THE ISSUE

IDEA (2004) regulations state that non-discriminatory practices should be used to evaluate children for special education services (1,2). Despite this clear guidance, the under- and over-referral of children of color to preschool special education remains an issue nationally (3) and in New York City, raising questions about disproportionality and disparities in the referral and inclusion of minoritized children.

Educators' misunderstandings and biases about children and families of color can play a role in inappropriate decisions regarding special education referral for evaluation around children's academics, behaviors, and bilingual communication skills (4, 5). System-level factors, such as administrative support, clear policy and process, and infrastructure (e.g., dedicated planning time) have long been known to play a role in supporting teachers' successful implementation of inclusion (6, 7, 8, 9). More recently, research on teacher positionality in these spaces, the potential influence it has on their inclusive practice, and how best to mitigate negative influences through explicit training is emerging (10, 11, 12).

Our research study centered around teachers as primary service delivery agents who 1) must comply with system policies guiding evaluation and referral; and 2) are expected to design and implement sensitive, appropriate, and quality inclusive practice.

Our research study asked:
What do preschool teachers need to equitably refer and meaningfully include young, minoritized children?

CONTEXT

The study acknowledged four components in a preschool environment that can influence teachers' decision-making around referral and inclusion: PROCESSES, PEOPLE and their POSITIONALITIES, and PRACTICES.
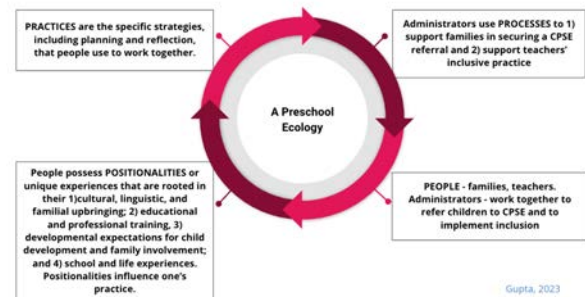
RECOMMENDATIONS

Study recommendations highlight a need for the larger system to provide programs, professionals, and families with explicit, timely, and ongoing supports.

Recommendation 1: Pair families with a direct system-contact, akin to a Part C service coordinator, whose primary role is to help them navigate system transitions (Part C to Part B-619) and Part B-619 system entry and exit (referral, evaluation, IEP development).

Families across sites described multiple challenges in securing a special education evaluation and beginning preschool special education services, even if their child had received services through Part C early intervention. Families also expressed apprehension individually and as a community about the lack of system support, and response, in upcoming system transitions (Turning 5).

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Recommendation 2: Reduce burden on preschool administrators, whose primary role is to lead and manage a preschool site, by providing them a dedicated social worker who can assist in gathering necessary information for families to secure timely referrals, evaluations, and other system transitions (Part C to B, Turning 5).

Administrators across sites are supporting families in every step of the referral process, and guiding teachers to gather developmental information about the way.

One administrator created a program-wide timeline and process for screening, assessment, and family conferences. Another works directly with families to secure referrals, follow up about requested evaluations, and joins parents who are notified in advance about IEP meetings.

Recommendation 3: Provide positionality-focused coaching that can support teachers at various stages of their career and that integrates time for ongoing and collaborative reflection on practice.

Novice (under 4 yrs), seasoned (5-10 yrs), and veteran teachers (11+ yrs) participated in this study. ALL teachers' personal experiences with belonging and membership, as seen and explained through life maps of their educational experiences, are influencing their desire to support all young children. The majority of teachers, however, were not able to explicitly name recommended practices or individualization/ differentiation strategies.

All teachers expressed a desire for more dedicated planning time to meet with other teachers and to learn about and share about strategies.

Recommendation 4: Create a Community-of-Practice (13) for administrators to 1) share programmatic policies and practices that promote teachers' decisions to refer children for special education services, and 2) encourage ongoing brainstorming about how to support teachers in individualizing/ differentiating practice for all learners.

All teachers expressed a desire to support children's individual abilities, and want more individualized help) from their programs in doing this. Novice teachers, in particular, want more time to meet with other teachers.

Administrators are actively searching for ways to support teachers, while leading and managing their programs, and assisting families in navigating what one administrator called a constantly changing system.

STUDY DESIGN

We designed a convergent, mixed-methods study (14) to examine the relations between processes, people and their positionalities, and practices. We gathered and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data sequentially to enable within and cross-case comparisons.

Two (2) NYCEEC Sites: (New York City Early Education Centers) (Community-based organizations that partner with the DOE)					
	Documents	Interviews	Life Maps	Classroom Observations	Focus Groups
Administrators (n=4)	4	4			
Teachers (n=7)		14	7	7	
Families (n=5)					2
TOTAL	4 program documents	17 interview transcriptions (1 teacher declined audio recording)	7 life maps	7 scored observations in 4 classrooms	2 focus group transcriptions

REFERENCES – 1) 34 CFR§303.113; 2) 34CFR§300.304; 3) OSEP 2019; 4) Cheatham et al., 2014; 5) Harry & Klingner, 2014; 6) Lieber et al., 2000; 7) Love & Horn, 2019; 8) Purcell et al., 2007; 9) Salisbury & McGregor, 2002; 10) Banerjee & Luckner, 2013; 11) Beneke et al., 2019; 12) Blanchard et al., 2018; 13) Wenger & Wenger-Traynor, 2015; 14 Yoshikawa et al 2008.

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