Inclusion

Experiences of Early Childhood Special Education Teachers in Inclusive Classroom: A Phenomenological Study

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Corresponding Author:	Guofeng Shen University of Northern Colorado Greeley, Colorado UNITED STATES
First Author:	Guofeng Shen
Order of Authors:	Guofeng Shen
	Millicent M Musyoka
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Abstract:	The inclusion of children with disabilities in preschool classrooms is increasing, supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Head Start, which promote educating students with disabilities alongside their peers. Well-trained early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers are critical to the success of these inclusive programs. This study addresses a gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of ECSE lead teachers in inclusive preschool classroom settings. Using a phenomenological research design, qualitative interviews were conducted with fifteen ECSE lead teachers. Four major themes emerged: (a) ECSE lead teachers' perspective on inclusion, (b) ECSE lead teachers' emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support, (c) ECSE lead teachers' resilience in inclusive settings, and (d) ECSE lead teachers' suggestions for pre-service and in-service teachers. Findings and implications are discussed to inform future research, policy and practice.

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When everyone is included, everyone wins--Jesse Jackson

Introduction

Since the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975, later renamed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and then reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, children with disabilities have been guaranteed a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). These legislative updates, particularly the 2004 reauthorization, have reinforced and expanded provisions to support inclusion. It mandates that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities should be educated alongside their nondisabled peers. While IDEA does not specifically use the term "inclusion", the law states "Each public agency must ensure that... children with disabilities... are educated with children who are nondisabled" [§300.114(a)], implying support for inclusion.

Because the study focused on young children, the paper adopted the definition of inclusion provided by the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). According to their joint statement, inclusion in early childhood education refers to "the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society" (DEC/NAEYC, 2009, p.2). Based on this understanding, educators are charged with providing equal opportunities to all students, regardless of their level of functioning (Lawrence et al., 2016).

Inclusion has evolved into a widely valued and respected educational practice (DEC/NAEYC, 2009; U.S. Departments of Education & Health and Human Services, 2015). For example, Head Start, a federal program established in 1965 to provide comprehensive early childhood development services to low-income children, has aligned its practices with the principles of inclusion, as outlined in IDEA. Head Start, as a public agency, reserves at least 10% of its enrollment slots for children with disabilities in support of the IDEA mandate (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S.

Department of Education, 2015). This practice ensures that children with disabilities receive the necessary accommodations and can participate alongside their nondisabled peers. Inclusion benefits both children with disabilities (Bayrakli & Sucuoglu, 2018; Guralnick & Bruder, 2016; Odom et al., 2004) and those without disabilities (Noggle & Stites, 2018; Odom et al., 2004).

With the idea of inclusion embedded in IDEA, NAEYC, and HEAD START, there has been a growing emphasis on understanding how inclusion functions within community-based early childhood programs. These programs, which serve children in non-school settings such as childcare centers and preschools, are vital for ensuring that children with disabilities are included in diverse educational environments. Given the importance of these programs, it is imperative to study how educators contribute to and improve inclusive school environments. In agreement with Lawrence et al. (2016), a high-quality, inclusive early childhood program comprises three essential elements: access, participation, and support. By fostering collaboration among competent and nurturing families, caregivers, and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) teachers, these elements can significantly benefit young children with disabilities in attaining their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals.

Early Childhood Special Education Teachers

The field of ECSE has evolved over the past 40 years to meet the specific needs of young children with disabilities, from birth to age eight, and their families (Mickelson et al., 2022). In response to the growing recognition of these unique needs, dual training programs have emerged, providing educators with certification in both early childhood education and special education. These dual certification programs equip ECSE teachers with the skills to support a wide range of developmental needs in inclusive settings. In the current study, the ECSE teacher holds a special education degree and dual certification in both early childhood and special education, reflecting this trend. However, irrespective of their specific training and certification, ECSE teachers across the field report juggling multiple roles and responsibilities (Lava et al., 2004) while often experiencing work overload (LaRocco & Sopko, 2017). These complexities arise from teaching children with diverse special needs, engaging with families from varied backgrounds, collaborating with other service providers, supervising paraprofessionals, and fulfilling non-teaching administrative duties (Jeon et al., 2022; Lava et al., 2004).

The multiple roles vary with the nature of the ECSE teacher. In early childhood programs, the ECSE teacher falls under two categories depending on whether an ECSE teacher is the lead teaching instructor of a class. The first category contains an ECSE teacher working as an itinerant teacher or co-teacher with a general education instructor (Dinnebeil et al., 2019). Itinerant ECSE teachers serve young children with an IEP outside an ECSE classroom setting (Dinnebeil et al., 2019). Like other itinerant teachers in special education, they travel to multiple schools to work one-on-one or with a small group of students who require special education services (Meers, 2013). The second is an ECSE teacher working as the lead instructor in the inclusive classroom. They are responsible for implementing curricula for students without disabilities and those with disabilities, and making modifications and accommodations for children with disabilities.

Inclusive Classroom

A continuum of educational placement exists to meet the needs of children with disabilities for special education and related services, including regular (inclusive) classes (Scruggs et al., 2007), special classes (Friend et al., 2010), special schools (Burks-Keeley & Brown, 2014), and other non-school contexts (Scruggs et al., 2007) such as homes, hospitals, and other institutions. In the current paper, we have adopted the following definitions regarding diverse educational settings:

(a) Regular Inclusive Classes: These are general education classrooms where students with and without disabilities learn together, with the aim of promoting social integration and access to the general curriculum. Research has shown that inclusive settings can benefit all students by fostering peer interactions and diverse learning experiences (Scruggs et al., 2007).

(b) Special Classes: These classrooms are designed specifically for students with disabilities who require more focused instruction than what is available in regular classes. Special classes are often held within general education schools but offer a more tailored educational approach (Friend et al., 2010).

(c) Special Schools: These institutions provide education exclusively for students with disabilities. Special schools are equipped to address more intensive needs that may not be adequately supported in general or special education classrooms (Burks-Keeley & Brown, 2014).

(d) Non-School Contexts: This category includes educational settings outside of traditional schools, such as homes, hospitals, and other institutions. These environments are often used for students who require medical care or other specialized services alongside their education (Scruggs et al., 2007).

