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Constructing (Dis)ability through participation in early childhood markets: Preschool leaders' enrolment decision-making

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ABSTRACT: This article employs a critical case study (critical disability studies and critical policy analysis) to unpack how leaders in publicly funded private prekindergarten programs invoke conceptions of normality, and subsequently abnormality, during decision-making processes for student (dis)enrolment. More specifically, this research is concerned with ways private preschool leaders' constructions of disability are implicated in decision-making affecting student enrolment and disenrollment, thereby facilitating constructions of children's participation in this state-sanctioned early childhood education program. Three leadership teams at private preschools participated in responsive interviews, observations, and provided policy and curricular documents for analysis. Findings reveal how policy, market, and preschool leaders' conceptions of (ab)normality influenced decision-making rationales and outcomes affecting (dis)enrolled students. Additionally, findings indicated leaders' sense of identity impacted their interpretation of and reaction to program polices, local market pressures, and their construction of the "good consumer"—a parent/child dyad prepared for rigor with the exhibition of self-control. This research evinces complexities undergirding leaders' decision-making when choosing to (dis)enrol students in publicly-funded voucher programs on privately-driven markets and how decisions function to (re)shape (dis)ability discourses in early childhood.

Keywords: *early childhood education, participation, rights, disability studies*

Introduction

Children's participation in early childhood education programs is influenced by a labyrinth of national, state, and local policies and private business interests. In the United States (US), the State of Florida established participation in its Voluntary Prekindergarten Program (VPK) as a constitutional right for all four-year-olds. This program operates almost exclusively on the private market, allowing preschool leaders' decisions regarding student participation and enrolment to be guided by market-driven imperatives. The spectre of Florida's early childhood (VPK) program design provides unique context to interrogate how various private markets and preschool leaders' interests converge with government regulations to construct children and their participation in early childhood programs in particular ways. This research is concerned with ways private preschool leaders' perceptions of disability are implicated in decision-making affecting student enrolment and disenrollment, thereby facilitating constructions of children's participation in this state-sanctioned early childhood education program.

Critical policy research reveals how constructions of ability/normal and disability/abnormal are shaped by school choice policies and their taken-for-granted assumptions about individualized choice (Baker, 2002; Bradbury, 2013; Lee, 2010; Stern et al., 2015). Policies, practices, and discourses supporting constructions and experiences of disability are intertwined and work congruously to constitute children with disabilities in particular ways (Jessup, 2009). Furthermore, education policies engage normative discourses in which the purposes and desired outcomes of schooling are negotiated and prioritized, thus reifying types of students for whom schooling is intended.

This article employs a qualitative case study to unpack how leaders in private VPK programs invoke conceptions of normality, and subsequently abnormality, during decision-making processes for student (dis)enrolment. Combining a critical poststructuralist approach (critical disability studies, critical policy analysis), decision-making on (dis)enrolment was contextualized within the local policy ecology (Weaver-Hightower, 2008). While enrolment is not synonymous with participation, we suggest when leaders make decisions about enrolment and disenrollment of children, they simultaneously create possibilities for children's participation—that is, they have power to include or exclude children from services and, as a consequence, allow or forbid their participation.

To better apprehend decision-making processes and practices affecting students with disabilities within (pre)school choice systems, a discussion of previous research—the conceptional framework—is presented. In addition to parent and school choice literature,

we consider the evolution of rational choice theory and its role toward advancing school choice policies and schooling for students with disabilities. Subsequently, methods used to unpack the article's research questions, findings, and discussion are presented. Findings of the "good consumer" are presented and discussion considering implications of business interests in the construction of children's participation in early childhood programs concludes this paper.

Conceptual framework

We draw upon critical disability studies to deconstruct the binary logic supporting the daily sorting of children through enrolment practices that influence children's participation in a State funded prekindergarten program. Furthermore, critical disability studies allowed us to unpack the social making of disability—that is, the way words, actions, and ideas worked continuously to reconstruct norms and ability around children's participation in this program (Danforth & Rhodes, 1997). Critical policy analysis also provided a context and process to reveal school leaders' daily decision-making as they enacted schoolwide policy that constructed binaries of the abled and disabled student. As critical disabilities studies and policy analysis guided the purview of this study, three literature streams were investigated to construct a conceptual framework for understanding how choice-making processes reconstruct (dis)ability within (pre)school choice systems. The research within these literature streams included: (1) disability construction via education policies, (2) tenets of rational choice theory, and (3) decision-making processes school leaders and parents enact regarding enrolment of students with disabilities within school choice systems.

