportunities for creative expression (NAEYC, 2008). Furthermore, preschool teachers sought to promote the child's social-emotional development and encourage the child to have positive interactions with others (DEC, 2014). Other critical components of quality preschool programs include having a competent and capable staff and having adequate administrative support (DEC, 2014; NAEYC, 2008).

Within these preschool programs developmentally appropriate practices have been advocated for young children with special needs based on the recognition that early experiences and later outcomes are linked (Sandall, McLean, Santos, & Smith, 2000). These practices should ultimately encourage a close match between the program, the family, and the child in order for the unique needs of all to be met. A developmentally appropriate curriculum focuses on the process of how children learn within the classroom; construct activities that are both age appropriate and individually appropriate, are relevant and concrete to the children; and take into consideration the social and cultural contexts of children's lives (NAEYC, 2008). Furthermore, developmentally appropriate programs identify, accept, and respect the values and diversity of families and children by encouraging the types of interactions that promote a shared sense of responsibility and collaboration with professionals and service providers (Trivette & Dunst, 2000). In general when looking at the quality of preschool programs with young children with special needs, it has been shown that they are as good as, if not better than, programs that do not include them (Knoche, Peterson, Edwards, & Jeon, 2006). Establishing families as educational partners and advocates for their children is encouraged and reflected in US legislative mandates. The majority of US families of children with special needs will become involved in their child's preschool programs as a variety of services are provided to assist their child transition from early intervention to preschool (Hanson et al., 2000). Families of children with special needs make critical decisions about what services their children receive to achieve the goals that are most beneficial to their child. Thus, the family's perspective on the effectiveness of services provided to their child with special needs is essential, in addition to the valuable information families provide about themselves and their child (Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2008; Malone & Gallagher, 2009).

Due to the challenges in providing appropriate services to young children with disabilities in state funded preschool programs, this study focused on how families, teachers, and principals felt about how these preschools were meeting the needs of young children (ages 3-5) with special needs and their families. More specifically, we sought to understand families, teachers, and principals' perceptions of state funded preschool programs across 31 schools in a large, urban school district in the US. The inclusion of multiple stakeholders and the use of interviews and surveys in the study provided an opportunity to examine the satisfaction of parents and key professionals in the education of young children with special needs.

2. Methodology

2.1 Setting

The study was conducted in large, urban school district in the US that was composed of a diverse student population (48% Caucasian; 35% Black, non-Hispanic; 14% Hispanic; 3% other minority groups). The school district has a long history of offering a variety of services and programs to support the needs of young children with special needs and their families. For this study, we specifically focused on state funded full-day preschool programs that served young children with special needs. All the preschool programs included: family education, support and assistance; receptive and expressive language activities; multi-sensory stimulation; cognitive and pre-academic development; social skills training; behavior management; and teaching appropriate play with toys. There were a total of 57 full-time preschool classrooms at 31 public schools throughout the school district. At the time of the study, most of the children with special needs who were provided with special education services in these preschool classrooms were identified as developmentally delayed (52%) or speech and language delayed (40%).

2.2 Participants

Parents. All parents with children with special needs currently enrolled in one of the full-day preschool classes were mailed a survey. A total of 301 surveys were completed and returned by the parents of children with special needs. Due to school district requirements, a follow-up survey to parents who did not respond was not permitted. Sixty-three percent of the parents reported that their child had been in an early childhood program one year or less. The majority of parents (67%) indicated that their child had a speech and language delay and 14% of the parents had a child with a developmental delay. The remaining parents reported that their child was identified under another category of disability (e.g., emotionally disturbed, autistic), with no category comprising more than 3% of the sample.

Teachers. All teachers in the full-day preschool classes were asked to participate in the study and were provided with a survey to complete. Forty-five teachers (79%) completed and returned the survey. The majority of the teachers are female (n=43) and 58% of the teachers indicated having only a Bachelor's degree and 42% stated they had an advance degree. All the teachers were certified to teach in the early childhood program. The teachers had an average of 9.9 years of teaching experience of which 3.7 years were in early childhood programs.