The current study focused on inclusive special education classes, which differ from both general inclusive classrooms and self-contained special education classrooms. Specifically, inclusive special education classrooms are designed for young children in early childhood education and follow a structured inclusion model where children with disabilities receive specialized instruction and support within a dedicated special education setting while also benefiting from inclusive practices that promote interaction with peers without disabilities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2015). These classrooms emphasize a universal design for learning (UDL) approach, fostering social, cognitive, and emotional development regardless of students' identities, abilities, and learning preferences (Brown et al., 2014; CAST, 2018).

The structure of inclusive classrooms varies depending on the co-teaching model implemented. Five co-teaching models commonly identified in inclusive settings include One Teach-One Assist, Team Teaching, Station Teaching, Parallel Teaching, and Alternative Teaching (Burks-Keeley & Brown, 2014; Friend et al., 2010; Scruggs et al., 2007). Table 1 outlines these models, illustrating how general and special education teachers collaborate to support diverse learners in inclusive settings.

The most popular in inclusive settings is the "one teach-one assist" model, in which the general education teacher teaches, and the special education teacher supports specific students with IEPs (Burks-Keeley & Brown, 2014; Friend et al., 2010; Scruggs et al., 2007). An alternative approach is team teaching, where both the general and special education teachers share instructional responsibilities equally, actively co-leading lessons and engaging in all aspects of instruction together. The third model, station teaching, adopts differentiated instruction, which groups students in different groupings and organizes the learning into stations or centers. The general and special education teachers work with students in the various stations on the same or similar content. In the fourth model, parallel teaching, the general and special education teachers simultaneously teach the same or similar

content. Still, the students are in two groups, with the special education teacher having the group with IEPs. The final alternative teaching model is another popular form of inclusive teaching, mostly called pull-out. The special education teacher may take some students to a different location for a limited period for specialized instruction.

Although there are studies on inclusion in early childhood education, the uniqueness of the current study is that the teachers involved did not follow any of the prescribed co-teaching models. In the current study, the ECSE teacher was the lead teacher and was assisted by one or two paraprofessionals. The ECSE teachers, as the lead teacher in the inclusive setting, tend to work with paraprofessionals who have minimal experience related to their job responsibilities (Brown et al., 2014; Frantz et al., 2022). Killoran et al. (2001) reported that 73% of ECSE paraprofessionals were high school graduates, 11% held a 2-year associate degree, and 13% held a bachelor's degree. In addition, research indicates that paraprofessionals start working in the ECSE settings without prior training, and the supervising ECSE teachers do not receive adequate training for their roles supporting and managing paraeducators (Frantz et al., 2022; Max & McCoy-Dailey, 2024). Additionally, their professional development is not always consistent (Max & McCoy-Dailey, 2024). Conversely, some ECSE teachers are dual certified in general education and special education teachers to implement curriculums for all students, adapt and modify them to meet the needs of students with diverse disabilities (Anderson et al., 2015; Blanton & Pugach, 2011). With this expected dual certification, the current study examined their experiences as lead teachers in inclusive classrooms.

Teacher Preparation

Research indicates that some ECSE teachers may not be adequately prepared in their teacher preparation programs to work with young children with disabilities (Bruder, 2016; McLeod et al., 2022). For example, Bruder (2016) showed coursework deficits in ECSE-specific content and a lack of field experiences in inclusive settings. Additionally, some ECSE teachers who expressed unpreparedness had lower self-efficacy in supporting and meeting the unique needs of young children with disabilities (Bruder et al., 2013). Further, ECSE teachers are more likely to leave the profession when they have less field experience in their preparation program (McLeod et al., 2022). Therefore,

due to significant national shortages, it is critical to prepare ECSE teachers well to retain them at work with young children in inclusive classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Today, most ECSE teacher preparation programs align with the guidelines and standards set by DEC and NAEYC (Chandler et al., 2012). However, research reported that the ECSE credentials, compared to all other disciplines, presented the most variability across the 50 states in the United States (Bruder, 2016). In addition, states needed more consistency regarding the exact ECSE licensures/certifications title (Bruder, 2016). The titles of ECSE include early childhood particular education specialist, special education preschool certificate, infant-toddler family specialist credential, teacher of children with disabilities 0-5, and special education preschool/EC endorsement, to name a few. Hence, to improve the field of ECSE and ECSE teacher preparation, it is crucial to understand what is happening in the classroom. The current study examined a group of trained ECSE teachers, the lead teachers in an inclusive classroom.

Purpose of the Study

Previous research has highlighted various challenges and perspectives faced by itinerant ECSE teachers (Dinnebeil et al., 2019) and general education teachers (Bryant, 2018). However, a significant gap remains in the literature concerning the experiences of ECSE teachers when they serve as lead teachers in inclusive settings. Most studies have focused on contexts where the general education teacher is the primary instructor, leaving a need for more research on how ECSE lead teachers navigate and manage inclusive classrooms. Past studies on inclusion have predominantly examined scenarios where general education teachers lead the instruction, which does not fully capture the unique dynamics of classrooms where ECSE teachers are in charge. This gap underscores the importance of exploring the specific experiences and challenges faced by ECSE lead teachers in inclusive early childhood education classrooms. Such research is essential for understanding how these educators manage their roles and to identify ways to enhance their preparation and professional development.

The purpose of this study is to fill this gap by examining the phenomenon of preschool inclusion from the perspective of ECSE lead teachers. The central question guiding this study is: "What are the lived experiences of ECSE lead teachers, and how can those experiences inform

improvements in ECSE teacher preparation and professional development programs?" To address this question, the study will explore the following sub-questions:

1. How do ECSE lead teachers perceive their preparedness for working in inclusive classrooms, including their training and professional development experiences?
2. What challenges do ECSE lead teachers encounter when supporting students with and without disabilities in inclusive settings?
3. What strategies do ECSE lead teachers use to address these challenges, and how do these strategies contribute to their professional resilience?
4. What recommendations do ECSE lead teachers have for improving pre-service preparation and in-service professional development to better support inclusive education?

By focusing on these aspects, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the role of ECSE lead teachers in inclusive settings, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of inclusion and informing future improvements in teacher training and support.

Theoretical Framework

The current study employed House's (1981) conceptual framework on work, support, and stress as a theoretical lens. Teachers in inclusive settings, like those in other educational environments, require various forms of support to effectively perform their roles and mitigate stress. Research has consistently shown that support systems are critical for teacher well-being, job satisfaction, and the successful implementation of inclusive practices (Dan, 2019; Moua, 2021). House's framework categorizes work support into four types: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. These supports are essential for addressing the unique challenges faced by ECSE lead teachers, who must navigate the complexities of inclusive classrooms while meeting the diverse needs of students with and without disabilities.