Constructing disability through policy

Considering how education policies, as discursive spaces, structure purposes and practices of schooling, normal is continuously (re)defined and otherness is (re)produced (Baker, 2002). These concepts have been, and are being, (re)defined by language and legitimized as they have been passed down with each generation. Institutional ableism, defined by Beratan (2008), is a form of covert discrimination embedded in the structures, practices, and beliefs concerning disability within education systems. According to Beratan (2008), the institutionalization of ableism is not only situated in policy discourses concerning disability, but also in discourses communicating norms and expectations—in the construction of "able".

Bradbury (2013) claimed policies and practices in education construct an ideal student and, as a result, systematically exclude children who do not meet expectations. Likewise,

Baker (2002) argued, "all forms of schooling teleologically seek to govern, discipline, and engineer students' being toward some name ideal" (p. 676). Education policies engage a normative discourse in which the purposes and desired outcomes of schooling are negotiated and prioritized, thus constructing the type of student for whom schooling is intended (see also Reid & Knight, 2006; Stern et al., 2015; Youdell, 2003). Disability is constructed in the space outside this normative discourse. Students whose performance is perceived to deviate from the norm are othered and, as Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) proclaimed, disability is the "ultimate 'other'" (p. 73).

Rational choice in the education market

Informing most school choice policies is rational choice theory (RCT), which assumes people are intentional actors whose behaviours are directed by their preferences (i.e., beliefs, goals, values, etc.) in order to obtain desired outcomes (Boyd et al., 1994). Assumptions embedded within RCT, Petracca (1991) argued, "may end up creating the political reality which looks very much like the assumptions themselves" (p. 301). Therefore, RCT can function to promote self-interested behaviour—a characteristic antithetical to that of a democratic society (Petracca, 1991). Further, Robenstine (2001) argued as public schooling moves into the market, a shift in values occurs, moving "from cooperation among schools to competition between schools; and, more significantly, from schools oriented to serving community needs to schools oriented to attracting 'motivated' parents and 'able' students" (p. 237).

School choice discourses shift responsibility for provision of education away from the State and places it on the parent(s). This transference from collective to individual responsibility places blame for any problems and social inequities on the efforts, or lack thereof, of individuals (Apple, 2008; Bosetti, 2004; Lee, 2010; Robenstine, 2001; Wright, 2012). With unquestioned faith in the market, school choice schemes place the role of the State as arbiter for the educational marketplace and assume parents to be "good" economic actors who are "socially responsible" and "self-motivated" (Perez & Cannella, 2011). This assumes economic actors access and navigate markets by making informed decisions from a litany of popularized choices (Bosetti, 2004). When an actor is not able to access, navigate, and make selections, market discourses often cultivate a logic that ignores historically oppressive societal structures preventing individuals from participating in the market. Furthermore, Dudley-Marling and Baker (2012) argued marketed based reforms "are fundamentally incompatible with human difference" (conclusion, para. 2) and tend to exclude students with disabilities. The concern herein is how decision-making in the context of school choice impacts enrolment and participation of students with disabilities in choice schools.

Decision-making processes

Interpretations of (pre)school policy discourses by school actors construct microsystems within the local market. Jennings (2010) asserted, "human actors do not react to the environment but instead enact it" (p. 229). The sense (pre)school leaders make of various policy discourses determine how their school is positioned within the local marketplace influencing who is able to enrol in their schools. Research on school choice suggests students from low income families, with disabilities, and from non-English speaking homes are underrepresented in choice schools when compared to community demographics (Elacqua, 2006; Frankenbery et at., 2011; Jennings, 2010; Jessen, 2012; Miron et al., 2010; Mora & Christianakis, 2013; Thomas, 2012). Choice schools are also found to increase racial and class segregation (Bifulco et al., 2008; d'Entremont & Gulosino, 2008; Miron et al., 2010; Thomas, 2010, 2012). This exclusion and segregation appear to be intensified in choice schools of franchise and for-profit organizations (Jennings, 2010; Miron et al. 2010). The exclusion of students occurs in choice programs through selection rituals such as cream-skimming (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012; Epple & Romano, 1998, 2008; Jennings, 2010; Jessen, 2012), signalling, steering away, and counselling out practices (Jennings, 2010; Jessen, 2012).

Studies examining preschool programs' accessibility focus mostly on private markets or need-based public systems. Lee (2010) found taken-for-granted assumptions of good economic actors embedded in preschool voucher programs in Taiwan and Hong Kong perpetuate inequity by privileging certain families. Such ideology ignores and intensifies inequity (see also Perez and Cannella, 2011). According to Bastos and Cristia's (2010), privilege within the Brazilian marketplace, as well as quality choices, increases as families' income increases. Additionally, researchers identified decreasing quality and safety of childcare for low-income children (Hatfield et al., 2014; Helburn & Homes, 1996; Marshall et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 1994; Polakow, 2007, 2008), as well as limited options (Noaily & Visser, 2009; Warner & Gradus, 2011). While some researchers found parental choices of childcare is impacted by families' cultural norms and preferences (Coley et al., 2014; Vesely, 2013), others identified issues of cost, location, and availability to drive decision-making, thus limiting choices accessible to families (Forry et al., 2013; Gorgan, 2012; Sandstorm & Chaudry, 2012).