Principals. All school principals (n=31) who had state funded full-day preschool programs at their school were asked to participate in a telephone interview in which all but one participated. The principals had an average of 8.1 years of administrative experience and averaged 3.4 years as principal of their current school. Furthermore, the principals reported that the preschool program had been at their school for an average of five years, and that they had 1.4 years of experience working with an early childhood program at a previous school.

2.3 Measures

Development of instruments. The instruments (interview and surveys) used were developed by the researchers in collaboration with school district personnel to achieve the study's goal of determining stakeholders' perceptions and experiences with preschool programs in the school district.

School district guidelines placed certain constraints on the researchers in the development of the instruments including length, content, and issues surrounding confidentiality of respondents. At the request of the school district, principals were the only group interviewed via the telephone while teachers and parents completed a survey.

All items on each instrument were derived from three sources: classroom observations, school district guidelines, and a focus group interview with educators. The first step was to conduct classroom observations ($n=6$) in three different preschool classrooms to familiarize the researchers with the structure of these classrooms and the children. During the observations, the researchers took notes in the following areas: curriculum, classroom structure and set-up, daily schedules and activities, behavior management plan, materials and supplies, modes of home/school communication, and key components of the programs.

The school district provided the researchers with guidelines and descriptions of key components of the preschool program. A focus group interview was conducted at the school district's main office with teachers. The group discussion consisted of questions about classroom programming and curriculum, support services, and home/school communication. This discussion provided participants with an opportunity to express their views and opinions and exchange ideas with other participants in the session. The focus group interview was structured and conducted based on the recommended procedures provided by Krueger and Casey (2014). The final step involved conducting a pretest of the instruments with key personnel in the school district. The primary purpose of the pretest was to determine the clarity and consistency of responses within interview and survey questions.

Parent survey. The parent survey consisted of seven questions that focused on the types and frequency of communication parents had with the teacher (e.g., How often do you and the teacher communicate about activities you can do at home with your child?). In addition, parents were asked to respond to 12 Likert-type items (1=strongly disagreed, 4=strongly agreed), which had them rate different preschool program components. The Cronbach alpha for the parent survey was .95. Parents were presented with items such as: I believe the class activities are appropriate for meeting the needs of my child; I am comfortable doing activities the teacher sends home with my child; and I believe my child's teacher is prepared to meet the needs of my child. The survey also included an open-ended question that asked parents to share any additional comments about their child's preschool program.

Teacher survey. The teacher survey consisted of 16 items, which required the teachers to rate components of the preschool program using a four point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagreed, 4=strongly agreed). A sample of items included: This is an appropriate placement for the majority of children in my class; I am provided with sufficient paraprofessional support; and resources are available to meet the needs of the children with disabilities in my class. In addition, teachers were asked five questions, which focused on the frequency and types of communication they had with parents of children with special needs (e.g., How often do you communicate with parents about their child's progress?). The Cronbach alpha for the survey was calculated at .75. The survey concluded with an open-ended question requesting additional comments about their preschool program.

Principal telephone interview. A telephone interview was developed to determine principals' perceptions of the state funded full-day preschool program at their school including strengths and areas of needed improvement.

Each interview consisted of six open-ended questions with probes of which the following is a sample: Please describe the preschool program in your school; Identify and describe some strengths you see in the preschool program at your school (e.g., facilitators); and Identify and describe areas in which you would like to see improvement for the preschool program (e.g., barriers, inhibitors). Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes with the interviewer taking notes and including salient quotations

2.4 Data Analysis

Data from the interviews and open-ended survey questions were gathered and coded using qualitative methodology (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Three flows of analysis were applied for summarizing the data in the interviews and open-ended survey responses (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The first flow of analysis involved the two researchers independently summarizing the written interview data. Key themes were identified and the researchers met to discuss their findings. The second flow of analysis included the development of data summaries on each theme. This included written summaries of key topics (e.g., key components of the preschool program).

These data summaries were presented to the research team and findings were negotiated using the group mind process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Rules were revised as needed and all salient phrases and sentences were read to insure they were placed in the appropriate theme. The third flow of analysis involved drawing conclusions and verifying findings. Contradictory evidence was examined and firmly established conclusions reported. Findings were summarized to reflect the major themes that emerged in the analysis supported by representative quotations. Furthermore, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the Likert-type items on the teacher and parent surveys.