1. **Emotional support** often referred to as affective support, encompasses feelings of affection, respect, care, trust, and understanding that ECSE lead teachers receive from coworkers or supervisors. Emotional support is critical for reducing stress and fostering a sense of belonging and validation, which are particularly important in high-demand roles such as

inclusive teaching (Dan, 2019; Moua, 2021). Without emotional support, teachers may experience burnout, which can negatively impact their effectiveness and commitment to inclusive education.

2. **Instrumental support** involves tangible resources and practical assistance, such as access to materials, paraprofessionals, time, and space. This type of support is vital for enabling ECSE lead teachers to manage their workloads and implement effective instructional strategies (Rispoli et al., 2011). Instrumental support directly addresses the logistical challenges of inclusive classrooms, such as managing large class sizes and meeting individualized student needs.
3. **Informational support** includes knowledge, advice, and feedback that help ECSE lead teachers improve their practice. This support can take the form of professional development, training, or informal exchanges of effective teaching strategies (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017; Douglas et al., 2016). Informational support is particularly important for helping teachers stay current with evidence-based practices and adapt to the evolving demands of inclusive education.
4. **Appraisal support** provides teachers with feedback and opportunities for self-evaluation, enabling them to reflect on their practice and pursue professional growth. This support can come from formal evaluations, peer observations, or informal feedback from colleagues (House, 1981). Appraisal support helps teachers build confidence, refine their skills, and maintain high standards of teaching in inclusive settings (Dan, 2019; Moua, 2021; Rispoli et al., 2011).

By applying House's framework, this study aims to explore the types of support ECSE lead teachers receive and how these supports impact their experiences in inclusive classrooms. Understanding these dynamics will provide insights into how to better support ECSE lead teachers and address the challenges they encounter.

Methodology

According to Merriam (2015), a qualitative research approach embraces a more broadscale use of several forms of inquiry that "…help us understand and explain the meaning of social

phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (p. 5). The current research project implemented a phenomenological method exploring in-depth early childhood special education teachers' experiences and perspectives on preschool inclusion. A phenomenological design allows a researcher to examine a perceived or experienced phenomenon or focus on a specific subject (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For example, the phenomenon studied in the current study was preschool inclusion.

Research Settings

The study occurred in three school districts in a Western state in the United States. The districts implement inclusive preschool programs with morning and afternoon classrooms, each lasting three hours with different students enrolled. There was an average of 14 children in each classroom (Range =11-16) and an average of six children with disabilities (Range = 4-8) who received special education services. Disabilities categories include but are not limited to autism spectrum disorder, multiple disabilities, speech or language impairment, and developmental delays in one or more of the following areas: physical, cognitive, communication, social or emotional, or adaptive, which prevents the child from receiving reasonable educational benefit from general education. All children in the classroom were three through five years of age.

Sampling Procedures and Participants

The sampling procedure used to select the participants was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling selects participants who can give rich, in-depth information about a phenomenon studied, and the selection depends on a researcher's judgment (Creswell & Poth, 2017). When selecting the participants for a phenomenological study, they must have experienced and be able to describe the phenomenon studied (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Hence the criteria used for selecting the participants included,

1. ECSE teachers serving as lead teachers in an inclusive preschool classroom, where students with and without disabilities are taught together. The lead teacher designation was based on state-specific qualifications, which require ECSE teachers to hold specialized credentials in early childhood special education (for example, a bachelor's degree in early childhood

education or special education with a certification in early childhood special education) to lead classrooms in inclusive settings.

2. The preschool classroom must include both children with and without disabilities, meeting the requirements for an inclusive setting as defined by the IDEA and state guidelines for preschool inclusion.
3. A minimum of five years of classroom experience, ensuring they have substantial experience in an inclusive educational context and can provide rich insights into the challenges and strategies in such settings.

Based on these criteria, fifteen ECSE lead teachers were selected to participate in the study, with five teachers from each of the three school districts (see Table 2). The study included 15 participants, all of whom identified as female. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 59 years, with the majority (66.6%) between 35 and 59 years. Specifically, 13.3% were aged 25–29, 6.7% were 30–34, 13.3% were 35–39, 13.3% were 40–44, 20% were 45–49, 20% were 50–54, and 13.3% were 55–59. In terms of racial and ethnic background, most participants identified as White (80%), while others identified as Hispanic/Latino (6.7%), Asian American (6.7%), or as belonging to two or more racial groups (6.7%). Regarding educational attainment, the majority of participants held a Master's degree (86.7%), with one participant earning an Education Specialist (EdS) degree (6.7%) and two participants holding a Bachelor's degree (13.3%). Participants' professional experience in ECSE varied, with 40% reporting 5–9 years, 26.7% reporting 10–14 years, 20% reporting 15–19 years, and 13.3% reporting 20 or more years in the field. Similarly, their overall years in education ranged from 5–9 years (26.7%), 10–14 years (26.7%), 15–19 years (20%), to 20 or more years (26.7%).

Data Collection

Data Collection Instruments. The researchers developed two primary data collection tools: a background questionnaire to gather demographic information about the participants and a semi-structured interview protocol designed to explore teachers' experiences, practices, and perspectives on inclusive education. The interview protocol was informed by an extensive review of literature in the fields of inclusive education, special education, and early childhood education. This literature highlighted key areas of inquiry, including teachers' training, classroom practices, philosophical

beliefs, challenges, and resilience strategies in inclusive settings. These areas were selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the implementation of inclusive education and to identify potential areas for improvement in teacher preparation and professional development.

The interview questions were intentionally designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to share their experiences in depth and providing rich, nuanced data. Initial questions were drafted based on themes identified in the literature, such as the importance of teacher training, the practical challenges of inclusive classrooms, and the strategies teachers employ to overcome these challenges. These questions were then refined through an iterative process to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives. For example, questions were crafted to explore not only teachers' practical experiences but also their underlying beliefs and attitudes toward inclusive education, as these factors are critical to understanding their instructional practices. The interview protocol included questions such as:

1. Tell me about your experience teaching in an inclusive classroom. How many years have you taught in this setting, and what does your classroom look like?
2. What is your educational background, and how has it prepared you for teaching in inclusive settings?
3. Do you support teaching in an inclusive classroom environment? Why or why not?
4. Can you describe your experience as an ECSE lead teacher working with both students with and without disabilities in an inclusive classroom?
5. What are some notable or successful teaching moments you have experienced in an inclusive classroom?
6. What challenges have you faced as an early childhood special education teacher in an inclusive classroom?
7. How do you overcome these challenges, and what strategies do you use to build resilience?
8. Could you describe your training to work with students with and without disabilities in inclusive settings?