Furthermore, literature suggests parents' decision-making practices when selecting a preschool in the United States were influenced by parents' perceptions of (in)accessibility for children with disabilities (Glenn-Applegate et al., 2010; Knoche et al., 2006) and organizational practices such as the continuum of services limiting choices predicated on perceptions of children's (dis)abilities (Hanson et al., 2000; Lovett & Haring, 2003; Podvey et al., 2010, 2013).

Methods

This study followed a case study design to unpack the complex phenomena of preschool leaders decision-making practices within the naturally occurring context (see Creswell, 2013). The study was conducted over the span of five months. Data collection involved semi-structured responsive interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), observations (Hatch, 2002), and document reviews (Krippendorff, 2013).

To understand VPK leaders' decision-making in the appropriation of (dis)enrolment policies, interview questions delved into preschool leaders' professional backgrounds, specific program information, VPK enrolment policies and practices employed by the leaders and their VPK policy perspectives related to State mandates. Each leader was interviewed twice, totalling twelve interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. First-round interview questions explored the participants' perceptions of their preschool program's purpose for children and families and different challenges they encountered delivering the program. Leaders were also asked to share perspectives on children and families they desired to attend their programs. First round interviews lasted 21-55 minutes. Review of first-round interview transcripts facilitated the refinement of second-round interview questions, opportunities for observation, ancillary sources for document review, and clarification of ambiguously answered questions from the first interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Second round interviews lasted 18-55 minutes.

Three observations—one per centre—lasting approximately 30 minutes in length were conducted to gauge each preschool's enrolment processes and to increase insight into how leaders perceived their programs, providing further understanding of the way language and rituals of sensemaking occurred within the preschool. Field notes were taken during observations and included thick description of preschools' context and participants' actions and conversations (Hatch, 2002). Documents offered by leaders were reviewed, revealing deeper "relevance sampling" aimed "at selecting all textual units that contribute to the given research question" (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 120), which asked how leaders invoked conceptions of normality and abnormality during decision-making processes for student (dis)enrolment. The documents reviewed addressed preschools' enrolment policies, behaviour/discipline policies, dismissal/termination policies, program brochures and flyers, curriculum materials, parent communication forms, marketing materials, and the program's website or social media pages. Other reviewed documents illuminated student demographics and enrolment information, student assessment data, and the program's readiness rates obtained from the Florida Department of Education Kindergarten Readiness Rate Website. Kindergarten Readiness Rates are calculated by the State based on student assessment data and determine

funding eligibility in the provision of the VPK program (Florida Department of Education [DOE], 2016). See Table 1 for data sources.

Table 1 *Data Sources*

CENTER	*PARTICIPANTS*	*INTERVIEWS*	*OBSERVATIONS*	*DOCUMENTS*
A	Owner VPK Director Administrator	Owner (2) VPK Director (2)	Administrator: Center Tour	Readiness Rate Report, Parent Handbook, Application and Enrollment Forms, VPK class daily schedule, VPK class rules, Parent communication samples (letters, informational flyers, incident reports, student assessment results, etc.), curricular document samples (worksheets, activities, etc.), and social media page.
B	Owner Curriculum Director	Owner (2) Curriculum Director (2)	Owner: Center Tour	Readiness Rate Report, Family Handbook, Application and Enrollment Forms, Advertisements (print ads, commercials, YouTube videos), Website, Blog posts, social media page, and VPK class schedule.
C	Director VPK Teacher Receptionist	Director (2) VPK Teacher (2)	Receptionist: Center Tour	Readiness Rate Report, Parent-Student Manual, Application Packet, Parent communication samples (flyers, letters, forms), VPK academic year schedule and daily schedule, discipline plan, VPK curriculum newsletters, Parent orientation presentation, and social media page.

Recruitment and selection

The local VPK market in this study consisted of private childcare centres, home day cares, and public schools. Because private childcare centres disproportionately represented local VPK providers (a composition of franchises, family-owned, and church-run preschools), they were the focus of this study. Three centres were selected to participate, each representing a family-owned, church-run, or franchise operation. Leadership teams were identified at participating centres, with each member participating in interviews, observations, and the provision of documents for review.