3. Results

Careful examination of the data revealed that across stakeholder groups there was consistency in regard to the preschool program strengths and areas needing improvement. Overall, principals, teachers, and parents were satisfied with different aspects of the programs. The data have been collapsed across stakeholder groups to highlight the salient issues that were raised and further supported with representative quotations by the stakeholders.

3.1 Positive Perceptions of Preschool Programs

Meeting the needs of children with special needs. A primary strength cited by all three stakeholder groups was the positive influence the programs had on children with special needs. Accordingly, 63% of the principals emphasized the importance of the programs and reported that they were a positive and necessary component of the school's educational services. Principals also emphasized the impact that preschool programs have on the language development, social skills, and behavior of young children with special needs. One principal reported, "I think it is great that people have finally realized that children should be treated at a younger age. It makes a difference." While another principal stated, "Observe these classes at the beginning of each day. They will make your day. I think these types of programs really help students improve in areas they are lacking."

Many of the teachers indicated that they were satisfied with their preschool program and their job as highlighted by the following quotes, "The children show a great deal of improvement by the end of the school year. It is a wonderful experience for teachers, parents, and students" and the program "is a nicely designed program, with appropriate workshops/strategies offered to the teacher." Additionally, teachers reported high levels of satisfaction on the survey with several aspects of the programs including that the children were aware of the classroom's daily schedule (3.82), and believed most of the children in their class were appropriately placed (3.49) (see Table 1).

Overall, parents would recommend the preschool programs to other parents of children with special needs (3.79), were satisfied with the child's program (3.73), and felt that their child's program was an appropriate placement for their child (3.71) (see Table 2). Parents were satisfied with the progress their child had made while enrolled especially in the areas of speech and language, and social and motor development. As one parent wrote, "I have been very pleased with our son's progress over the past six months. He has improved significantly in language and social skills." Another parent stated, "Since my child has been in the program I have seen so much improvement."

Program personnel. Principals also felt very strongly about the quality of the instructional staff in the programs. Eighty-three percent of the principals reported that their teachers were the key to their program's success. Many of the principals echoed the comments of this one, "Teachers are our biggest strength. They have lots of initiative and energy. These teachers have received good training which allowed them to provide these kids with the best learning methods."

Most of the teachers (89%) reported that the paraprofessional assigned to their classroom was knowledgeable about working with children with special needs. However, teachers did state that further preparation of paraprofessionals was needed before they entered the classroom. As one teacher noted, "They need to be required to take classes on children's disabilities, behavior management, and toileting skills."

Table 1: Teachers' Satisfaction with Preschool Programs (n=45)

Statement	M	SD
Children are aware of daily schedule	3.82	0.53
Appropriate placement for children	3.49	0.63
Paraprofessional knowledgeable about exceptional children	3.45	0.73
Satisfied with communication frequency	3.28	0.75
Topics for professional development s are relevant	3.27	0.69
Social workers assist with children's families	3.27	0.72
Provide activities for parents	3.20	0.63
Monthly allocation sufficient to purchase materials	3.20	0.84
Administrators support early childhood program	3.20	0.97
Provided with sufficient paraprofessional support	3.18	0.94
School district provides assistance upon request	3.14	0.91
Sufficient space for learning centers	3.07	0.89
Attend early childhood special education workshops	3.04	0.88
Resources meet needs of children with special needs	2.78	0.97
Child-teacher ratio allows the needs of all children to be met	2.48	1.15
Materials are replaced as needed	1.96	1.02

Note: 1=strongly disagree; 4=strongly agree

Parents indicated their satisfaction with their child's program personnel by noting the quality and professionalism of the staff. "Your teachers deserve this credit because without them our kids wouldn't achieve as much as they do. My daughter loves her teachers. Thumbs up to allyour Pre-K teachers and assistants" composed a satisfied parent. Another parent stated, "I am very pleased with the program my son has been placed in. The teachers are wonderful, and I already see a change in my son's speaking. I don't know what I would have done without this program."