9. What suggestions would you provide for strengthening pre-service training and in-service professional development for inclusive education?

To ensure the validity and reliability of the interview protocol, the tool was piloted with three early childhood special education teachers who were not part of the study sample. Feedback from the pilot phase was used to refine the questions for clarity, relevance, and depth. Additionally, the protocol was evaluated by two university professors specializing in ECSE, a faculty member with expertise in qualitative research design, and four doctoral students focused on special and general education. Their input helped to further strengthen the alignment of the questions with the study's goals and to ensure that the protocol captured the complexities of teachers' experiences in inclusive settings. This rigorous development process underscores the methodological strength of the study, as the interview protocol was carefully designed to elicit detailed, meaningful responses that address the research questions. By focusing on teachers' training, practices, challenges, and resilience strategies, the interviews provide critical insights into the implementation of inclusive education and highlight areas for future improvement in teacher preparation and support.

Data Collection Procedures. The participants signed the informed consent before participating in the individual semi-structured interviews. The participants volunteered and did not receive any compensation. The interviews were conducted during the academic school year while experiencing the phenomenon studied. The semi-structured interview process is the primary and highly recommended means of collecting qualitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The current study included five face-to-face interviews, one phone interview, and nine online Zoom interviews. The format of the interviews varied with the participants' preferences and convenience due to their work schedules. During data collection, an interview protocol guided the interviewer to ensure consistency in administering the interview session irrespective of the interview format such as face-to-face, phone interview, and Zoom interviews (Synnot et al., 2014). In addition, the interview protocol provided guidelines on introducing self, describing the research topic, explaining the participant's consent, the interview questions asked, and how to end and wrap up the interview. The first author conducted all the interviews, and each interview session was limited to forty-five to sixty minutes. Participants responded to questions about their early childhood inclusion experiences, philosophy for teaching in

an inclusive setting, challenges faced, support needed, resilience, and shared suggestions with pre-service and in-service new teachers. All interviews were digitally recorded, preserved, and transcribed verbatim. All participants received a copy of their recorded interviews for review and accuracy. In addition, participants were allowed to provide an addendum.

Data Analysis

The data analysis began by transcribing the fifteen recorded participants' interviews into textual data. Next, the researchers followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method and coded the data to identify common themes across the interviews. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method include the following steps:

Step 1: Become familiar with the data. The researchers read the textual data several times to become familiar with the data.

Step 2: Generate initial codes. The researchers read the data and began to use open coding to identify and organize the data in a systematic and meaningful way, through coding. The coding system referred to House's (1981) workers' Support and Stress related elements.

Step 3: Search for themes. First, the researchers examined the data and the initial codes created for patterns. During this analysis step, the researchers used axial coding to identify the relationships among the open codes and created categories. Next, the researchers examined the categories for possible themes that respond to the researchers' questions and how they aligned to House's (1981) Workers' Support and Stress.

Step 4: Review themes. The researchers reviewed the themes created in step three to ensure there were no overlapping themes or themes stuck with more than one idea that needed clarification.

Step 5: Define themes. The researcher examined each theme in relation to the phenomenon studied, which is the experiences of ECSE teachers in an inclusive classroom. Also, the researchers examined the relationship of one theme to the others and a response to the research questions.

Step 6: Write-up. The last step is writing up the findings of the thematic analysis.

Trustworthiness

The researchers used the qualitative research rigor evaluative criteria developed by Lincoln et al (1985), which ensured that the data would be deemed trustworthy in relation to four specific

categories: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To do so, the researchers used various strategies. First, the researchers employed member checks. Member checks involved sending the transcribed data and data summaries of our interpretations of each interview to participants before analysis to verify their accuracy (Brantlinger et al., 2005). From the feedback we received from the participants, they confirmed that the interpretations were representative of their beliefs and inputs.

Next, the researcher also provided a thick description of the research process, including the research setting, the participants, data collection, and analysis to enable other researchers to make decisions about transferability (Merriam, 2015). Finally, peer debriefing occurred throughout all stages of the research when an experienced qualitative researcher provided critical feedback on protocol development, data analysis, identification of emerging themes, and interpretation of the study's results (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Positionality

The first author's fascination with this research subject originated from her experience teaching in an inclusive preschool classroom before entering higher education. As a new inclusive ECSE teacher, there were days when she encountered a mental balance challenge off her usual limits. At such times she turned to teacher educators and seasoned teachers for knowledge and skills. An important lesson she learned was that a teacher's core beliefs/perceptions often dictated a successful or failed early childhood inclusive program. Also, she noted how novice teachers sought advice from veteran colleagues when all else failed. She realized there was a need to collect the experiences of veteran and novice ECSE teachers in an inclusive classroom to have a collective shared knowledge and skills that can improve both preservice and in-service training for ECSE teachers. It is this realization that gave birth to the idea of this study.

Before joining higher education, the second author worked in an early childhood learning center as the lead ECSE teacher. Although the center focused on special education, the center embraced enrolled children with diverse disabilities, including physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, autism, down syndrome, and intellectual and developmental disabilities. As a result, the center embraced the inclusive classroom model. As the lead ECSE teacher, the author's class session

started at 8 am with breakfast and ended at 3 pm when the children left for home. Each inclusive class had about 9 to 12 children with different disabilities and learning goals. Beginning her career as an ECSE teacher in an inclusive setting was a challenging experience in planning and implementing learning goals for the diverse special needs learners in the class.

Both authors had to set time to collaborate with families and other professionals who served the diverse children, particularly speech and language pathologists and physical and occupational therapists. Despite school-organized professional development, the authors had to turn to seasoned teachers on specific concerns such as classroom management, effective teaching strategies, and developing educational plans. In addition, there was a challenge in that although there were active and motivated teacher assistants in the class, most of the time, they had no special education background. Therefore, the authors felt a need for professional development that specifically targeted the teacher assistant so they could effectively support the teachers. Hence, working on this project allowed the authors to reflect on their experience as lead ECSE teachers and ensure they bracket their own experiences when examining the data by writing memos during data collection and analysis as a means of examining and reflecting upon their engagement with the data (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021).