Data analysis

Normalization discourses associated with constructs of choice, disability, and decision-making guided data analysis. Interviews were transcribed and then uploaded along with

documents, observation and field notes, and reflective journal entries into Dedoose for analysis. To identify ideas supporting normalization assumptions of difference and otherness were unpacked using binary analysis as described by MacNaughton (2005). The concept of a binary suggests meaning is derived from differences between signifiers and therefore such meaning can only be relative (Davis et al., 2015). According to MacNaughton (2005), "binary analysis inverts and subverts binary meanings and it ruptures logic to create alternative meanings" (p. 92). She offered questions to help researchers deconstruct text using binary analysis: (1) "What binaries does this text rely on for meaning? What are silenced others in this text?" (2) "How does this specific text create assumptions about what is normal or desirable?" (3) "How does each term in the binary depend on the other for its definition?" (4) "Who benefits in this text from how the word or idea is used and its binary constructed?" and (5) "How is the norm exceptional?" (p. 94)

Research quality

Considering the role poststructural approaches to data sense-making entail, we borrowed from Harrison et al.'s (2001) use of the term re/presentation to emphasize the importance of our role in (re)presenting meaning shared by participants and that discovered self-reflexively. Further, Britzman (2012) noted a poststructural approach to inquiry participants' words do not wholly constitute their character nor what they intend for researchers to know or understand. Conversely, he argued words (stories) shared by participants are (re)interpreted by researchers and thus are more representational of researchers responsible for retelling their stories. The analytic culmination of this study is best understood as a retelling of social events (Phillips, 2002) for the purpose of demonstrating the process of normalization and subsequent (re)construction of (dis)ability through VPK leaders' practices of (dis)enrolment.

Ethical consideration for the ways our orientations and biases influenced this study's quality and transparency is warranted. It is important to note both researchers were trained as special education teachers and worked in various leadership roles in public schools. In these roles we experienced first-hand discourses, practices, and policies engaged by school leaders, teachers, and other educators who sought to normalize (dis)ability based on social and behavioural norms enacted by students with disabilities and their parents. As such, in this study we cautiously endeavoured to (re)engage participants in their storytelling and encouraged supportive opportunities (e.g., centre documents) to help them clarify/explain their stories and written policies. Our goal was to create a text (findings) that causes readers to question taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in the daily lives, language, and practices of (pre)school leaders as they construct and reconstruct ability (normality) and disability (abnormality).

Findings

Analysis revealed two interacting findings. First, leaders interpreted program policies and made decisions around student (dis)enrolment through the lens of their identity. Second, leaders' sense of identity influenced enrolment decision-making and, subsequently, constructions of the "good consumer", a perceptual dyad comprising good children and good parents. Findings are detailed in subsequent sections.

Identity

Leadership team members described meanings attributed to their personal and work experiences as they led their preschools. Findings revealed leaders' sense of identity influenced their interpretations of and reactions to program polices and local market pressures. Analysis revealed binaries, descriptions, and characteristics participants used to referentially connote varied constructions of identify. According to Stryker and Burke (2000), "identities are internalized role expectations" (p. 286) that can be better understood as "cognitive schemas—as internally stored information and meanings servings as frameworks for interpreting experiences" (p. 286). Further, Stets and Burke (2000) acknowledged identity is a negotiation of self-meanings, expectations of roles, and their connection to meanings associated with other social roles (i.e., one's personal identity, one's identity as a leader, and the identity they project upon their school). Moreover, our social identities are salient when we work to influence our membership within a certain group as well as the perceptions and behaviours of other group members (Haslam et al., 1999).

Participants' pseudonyms purposively reflect identity findings (i.e., leaders' curricular and economic values) and illustrate (dis)enrolment decision-making related to preschool leaders' personal conceptions of normalization, (dis)ability, and other influences—for example, the strength of the local market economy—that additionally guided their (dis)enrolment decision-making.

Preschool A

Located in a more rural location at the outskirts of the local market, Preschool A, a family owned centre, had operated seven years and provided VPK for nearly six and a half years at the time of the study. On average, 130 children attended this preschool daily (capacity about 160), with approximately 30 children participating in VPK. Its fees were nearly 29% lower than Preschool B and 16% lower than Preschool C. According to the preschool's Kindergarten Readiness Rate history, the program received a Low Performing Provider status in its second year delivering the VPK program. However, they exceeded minimum

criteria every year thereafter (DOE, 2016). According to Preschool A's parent handbook, its preschool mission sought to provide "an inviting atmosphere for your child that promotes growth socially, emotionally, and intellectually… [with a] staff that is well trained and displays love for children in their daily interactions".

The leadership team at Preschool A included the owner (Maria) and her two daughters (Alice and Dorothy). The owner and daughter (Alice) who ran the VPK program were interviewed. The second daughter (Dorothy) who oversaw enrolment provided an observational tour. All participants provided various documents deemed relevant for this study. Participants' pseudonyms were based on historical female figures who significantly influenced the emergence of the Montessori Method. While Preschool A was not a Montessori centre, the owner often recounted how elements of the Montessori Method influenced her curricular orientation and design. Additionally, Maria grounded her work within the context of her Christian faith; her faith allowed her to envision her work as a (benevolent) service rather than one based linearly on monetary gain.