Home/School connections. Another commonly cited strength of the programs was its emphasis on parent communication with 44% of the principals indicating that home/school connections were a particular strength of the programs.

Principals commented in this way, “We have regular newsletters that parents receive each week. Also the parents receive constant information on parent involvement from the teachers” and “A major component of our program is family involvement. The teachers interact with the parents constantly. Our program also involves home visits.”

Table 2: Parents' Satisfaction and Perceptions of Preschool Programs (n=301)

Statement	M	SD
Recommend preschool program	3.79	.64
Satisfied with preschool program	3.73	.71
Appropriate placement for my child	3.71	.69
Comfortable with activities sent home	3.71	.73
Activities are appropriate for my child	3.62	.73
Teacher prepared to meet child's need	3.64	.68
Paraprofessional knowledgeable about my child	3.64	.73
Activities encourage child's independence	3.61	.74
Familiar with teacher's classroom management	3.59	.79
Assessment results are shared with me	3.59	.84
Satisfied with communication frequency	3.55	.84
Familiar with activities in classroom	3.54	.76

Note: 1=strongly disagree; 4=strongly agree

The majority of teachers were satisfied with the frequency of communication they have with their students' parents (3.28) and provided activities for parents to do with their children at home (3.20) (see Table 1). Fifty-one percent of teachers said that they communicated with parents about their child's progress and 58% communicated about the child's behavior in the classroom on a daily basis. In addition, teachers indicated that on a weekly basis they discussed activities with parents of children with special needs that can be done at home (42%). The most frequently identified modes of communication emphasized by teacher survey respondents were visits (98%), telephone calls (91%), and newsletters (87%).

Overall, parents were satisfied with the frequency of communication with their child's teacher (3.55) and felt comfortable with the activities the teacher sends home (3.71) (see Table 2). “The teacher is wonderful with the kids and has always been available to listen to my concerns about J. and offers useful advice.” Forty-four percent of parents indicated that they communicated with the teacher about their child's progress on a daily basis, and 41% discussed with the teacher their child's behavior during the school day. Furthermore, parents indicated that teachers provided them with activities to do with their child at home on a weekly basis (43%) and that they visited their child's classroom (36%).

The most frequently identified modes of communication reported by parents on the survey were daily progress/behavior reports (72%), visits (61%), and newsletters (60%). Moreover, parents indicated that their preferred mode of communication was the daily progress/behavior reports (53%). Although parents indicated satisfaction with the frequency of communication, some parents still reported wanting an increase in communication between home and school. As the following two parents reported, “We would appreciate better communication with the teacher on the activities in the classroom and our daughter's progress in the program.

Also, we would like to know how to implement activities in the home” and “We would like to have more communication with our son's teacher. Our son has been in this program for almost six months and there is no communication between the teacher and myself.”

3.2 Areas Needing Improvement in Preschool Programs

Program supports. An area of concern reported by principals and teachers focused on critical elements needed in place for program's success particularly in the area of human resources. Although principals were positive about the quality and professionalism of preschool teachers, 57% indicated concerns about other areas of staffing. Some principals indicated the need for more support staff (e.g., family counselors, speech therapists) while others registered concerns about the quality of the substitute pool for handling the needs of this population of children. A principal commented, "The few times that the program's aide has been out, it has been impossible to find a substitute aide. ... The district should train a group of aides to be on call." In addition, 30% of principals indicated that additional program areas were in need of improvement including more informational sessions for parents and better procedures for transition into kindergarten.

Several teachers stressed the need for school sites and administrators to be prepared for new preschool programs being implemented at their schools. The following quote highlights this need, "The school needs to be prepared for us. They weren't ready. There was a classroom prepared. That was it. Maybe in the future, we can train some of the administration as to what the needs are going to be."

Funding and resources. There was general consensus among principals and teachers that funding for the preschool programs put constraints on the school budget. Seventy-seven percent of the principals indicated that the budget was a major concern.