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the data including: (a) ECSE lead teachers' perspective on inclusion, (b) ECSE lead teachers' emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support, (c) ECSE lead teachers' resilience in inclusive settings, and (d) ECSE lead teachers' suggestions for pre-service and in-service teachers. All the participants' names are pseudonyms to protect their identities.

ECSE Lead Teachers' Perspective on Inclusion

All the participants provided their perspectives of what Inclusion meant regarding their experience in the inclusive preschool classroom. A common theme that emerged from their definitions was that Inclusion was an umbrella term that stressed the importance of meeting all educational needs of all children. For example, Kaitlyn (pseudonym) stated, "I think Inclusion is a great idea; it is an umbrella term of special education, you know, Inclusion is crucial to meet the educational needs of all children. It creates a learning environment that celebrates diversity, promotes tolerance, and ensures that every child has access to the resources they need to succeed, whether a

child has a disability or not." Sara echoed, "Inclusion ensures that all children have equal access to education and ensures all their needs are met. It allows children with disabilities or other special needs to learn alongside their peers, which benefits their social and academic development." Laura also stressed, "I believe in Inclusion because it benefits all children. Inclusion means all children. Inclusion means meeting all children's needs, not only for children without disabilities but also children with disabilities."

In particular, the ECSE lead teachers shared the belief that inclusive education in all early childhood occurs in an inclusive environment that allows children with and without disabilities to interact with one another as they would in society. Also, all participants believed that Inclusion allowed the modeling of learning by peers. For example, Sara, one of the ECSE teachers, defined Inclusion as a great model using typical students, paraprofessionals, and teachers to support students with disabilities learning process:

> It is good for the kids that have needs like language and all those social-emotional needs, that they see other typical peers, how they can solve a problem and how they can request stuff from the teacher or a peer and stuff like that. So, it is a great idea. That is a great model. And yeah, I support it. I am doing it.

Most of the participants used either "peer model" or "role model" when stating that students with disabilities can and do make the most growth or do achieve higher educational goals than typical peers. For example, Sophia shared the following quote:

> …that kids learn a lot from one another, perhaps even more than we can teach them. So, peer models are really important for students with disabilities to learn social and language skills and behaviors that we teach in preschool, such as how to sit for a story, how to line up, and how to sit and eat a snack with friends, all those kinds of social skills. And then I think it is also really important for families of students with disabilities to see their kids in a general education preschool classroom with their peers…

Eleanor's sentiments concurred with those of Sophia when she said,

> … I think that if students are going to make growth and gains, they will make the most gains in an inclusive classroom if they observe, interact, and play with peers without disabilities. I

> think that is the best way for children to learn. So, I support teaching an inclusive classroom for that reason that if kids have peer models that can be models for play skills and communication, that will help them learn quicker than if they are in a segregated classroom.

Laura also said,

> I fully agree with inclusion. I have fought against the non-inclusive settings I was in … I just feel like kids learn best from other kids. Yes. And so, when you take away those role models, you are not doing a service to those kids that need those models.

Also, some participants strongly believed that a properly organized and equipped inclusive classroom environment benefits children with and without disabilities.

Kaitlyn (pseudonym) stated:

> It is good for kids receiving and not receiving services because they are good models for each other. I think the children with disabilities receiving services can have peers without disabilities as models to help them with their goals. And then, the children without disabilities that are not receiving services, I think it is good for them to develop compassion and see different abilities within their classroom. Learning alongside them and just noticing as early as they can, everybody is different, and everybody learns differently.

Hence, inclusion as an educational model for instructing at the preschool level was viewed positively by all the experienced in-classroom teachers. Although they each defined inclusion through their own experiences, their successes with inclusion were never in doubt, nor was its future.

ECSE Lead Teachers' Emotional, Instrumental, Informational, and Appraisal Support

The ECSE teachers shared various support they wished they could get to make their work more effective and less stressful in inclusive settings. The various supports they shared were categorized based on House's (1981) types of work support.

Emotional Support

Thirteen out of fifteen ECSE lead teacher participants mentioned experiencing feelings of lack of concern, care, understanding, or interest in what they were doing as ECSE teachers by administrators in the school and district and community leaders. These teachers reported that few

administrators visited the EC classrooms, increasing their sense of isolation and helplessness. For example, Jenny, one of the ECSE teachers, shared,

> Two preschool classrooms are in the elementary building, and my classroom is one of them. The elementary school's principal rarely visits my classroom, and the early childhood special education director does not visit us either since she is in another building and not in the location of my ECE classroom. So, I feel disconnected and isolated from other ECSE teachers. You know, what makes it worse? Just during this semester, two paraprofessionals resigned...As you know, in my morning class, I have 16 kiddos, and 8 of them demonstrate severely challenging behaviors almost all the time. As a result, running story time, small group time, or snack time is difficult. It is chaotic. My paraprofessional got burnout so quickly. And to be honest, I am so stressed out and helpless.

Also, the participants stressed the importance of respect and trust from their administrators, co-workers, and families. Based on their daily work and stress, they expressed a need for affection, sympathy, and understanding from others, particularly in their service and interaction.

Laura, one of the ECSE teachers, said:

> …You know, I cried one time when one mother whispered to me that she respected and thanked me so much because she saw her son was making progress. I feel so glad when parents recognize our hard work and trust us with their children. It is huge, you know.

Some teachers expressed how it hurt due to the lack of administration of their work. Amy said,

> …we have students that are receiving special education, but we also have all those other students in general education. And we… teaching a general education classroom curriculum and doing all special education stuff on top, and I do not think everybody in like administration understands how much work that is … I just do not think they really understand how much they are asking. I really wish they could understand us and show trust in us with what we are doing.

Instrumental Support

All the participants reported several times that the lack of school district financial support or funding affected the hiring of co-teachers and well-trained paraprofessionals. They all struggled daily

with the lack of adult support. As classroom numbers increased, so did students of moderate to significant needs. All ECSE lead teachers shared their hardships with higher in-class enrollments and less adult support. Kristen made the following statement:

> We need more adults in these classrooms. When you look at early childhood special Ed, we have all kinds of kids in one setting. We have children with physical disabilities and speech and language difficulties who may be learning disabled later or need reading interventions. We have got a hodgepodge of kiddos in one classroom with most of the time two adults. We are serving the needs of the needy. Sixteen of them.