Preschool B

Located in a newly developed area of the local market, Preschool B had operated seven years and provided VPK since its inception. With an average of 260 children enrolled and about 70 children who participated in VPK, Preschool B was the largest childcare and VPK provider in this study. Its fees were more expensive than the other preschools, approximately 41% higher than Preschool A and 23% higher than Preschool C. The Kindergarten Readiness Rate history for Preschool B was considered average since their inception, meaning it always met the minimum criteria (DOE, 2016). To showcase the facility's eminence, literature and video advertisements depicted the preschool as the "best" in town, and the owner heralded the centre as the town's "best kept secret". According to Preschool B's parent handbook, its mission was to "provide a secure, nurturing, and educational environment for young children; a place for children to bloom into responsible, considerate, and contributing members of society".

The leadership team at Preschool B included the owner (Milton) and program director (Michelle) who were both interviewed. Milton provided the observational tour and documents. Prior to opening this franchise preschool, Milton was an international currency trader. By operating this preschool, Milton believed he was *"putting back into something, in the lives of families, knowing they have somebody here that's committed for them than somebody...that has the mindset or a frame that revolves around dollars"*. Michelle was a former a public-school teacher hired several months prior to our interview. She acknowledged being hired to improve instructional quality through

stringent, data-based methods that challenged instructional practices previously used by the preschool's teachers.

Preschool C

Located in an older, less-densely populated area of the local market, Preschool C had operated 16 years and provided VPK approximately 10 years. On average, it provided childcare for 85 children daily, with about 40 children participating in VPK. The Preschool was positioned as a ministry and preschool, relying upon its non-profit, church-affiliated status. Its fees fell between the other two centres. At the time of this study, Preschool C was 19% more expensive than Preschool A and 14% less expensive than Preschool B. Preschool C's parent handbook purported its mission was "to teach and empower students through Christian education that they may uphold God's standard of truth, and make an impact on their world".

Preschool C's leadership team included the program director (Ester), VPK teacher (Ruth), and receptionist (Martha). Ester and Ruth participated in interviews and Martha provided the observational tour and documents. She was responsible for greeting parents, children, and visitors of the day care. Esther, the preschool director, worked in childcare 25 years—a career she chose out of her professed love for children. She described the preschool as *"a ministry first and a preschool second"*. Ruth worked professionally with children approximately 14 years, all of which at Preschool C. Ruth's career with young children was sparked by her voluntary service at the church's nursery.

The good consumer

Findings revealed how program policies, market pressures, and leaders' conceptions of (ab)normality influenced decision-making rationales and outcomes affecting (dis)enrolled students. Findings suggested leaders sense of identity (service for Preschools A and C, and prestige for Preschool B) influenced enrolment decision-making and, subsequently, constructions of the "good consumer", a perceptual dyad comprising good children and good parents (detailed in the following sections) who are prepared for rigor and the exhibition of self-control through processes of normalization. Moreover, preschool leaders' justified enrolment and disenrollment decisions within a continuum of exchanges occurring between consumers and themselves.

Good children

All preschools described the purpose of their VPK programs as preparing children for kindergarten. Teachers and directors described kindergarten as academically rigorous and expressed feelings of urgency in preparing children to be good readers, as if they were

scared for children who were not ready. Subthemes within the good child include a child who is prepared for the academic rigor of kindergarten and exhibits self-control.

Prepared for rigor. Participants discussed desire for children to be prepared for the academic rigor of kindergarten. Competition for desired status and reputation in the marketplace, based on discourses of academic rigor, influenced their curriculum decisions. For example, participants from all three preschools mentioned how kindergarten teachers at local public schools said children who attended their centres were well-prepared for the kindergarten classroom. Additionally, Preschools A and C explained conflict regarding their practice resulting from pressures to prepare students for kindergarten with their beliefs about what children should be doing and how curriculum should be for four-year olds—feelings of nostalgia for past schooling practices. For example, Maria discussed how she changed the structure of her VPK program after her program was on placed probation from the state due to low kindergarten readiness scores. Per the urging of her daughter, Alice changed the curriculum to a more structured, teacher-directed program. Maria was proud of the program that emerged from these changes and stood by her decision but often reminisced about how the curriculum used to be more nurturing and play based.

The director at Preschool C also discussed adjustments to curriculum resulting from participation in the VPK program. According to Esther, *"we try and fit them together like a puzzle, what the State wants and what we want from our school, our teachers, what we think the child needs to have at that particular time"*. As preschool leaders made sense of standards through the lens of their identity and juxtaposed pressures from the market, an ideal type of student emerged. Through participants' stories of struggles and successes of classroom practices the kind of child suited for participation in their preschool classrooms was revealed.