Related to budget considerations was the issue of resources with over 70% of the principals raising concerns about resources. While most reported they had at least adequate resources, principals also felt they needed to tap into additional funds to provide them. Requests for additional resources were scattered, but included such items as technology, fieldtrips, classroom space, kitchen equipment, and health-related resources (e.g., immunizations). The majority of principals (67%) indicated that dipping into the other parts of the school budget was necessary when replacing instructional materials in the preschool programs.

Overwhelmingly, teachers responded that the replacement of materials was an issue that concerned them. Teachers commented that replacing materials once used or broken was difficult due to the absence of systemic guidelines for how to order new materials as well as a lack of funds. Teachers' made the following statements, "I have a relatively new preschool program and when they start-up they give you a good supply of your basics for block area, for housekeeping. For an early childhood program, I don't think they address the issue of when you run out." and "I do wish that we had more classroom space, materials were replenished instead of me having to buy toys, books and art supplies."

Adult-child ratio. The issue of ratios and appropriate coverage in the preschool programs was a concern shared by all and noted as an area needing improvement. Many teachers reported dissatisfaction with the adult-child ratio in their classrooms and gave it a lower rating (2.48). Teachers were concerned that the larger classes were not allowing them to meet the needs of all the children with special needs. Teachers expressed this concern by stating, "I feel our classes are too large. There needs to be a cap on the class so we can better meet the needs of the children" and "With so many students, you just don't have the time to address all their needs." Parents whose children were in larger classes also expressed their concern about adult-child ratio. As this parent expressed, "I feel children with special needs should be in smaller groups so that the teacher can concentrate and help them a little more one-on-one. The teacher can't when there is a dozen children with all different needs." Another parent made similar comments, "I feel that the preschool class is overcrowded."

4. Discussion

This study provides information regarding the perceptions of families, teachers and principals regarding how state funded full-day preschool programs are at meeting the needs of young children with special needs and their families.

Overall, all stakeholder groups identified the programs' structure, personnel, and home to school connections as major strengths. Stakeholders reported being satisfied with the overall quality of the preschool programs, believed that the programs were an appropriate place for young children with special needs, and would refer others to the services provided by the preschool programs. These findings are consistent with other studies that have measured levels of satisfaction with early intervention services (e.g., Bailey, Hebbeler, Scarborough, Spiker, & Mallik, 2004; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2012). Overall, parents and principals had positive perceptions of the teachers in the preschool programs, which can be viewed by families as an indicator of a quality program (Yamamoto & Li, 2012). Principals, teachers, and parents also expressed the importance of providing children with special needs with support services as early as possible and maintaining the continuity of these services over time as needed. This finding was also consistent with a theme (i.e., Families Must be Supported Earlier) that emerged in a study by Brotherson, Sheriff, and Milburn (2001) that children with special needs and their families need to be provided the necessary supports early on. The importance of identifying children with special needs during the early years and providing appropriate services to them and to their families is vital. The experiences children with special needs have early on can establish the attitudes, behaviors, and competencies that later can contribute to patterns that are directly related to long-term school success (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001).

Overall, stakeholders cited that the preschool program at their schools was of high quality due in part to the home and school connections that are established. Parents and teachers indicated satisfaction with the frequency of communication; however, both parents and principals still wanted to see an increase in communication between the home and the school. Although teachers and principals perceive that they are making extensive efforts to establish effective patterns of communication with parents, still many parents perceived the level and type of communication insufficient and wanted more.

Parental participation is critical since the child is embedded within the context of the family thereby the family has the potential to have the greatest impact and influence on a child's development. Furthermore, many of the early childhood programs are seen as extended families for children which further sheds light on the need to continue to support families and their chosen level of involvement, regardless of the degree of involvement.

Principals and teachers identified the need for additional funding and resources as another area needing improvement. Funding shortages were identified as having an impact on the availability of resources, replacement of worn or broken materials, and personnel specifically support staff and a quality substitute pool. The issue of funding was also identified as a perceived challenge and a high priority item by principals in other studies (e.g., Brotherson, Sheriff, & Milburn, 2001). Other areas cited by stakeholders as needing improvement included providing more preparation for paraprofessionals working with young children with special needs and allocating additional related services to children with disabilities (e.g., speech therapy, occupational therapy). As more and more young children are meeting eligibility criteria for a variety of programs and support services, the availability of funds continues to be stressed and state budgets are still recovering. In light of this, many preschool programs are feeling the financial pressure and are trying to make creative and innovative changes to meet current and future demands.