Jamie echoed Kristen's concern saying:

> Many paraprofessionals are hired at low wages and lack the skills to assist teachers. The lack of qualified in-class supports reduced teachers' time to provide quality instruction. Moreover, it robbed teachers not only of time but of personal energy.

Additionally, ECSE teachers lamented that while recommended practices in inclusive classrooms required them to provide services based on a student's interests and needs, they often had to offer services based on what resources (or lack thereof) were available. They yearned for additional resources and staff through the collaboration and support of their school administration. Lee stated the following,

> Resources are a challenge; we sometimes need more. For example, we just got a new student, and I was short on cube chairs. Furthermore, I had to beg, borrow, and steal to get the cube chairs in the building for him because it is in his IEPs, you know, for preferred seating.

Informational Support

Fourteen participants shared their concerns about needing specific knowledge to work in inclusive settings in certain situations, such as classroom management. In addition, they shared how they needed mentoring and coaching on effective teaching strategies. Despite occasional professional development, most teachers expressed they still needed hands-on or modeling of some practices. Most participants reported that they would like more information about what constitutes effective teaching, behavior management, family professional partnership training, and clear job expectations and responsibilities guidelines. Audrey said,

> I have a girl who would not want to come back into the classroom after recess. It was a big transition difficulty; she would scream, cry, throw herself down, and then in the classroom, she still screamed for 30-40 minutes. Another little boy often takes off his shirt, probably to gain my attention. And again, another two boys kick and hit peers constantly. So, I can manage some challenging behaviors but am not professionally trained to address them, especially when they escalate.

Eleanor stated,

> The curriculum coach only visited my classroom twice. The first time, I requested her to model how to embed drawing into stories. The other time is for recording me teaching songs and letters. Right, two times, and the curriculum coach is not for the special education part. We do not have a special education coach. So, when I have questions, I sometimes ask the other ECSE teachers or the special education director.

Appraisal Support

Eleven of the ECSE lead teachers mentioned that few administrators visited the classroom and thirsted for frequent and constructive feedback about their performance. Some reported that when they received feedback, it conflicted with what was happening in the class or the needs of their students, indicating the administration may not have understood their work and misevaluated them. Scarlett shared the following conflict,

> We deal with childcare, licensing, health department rules, and all these high-quality indicators. We want to do all of them to do what is best for our students. And then the administration does not understand that. They want to only focus on the literacy and math components, and then they tell you to add this, add that to the curriculum, and they do not understand that in 3 hours, you cannot do it all. And really, what is best for kids is teaching strong social-emotional skills…

Savannah stated the following,

> Yes, I would like some form of feedback. For example, a coach would visit my classroom and provide constructive feedback on my teaching, you know, or comments on the IEPs, or provide consultation when there are challenging behaviors. In addition, I often self-evaluate

> and reflect on my practice. So, it would be fantastic if I could receive positive or even negative feedback from the perspectives of supervisors, peers, or service providers such as SLPs, OTs, and school psychologists.

ECSE lead teachers' resilience in inclusive settings

When asked what kept them in the profession or what motivated them daily, the participants all responded and commented on their dedication to the teaching profession and unconditional love for students. The participants considered time spent with students as precious while emphasizing a caring love for each student. As one participant, Eleanor endearingly said,

> ... it is just seeing all these little faces. I mean, they are just so cute… but just seeing them, and they come to school, and sometimes they are affectionate. They want to hug you or say goodbye or high-five, you know? And it is like, Okay, I am making a difference.

Another positive motivation for the profession was reverentially witnessing student progress while under their care and instruction. They were making a difference. As one participant Sofia noted:

> …being able to see the growth and the changes in the students and I really believe that what we are doing is very, very important. You know if some of these kiddos had to go to kindergarten without having early childhood support, they would look a lot different. I mean, some of them are going to continue to struggle in kindergarten, but they at least have a basis and they have some skills that they have learned. So, I think that is probably the biggest thing is believing that what we are doing makes a difference for kids.

Another participant Amy commented,

> When you look back, the growth and the joy in those moments carries you forward. …so, this helps kids make those big, cognitive, and social emotional jumps in their thinking. I mean, that they will carry me for years.

In addition to their fondness for students, the participants appreciated working with other teachers and paraprofessionals. It was collaboration with colleagues that came up many times as a crucial factor for remaining in the profession. A single noteworthy comment made by a participant Laura says it all,

> … because I have a great assistant this year. She is really helpful and has the same mindset that I do. We ask each other questions and we have a good relationship.

All participants held a bright future for inclusion education despite the challenges. Inclusion is becoming a reality nationwide, starting with support from local school districts. As a participant, Kristen said,

> I like that our district is trying to push for more inclusion. So, we are trying to have every child who can be in an inclusive classroom, be in as much as possible…So I see our district kind of pushing toward that. It is hard though because that is also like a funding issue. You have to pay for more teachers to be in the classroom. So, that's going to be a challenge. But I see our district kind of moving in that direction of wanting inclusion for as many as we can do it for and only kids that really, really, really require it to be pulled out for services.

Another participant Sofia also stressed the importance of full inclusion and the way to be successful.

> I would like all kids to be in inclusive classrooms. I do not want any kids to be in self-contained classrooms for any reason. And the changes I would like to see is that we have more adult support in those classrooms so that it can be successful. And I do not think that there is any other way we can make it successful. I think that all preschool classrooms should have at least three adults every day.

ECSE Lead Teachers' Suggestions for Pre-services and In-service teachers

According to the interviewed ECSE teachers, all incoming pre-service and in-service instructors must have a basic standard of knowledge, skills, and training to implement services for children in inclusive classrooms effectively. The teachers shared how ECSE teachers need training on ECSE before teaching in the inclusive program. They argued that their knowledge and skills to do what they do began at the teacher preparation program and improved with experience and ongoing professional development training. Most of them praised their former pre-service institution for their knowledge and skills. For example, Eleanor shared,

> They [professors at universities, colleges, and community colleges] taught me the skills and the tools I needed to start with. They also gave me some information on what to do and where to go … they have given us a couple of websites. I will not have known what to do without returning to the [institution] to get my masters in ECSE.