Children enrolled at the participating centres were expected to comply with a structured classroom routine. For example, Maria was proud children learned "structure" at her center. Maria shared *"we try to get them in the habit of doing their homework, get them in the habit of reading"*. Throughout hers and Alice's interviews, mention of structure and descriptions of a high paced, rigorous classroom routine were prevalent. According to Alice, they provided *"a pretty structured program . . . We also try to make it fun. So structured but fun too for the kids and where they really get a desire to learn"*.

Although initially hesitant to shift her curriculum away from the Montessori practices based on child-led instructional choice, Maria adapted to demands from VPK policies (i.e., standards and accountability). The move toward a more structured preschool—that is, a more teacher directed curriculum—was something she eventually embraced. While she

often shared nostalgic perceptions of her past practice, she rationalized the shift in her curriculum this way:

> *I think as we've grown as a country, we are needing more out of our children so that our country . . . can grow and mature as well. Where we're not stumbling still back in the fifties to sixties. . . we need progress in this country and I feel the [VPK] standards help.*

Preschool B's curriculum required children to be actively engaged in play. Milton described his centre's curriculum as based on brain research and Michelle shared how she expected to see children busy learning through play at all times in classrooms. According to Michelle, the VPK standards *"are definitely helping* [the children] *to get towards that kindergarten level"* but they are *"not always developmentally appropriate for them...some kids can do it...some are not ready"*. However, Michelle described skills VPK students should perform as *"they should be able to understand*" verbal directions in English, and they should *"know how to hold a book"*. Assumptions embedded in this construction of the able child suggest exposure to preliteracy experiences that Michelle deems desirable—that is, being read and spoken to in English.

Ruth at Preschool C shared that her priority was *"getting [the children] ready, prepared for kindergarten because I feel like there's huge expectations now in kindergarten"*. She also discussed how her curriculum had a lot of "paperwork" (worksheets) for the children to complete. Ruth believed there is sometimes too much paperwork, but she also believed that it is what the children need to be ready for kindergarten. When asked about the VPK standards, Ruth shared *"I think it's good to expect good things from our children*…[the standards] *are a little bit high, but I think if we don't do that now, because kindergarten is so high. . . we're sending them into a place they're not gonna be successful if we don't do this now"*. She expressed that *"we're asking them to do things sometimes that their brains are not really ready to do"*.

Ruth shared *"*[my] *goal is for the child to be successful"*. When a student was having difficulty, Ruth explained, *"I try to do the best I can to make her feel successful still because she notices herself, that she's not able to do the same things* [as the other kids]*"*. This discourse illustrates an emphasis placed on the logic of success versus failure in schools. However, Ruth attempted to compensate by making children feel successful even if they had not successfully grasped the curriculum. At Preschool C, normality is equated with success. While Ruth exhibited patience and flexible expectations for students as she attempted to accommodate their specific learning needs, the curriculum required children to sit at tables and complete worksheets, thereby constructing the successful or normal student as one who can sit still, properly use writing utensils, and attend to abstract symbols on the page while listening and following the teacher's directions. Ruth scaffolded children's learning so they felt successful in this process, a normalization

process to develop children into passive, compliant learners. Across participating programs, the finding that good children are those who easily follow structured routines and rigorous program (academic) standards illustrates how othered, disabled children lack the intelligence to attend to stringent learning outcomes and, given such, their academic performance affects their (dis)enrolment status.

Self-control. Across all preschools disruptive (abnormal) behaviour was the most prevalent justification for student disenrollment. Leaders shared how decisions regarding disenrollment were often predicated on issues of "safety". What also emerged through analysis of interview transcripts was a binary logic of the aggressive child versus the child with self-control. A child who exhibits self-control, a child capable of submitting to and obeying authority, was depicted as desirable for enrolment at all preschools.

For example, Ester described a "very angry child" she had to disenroll due to challenging behaviour. She explained children at her preschool would be disenrolled if their behaviour was harmful to themselves or others—a sentiment consistent across all preschools. Further, Alice at Preschool A discussed a student who was enrolled in her class at the beginning of the school year:

> *If it were up to me, he would have been out of the program sooner. . . I wasn't comfortable any more having him in my room as far as he would flip over shelves and that sort of thing and punch the kids and spit . . .*

Similarly, Michelle, at Preschool B, shared:

> *If a behaviour is so extreme that it just can't be dealt with in this kind of setting, that's when we have to disenroll a student. . . It just might not be the right place for that child...they may need a smaller setting or a one-on-one [be]cause our class size is, I mean, it's big. It's big. There's a lot of kids in there and they just might need a smaller setting.*

A significant consideration, given the purview of Michelle's narrative, is who defines and what constitutes extreme behaviour. Furthermore, at Preschool B the class size argument was used to bulwark her decision for (dis)enrolling challenging students. The child's behaviour existed beyond the periphery of normal, causing her to question whether s/he needed to be placed in an environment that was "right" or more suitable for her/him. Michelle's background as a former public school teacher allowed her to think about this child's behaviour along a continuum of restrictive services commonly reserved for students with disabilities. Her rationale the child may have needed to be placed in a "smaller setting or a one-on-one [case]" appeared to strengthen her argument for disenrollment. In this particular school district, smaller prekindergarten settings are only available for children identified disabled. By justifying disenrollment through a "smaller setting" discourse, this operated as coded language that pre-labelled the child disabled.