The majority of principals, teachers, and parents who participated in our study identified the need to decrease class size as an area in need of improvement and also one of concern. Although class sizes many times appeared small in comparison to other classrooms in the school, the variety children in each class made it difficult for teachers to meet the needs of each individual child. Smaller class sizes allows for more opportunities for teachers to initiate child center practices, which in turn may improve the child's performance (Watson, Handal, Maher, & McGinty, 2014).

4.1 Limitations and Implication of the Study

The results of this study should be viewed in light of some methodological limitations. Although the construct of satisfaction is "volatile", and difficult to define and measure (Schwartz & Baer, 1991), assessing satisfaction and dissatisfaction is critical to providing better programs and services for children with special needs and their families (Turan & Meadan, 2011). Social desirability may also be a source of bias in our study. In order to address the challenge of measuring satisfaction in our study, we employed the use of surveys that included a variety of questioning formats including open-ended questions. The use of open-ended questions may provide opportunities for individuals to raise topics not previously predicted while also encouraging individuals to express their dissatisfaction. A second limitation in our study was a lower than anticipated survey response rate, which was indicative of the constraints placed on us by the school district in not providing ways to contact non-respondents or conducting follow-up mailings. Furthermore, we were restricted by the school district from conducting interviews with parents due to confidentiality issues. However, we are confident that we obtained a fairly representative sample of parents based on demographic information provided by the school district.

The results of this study have implications for practice and for professionals working with young children with special needs and their families. As much of the literature has suggested, establishing effective home to school connections is vital for children in preschool programs. Although the language of US federal laws reflect a more family-centered approach to services, mandate parental involvement, and encourage parents to become equal partners with professionals, many experts still indicate that parental involvement in education is limited (e.g., Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Participation may be limited due to a number of factors (e.g., parenting styles, parental beliefs and values, experience with the formal educational system). However, it is that much more of a challenge for service providers to find appropriate ways to develop strong connections between the home and the school by keeping parents informed and involved in all aspects of their child's education, as well as recognizing that parents define involvement and participation in various ways. Professionals should be sensitive to the needs of all parents by making adaptations when interacting with them. Professionals can facilitate these interactions by using a more personalized approach, having respectful verbal and non-verbal interactions, simplifying educational jargon, and ensuring parents comprehension of their rights and special education procedures.

Moreover, professionals can consider inviting community liaisons to parent-teacher meetings, providing alternate forums for parents to voice their opinions and concerns (i.e., group meetings or family advisory boards), and meeting parents in "neutral" or family-friendly places in order to encourage more open and informal styles of communication (Parette & Petch-Hogan, 2000).

Another issue raised primarily by principals and teachers was the availability of resources and the replacement of materials. While principals reported they had at least adequate resources, they also felt they needed to tap into outside funds to provide and replace the necessary instructional materials for the programs. Moreover, teachers commented that replacing materials once used or broken was difficult due to the absence of systemic guidelines for how to order new materials. Furthermore, principals, teachers, and parents expressed a need for additional resources including technology. Due to this ongoing concern, preschool programs need to develop plans to ensure that all classrooms are equipped with the necessary materials and resources. Although most school districts provide an ample supply of classroom materials at the inception of a preschool program, ongoing replacement and enhancement of resources is crucial throughout the existence of the program. Principals and teachers must be able to project future needs as well as keep abreast of the latest advancements in resources for the classroom. Maintaining an ample supply of materials and resources is vital to the functioning of any classroom, but is it especially critical in early childhood classrooms where the curriculum focuses so strongly on a hands-on, exploratory approach to learning. Families could be included in replenishing supplies by sending home "need inventories" requesting for donations or specific supplies for the classroom.

In addition, community partnerships and links should be established with local businesses and interested parties to facilitate the acquisition of needed supplies and materials for classrooms.

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