Laura added,

> Also, during my practicum, I feel fortunate to observe and practice teaching in an inclusive classroom as well… first few years are always a struggle, and everyone struggles there for a few years. The way you get good at it is just by doing it. I think it can be incredibly challenging and scary. And you kind of think of yourself as a failure. It is just one of those jobs that you cannot be good at right away. So, you must be patient and know that every year gets better and easier by practicing it and ongoing training.

Hence attending the teacher preparation programs offering content and field experience in ECSE appeared highly recommended. A second suggestion for ECSE teachers is to locate and build a resource contact, face-to-face or virtually. They all shared that building one's resource collection process begins by knowing all the valuable online ECSE teacher communities and resources for ongoing professional development. Jenny recommended the following,

> In my global ECSE community, I reach out Online a lot. I follow a lot of online resources, you know, like NAEYC and DEC. I consider them my global ECSE community, and I do a lot of online research to support my learning and knowledge. And so, if I am having an issue with a child, I start to dig in that way. Or if I were to get a kid with a certain diagnosis, that is where I would begin researching to support my knowledge and skills. So, I train myself that way. Besides online resources, it is also important to locate appropriate contact people. These people may include supervisors, school principals, seasoned ECSE teachers, social workers, psychologists, therapists, librarians, families, and community leaders. Then, when faced with a specific need or challenge, seeking the most pertinent or judicious individuals for assistance and guidance becomes easier.

Sara added the following suggestion

> Along with the principal, I would also say, like veteran teachers, …and then other supports we have would be like our coaches, other special service providers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech therapists.

ECSE lead teacher Lee said,

> For me, when focusing on behavioral needs, I work closely with a school psychologist. So, she's a really, really valuable resource for me when I need support. ECSE participants also

> recommended that pre-service and in-service teachers utilize organizations for resources available either at their institution or community.

Five other participants mentioned that they utilize community-based resources, including local libraries. As Savannah noted,

> …I learned a lot about the United Way, what they can do for our families, and what they offer, and I also use local libraries. Local libraries are good places for our kiddos and families. There are books, materials, and fun activities for them [children and their families]. Another suggestion is to build a close relationship with the parents of the students.

Furthermore, a family-professional partnership is federally mandated legislation. Building a positive and strong partnership with families by pre-service and in-service teachers is educational and personally gratifying. As Sara expressed,

> Parents are a great resource. They are the experts; they know their children the most. They know their child's strengths and weaknesses, what toys he likes to play with, and what activities he likes to do…

Amy echoed the same sentiments,

> What they [parents] do at home helps to find out information about that child. And if parents have something that works really, really well, that is something we can utilize.

Finally, the participants recommended that ECSE teachers take the initiative and be "self-starters" to build confidence. All the participants believed in learning by doing. In other words, the best resource is oneself. Learning from mistakes is the best teacher. As ECSE teacher Lee said, it just takes experience to get good at it. Other participants also noted that they learned and developed their confidence in inclusive teaching by encouraging themselves to engage in new experiences and consistently doing it.

Discussion

Research has consistently demonstrated that the successful implementation of inclusive education models depends heavily on teachers' attitudes and perceptions (Dan, 2019; Leatherman, 2015; Moua, 2021; Yu & Park, 2020). The current study reinforces this body of literature, revealing that all participating ECSE lead teachers expressed positive attitudes and a strong willingness to work

within inclusive environments. These findings align with Moua's (2021) study, which also found that ECSE teachers were overwhelmingly supportive of inclusion and viewed it as beneficial for students with disabilities. However, this contrasts with studies involving general education lead teachers, where attitudes toward inclusion were often mixed or negative. This divergence suggests that attitudes toward inclusion may vary significantly between special education and general education teachers, potentially due to differences in training, experience, and philosophical orientations toward inclusive practices.

The positive attitudes expressed by ECSE teachers in this study were further reflected in their commitment to treating all students equally and fostering interactive social opportunities for students with and without disabilities. This sociocultural perspective, which emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive social environments, aligns with Leatherman's (2015) findings that teachers who adopt such an approach are more likely to display positive attitudes toward inclusion. These results highlight the critical role of teacher mindset in creating inclusive classrooms and suggest that fostering a sociocultural perspective in teacher training programs could enhance the effectiveness of inclusive education.

Implications for Teacher Support and Professional Development

A recurring theme in both the current study and previous research is the necessity of various forms of support for teachers in inclusive settings (Dan, 2019; Moua, 2021). Commonly identified support needs include professional training, manageable workloads, qualified paraprofessionals, effective communication, adequate time, and involvement in decision-making processes. The current study corroborates these findings and extends them by identifying additional support factors, such as emotional and appraisal support from administrators, which are crucial for reducing teacher stress. Insufficient support, particularly from administrators, has been shown to exacerbate stress and hinder the implementation of inclusive practices (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017; Dan, 2019; Douglas et al., 2016). This underscores the need for school leaders to provide not only logistical and instrumental support but also emotional and appraisal support, such as recognizing teachers' efforts and involving them in decision-making processes.

Utilizing House's (1981) framework, this study examined the types of support that inclusive teachers need across all of House's dimensions, including emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. The findings echoed previous research indicating that ECSE teachers' support needs vary depending on individual circumstances and contexts (Laravie, 2023; Macedonia & Weiss, 2022). Some teachers reported needing one form of support more than others. Similarly, previous studies showed that teachers experiencing work-related stress require emotional support to address feelings of frustration, overwhelm, anxiety, exhaustion, and depression (Laravie, 2023). On the other hand, during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers needed more informational and emotional support, indicating that their support needs were context-dependent (Macedonia & Weiss, 2022). These findings emphasize the importance of administrators intentionally understanding the specific types of support teachers need to avoid mismatching the assistance provided. Administrators need to engage with their teachers and understand the nature of the support they require. For instance, offering additional resources and paraprofessionals may not be beneficial if the teacher truly needs emotional or appraisal support.

The issue of paraprofessional qualifications also emerged as a persistent challenge in the current study, consistent with prior research (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017; Douglas et al., 2016). The lack of adequately trained paraprofessionals places an additional burden on lead teachers, who must often provide guidance and supervision. Furthermore, inadequate fiscal resources and funding for inclusive programs have created significant gaps in instrumental support, particularly in securing qualified paraprofessionals (Moua, 2021). These findings highlight the urgent need for policymakers and school administrators to reassess funding allocations for inclusive education and invest in the professional development of paraprofessionals.