The idea the classroom environment is "big" sets the operational stage for normality whereupon the normal child(ren) are capable of functioning and participating. On this stage the child(ren) must adhere to various classroom routines and procedures, especially having the social acuity and awareness to behave well with others. Otherwise, they are better equipped to socialize and learn in "small" restrictive settings relegated to children identified disabled. Across participating programs, the finding that good children exhibit self-control demonstrates how behaviours consigned to children with disabilities are often deemed aberrant and plausibly incurable. When confronted with a child whose behaviour was perceived deviant, the child's enrolment status and ability to participate in the program was clearly questioned.

Good parents

All preschool leaders expressed the significance of parent involvement and their expectation to work with actively engaged parents. However, when asked to describe characteristics of an involved parent, participants described a passive, almost superficial level of parent involvement: a parent who seeks information from teachers, eagerly listens to what teachers suggest, and follows the advice of teachers. Further, the good parent mirrors the characteristics of a good child: listens to and follows directions, demonstrates self-control (all centres shared stories of parents who lost their tempers when they attempted to encourage the parent to get academic/behavioural help for their children), and are good readers (Michelle at Preschool B: children should be read to at home… some kids "don't even know how to hold a book").

According to Alice, an involved parent is one who *"stays and asks questions about their child's day, checks on their behaviour chart, completes their homework with them, that sort of thing. Reads the papers in the folders"*. Similarly, Milton describes his program as *"a strong program and it's stronger for the families which have parent participation"*. He also emphasized efficiency and parents being on time. At Preschool C, Esther shared *"I just don't think parents care as much as they used to"*. Ester also connected the idea of bad societal influences and the preschool's positionality as a ministry to combat those influences.

Esther shared she might disenroll a child if *"we are unable to help the child any further or the parent doesn't accept our help"*. When sharing about a time she had to disenroll a student, she said *"it was more the parent than the child"*. She further explained,

> *The child had learning issues and we tried addressing it with the parent. The parent did not want to have anything to do with it and got into a big argument with our administrator at the time and we had to ask them to leave the school.*

Reflecting on a similar experience with a different outcome, Ester shared the parents *"went above and beyond and got their child a tutor"* when she shared concerns pertaining to the child's learning.

A discourse of "fit" emerged amid one participant interviewed at Preschool B. Analysis of Michelle's transcript revealed good parents find preschools where their children belong. Specifically, she commented, *"*[children with disabilities] *need to fit into the classroom. If their parent feels comfortable with them being here, then that's, that's fine"*. Michelle made it clear their centre was less inclined to make special accommodations, as the child needed to fit into established classroom structures and systemic routines. This discourse illustrates her perception that their centre operated under the auspices of a normal (abled-bodied) preschool paradigm and the local market ecology provided othered facilities that children with disabilities could "fit" into.

All participants placed blame for poor academic or behavioural performance of children on the child's parent(s). According to Michelle, *"maybe the parent is not putting in their effort at home"*. When asked to expand on this idea during her follow up interview, she explained, *"I think it's just got to do with a lot of what they have been exposed to before"*. Similarly, Ester explained, *"I think that's why a lot of children now a days have so many issues and problems. It's cause they're not getting the guidance that they need to have at home"*. Finally, Maria believed *"it goes back to the parent, it's not the child's fault"*. Across participating programs, embedded discourses of parent blame revealed assumptions about effort, exposure, and guidance in preparing the good child for participation in preschool. Further, these narratives position parents as the causation of a child's perceived disability.

Discussion: The child as consumer and commodity

Within the context of this market, the consumer was dyadic: both child and parent. Participants' responses suggested "good" parents find preschools where their children "fit" or are enabled to participate, including schools better deemed suited to educate children with disabilities. Additionally, findings suggest when a child exhibits problems (academic or behavioural) and their participation conflicts with professionals' desires, these problems are considered inherent to parents and children and not endemic to those who work at the preschool, its curriculum, or instructional practices. In other words, parents and their child were atypical, and the child manifested a disabling condition that prevented the child from participating in the program, thus stripping away the child's constitutional right to participate in the early childhood program. Similar to Lee's (2010) findings of preschool voucher system in Taiwan and Hong Kong, taken-for-granted

assumptions of "good economic actors" embedded in preschool voucher policies perpetuate inequity by privileging certain families within the market. Moreover, in Lee's (2010) study, families were privileged consumers based on their economic behaviours. Similarly, in this study some families achieved privileged consumer status on the basis of VPK leaders constructing them as "good," which meant they participated in socially (and economically) acceptable ways that reinforced the leaders' personal identity and the identity they desired for their preschools.