Implications for Teacher Training and Collaboration

The participating ECSE teachers in this study offered several critical suggestions for improving inclusive practices, including enhanced training, collaboration with other professionals, and stronger partnerships with families. These recommendations align with previous research, which has consistently emphasized the need for preservice training programs to address the growing enrollment of students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Chang et al., 2005; Mickelson et al.,

2022; Mitchell & Hedge, 2007). Specifically, incorporating fieldwork experiences in inclusive settings during teacher preparation can provide candidates with authentic insights into the dynamics of inclusive classrooms (Taliaferro et al., 2015). Such experiential learning opportunities are essential for equipping future teachers with the skills and confidence needed to navigate the complexities of inclusive education.

Collaboration emerged as another key theme in the current study, echoing findings from prior research (George, 2020; Hong & Shaffer, 2014). Effective collaboration with colleagues and families is critical for addressing the diverse needs of students in inclusive environments. For ECSE teachers working with students who have extensive support needs, collaboration with other professionals becomes even more vital. The current study also highlights the importance of strong family-professional partnerships, which are mandated by federal regulations in the U.S. education system (Cummings et al., 2015; Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Turnbull et al., 2022). These partnerships enable teachers to integrate diverse perspectives and expertise, ultimately enhancing their ability to address learner variability.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have several important implications for policy and practice. First, there is a clear need for targeted professional development programs that address the specific challenges faced by teachers in inclusive settings. These programs should focus on fostering positive attitudes toward inclusion, developing sociocultural perspectives, and providing practical strategies for managing diverse classrooms. Second, school administrators must prioritize providing comprehensive support to teachers, including emotional and appraisal support, to reduce stress and improve job satisfaction. Third, policymakers should consider increasing funding for inclusive education programs, particularly for the training and hiring of qualified paraprofessionals. Finally, teacher preparation programs should emphasize the importance of collaboration and provide opportunities for preservice teachers to engage in fieldwork within inclusive settings (Barton & Smith, 2015; Lawrence et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2020; Steed et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the current study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education by highlighting the positive attitudes of ECSE lead teachers and identifying key areas for

improvement in teacher support, training, and collaboration. The findings underscore the importance of addressing systemic challenges, such as inadequate funding and insufficient paraprofessional training, while also emphasizing the need for strong administrative and family-professional partnerships. By addressing these issues, schools can create more effective and sustainable inclusive education models that benefit all students.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The majority of participants were urban, White females trained in ECSE, working in inclusive classrooms where they were the lead teachers. As a result, the study does not capture the experiences of a more culturally diverse population of ECSE teachers, particularly those from rural areas or different states. Additionally, this study differs from previous research that included co-teaching models with two licensed teachers in the same classroom, as the ECSE lead teachers in this study worked with paraprofessionals rather than another licensed teacher. These contextual limitations emphasize the importance of viewing the findings within the specific scope.

Given the unique nature of the sample and the limited research on ECSE teachers as lead educators in inclusive classrooms, the researchers recommend that future studies focus on more diverse, contextually specific participants. Additionally, expanding future research to include ECSE lead teachers from various states and districts, as well as those from different genders, cultures, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, could provide valuable insights into the perceptions, needs, and challenges associated with inclusion in early childhood inclusive education programs led by ECSE teachers.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study offers important insights into the experiences and perspectives of ECSE lead teachers in inclusive preschool settings. The findings reveal that ECSE teachers hold positive attitudes toward inclusion, viewing it as a model that benefits all children. However, they also identified significant challenges, including the need for emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support to effectively manage classroom demands. ECSE teachers emphasized the value of peer modeling, social-emotional development, and equitable access to resources, while pointing to systemic barriers such as inadequate funding, insufficient paraprofessional training, and limited

administrative support. Their resilience, driven by a commitment to students and collaboration with colleagues and families, underscores the importance of fostering supportive environments for educators. The study reinforces the value of inclusion as an equitable and beneficial educational model while highlighting the systemic and practical challenges that need to be addressed to ensure its success. By prioritizing teacher support, collaboration, and professional development, schools and policymakers can create inclusive environments that meet the needs of all children and empower ECSE educators to thrive. The dedication and resilience of ECSE lead teachers, as demonstrated in this study, highlight the transformative potential of inclusive education when supported by adequate resources and systemic commitment. Addressing these challenges is essential to building sustainable and effective inclusive practices that benefit all students.

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Table 1

Inclusive Co-teaching Models

Model	Description	Teacher Roles
One Teach-One Assist	The general education teacher leads instruction, while the special education teacher supports specific students with IEPs.	General education teacher teaches; special education teacher provides support to individual students.
Team Teaching	Both general and special education teachers equally share teaching responsibilities and lead instruction together.	Both teachers co-lead instruction, equally involved in all aspects of teaching.
Station Teaching	Students are divided into groups and rotate through stations or centers, where both teachers work with students on the same or similar content.	Both teachers manage different stations or groups, offering differentiated instruction.
Parallel Teaching	The general and special education teachers teach the same or similar content simultaneously to two different groups.	Each teacher leads a group; special education teacher typically handles the group with IEPs.
Alternative (Pull-Out) Teaching	The special education teacher pulls students out of the main classroom for a limited time to provide specialized instruction.	General education teacher remains with most of the class; special education teacher offers individualized instruction in a separate space.
ECSE Lead Teacher with Paraprofessionals	The ECSE teacher is the lead teacher in the inclusive setting, assisted by one or two paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals may have minimal training or experience.	ECSE teacher leads all instruction, often dual-certified in general and special education; paraprofessionals assist under the ECSE teacher's direction.

Table 2

Participants Characteristics (N=15)

Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
25-29	2	13.33%
30-34	1	6.67%
35-39	2	13.33%
40-44	2	13.33%
45-49	3	20.00%
50-54	2	13.33%
55-59	3	20.00%
Gender		
Male	0	0%
Female	15	100%
Ethnicity		
White	12	80.00%
Hispanic/Latino	1	6.67%
Asian	1	6.67%
Mixed (Two or More Races)	1	6.67%
Highest Education		
Bachelor's Degree	2	13.33%
Master's Degree	12	80.00%
Ed.S.	1	6.67%
Years in ECSE		
5-9	6	40.00%
10-14	4	26.67%
15-19	3	20.00%
20+	2	13.33%
Years in Education		
5-9	4	26.67%
10-14	5	33.33%
15-19	2	13.33%
20+	4	26.67%