Jessen (2012) similarly found school leaders shaped enrolment by constructing perceptions of desirable students. As participants in this paper's study described children and parents enrolled at their preschools, preferred characteristics of the consumer dyad was revealed. Furthermore, assumptions of difference and (dis)ableness emerged from analysis of participants' stories of successes and frustration, hence constructing a binary of the good versus bad consumer (parent and/or child). The binary suggests meaning is derived from differences between signifiers (Davis et al., 2015) and such meaning can only be relative. According to MacNaughton (2005), "binary analysis inverts and subverts binary meanings and it ruptures logic to create alternative meanings" (p. 92). In this analysis, characteristics of good/bad consumers (children and parents) emerged and provided a portrait of how children are normalized or perceived disabled via participation in this VPK market.

Leaders' interpretations of and responses to VPK policy affected decisions regarding student (dis)enrolment and subsequent participation in ways that purported constructions of students as abled, not abled, or disabled by leaders' expectations. More often leaders enacted practices in attempt to preserve their business interests. Protecting personal and business identities within this market necessitated a nuanced positioning of children and parents as the idyllic consumer and commodity, as opposed to rights-bearing citizens granted by the Florida Constitution. As consumers, parents, and by consequence children, sought services provided by preschools in this study. Paradoxically, preschools within this scenario should have served as the quintessential good—the product, or commodity, packaged inextricably as educational and childcare services. Yet, in this market children's perceived (academic and behavioural) performance helped buttress leaders' decision-making when accounting for their preschool's financial and reputational solvency. Similar to Bradbury (2013), this study found children's academic and behavioural performance assured each preschool's continued eligibility to provide VPK and thus receive state funding, prompting leaders to make enrolment decisions and practices that reinforced the preschool's identity and strengthened their survival in the marketplace. Interestingly, this study illuminated it was not just what the preschools were able to provide for parents and children, but reciprocally what good their participation yielded to the preschool leaders' interests.

Rational logic embedded within neo-reform discourses position children and parents as commodities rather than rights-bearing citizens (Apple, 2005; Gewirtz et al., 1995). Assumptive "responsible" and "self-motivated" parental consumers (Perez & Cannella, 2011), after having accounted for the choice to send their child(ren) to one of the VPK providers in this study, were encouraged to commoditize their child(ren) based on a maelstrom of discourses, policies, accountability schemes, and identity concerns. This reconfiguration—this cyclic reconstruction—of students into commodities, via participation in this market, brands a child(ren) with a market value attributed to his or her perceived educable capacity (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012). Further, as Perez and Cannella (2011) suggested, this logic can create an illusion of particular groups of students as less-able, not-able, un-able, and therefore disabled, thus limiting their participation in early childhood programs.

Implications for future research

This study supports previous research that suggests how assessment-driven policies influence curricular and enrolment decision-making and how students are constructed as good, able, or othered (Bradbury, 2013; Jessen, 2010). Research prying deeper into influences of (pre)school leaders' identity, perceptions about normality, and reasons they employ for making disenrollment decisions for students with diverse needs can further help frame notions of participation in preschools. Our findings also suggest research aimed at understanding personal, financial, and logistical struggles leaders, staff, and families, and what children at these types of preschools undergo can potentially inform how policy can and should be implemented. Finally, given the prevalence and specificity of local preschool market contexts, our study further suggests expansive research examining children with diverse learning needs' participation within school choice and voucher programs is warranted.

Conclusion

Participation in Florida's VPK program is positioned as a right for all four-year-olds residing in the State per the Florida Constitution. However, this research illustrates how this right is dependent upon the interests of private business leaders. By engaging in discourses of norms and expectations, school leaders construct students as "able" to participate in their programs. The binary analysis employed in this study questioned assumptions of normality while simultaneously drawing attention to discourses that depicted children abnormal and disabled. By uncovering "able" in the context of this privatized prekindergarten program, we revealed how disability was subsequently (re)constructed by (pre)school leaders. Moreover, this research evinces complexities

undergirding leaders' decision-making when choosing to (dis)enrol students in publicly-funded voucher programs on privately-driven markets and how decisions function to (re)shape (dis)ability discourses in early childhood. Legislative and regulatory fiats directly affect everyday decisions incentivizing leaders' actions toward determining which child(ren) can participate or be dismissed from their early childhood program. Utilizing the constitutional imperative Florida created to vouchsafe all four-year-olds the right to participate in the early childhood education program, this study reveals how children's participation is yet determined by private school leaders' paradigms that position parents and children as good or bad consumers.

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